

**SELF THEOLOGY, GLOBAL THEOLOGY,
AND MISSIONAL THEOLOGY
IN THE WRITINGS OF PAUL G. HIEBERT**

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I. INTRODUCTION

In a time when anthropology and missions were in a "Love/Hate relationship" (Hiebert 1978), Paul Hiebert was vocal in both disciplines, seeking to find a missionally-informed anthropology and an anthropologically-informed missiology. His life-long pursuit was to wed in appropriate fashion anthropology, missions, and theology. Subsequently, one of his often-addressed subjects was theology and its role in both the local and global church. He introduced the "fourth self" to the classical three-self indigenous church model and also believed that dialogue between "theologies" in the global hermeneutical community would lead the church toward a true metatheology, or "global theology," coming ever closer to the more complete truth of theology as God sees it. Hiebert constantly revisited the correctness and effectiveness of the theological praxis within the church, and the final articulation of his vision for a global theology was his idea of "missional theology." This paper will (a) trace Hiebert's path to missional theology by reflecting on the principle arguments of self theology and global theology, (b) examine missional theology—both its context and its components, and (c) survey interactions with Hiebert's theologizing within the larger dialogue of missiology.

II. TOWARD MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

The foundation of Hiebert's thinking on theology can be traced along two paths: his views on contextualization and his views on epistemology. Though neither path is mutually exclusive, overlapping in significant ways, Hiebert's understanding of contextualization largely fed his idea of self theology, and his embrace of critical-realist epistemology more specifically grounded

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his global theology. He eventually merged the ideas from his concepts of self theology and global theology into his missional theology.

A. Contextualization

One of Hiebert's earliest publications, a 1973 article titled "Cultural Relativism and Theological Absolutes," established the trajectory for Hiebert's theologizing by revealing the ideas that became key components in each of his revisions and publications on theological praxis and missions. In the article, Hiebert affirms the twin truths that theologies must be true to divine revelation and relevant to current cultural contexts. He differentiates "between biblical revelation of God and the human theologies man constructs to understand this revelation" (1973, 4) and says all theologies must be tested by the biblical record (1973, 4).

Because Hiebert views the local and global church as a family of forgiven sinners helping one another follow Christ more closely, he calls the church to "recognize the integrity and autonomy of . . . new churches" (1973, 6). He pleads for a "fundamental spirit of mutual trust" that sees relationship as "one of partnership in a common effort rather than a unilateral action on the part of one, or a negotiation between competing bodies" (1973, 6).

Ten years later, Hiebert developed these ideas significantly, in what is now considered one of the most widely-read and influential articles in missiology: "Critical Contextualization" (1984; 1987). Hiebert traces how the shift from colonialism to anti-colonialism affected missionary paradigms for doing cross-cultural ministry, increasing, in particular, missionary zeal for contextualization. He applauds the cultural sensitivity sought by missionaries, but is concerned that zeal for contextualization has often led to *uncritical* contextual judgments resulting in theological error and church disunity. As a corrective, Hiebert calls for *critical* contextualization (i.e., that incorporates emic/etic models, metacultural grids, and knowledge systems) and suggests four steps for helping Christians uphold Scripture in culturally specific ways: exegesis of the culture, exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge, critical response, and new contextualized practices. To guard this process against syncretism, Hiebert appeals to biblical authority, the work of the Holy Spirit, and the input of an international hermeneutical community.

B. Self Theology

Hiebert's views on contextualization led him to see the limitations of the indigenous church model first advocated by Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn in the late nineteenth century. Anderson and Venn believed churches initiated by missionaries needed three

qualities to be considered mature and truly “indigenous”: self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Hiebert challenged the adequacy of these three qualities, believing a missionary-initiated church that became a fully-functioning three-self church was neither healthy nor indigenous if it simply adopted the theologies formulated in the West. Healthy indigenous churches, according to Hiebert, engaged in their own theological reflection.

Hiebert was not the first to see limitations with the indigeneity model (see Smalley 1958; Tippett 1973), but he was the first to identify “self-theologizing” as a major missing component. In 1985, he wrote about the need to add this “Fourth Self” (Hiebert 1985a; 1985c). He pushed for the right of young churches to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves at a time when many were asking *if* young missionary-initiated churches should be encouraged to develop their own theologies or not, and *what* missionaries should do “when these theologies seem to be going astray” (1985a, 193).

Though non-Western Christians around the world were discussing the concepts of contextualized “non-Western” theology as early as the 1940s in Japan,¹ the contextualization discussion among evangelicals—that had begun in earnest in the 1970s—focused more on missionary efforts at communication and cross-cultural theologizing (e.g., Kraft 1979). Hiebert coined the phrase “self-theologizing” and was the first to connect it to the traditional “three-self” model and push the contextualization discussion among North American evangelicals to include this fourth-self concept for mission churches.² Hiebert’s “self-theologizing” idea has been widely influential in missiological and theological circles (see Gonzalez 1990, 49; Bosch 1991, 427, 451-52; Terry, Smith, and Anderson 1998, 19, 311, 317; Hanciles 2002, 163; Clark and Feinberg 2003, 113; Frost and Hirsch 2003, 71; Phan 2003, 175; Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 60; Moreau, Corwin, and McGee 2005, 12, 155; Pocock, Van Rheenen, and McConnell 2005, 15; Penner and Barnes 2007, 119, 129; Rowell 2007, 76, 77, 189).

C. Epistemology

The second path of Hiebert’s theologizing—global theology—was grounded in epistemology. In 1978, Hiebert alluded to epistemological shifts taking place within the sciences and in 1985, he wrote two articles specifically addressing these shifts and their implications for theology and missiology. Hiebert (1985b) believed theology is best grounded in a critical realist epistemology because it

¹Based on email correspondence between Jon Ro and his father Bong Ro, November 30, 2007.

²Darrell Whiteman is confident the phrase “self-theologizing” did not appear before Hiebert wrote about it and Scott Moreau adds he doesn’t know of anyone else using the term “self-theologizing” prior to Hiebert. Based on email correspondence between Darrell Whiteman, Scott Moreau, and Robert Priest, November 26, 2007.

promotes our ability to know truth (even if our understanding is partial), and does not collapse our knowledge of truth into a single system. By integrating many theologies and taking human contexts/understanding into consideration, Hiebert argued that a critical-realist theology (1) differentiates between theology and biblical revelation, giving final authority to the Bible, (2) recognizes theology as *human* understanding of Scripture, (3) affirms the priesthood of all believers and their application of the Bible in specific contexts through the work and power of the Holy Spirit, and (4) requires the formation of an international hermeneutical community that together works and dialogues toward theological truth.

Since missiology seeks to marry theology with the social sciences, Hiebert says the adoption of critical realism as the epistemological foundation for theology and mission will lead missiologists to embrace a system of complementarity that allows for the strengths and viewpoints of the differing sciences (i.e., theology, anthropology, missiology) to overlap, in much the same way that blueprints for architecture, plumbing, and electrical networks overlap to show complementary, yet distinct, parts of a building. This more complete understanding, gained from the integration of multiple knowledge systems, helps missionaries better face cultural differences, pluralism, and relationships with non-Christians.

D. Global Theology

Based on his understanding of critical realism, Hiebert argued that hermeneutics was the task of the world-wide community of believers. Though churches have a right to interpret the Bible for their particular contexts, they also have a responsibility to listen to the greater "international" church to which they belong (1985a, 217). It was out of this global dialogue that Hiebert envisioned the development of a biblically-based, supracultural, historical, christological, and Spirit-led "transcultural theology" or "meta-theology" that would compare theologies, explore the cultural biases of each, and seek to find biblical universals (1985a, 217-19).

Why were contextualized theologies not enough by themselves? Because, Hiebert said, seeking a transcultural theology, not local theologies, is what builds the global Christian community, lets us all share in the church's mission, and helps us "to see more clearly the cultural biases in our theologies and . . . avoid the syncretisms that emerge when we contextualize our theologies uncritically" (1985a, 219). Hiebert knew that all Christians "see through a glass darkly,"³ but was convinced that through common study of the Scriptures the church could arrive at a better understanding of theology as God knows it. He cautioned that in dialoguing with theologians from

³This allusion to 1 Cor 13:12 is a favorite of Hiebert's, found in many of his writings.

other parts of the world, we must use the Bible and not our own theological understanding as the final criterion against which all theologies are measured (1985a, 219). In 1987, Hiebert wrote optimistically about the growing number of Christians around the world who were examining biblical absolutes and their meaning in different cultural contexts; he was truly encouraged by the increase in understanding of the biblical message without cultural bias (1987b, 19).

In 1991, Hiebert re-examined the impact that the shift from colonialism to anti-colonialism to an emerging globalism has had on missions, anthropology, theology, and epistemology. Though the article covers many of the same themes found in his previous works (cf. 1987a; 1985b; 1985c), "Beyond anticolonialism to globalism" (1991) more clearly articulates Hiebert's view for effectively engaging a global world. Missions, undergirded by a critical realist epistemology, must reevaluate its history, embrace critical contextualization, use double translation to "preserve the connection between meanings, forms, and realities in the translation" (1991, 273), be incarnational in witness in order to dialogue with others with the hope of persuading them to Christ, and carry out holistic ministry. Missions should embrace the complementarity between social sciences and theology, between emic and etic analyses, and between cultures; however, it is a biblical worldview that must be the master blueprint on which all of our systems for knowing are mapped.

When speaking of theology in a global world, Hiebert asks the critical question many missiologists have asked, "How do we resolve the tension between theological absolutes and theological pluralism—between Theology and theologies?" (1991, 277; cf. Nida 1960; Kraft 1979; Conn 1984). Hiebert's answer hints of missional theology. With the embrace of the complementary natures of systematic and narrative theologies, he calls for the development of "a theology of how to do theology" which begins and ends with Scripture and includes the rights of churches—led by the Holy Spirit—to carry out theologizing in light of their own contexts and in dialogue with the wider hermeneutical community of the church.

III. PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

A. *The Anabaptist Influence on Hiebert's Theology*

Thus far, we can see that Hiebert's theologizing has several prevalent themes: the authority of the Bible, the priesthood of all believers/churches, reliance on the Holy Spirit's leading, a critical realist epistemology and its embrace of the complementarity of multiple knowledge systems, an international hermeneutical community, the Bible's relevance to particular human contexts, and the development of a global theology. His essay, "Metatheology: The

step beyond contextualization" (1988), reveals why these themes resonate so loudly. Hiebert's theological understandings are clearly informed by his own Anabaptist roots and convictions.

Anabaptists' radical embrace of the priesthood of all believers leads to laypeople interpreting Scripture, some even serving as pastors. In contrast to some theologians who seek "to make ever more precise statements of final truth" (1988, 388), Anabaptists recognize a distinction between God's reality (objective truth grounded in Scripture) and humans' subjective understanding of it (theology, beliefs, and practices). This distinction makes Anabaptists unwilling to claim that any human doctrinal creed ought to be normative. Theology must be tested against Scripture, which has ultimate authority.

As critical realists, Anabaptists believe knowledge is an integration of God's truth with the specific cultural, historical, and social contexts of human beings. Theology, therefore, directly relates "the unchanging truths of the Gospel to issues of real life" (1988, 390) and leads to a living faith affecting all areas of life, on both cognitive and affective levels. Anabaptists do recognize the limitations of human understanding and knowledge. Since they "see through a glass darkly" they must continually return to Scripture to evaluate their convictions. However, if theology is both subjective and objective, how does one differentiate between "objective truth and . . . personal bias" (1988, 391)? Hiebert says the answer is not systematic theology, but rather, three tests for identifying error: (1) Is the idea espoused in or based on the Bible? (2) Is the interpreter humble toward Scripture and willing to listen to the leading of the Holy Spirit? and (3) Is the interpreter open for checks from the Christian community? This Anabaptist metatheology is the process by which "different theologies, each a partial understanding of the truth in a certain context" (1988, 391) are created. They are grounded in Scripture, arise from questions, situations, and problems faced in everyday life, find expression in discipleship, and are limited by the hermeneutical community of the church.

Hiebert says this metatheology gives Anabaptists a "center and a limit" when dealing with the diversity (implicit pluralism) inherent in their practice of the priesthood of all believers (1988, 392). Applying the Anabaptist approach to missions, he asks:

Is it possible that the *metatheological* approach can solve the missiological problems of contextualization and theological pluralism where traditional *theological* approaches have failed? What would theology on the international scene look like if these approaches were taken? (1988, 392)

Though he does not fully answer these questions, he identifies key areas involved with such pursuits: the priesthood of all believers, the need for continued Bible translation with attention made to cultural particularities, the evaluation of past cultural customs in light of

Scripture, the role of churches as manifestations of the kingdom of God within their own sociocultural contexts, the development of theologies based on the application of biblical truth to life issues, the role of Scripture as the standard by which all theologies are tested, the role of the Holy Spirit in leading us into truth, and the role of a hermeneutical community in “checking interpretations and seeking consensus” (1988, 393). He believes that, if the international church community integrates this metatheological process, there might be a growing global “consensus on theological absolutes” (1988, 394).

B. Missional Theology in Context

Hiebert identifies the purpose of his “Metatheology” article as dealing with “the rise of theological pluralism and the search for a supracultural theology that transcends cultural differences” (1988, 384). With this terminology, Hiebert places himself in dialogue with Harvie Conn and Charles Kraft. In *Eternal word and changing worlds*, Conn (1984) traces the history of interaction between anthropology and the church, identifying two stages of relationship or “Consciousness.” It is Conn’s belief that many of the questions and fears about contextualization, indigeneity, and ethnotheology⁴ would be resolved if missiology, anthropology, and theology could work in a balanced trialogue. The problem, however, was that he had not seen a model that put these in a proper balance. In the early 1980s, when Conn was writing, the stage had only recently been set to move missions from “Consciousness Two” toward “Consciousness Three”—trialogue. Conn credits Eugene Nida and Kenneth Pike for leading the way toward “Consciousness Three” and says Kraft’s 1979 expansion on Nida and Pike “moves us to the brink of trialogue” (1984, 157). While he has much to commend about Kraft’s “Christian Ethnotheology” model (Kraft 1979, 13), Conn also sees dangers. In his view it could give anthropology and the human side greater weight than theology, has potential for syncretism, confuses the role of the Holy Spirit’s illuminating work, and stresses localized theology over universal theology.

Though Conn eagerly anticipates “Consciousness Three,” he does not attempt to create a model for doing theology; however, in correcting the imbalances that he sees in Kraft, Conn does suggest that a balanced “trialogue” should include: a specific role for systematic and biblical (historical) theology, an understanding of theology in relation to cultures and lifestyle, the involvement of a worldwide community in theological development, and ways to guard against the dangers of syncretism should the trialogue become unbalanced.

⁴These concerns were flourishing in missiological conversations taking place at the time that Conn was writing this book in the early 1980s—the peak of contextualization zeal.

As the next major writer on “the trialogue in missions” (cf. Nida 1960; Pike 1977; Kraft 1979; and Conn 1984), Hiebert incorporates Conn’s suggestions into his missional way of “doing theology.” As we will see, Hiebert (a) formalizes the relationship between systematic theology, biblical theology, and missiology/anthropology, (b) emphasizes the role of the Holy Spirit, (c) embraces an epistemology that encompasses theology and lived human realities, and (d) incorporates the hermeneutical community and the ultimate authority of Scripture as guards against syncretism and an independent reliance on anthropology.

In the introduction to his book *Anthropological reflections on missiological issues*, Hiebert (1994, 10) cites his indebtedness to Conn’s thoughts on the “trialogue in missions” and then goes on to say, “The articles in this book attempt to carry out the trialogue between philosophical, historical, and empirical approaches to the study of both Scripture and humanity” (15). Every element found in this introduction is later expanded in his treatment of missional theology.⁵ What Conn (1984) could only see on the horizon⁶ and what Hiebert had attempted to do through various articles over the years became cohesively articulated by Hiebert in 2002 and following under the rubric of *missional theology*.

C. Missional Theology

Hiebert co-authored four expositions of missional theology with his colleague, Tite Tiénou, between 2002 and 2006.⁷ Their goal was to “suggest a third way of ‘doing theology’” which would begin with a view toward mission and God’s desire to affect contemporary contexts and would also complement, even rely on, the strengths of systematic and biblical theology (2006, 221). They modeled their proposed complementarity on the American judicial system.⁸

Systematic theology’s strength is in its pursuit of universals that logically structure reality into a comprehensive “conceptually coherent” system (2006, 222); because it is foundational, it functions very much like the constitution. Biblical theology, likewise, is strong in its understanding of history as a cosmic story of which we are all a part. As a diachronic system, biblical theology mirrors statutory law

⁵He speaks of the integration of systematic, biblical, and anthropological theology (11); the need for complementarity between systems of knowing (12); and the steps of ontology (11), phenomenology (12), and missiology (13). Though some of the terminology in the introduction is different from his final product, the meaning is the same.

⁶Conn died in 1999, before Hiebert’s first missional theology article was published.

⁷The fifth publication of this article, a reprint from *Missiology* 2006, was published this year in Paul G. Hiebert, *The Gospel in Human Contexts: Anthropological Explorations for Contemporary Missions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

⁸The law analogy is absent in “Missions and the doing of theology” (2002b), it appears in the rest of the missional theology articles (2002a; 2005; and 2006).

and its historical interpretations of constitutional law in “a changing world” (2006, 225). Though both systematic and biblical theology have strengths, they share the limitation of not dealing extensively with present human realities or God’s mission to penetrate these specific realities. This is where missional theology, compared to case law, steps in. Just as case laws arbitrate specific circumstances based upon the foundation of constitutional law and the historical precedent of statutory law, missional theology is grounded in systematic theology and incorporates the historical outworking of biblical theology.

To “do” missional theology, Hiebert and Tiéno establish three steps. *Phenomenology* requires an exegesis of humans and all that the specific issue under consideration involves. This step utilizes anthropological tools to gain an emic and etic view of the situation. *Ontology* places the phenomenological discoveries in light of Scripture and other church situations similar to the one in question. All three disciplines interact in this step: systematic and biblical theology revealing the “structure and story underlying the biblical narratives” (2006, 228), and anthropology giving insight into divine revelation “which was always given in particular historical and sociocultural contexts” (2006, 228). *Missiology*, with tools provided by both anthropology and theology, brings the findings of phenomenology and ontology to bear on a specific case and makes a “biblically shaped and culturally sensitive” judgment (2006, 229). Where systematic theology seeks to maintain boundaries and define orthodoxy, missional theology works to bring Scripture into dialogue with the world in a way that maintains biblical truth while giving value to human realities, worldviews, and experiences.

This complementarity between missional, systematic, and biblical theology keeps theologians asking relevant questions and missiologists grounded in biblical truths. Dialogue within a hermeneutical community of missiologists and theologians from around the world exposes biases and keeps “universals and particulars” and “past revelation and the gospel to the present” connected (2006, 231). Missional theology’s end result, Hiebert and Tiéno argue, is that it “makes theology live for us, because theology is no longer an abstract understanding of truth, but a map for living our lives” (2006, 235).

IV. INTERACTIONS WITH MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

As a relatively recent contribution, “Missional Theology” has received few formal critiques. In 2002, Juan Martinez questioned the application of missional theology to real life, recalling that history shows a “well intentioned missionary, trained in a traditional seminary, [could] ‘impose’ European/North American ‘precedents’ . . . and call them biblical” (2002, 56). If “complementarity . . . is mediated through Western models,” he says, it cannot identify and

respond to its own biases and weaknesses (2002, 57). As way of illustration, Martinez lists the controversial practice of polygamy. Though absent from their 2002 drafts, Hiebert and Tiénou's 2005 and 2006 revisions directly address both of Martinez's concerns with (1) their inclusion of illustrative case studies on Acts 15 and polygamy and (2) their more explicit endorsement of dialogue among international hermeneutical communities to combat error and cultural bias.

David Hesselgrave briefly mentions missional theology in his 2005 book, *Paradigms in conflict*. Hesselgrave says the theology "has its own baggage" (2005, 110)—a phrase he does not explain; however, he sees Hiebert's contribution as a positive way to establish common ground with people in other faith traditions. According to Hesselgrave, missional theology is one way correctly to uphold the relevance and ultimate authority of Scripture while also giving careful, thoughtful, and deliberate intention to understanding the cultural specifics that necessarily affect people's worldview and religious beliefs. In action, it "enables us to stand where others stand, temporarily making *their ground* common ground for the contextualizing of the gospel" (Hesselgrave 2005, 111).

The most extended interaction with Hiebert comes from fellow anthropologist and missiologist Robert Priest (2006, 180-95). Priest uses "the human comprehension of sin" as a basis for his study on the relationship between theology and anthropology in the global scene, and explores the validity and helpfulness of missional theology in mediating this relationship. Priest (2006, 183) adopts the distinction between "'experience-near' and 'experience-distant' concepts" from anthropologist Clifford Geertz to clarify the roles of theology and anthropology. Because its dialogue partner is philosophy, systematic theology leads to "abstract or theory dependent" understandings that establish universal categories of an "experience-distant" sort, categories not closely reflective of specific cultural contexts and experiences (Priest 2006, 183). Anthropology and the human sciences, on the other hand, provide tools for grasping experience-near understandings of people in specific cultures today. By its balanced use of both disciplines, Priest asserts that missional theology correctly brings the "experience-distant" understandings of systematic theology into close connection with the "experience-near understandings" of contemporary people, creating a meaningful relationship that aids in a theology that is both correct and culturally relevant. Through his application of this experience-near theologizing, Priest (194) concludes that missional theology, by engaging biblical texts in dialogue with anthropology and human experience, "contributes strategically to the larger task of theologizing in a global world" (195). This is precisely what Hiebert hoped missional theology would do.

V. CONCLUSION

“Doing Theology” is a sacred task and Hiebert repeatedly and prophetically emphasized the importance of globalizing theology in his writings. He had a high view of *all* people and their capacity for knowing and understanding God and the Scriptures, and Hiebert trusted that the same Holy Spirit at work in him was also working in the life of believers in other cultures. Since his “missional theology” is a relatively new contribution, it is hard to say exactly where it might take us; however, what is clear from this study is that missional theology is not a radical invention, a hastily thrown together idea, or a reactionary proposal to debates on the relationship between theology, missiology, and anthropology. In a sense, missional theology serves as the capstone of Hiebert’s life—his ingrained Anabaptist beliefs, his dedication to anthropology, his passion for missions, his reliance on the authority of the Bible, and his high regard for people and their ability to do theology. Hiebert was highly-respected, well-versed in a variety of fields, and known for his careful, thoughtful, and well-worded contributions. As one of recent missiology’s greatest prophetic voices, it behooves us to consider this final summation of his views.

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