

PAUL G. HIEBERT: A LIFE REMEMBERED*

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Paul Gordon Hiebert, Distinguished Professor of Mission and Anthropology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, arguably the world's leading missiological anthropologist, died in March of 2007 of cancer. He was 74.

Paul combined attributes not easily combined: anthropologically and theologically informed scholarship and a passion for God's global missionary purposes. The story of how Paul fruitfully merged these commitments is worth telling.

Born in India (1932) to second-generation Mennonite Brethren missionaries, Paul was deeply influenced towards missionary service by his evangelistic and erudite father, Johann Hiebert, whose single-minded missionary commitment led him in 1947 to reject the tempting offer of a faculty position in Indian History at the University of Southern California.

Paul often told the story of how, at Taber College (Hillsboro, Kansas), where he studied physics and history, he approached a young lady:

"Miss Flaming."

"Yes?"

"I'm Paul Hiebert. I'm going to be a missionary. Would you like to have dinner with me?"

So began a romance that would last 57 years, until Fran's own death from cancer in 1999.

A missionary needed theological education, which Paul acquired at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary (Fresno, Calif.). Inspired in college by missionary anthropologist Jacob Loewen, whose lectures were "exciting," "iconoclastic," and "made so much sense," Paul felt missionaries needed anthropology. And in a family that took education seriously—four of his seven sisters would earn Ph.D.'s—only the Ph.D. would do. So Paul completed Ph.D. coursework in anthropology at the University of Minnesota while

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also pastoring a church. Then in 1960 he went to India for fieldwork and a six-year term of service with the Mennonite Brethren Mission Board. Here Paul unlearned the simplistic missiology he was taught in seminary, and began rethinking missiology for a postcolonial age.

Inherited models were strong. Old-timers challenged him, "Do you really have the call of God? Are you going to be here for forty years and not quit? Are you going to stay and die here and be buried?" Paul's answer? "Yes!"

But God had other plans. While on furlough Paul completed his dissertation in Anthropology (Minnesota, 1967), which established him as a rising scholar. When his Mission was unable, temporarily it was thought, to arrange his return to India, he took a one-year appointment in anthropology at Kansas State University, close to family and supporters. Since this was a stopgap measure, he rejected the professionally more attractive offer of a faculty position at a leading graduate program of anthropology. But in May, Fran was deathly ill, and Mayo Clinic doctors insisted she not return to India. Kansas State wanted to keep Paul, but he struggled to reconcile this with his missionary call. So he agreed to teach at the Mennonite Brethren Seminary in Fresno (1969). His assigned teaching there, as it turned out, involved very little missions and no anthropology, and so Paul returned to Kansas State (1970) to teach anthropology to undergraduates, write anthropology books and articles, and direct the South Asian Study Center. Recruited to the University of Washington (Seattle, 1972-1977) with its large graduate anthropology program, Paul received tenure, prestigious research grants (ACLS, SSRC) and honors (Fulbright), and continued publishing.

Despite all this encouragement, and though he loved the intellectual pleasures of anthropology, he was unable to connect his professional achievements with his sense of calling. Each weekend he preached about missions in churches, served on the Mennonite Brethren Mission Board, helped edit mission publications, and ministered on research trips to India—struggling to link the free moments of his life to what really mattered, missions. For years he kept telling people that he and Fran would someday return to India as missionaries, only gradually acknowledging even to himself that this would not happen. "Psychologically," he said in an interview, "I was never able to understand my calling in terms of being an anthropology professor." Although he would later question the model of the "missionary call" he had inherited, he nonetheless came to believe that his ongoing sense of unease was used by God to move him in a different direction—one that would position him at the center of American missiological training.

Anthropology historically played a key role in American mission-training structures. Under linguists and anthropologists of the Summer Institute of Linguistics and the American Bible Society (such as Jacob Loewen, Kenneth Pike, Eugene Nida, and William

Smalley), thousands of American missionaries received training in linguistics and/or anthropology subsequent to the 1930s. Hundreds of undergraduates planning to be missionaries majored in anthropology at colleges like Wheaton, Bethel, and Biola, and thousands more picked up a course or two on the subject. (The most famous such graduate is Billy Graham, who majored in anthropology at Wheaton.) For decades the only place for doctoral work in missiology was the Kennedy School of Missions at Hartford Seminary, which fielded a faculty of noted linguists, comparative religionists, sociologists (such as Peter Berger), and anthropologists (Absalom Vilakazi, Paul Leser, Morris Steggerda, Edwin Smith). George Peters, Charles Kraft, Dean Gilliland, and Charles Taber were among those who received doctorates here before this mainline Protestant school closed in the mid-1960s.

In 1965, Fuller Theological Seminary opened its School of World Mission, intentionally modeled on the recently closed Kennedy School of Missions. Donald McGavran was dean and Alan Tippett, an anthropologist, was the first full-time faculty member. Fuller's School of World Mission grew quickly, adding new faculty, including linguist-anthropologist Charles Kraft. Fuller was the only school offering doctoral missiology during the 1970s.

So when Fuller came calling in 1977, Paul was very attracted to the possibility of teaching within a doctoral program that valued anthropology and was strategically educating the next generation of missiologists—including the professors teaching mission courses offered in hundreds of Christian colleges and seminaries. This, he said, was a “return to mission, as I understood it.” And indeed he found Fuller an intellectually exciting place. Initially he struggled to maintain ties to the secular world of anthropology. But with a heavy teaching load, minimal funds to attend academic conferences, and a very different institutional and community set of priorities, Paul soon redirected intellectual efforts into the world of missiology. For the first time he was able to devote teaching, writing, and interaction with colleagues and doctoral students to issues of gospel and culture, contextualization, and mission theology.

Soon Paul's essays on conversion (contrasting “bounded-set” vs. “centered-set” thinking), critical contextualization, split-level Christianity, and self-theologizing were establishing many of his ideas as core concepts of the discipline. Paul sometimes wrote for missionary practitioners, as in his *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Baker, 1985), which has sold over 50,000 copies. But many of his writings aimed, successfully, at influencing missiology as a field. For example, according to Darrell Whiteman, former editor of *Missiology*, Paul's essay on “Critical Contextualization” has been employed as a theoretical framework in more missiology Ph.D. dissertations in the last twenty years than any other single missiological contribution.

Scholarship sometimes brings controversy. In his classes Paul articulated ideas later published in a 1982 essay, "The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," arguing that Western missionaries historically addressed the "natural" world of people and things and the spiritual world of God and eternity but failed appropriately to address the middle-range religious experience of folk religionists (of healings, visions, ancestral spirits, demons, and local deities). This failure, he claimed, produced an unhealthy split-level Christianity in mission churches. John Wimber, Peter Wagner, and Charles Kraft began to develop an approach to power encounter, healing, and spiritual warfare explicitly justified in terms of Paul's notion of the "excluded middle." When theology faculty complained about Wimber and Wagner's enormously popular but controversial course "Signs, wonders, and church growth," administrators intervened to restructure the course, asking Paul to give lectures providing a "balanced missiological perspective" on the controversy. Not surprisingly some were not satisfied with this "balance." When the controversy began splitting Mennonite Brethren Churches, Paul co-edited (with fellow Mennonite James Coggins) a 1989 book, *Wonders and the Word*, articulating a critique of ideas espoused by colleagues and proposing an alternative model.

In 1990, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School approached Paul about providing leadership to their own planned Ph.D. Program in Intercultural Studies, and found him more than ready to give himself to a new project where controversy could be left behind. During Paul's seventeen years at Trinity, he worked at building the Ph.D. Program in Intercultural Studies, which expanded at what the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (2003) called an "astonishing rate." Somehow he found time for recruiting new faculty (including myself), mentoring scores of Ph.D. students, teaching heavy loads, traveling to India on ministry trips, and always having time for family, colleagues, and students. In the final years after Fran's death he turned his home into an "ashram" where Ph.D. students were welcome to live with him in community. He also found time for extensive writing. Shortly before his death, he completed two more book manuscripts, which were published after his death, *The Gospel in Human Contexts* (Baker, 2009) and *Transforming Worldviews* (Baker, 2008) which was selected by *Christianity Today* in 2009 as the top book under the topic of Missions/Global Affairs.

Paul's colleagues, students, friends, and family (including his three children, Eloise, Barbara, and John) reminisced in the days after his death, not about the ideas in his twelve books or over one-hundred-fifty articles, but about the personal character and quality of his life. Paul's missiological commitments were undergirded by a life filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit and the hope of the resurrection. His legacy will live on, not merely through published words, but through the character qualities, missiological

understandings, and mission commitments he helped transmit to thousands of others.

In 2006, colleagues and friends honored Paul with a festschrift, *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, edited by Craig Ott and Harold Netland (Baker). And more recently, Craig Ott and Robert Priest worked with a team of doctoral students to prepare papers for this theme issue of *Trinity Journal*—papers which will summarize and explore the impact of Paul Hiebert's writings on the wider world of missions and theology. With deep appreciation for all that Paul Hiebert meant to us, we commend the life and writings of Paul G. Hiebert to the readers of *Trinity Journal*.



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