

MISSIOLOGY AS A DISCIPLINE: A BIEF INTRODUCTION

Fran Blomberg, Adjunct Professor of Christian Missions, Denver Seminary

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I. Introduction

In humor, John Terry calls missiology: "a horrid hybrid word...a clumsy construct...a linguistic monstrosity." With more seriousness he defines missiology as “what happens when the mission of God comes into holy collision with the nature of man” (Terry, 1 and 2). Missiology derives from *missio*, Latin for “sending” as in *missio Dei* and *logos*, Greek for ‘word,’ used of Scripture and Christ, both with a sense of being living, vital and active.

II. Historical survey: Missiology in the scope of theology

Historically, when "Mission" was the fundamental expression of life in the church, its study was simply accepted as an organic part of theology. Mission was part of the definition of God and part of the nature of the church. As the church became institutionalized and the responsibility for sending and outreach became the domain of a particular group of people, the study of missions was narrowed to a branch of theology.

Many credit Raymond Lull (1200s) as being Christianity’s first missiologist for his attempts to establish training centers in which Islam, Arabic culture and principles of witness would be taught, counter to the prevailing attitude of conquest through Crusade.

In Europe during the period of Enlightenment, theology was further fragmented into aspects of theory and practice. The prevailing theory of study was the “fourfold pattern” of Bible: church history, systematic theology and practical theology. The study of missions was further marginalized as a subset of practical theology. “Missions was assigned to the practical areas which existed to serve the institutional church.” (Terry, 5)

Other early practitioners, who did not even know the title “missiologist,” were German Pietist leaders August Francke and Philip Spener, Moravian patron Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf, American preachers John Elliot and Jonathan Edwards and Englishmen William Carey and Hudson Taylor. From the mid-1800s to late 1900s, Henry Venn, Rufus Anderson, John Nevius and Roland Allen, and most recently Donald McGavran distinguished themselves in articulating principles and strategies for establishing indigenous church planting movements.

The term “missiology” was first postulated and defined with the rise of social sciences in the mid-1800s. However, more than asking how the discoveries in the social

sciences could intentionally support and further the supernatural and unpredictable work of the Holy Spirit, early studies of missiology seemed to go down the track of attempting to offer a fully rational and quantifiable depiction of how God could and would act.

Subsequently, missiology was reduced to a task/branch/program “missions” of the church and not part of its intrinsic nature. “Where mission was defined virtually exclusively in terms of saving souls or of church extension, missiology could only be the science of and for the missionary,” answering the question of how to “do missions” (Bosch, 492)

As colonial empires disintegrated, “missions” was suspect and often rejected. This forced theologians and practitioners to recapture the concept of "mission" as the very being of the church. The study of missiology again becomes more of a core feature of theology.

III. Missiology as an academic discipline

“Missiology” is the academic study of mission which draws on theological studies and the social sciences (Moreau, *IWM*, 73-74). It includes theology and the social sciences -- the social, historical and religious settings of people around the world -- anthropology, communication, economics, education, history, linguistics, political science, psychology, and sociology, demography geography, technology, etc.

According to Walt Kaiser, missiology is "the formal study of the Christian Mission in its biblical, the logical, historical, cultural, and strategic dimensions as well as its present and future aspects" (Kaiser, 11-13).

"Mission" is seen to permeate all theological disciplines, has its place in all core areas of study in academic institutions, but also has an intentional aspect which addresses the global context. (Terry, 6) At Denver Seminary for example, mission is seen in the core requirements for globalization expected of all students and faculty, and not only in the intercultural ministries core classes required of some students.

“We are in need of a missiological agenda for theology rather than just a theological agenda for mission; for theology, rightly understood, has no reason to exist other than critically to accompanied the *missio Dei*” (Bosch, 494)

Sound hermeneutical principles must not be subordinated to the methodologies or findings of the social sciences. Coherency within a social science discipline does not guarantee that such practice is acceptable or normative when considered theologically (see, for example, Wan, “Critique of Charles Kraft’s Use/Misuse of Communication and Social Sciences in Biblical interpretation and Missiological Formulation,” in Rommen and Corwin, 121-64).

IV. The practical potential and responsibility of Missiology

The following quotation from Bosch is very insightful and helpful to this discussion:

“Missiology acts as a gadfly in the house of theology, creating unrest and resisting complacency, opposing every ecclesiastical impulse to self preservation, every desire to stay what we are, every inclination to provincialism and parochialism, every fragmentation of humanity into regional or ideological blocs, every exploitation of some sectors of humanity by the powerful, every religious, ideological, or cultural imperialism, and every exultation of self-sufficiency of the individual over other people or over other parts of creation” (Bosch, 496).

Missiology has the responsibility to be "initiator and mediator in dealing with the new challenges that theology will face on every side." (Verstraelen, 467) Missiology will have a head start and will lead in making sense of the following:

- a. Religious pluralism and religious fundamentalism
- b. The particularity of contextualization and global Christianity
- c. The nature of the church and its task in representing the Kingdom of God both spiritually and in living contexts
- d. an eschatology of hope in the midst of a polarizing and decaying world

Missiology offers the dual perspective of theology and anthropology to help with critical questions regarding authentic human spiritual experience. International forums on issues of spiritual warfare, demonization, and the shifting boundaries of psychology and theology rely on the balanced perspective of missiological discipline.

Missiology must bring home the answers it has proposed for the unidirectional flow of mission from the West outward as the West experiences increasing religious pluralism and paganism.

V. Anticipating “Basic Questions in Missiological Research”

We need clear guidelines for the boundaries of theology and social science in the practice of missiology! In the absence of clear guidelines, we need sound principles, similar to lists of principles that have been developed for the practice of contextualization.

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