

Rethinking the Great Commission for the African Context: A Proposal for the Paradigm of Relational Missiology (Part I)

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Abstract

Given the fact that the popular practice in Christian mission in the West is “entrepreneurial” in conceptualization and “managerial” in operation, “relational missiology” is proposed as an alternative for the African context. In sharp contrast to western “managerial missiology” approaches, relational missiology is scripturally based, theologically grounded, theoretically coherent and contextually relevant for the African context for practical implementation.

Introduction

This article is written in response to the call for inclusive input from the Global South in international missiological discourse as stated in the “Iguassu Affirmation” of 1999. That gathering of 160 mission practitioners, missiologists and church leaders from 53 countries in South America issued the following:

We rejoice in diverse missiological voices emerging around the world, but we confess that we have not taken them all into our theory and practice. Old paradigms still prevail. Participation by and awareness of the global church, as well as mission from people of all nations to people of all nations, are needed for a valid missiology in our time (World Evangelical Fellowship Mission Commission 2001:50).

This article thus seeks to engage African mission leaders in rethinking the Great Commission for the African context. First, the article (in Part I) will provide a critique of the prevalent missiological paradigm in the West. Second, the article (in Part II) will propose relational missiology as a viable alternative for the African context.

The article holds two operational assumptions:

- (1) “contextualization” is imperative for the theory and practice of Christian mission anywhere and anytime; though an important topic, contextualization per se will not be covered in this article;
- (2) the Great Commission, as textually-based on Mt 28:16-20, is narrower than Christian mission (as defined below); a more comprehensive understanding of Christian missions is vital for healthy contextualization in African contexts.

The second assumption is based on the distinction between “the Great Commission” and Christian mission. This paper is entitled, “Rethinking the Great Commission for the African Context”, but the focus of this article is broader than the text of Mt 28:16-20. Readers may consider this broader focus on Christian mission as part of the process of “rethinking of the Great Commission in the African context.” African socio-cultural contexts requires a more holistic perspective than the task of “making disciples,” for there are two levels (i.e. individual and

institutional) and three dimensions (i.e. spiritual, social and transformational) in “Christian mission,” as shown in the definition of Christian mission below.

For the sake of clarity, several key terms and phrases are defined below:

Managerial Missiology (MM) – the academic study of missiology by uncritically adopting secular management principles and practices in Christian mission

Managerial Mission Practice (MMP) - ways and means of practicing Christian mission in the same manner as secular management in business that might be “biblical” and secularly contextual, but definitely not “scriptural”

Mission - Christians (individuals) and the Church (institutional) continuing on and carrying out the *missio Dei* of the Triune God at both individual and institutional levels spiritually (saving souls) and socially (ushering in *shalom*) for redemption, reconciliation, and transformation

Missions - ways and means of accomplishing “the mission” which has been entrusted by the Triune God to the Church and Christians (Wan 1998)

Paradigm - a coherent conceptual model for philosophical postulation and scholarly research (Kuhn 1970, Barbour 1974) or “the researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological premises” or “interpretive framework” (Denzin and Lincoln 2000:19).

Relational Missiology (RM) - the academic study of missiology with a relational theoretical framework, where relationship has both vertical and horizontal dimensions; vertical is primary and foundational, but horizontal is always necessary and present

The Importance of Relationships in the African Context

According to the joint research of African scholars Elizabeth Onyedinma Ezenweke and Louis Kanayo Nwadiolor, African societies as a whole are highly collectivistic. For example, they made the following three observations on the relational characteristic of African cultures in their article, “Understanding Human Relations in African Traditional Religious Context in the Face of Globalization” (Ezenweke and Nwadiolor 2013:64):

- “The African human relations were indissolubly connected with culture and permeate the whole of life...Communalism in African world was a system that was both supersensible and material in its terms of reference.”
- “For the African man, the basic belief is I am because we are.”
- “A true African man is known and identified in, by and through his community. The community is the custodian of the individual; he must go where the community goes.”

Sentiment and emphasis regarding the importance of relational characteristic within African socio-cultural context are shared by authors such as:

- Adigwe, H.A. & Okoye, V.V.L. (1980). *Women, Justice and evangelization*. Onitsha: Africana-Fep.
- Ayis, Eric O. (1979). *An Introduction to the Study of African Culture*, 2 edition. Heinemann.

- Davidson, B. (1969). *The African Genius*. Boston: Atlantic.
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Furthermore, according to Geert Hofstede, "collectivist societies" can be described in the following way:

The fundamental issue addressed by this dimension [of "individualism" is *the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members* [emphasis original]. It has to do with whether people's self-image is defined in terms of 'I' or 'We.' In Individualist societies people are only supposed to look after themselves and their direct family. In Collectivist societies people belong to 'in groups' that take care of them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede 2019a).

Hofstede's online country comparison tool (Hofstede 2019) shows that nearly all the African countries listed in this tool lean heavily toward being collectivistic, as shown in Figure 1 below. In fact, the average score for all 19 African nations listed is 20.421. This is perhaps one of the lowest averages for a region of that mass. Only the country of South Africa, with a score of 65, can be considered somewhat individualistic. It is literally the only significant outlier in the continent. This phenomenon can probably be attributed to the more current Western influences in

the region. Yet, even compared to other Western nations that spurred the “critical realism” form of contextualization, a score of 65 is exceedingly low. For example, the United States, which is the premier Western ideal of individualism, has a score of 91. Compared to that score and the scores of other Western nations, South Africa can be deemed more moderate rather than individualistic.

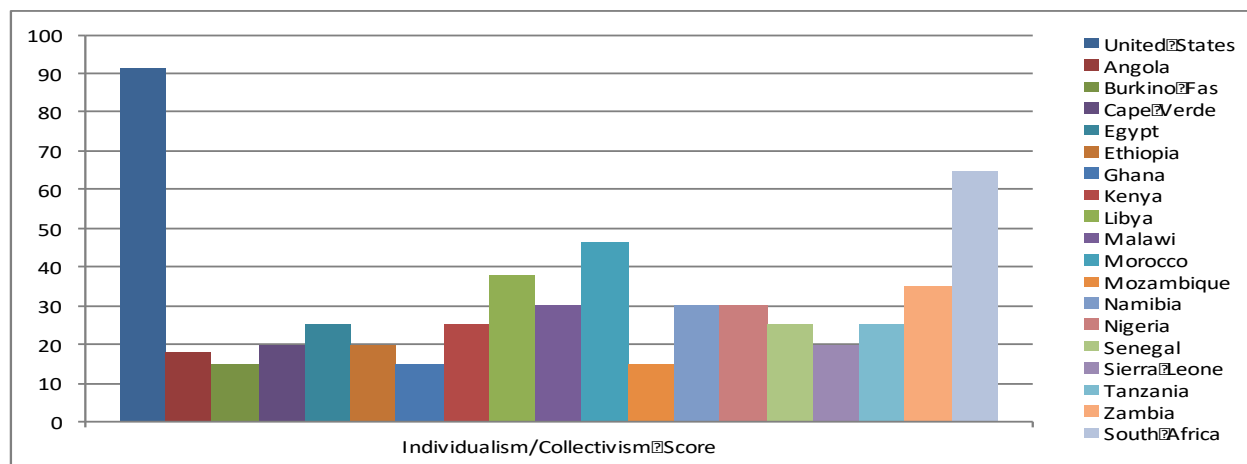


Figure 1 - Geert Hofstede’s online country comparison of selected African countries

Critique of the Prevalent Missiological Paradigm of the West

According to James Engel, the term or phrase “managerial missiology” was coined by Samuel Escobar, who made the following observation:

The term managerial missiology refers to a trend within evangelical missiology that emphasizes the management of mission practice. It developed in North America during the last third of the twentieth century. It came from a cluster of institutions connected to the Church Growth school and movements such as AD 2,000 and Beyond. It is an effort to reduce Christian mission to a manageable enterprise” (Escobar 2007:216).

When rethinking the Great Commission, we are to objectively review and reflect on the popular practice of Christian mission in the West, based on the prominent epistemological paradigm of “critical realism” embraced by western scholars. Here in this section, we will objectively critique “managerial missiology,” which is the popular way to practice Christian mission in the West in four aspects: focus, conceptualization, perspective and orientation (see Figure 2 below).

Focus

In managerial missiology, Christian mission emulates secular business management with its focus on programming and confidence in detailed planning for predictable results. The emphasis is on horizontal relationships with a low view (or often times none) of the vertical relationship.

James Engel was one of the leading figures in managerial missiology, for he had successfully convinced Evangelicals to accept his communication model and marketing principles in Christian missions, from his former training and career. He published and co-authored many books in the areas of communication theory, consumer behavior and promotional strategy, in which he proposed the “Engel’s Scale,” and led missiology in “a major leap onto the secular stage of strategic planning” (David Nett 1999).

Conceptualization

Practitioners of managerial missiology subscribe to “critical realism” which is merely horizontal in conceptualization. There is a preference for entrepreneurship that places high value on efficiency and outcome-based performance at the expense of relationships, i.e. relationship is conceived as a means to the end result of quantifiable outcomes (profiting in relationship). Only lip service to vertical relationship, for the entire mindset is man-centered. It is theoretically oriented in instrumentalism (Hiebert 1999:36-67) and functionalism (e.g. Malinowski and Radcliff-Brown of British anthropology), with strong emphasis on a receptor-oriented and “felt needs” approach in practice (Kraft 1979:81-99, 169-192;), leading to pragmatism (measurable success and outcome-based; effort-optimism: what counts is trying hard and long enough). This pragmatic orientation is in line with the research findings of the Barna Group in 2010: one of the “six megathemes” of American Christianity is “growing numbers of people are less interested in spiritual principles and more desirous of learning pragmatic solutions for life,” and at the same time “the Christian Church is becoming less theologically literate (i.e. another theme of the six).

Christian mission is presumed by managerial missiologists to be an enterprise, and “the gospel is a product to be marketed to the target group (or consumers) with measurable goals through carefully crafted strategy. One of the characteristics is the extensive use of marketing and communication technique for the quantifiable success with efficiency” (Wan 2014:111-112). Managerial missiologists “have tended to turn communication [of the gospel] into a technique where we market a product called ‘salvation’. The consumer is the sinner and the marketer is the missionary. In the bargain, what is missed is redemptive living in society” (David Nett 1999).

In order to reduce time for the sake of efficiency in church planting, here is a novel idea:

The shortest distance between two points is not a straight line. It’s a wrinkle.” Strategy Coordinators engaged in Church Planting Movements have learned to wrinkle time—combining multiple steps into a single model (Garrison 243-244).

On this same point, another way of critiquing managerial missiology is clearly articulated in the extensive quotation below:

‘The distinctive note’ of this approach to missions ‘is to *reduce Christian mission to a manageable enterprise,*’ Escobar wrote. Practitioners of this approach focus on the quantifiable, measurable tasks of missions and ask pragmatic questions about how to achieve goals. Escobar called this statistical approach ‘anti-theological’ and said it ‘has no theological or pastoral resources to cope with the suffering and persecution involved because it is geared to provide guaranteed success’ (David Nett 1999).

The conceptualization of managerial missiology is instrumentalism, which is non-relational and pragmatic. There is the tendency of emptying ministry and Christian mission of relational

reality by treating religion and spirituality as a program to be delivered and the gospel as a commodity to be marketed for consumption based on “felt need.” Let us heed the warning of James F. Engel, who was a main champion for MMP but has made drastic shift to become a critic, who observes:

One of the final lures of managerial missiology lies in the area of appeal to felt need.... it is possible to build a large church quickly and easily by promising that Jesus is the answer to all our hopes and felt need.... Crowds thronged around Jesus during his early ministry because of this very expectation. However, as he focused on the narrow way, on the true meaning of kingdom living, the crowds dwindle. Christ did take felt need seriously, but this was only the starting point. He quickly moved to the underlying real need and issued a stringent call for commitment and radically altered lifestyle. Numerical growth can slump drastically when we follow his model (Engel 1993).

Perspective

Managerial missiology is performance-based, therefore it is highly empirical and impersonal, therefore it is in stark contrast from the relational paradigm explained in Part II. By its “Babel Complex,” MMP is pointing back to Genesis 10 where man-centered expression and manifestation were reported as a city (not to be scattered) and tower (vanity). Their plot and plan are precursors of strategizing by managerial missiologists who set measurable goals and priority, aiding in achieving efficiency, according to Peter Wagner (1987:32). Within the strategic framework of managerial paradigm are elements of time, action and planning. Todd M. Johnson, director of the World Evangelization Research Center, writes that the closure idea has been kept “before the Christian public almost continually through the twentieth century in the form of confident slogans, plans and documents,” then lists out 20 international gatherings, conferences and consultations during the last century (Hesselgrave 2005:288-289).

Statistical data are informative for strategizing, but misused managerially will lead to dire consequences as warned by Janel K. Bakker:

They are concerned more with statistics, techniques, inventiveness, entrepreneurialism, leadership strategy, pragmatism, and numerical growth than with theological or anthropological reflection.... the managerial model has fostered numerous mission efforts among evangelicals (who now overwhelmingly dominate international mission endeavors among North Americans) that are ‘organized, focused, well-managed, and even scientific’ in their approach to ministry (Bakker 2014:34).

The missionary nature of Christianity will then become secularized, being changed to be mercenary and non-relational instead of missionary and relational. For this reason, Escobar criticizes managerial missiology for being dehumanizing (Escobar 2003:57) in the following manner:

Its basic tenet is that Christian mission can be reduced to a ‘manageable enterprise’ thanks to the use of information, technology, marketing techniques and managerial leadership. Their effort to visualize the missionary task with ‘scientific’ precision has led to the formulation of concepts such as ‘unreached peoples’, ‘homogenous units’, the ‘10-40 Wwindow’ or ‘adopt-a-people’. What I am seeing in the application of these concepts

in the mission field is that missionaries ‘depersonalize’ people into ‘unreached targets’, making them objects of hit-and-run efforts to get decisions that may be reported. The difficult tasks of discipleship and building the body of Christ are bypassed in the name of managerial goals that seem designed to give their missionary center in the United States an aura of success (Escobar 2003:167).

Operation

Managerial missiology emulates the secular business management model, therefore it is characteristically humanistic and impersonal. It is managerially statistical and strategically obsessed with quantifiable outcomes.

Since Christian mission is conceived of as an enterprise, there is the tendency of commodification of Christianity to consumers. Since recipients of the gospel are viewed as customers or target group, then the operational style will be more “mercenary” than “missionary.”

Also, there is the tendency to dichotomize between “the Great Commandment” and “the Great Commission,” or saving souls and serving human-social needs. In managerial missiology, technology has an important role to play, leading to the design of programs with quantifiable goals, the practice of formulaic approaches and programmatic procedures as described in the quotation below:

Concepts such as ‘people-groups’, ‘unreached peoples’, ‘homogeneous units’, ‘10-40 window’, ‘adopt a people’ and ‘territorial spirits’...express both a strong sense of urgency and an effort to use every available instrument to make the task possible. One way of achieving manageability is precisely to reduce reality to an understandable picture, and then to project missionary action as a response to a ‘problem’ that has been described in quantitative form (Escobar 2007:216).

A similar observation regarding the obsession with quantifiable outcomes is shown in the quotation below:

Quantifiable results soon became a virtual obsession... Organizational public relations machinery geared up to fever-pitch reporting the numbers allegedly reached through crusades, the media, and intensified personal evangelism initiatives... [but no] definite evidence that the kingdom of God is being exemplified (David Nett 1999).

The obsession with rapid, quantifiable growth and spectacular outcomes may mislead practitioners, who may end the church planting process disastrously with devastating damage to their sense of calling and career (Escobar 2003:57). Along the same line of thinking, a missionary has made the following observation regarding CPM: “Missionaries not experiencing the rapid reproduction of churches get discouraged. This methodology sets up 99 percent of missionaries for certain failure, because if no CPM occurs, most missionaries feel as though they have failed” (Sills 2010:146).

In managerial missiology, there is the practice of employing formulaic approaches at the expense of relationship:

A formulaic approach to missions that places a high premium on rapidly abandoning tried and tested practices in favor of cutting-edge discoveries in the social sciences or the business world has not benefited missions in the majority world. Instead, the pursuit of efficiency in missions has left behind a trail of broken relationships (Sills 2010:107).

The way of rethinking the Great Commission as described below may be considered as a post-colonial exercise:

Imperial missiology carried on missionary work from a position of superiority: political, military, financial, technological. While ‘the cross and the sword’ symbolized it at the height of Iberian mission in the sixteenth century, ‘commerce and Christianity’ symbolized it at the height of Protestant European mission in the nineteenth century. And in our lifetime ‘information technology and gospel’ has come to symbolize it. In the imperial missiology paradigm, Christianity is thus dependent on the prop and tutelage of another powerful partner.... The paradigm shift that this understanding requires is still underway, especially among the evangelical missionary establishment (Escobar 2003:26).

Proponents of managerial missiology embrace a strong Euro-American-centric perspective that has been shaped by the “Christendom” mentality with a centuries-long history of western domination internationally. Reinforced by their linear, territorial and spatial cognitive pattern, this perspective naturally leads to their insistence on the binary pattern of sending and giving, home and foreign missions, as well as local and global ministry.

In missionary work there are some aspects that cannot be reduced to statistics, but the managerial missiological approach has given predominance to that which can be reduced to a statistical chart. Some acts of verbal communication of the gospel, such as distribution of the printed page, hours of broadcasting through radio or TV, massive gatherings for evangelism, or groups of new believers organized into churches, are all activities that can be counted and registered. It is more difficult to measure the time, energy and sacrifice involved in leadership teams, personal discipleship or theological creativity, all of which are necessary for new churches (Escobar 2007:216).

Summary

Part I of this article has provided a multi-faceted critique of managerial missiology. The following defense of managerial missiology provides further food for thought:

It appears to me that the word ‘managerial’ is being used in a pejorative way. This is most unfortunate since a whole group of Christians who try and develop their God-given managerial gifts for the advancement of God’s Kingdom find their vocation placed under such negative light. Management is one of many gifts of the Spirit. Time and again Scripture instructs the believers about the use of their managerial skills.... Labeling the kind of reflection that has come out of Pasadena as ‘managerial missiology’ is reductionist in terms of an intentionally negative categorization of missiological studies. The so-called ‘Pasadena group’ or ‘Pasadena think-tank’ represents a wide variety of field experiences. The theories or models that have been proposed by both Fuller Seminary’s School of World Mission and the U.S. Center have been tested by that most demanding group of Christian witnesses, namely, the multiethnic group of students and

practitioners who have taken these ideas to bear upon their field contexts, and have critiqued and criticized them in papers and dissertations for more than two decades now.... (DeCarvalho 2003:15).

Part II's forthcoming presentation of "Relational Missiology" will continue the comparison with "Managerial Missiology" and the appropriateness of both to Africa.

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