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A Word from the Editor

The behavioral sciences offer many helpful insights to the missionary task. In utilizing this resource, however, we must realize that the study of a fallen race can never establish sure guidelines for the Christian mission. It is the Word of God, not society, which sets the course of world evangelization.

A neglect of biblical exegesis in contemporary missiology, with its consequent obscuring of theological issues, is a trend observed by Dr. Edward Rommen, the Naomi A. Fausch Associate Professor of Missions at TEDS. Holding both the D.Miss. and Dr.Theol., this veteran missionary and church planter knows whereof he speaks.

Responding to his concern is Dr. Paul Hiebert, distinguished anthropologist and missiologist, Chairman of the School of World Mission and Evangelism.

We trust that the articles will precipitate discussion of what is at stake.

Robert E. Coleman, Editor

The De-Theologizing of Missiology

by

Edward Rommen

Consider the case of the committee charged with formulating a missions policy for its church. The group began by planning a series of position papers which, when taken together, would form the policy. The proposed reports were grouped according to importance. Topping the list and marked urgent were (a) theological presuppositions and (b) a biblically informed concept of ministry priorities. The remaining papers were to address practical questions such as support raising and relationships with mission agencies.

Shortly after they began their work a missiologist was called in to evaluate the papers which had already been completed. The consultant noticed that the committee writers had skipped over the two priorities heading the list and instead had written statements on three topics related to finances. When asked why they had not followed their own agenda, they said that existing theological consensus allowed them to proceed directly to the more practical aspects of the task. However, as their initial reports revealed, this omission left the committee without a biblically defined framework within which to answer their own questions. In the absence of deliberately formulated scriptural principles, they were not even able to define what they understood the mission of the church to be.

The course followed by this committee has been adopted by many at all levels of evangelical missions. As a result, the enterprise is adrift on a sea of de-theologized paradigms and awash in competing "how-to" schemes.

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these and many other issues facing missions is serious theological investigation. Yet this is precisely what many have deliberately discouraged or, at least, allowed to atrophy.

My reference to a decline in theological activity is not meant to suggest that theology has been widely rejected or disbelieved. There are courses in missions theology offered at evangelical seminaries. Books and articles on the subject are being written. The issue is rather one of basic orientation. David Wells, writing of two basic models of ministry, suggests that

The difference is not that in one theology it is present and in the other it is not. Theology is professed and believed in both. But in one, theology is the reason and basis for ministry; it provides the criteria by which success is to be measured. In the other, theology does none of these things. Here the ministry provides its own rationale for itself, its own criteria, its own techniques. Theology is not disbelieved, but it does not give the work of ministry its heart and fire.¹

What then of missiology? Are theological skills being applied to the questions and issues raised by the church's encounter with the world? Does theology determine the way in which missionaries address the challenges of cooperation, the eternal state of those who have not heard the gospel, or the non-Christian religions? Are missiological decisions basically informed by theology or by the insights of modernity and social science?

Current trends seem to favor everything but theology. On the basis of a thematic content analysis of book reviews and articles published in the major missions journals (*Missiology*, *IRM*, and *EMQ*) between 1973 and 1986, David J. Hesselgrave shows that the social sciences and history are given more attention than theology.² He then asks, "Of what lasting significance is the evangelical commitment to the authority of the Bible if biblical teachings do not explicitly inform our missiology?"³

Several things have contributed to the de-theologization of missions. First, the presence of real, supposed, or imposed consensus tends to stifle theological activity. Many within the evangelical missiological community have assumed that because there is general agreement on basic theological issues, we should therefore focus our resources on completing the task.⁴ There is, of course, some justification for this assumption. The documents produced by various conferences convened by evangelicals do reflect a high degree of theological commonalty. Nevertheless, the advantages of consensus will dissolve into theological indolence, if activism is allowed to blind us to the theologically fluid nature of missionary encounter. For example, the ongoing encounter with non-Christian religions generates a

steady stream of theological questions which must not go unanswered. Theological consensus does not obviate the need for dynamic field theologizing.

Second, theological discussion is sometimes deliberately excluded in the hope of fostering unity. Motivated by the conviction that doctrines divide and humanity unites, some have suggested that missionary service and social action be pursued without serious discussion of theological issues.⁵ In spite of such efforts, doctrinal differences inevitably force theological issues to emerge. When theological activity is temporarily subdued, it is done at the price of clearly defined categories. Unity bought with the currency of theological ambivalence does no service to the missionary cause, since many of its challenges are essentially theological in nature.

Third, the elevation of pragmatism to the status of a missiological norm has led to an uncritical acceptance of applied social science. This trend has continued unabated during the last few years.⁶ There can be little doubt that the insights and techniques of social science are useful. Nevertheless it is distressing to

witness the lemming-like rush of church leaders who forget theology in the charge after the latest insights of sociology—regardless of where the ideas come from or where they lead to.⁷

Just where have these ideas led? To a missionary enterprise

(Rommen, continued from page 3)

in which there is no place for God and his enabling Spirit. The often stunning effectiveness of these methodologies has deceived some into thinking that (or acting as though) ministry can be managed quite nicely without God. If human agency is viewed as the primary engine of missions, then it should come as no surprise that theology has been neglected.

4 Fourth, the restructuring of missiological studies at theological schools threatens to rob missiology of its theological heart. Several prominent institutions either offer or intend to offer a Ph.D. in the area of missions studies. While this is a welcomed advance, it is troubling to note that in many cases the name of the degree has or will be changed from missiology to inter-cultural studies. The ostensible rationale for this is the difficulty related to the term mission in Third-World settings, in particular regions dominated by Islam. As understandable as this might be, the change in nomenclature coupled with curriculum changes and dissertation requirements (which all but eliminate theological pursuits), may reduce missiology to the study of applied social-science. One program, built around a series of required courses, devotes only one to the theology of mission and requires a dissertation based on a model used for research in education.

North American missiology has been subjected to gradual erosion of its theological foundation. Active theologizing has

been replaced by business techniques and applied social science. As a result the future development of the discipline is uncertain. It is to this challenge that the next generation of missiologists must rise. Theological skills will have to be recultivated and reasserted in every area of mission. What is now required is nothing short of the re-theologization of North American missiology.

¹ David Wells, "The D-Min-Ization of the Ministry," in *No God but God*, ed. Os Guinness and John Seel (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), p. 186.

² David J. Hesselgrave, *Today's Choices for Tomorrow's Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 139-44.

³ *ibid.*, p. 142

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ This is apparently the approach taken by the conveners of the 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions. See David J. Hesselgrave, "The 1993 Parliament of the World's Religions—Our Response to Invitations to Participate," in *Trinity World Forum* 18:2 (Winter) 1993.

⁶ Edward Rommen, David Hesselgrave, and John McIntosh, "American Missiology—Which Way?" in *Trinity World Forum* 12:2 (Winter) 1987.

⁷ Os Guinness, "Sounding Out the Idols of Church Growth" in *No God But God*, *op. cit.*, p. 157.

De-theologizing Missiology: A Response

Paul G. Hiebert

Professor Rommen's prophetic warning is well placed. In recent years, discussion in mission circles has moved away from topics such as the call of God, prayer, and divine guidance to mission strategies and techniques based on the theories and methods of the social sciences. We take the theological foundations of missions for granted, but this assumption is wrong. Too often we choose a few themes and from there build a simplistic theology rather than look at the profound theological motifs that flow throughout the whole of Scripture.

Equally disturbing to the foundations of mission is the dangerous potential of shifting from God and his work to the emphasis of what we can do for God by our own knowledge and efforts. We become captive to a modern secular worldview in which human control and technique replace divine leading and human obedience as the basis for mission.

We need to get back to a discussion of the theological foundations of mission, but we must go behind theology itself to divine revelation. Our theologies are our understandings of that revelation. They are shaped by the methods we use: philosophical in the case of systematic theology; historical in the case of biblical theology; and anthropological in the case of anthropological theology. All of these help us understand the word and work of God better. But we dare not equate theologies with Scripture. Behind them there is the reality of God's revelation that calls us not only to understand, but also to respond. We must return to theological discussions in mission, not as ends in themselves, but as the means to increase our understanding and obedience to his call in our lives.