

Book Review

Kenneth Nehrbass, *Advanced Missiology: How to Study Missions in Credible and Useful Ways*

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In *Advanced Missiology: How to Study Missions in Credible and Useful Ways*, Kenneth Nehrbass adds a significant contribution to the field of missiology. This book should be on the reading list of any Intercultural/Missions Studies program as it provokes thought and reflection, and it is well-designed for personal or classroom study. There are very few books that teach “missiology” in this manner. It will serve as a useful companion to works such as Charles Van Engen’s *Mission on the Way* (Van Engen 1996) and Stanley Skreslet’s *Comprehending Mission* (Skreslet 2012). Nehrbass’s book is not without shortcomings, but *Advanced Missiology* is commendable in its purpose and effort.

In introducing *Advanced Missiology*, Nehrbass recognizes the increasingly complex nature of missiology, targeting the twin needs for an interdisciplinary approach and to address the disconnect between theory and practice. Theories are defined as “*descriptive* explanations of the way the world works,” and Nehrbass uses the word “model” for best practices, “*prescriptive* ways for doing things” (5). He considers the book “advanced” because he is not merely introducing theories and models but critiquing them (2). As such, he considers David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission* and Timothy Tennent’s *Invitation to World Missions* among others as “introductory.” Nehrbass writes, “What we have found lacking is a book that shows how missiologists have actually generated academically credible theories that are useful for those missionary-practitioners who are making disciples across cultures” (2). The book is thus an attempt to advance an interdisciplinary process where theory is connected to practice.

The book is lengthy, nearly 400 pages, but it is easy to read and follow. *Advanced Missiology* is structured as a river (see following paragraphs) and is divided into two parts: seven chapters in Part I under the heading “Tributaries of Missiology” and four chapters in Part II under the heading “Distributaries of Missiology.” Each chapter begins with an inset box of Chapter Goals, “Action goals,” and “Heart goals,” and ends with suggestions for Future Research, Review Questions, and Reflection Questions. Key definitions and ideas have their own boxes throughout each chapter. Sixteen diagrams and ten tables help readers understand how the various topics are related to each other. Of note are the sidebars of key missiologists and their contributions that serve to illustrate the topics being presented. In summary, the book is well-designed to be used as a textbook on missiology.

In Chapter 1, Nehrbass sets the stage for the rest of the book by providing two constructs: a new definition and a new metaphor for missiology. First, Nehrbass begins with Alan Tippett’s definition of missiology: “the academic discipline or science which researches records and applies data relation to the biblical origin, the history ... the anthropological principles and techniques in the theological base of the Christian mission” (13). While seminal, Nehrbass feels it is unhelpful as contemporary missiology involves more than theology, history, and the social sciences; moreover, it does not include the process which connects theory with practice.

To address these shortcomings, Nehrbass redefines missiology to be “the utilization of multiple academic disciplines to develop strategies for making disciples across cultures” (14).

Second, Nehrbass proposes a better metaphor for contemporary missiology to be that of a river of interdisciplinary academic fields rather than the common metaphor of a “three-legged stool” comprised of theology, history, and the social sciences. He argues that the three-legged stool metaphor is too restrictive, presenting missiology as static, with separated disciplines, lacking the ability to provide a proper unifying meta-theory, and not accurately describing the recursive process between disciplines. In response, Nehrbass proposes the following:

I will develop a metaphor of missiology which attempts to rectify the deficiencies of models like three-legged stools, Venn diagrams, and spokes on a wheel. I envision the science of Christian missions more as a river with countless tributaries (theoretical disciplines) that converge at the common goal of making disciples in cross-cultural contexts. As the river moves downstream, it serves multiple communities in endless ways (mission strategies) (25).

Nehrbass’s contention is that missiology must be much more interdisciplinary in nature if it is to address the increasingly complex contexts of the twenty-first century.

With this new definition and new metaphor, the remainder of the chapters connect various upstream disciplines to the downstream goal of cross-cultural discipleship. The following chapters in Part I explore how theology, history, anthropology, intercultural studies, development theory, and education each connect to cross-cultural discipleship. Part II focuses on defining cross-cultural discipleship as “any activity that helps people across cultures to bring these spheres of their lives under the lordship of Christ” (202) and presents seminal theories and models that can be used to achieve it. Finally, chapter 11 discusses the future of missiology.

There are many strengths in the book. First, the book is well-designed as a textbook for pedagogy. Second, the book has substantive breadth in presenting the gamut of theories and models in the various disciplines that can be used to develop healthy missions practices. *Advanced Missiology* also serves as an extensive resource compendium for students and missiologists. Third, the book fulfills its purpose to connect theory with practice by using multiple examples. Examples of how theories contribute to new practices include an analysis of shifts in historiography which helps one understand the shifts in roles of the global missionary force in chapter 3, the discussion of how Mary Douglas’s grid-group theory aids in understanding cross-cultural dynamics in chapter 5, and a much-needed discussion in Chapter 6 on development studies in missiology on the role Christianity and churches play in the twenty-first century as globalization transforms nations, societies, and cultures. Fourth, Nehrbass fulfills his intention not just to introduce but to critique the strengths, weaknesses, and limitations of the various theories and models presented.

In addition, there are several other aspects of the book to keep in mind. First, Nehrbass’s premise that the “three-legged stool” metaphor is outdated and inadequate may be misplaced. Insofar as Nehrbass sees the metaphor as descriptive, his argument has merit. But his argument falls apart if the “three-legged stool” is viewed as prescriptive. In other words, prescriptively used, for any theory or model to be valid, all three must align. As a woodworker, I know making a “three-legged stool” is not as easy as it seems. It requires a recursive process to ensure that all the legs have the proper angles and are positioned properly. Making a stool is a dynamic, interactive process. In the same vein, Nehrbass’s river metaphor works descriptively but does not hold its weight prescriptively (see pages 29-32); that is, while Nehrbass may encourage collaboration, the metaphor does not require it. Streams can flow any which way without the

need to be supportive of other streams; a river just flows, but the interactions of streams are *ad hoc*, not intentional.

Second, *Advanced Missiology*'s limited framework presents missiology more like a stream than a river. Though Nehrbass uses terms such as “complex,” “recursive,” and “fuzzy,” he never enters the meta-theory framework from which these terms derive their particular meanings here—Complex Systems Science (CSS) or Complex Adaptive Systems (CAS), an approach almost every hard and soft science discipline has adopted since the turn of the millennium (Law 2016, 43; Matenga 2019). Hence, as much as Nehrbass endeavors “to rectify the deficiencies of models like three-legged stools, Venn diagrams, and spokes on a wheel” (25), he nevertheless does not illustrate “fuzziness” but still uses Venn diagrams (Figure 2), wheels (Figure 5), and taxonomies such as “systematic missiological theology” in Chapter 2.

Lacking a complex systems framework, coupled with a narrow definition of “missiology,” thus results in three shortcomings:

1. The book orbits an anthropocentric pole. By defining missiology as “the utilization of multiple academic disciplines to develop strategies for making disciples across cultures,” Nehrbass has limited the discipline to finding best practices. Though Nehrbass calls for the generation of new theories (293), the definition primarily focuses on “utilization” and “strategies.” If best practice is Nehrbass’s focus for missiology, my comments here in this review are moot.

Andrew Walls appropriately cautions that missiology should not focus on best practices alone (Walls 1996, 234); it must seek to understand what the Great Practitioner is doing. Van Engen’s and Skreslet’s missiological texts, as well as those of Bosch, Goheen, and Piper that Nehrbass cites, all sought to integrate both divine and human poles. While the “Holy Spirit” is mentioned 30 times, He almost always is the subject of study, not the One under Whose guidance missiology should take place. Nehrbass connects disciplines well with cross-cultural discipleship but could have better developed a recursive loop back to the Master. A systems approach of both/and would have avoided circling around just one pole.

2. Missiology’s narrow redefinition places *Advanced Missiology* in an academic eddy, a criticism others have raised (Baker 2014, 19). Many streams enter, but there does not seem to be much interaction with the rest of the river. Nehrbass studied missiological journals with regards to expiry dates of theories and models (285); but, had he compared the missiological journals with those from other disciplines in the river, he would have realized how missiology lags the other academic disciplines in studying twenty-first-century complex realities (Law 2016, 206). The other disciplines are already much further downstream (Rynkiewich 2011, 151-152).

A systems approach would have thrust missiology into dynamic interaction with the universe of disciplines. It is not enough to utilize theories and models from other disciplines: missiology should be in constant dialogue with them, both to keep missiology current as well as to cross-fertilize, even serving as a corrective to, the other disciplines. Unfortunately, such interaction is increasingly rare (Paas 2011, 5). Hence, while *Advanced Missiology* may improve the usefulness of missiology, its approach remains weak in improving academic credibility.

3. The book is U.S.-American-centric, drawing largely from North American publications. For example, I could not find a single article cited from the European and more interdisciplinary *Mission Studies*. This limited field of sources then begs readers to question if Nehrbass is addressing a primarily U.S.-American issue (Walls 1996)—where the majority of missiologists are now trained in seminaries (Baker 2014; Rynkiewich 2011).

It should be noted that perhaps I may have been a bit too critical than I should, as I am both *emic* and *etic* in perspective toward missiology. I do consider myself a “American-trained missiologist,” but I am also critiquing from a secular discipline and serving in a non-Western setting. If this book review is overly critical, the fault rests with me and I must apologize for that.

In the end, I wish to reiterate my strong recommendation for *Advanced Missiology*, and I will be adding it to my Missions Research course. It is a well-written, comprehensive work on the current state of missiology. Recognizing its limitations should help to provoke even more thought as to how missiology might advance in the future.

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