

Editorial

“Missiological Iron Sharpening”

J. Nelson Jennings

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The familiar phrase “iron sharpens iron” gets cited in all sorts of collaborative settings (religious or not), be they performing arts troupes, athletic teams, political parties, or myriad other groups. Those familiar with the Judeo-Christian tradition will recognize the phrase as a biblical one; some will pinpoint its source as the Book of Proverbs, specifically 27:17: “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another.” Actually, several of the individual proverbs in that chapter speak of the profundity of particular human interactions, e.g., “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips” (27:2); “Better is open rebuke than hidden love” (27:5); “Better is a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away” (27:10b). People’s actions and words—painful as they might come across—can shape others into better human beings, just as an iron sharpener grinds and scrapes against an iron axe and shapes it into a more effective instrument.

Those of us involved in the wider Christian mission movement can similarly contribute to each other’s growth by exhorting, challenging, encouraging, befriending, and otherwise constructively collaborating in gospel ministry. In one way or another, the contributions in this July issue of *Global Missiology – English* (GME) exhibit that kind of constructive interaction. Some articles seek to persuade others to change; some educate through history; others point out shortcomings that need correction. The missiological iron sharpening in this collection of articles is multifaceted and filled with soul-searching reflection.

Two of this issue’s articles, one by Matt Rhodes and one co-authored by Pam Arlund and Warrick Farah, explore further the January issue’s theme of “Kingdom Movements.” That theme continued in the April issue’s contrasting book reviews of Rhodes’s recent book *No Shortcut for Success*. In our pursuit of constructive discussions on what has become an important and sometimes charged topic, the GME editorial team approached Rhodes as well as Arlund and Farah about contributing articles that, while approaching the “movements” and movements-methodologies discussion from contrasting points of view, would seek to engage each other respectfully and meaningfully. I can personally attest that Matt, Pam, and Warrick have composed their articles with integrity, respectfully interacting with each other with cordiality and all the while aiming toward a frank discussion that would help everyone who might be interested to learn, grow, and flourish in gospel ministry.

Of basic importance for the two articles’ interaction was the building of the authors’ interpersonal familiarity and trust. It was a privilege to watch Matt, together with Pam and Warrick, progress from only knowing each other’s names (if that much) as authors to becoming acquainted and moving toward friendship. The building of relational capital helped in dealing with perceived misrepresentations and with offering clarifications of each other’s meanings and intentions. Clearing away that kind of intervening, thorny underbrush is difficult, but essential, work in the effort actually to meet and engage discussion partners.

My perception is that the authors were able to clear away at least most of those initial barriers of having no interpersonal relationships, several misperceptions, and inherent suspicions. The

resulting articles thus exhibit genuine engagement on various issues—albeit to limited degrees and perhaps only in halting fashion. Especially given their different starting points, the authors would have needed more time together, including informal relationship-building occasions, in order to refine their respective articles toward even deeper interaction. Further engagement, including with many other people, will be needed to sharpen the differences and particular topics to be explored.

Part of that engagement will be how you as readers understand the authors' emphases, reasoning, conclusions, and manner of interacting with the other author(s). As you assess each article, I expect that one type of resource upon which you will draw will be other authors' missiological works that you have found instructive. One example that may come to mind, particularly when working through the articles' discussions of missionary "professionalism" and the specific matter of language proficiency, is Ralph Winter's (and others') comments on missionary "amateurism" (Datema 2010; Lambert 2015). Winter characteristically articulated several helpful and nuanced distinctions that are pertinent to the articles' "professionalism" discussion. More generally, just as the authors have cited other works relative to their articles, no doubt you will do so as well—both consciously and unconsciously—as you read, reflect, and study.

From my vantage point, I perceive three interrelated spectrums along which the authors have operated in attempting to engage each other regarding important topics related to movement discussions. One spectrum involves authority or responsibility for determining what is "true," "valid," "right," or "biblical." Everyone agrees that God and his Word are the ultimate authority—but who should decide the truth, validity, rightness, or biblical character of particular practices, beliefs, methods, structures, or anything else? Wider Church leaders or local believers? Etic "experts" or emic believers? Theologians or practitioners? Does the question of who might be responsible even matter? Whoever the particular options might include, the spectrum of who bears authority or responsibility for deciding seems operative in these articles' respective analyses.

A second spectrum runs from closed to open notions of sets within which sensibilities of what is "true," "valid," "right," and "biblical" lie. Stated differently by way of just two examples, are there limited or expansive numbers of valid approaches to leadership training, and who qualify as "missionaries"? A more closed-set approach would see more limited options for both examples, whereas an open-set notion would accept wider ranges of possibilities.

Yet a third spectrum at work involves placing emphasis on teachings or translations of God's communication to people being "faithful," "appropriate," or "relevant." All three emphases or values are in fact necessary in biblical communication and gospel ministry (Shaw and Van Engen 2003). Even so, different mission thinkers tend to lean toward one end of the spectrum (faithfulness) or the other (relevance). I suggest that each of the two articles—while valuing all three emphases of "faithfulness," "appropriateness," and "relevance" of gospel ministry—places distinctive emphasis in the direction of particular sections on a faithful-appropriate-relevant spectrum.

Again, I see all three spectrums just sketched—responsibility for determining what is "valid" or "biblical," closed to open (limited to unlimited) options, and faithful-appropriate-relevant ministry—simultaneously operative in the Rhodes and Arlund-Warrick articles. Analyzing where on each spectrum each article might place particular emphasis could help understand more clearly the articles' points of genuine engagement or lack thereof.

In the end, the hopes of the authors and the GME editorial team are that these two carefully crafted articles related to discussing movements and movements-methodologies will contribute to ongoing, constructive interactions within the wider missions community. Reader feedback will of course be welcome.

J. N. Manokaran's moving personal tribute to Dr. K. Rajendran, who was recently gathered to other saints who have gone before us and groan with anticipation for the final resurrection, testifies to the deep sharpening that Rajendran contributed to Manokaran himself and to many others. Manokaran's piece joins other tributes to a devoted and widely effective gospel servant (WEA 2022), thus encouraging all of us to learn much from Rajendran's life that was well lived. Using the example of Christian-Muslim relations in Chicago, Mike Urton encourages Christians everywhere to face whatever fears we might have regarding Muslim acquaintances and move toward actually engaging them as fellow human beings who, like all other people, need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Contributions by Jim Harries and Christopher Sadowitz discuss aspects of "Vulnerable Mission," a theme addressed several times before in GME. Harries challenges Christian missionaries aligned with economic power—specifically Westerners working in Africa—to try and disentangle their ministries (and their African acquaintances) from such associations by operating within indigenous languages and resources. Sadowitz draws on his years of service in Japan to make comparisons between how the New Testament Corinthian Christians and today's Christian mission organizations and missionaries (including himself) unconsciously exhibit an alignment with societal values at the expense of Christian distinctives of humility and service.

This issue's challenges from mission history come from Steven Estes and from Derek Seipp and Jeff Kwon. Estes, now a retired long-term U.S. Protestant missionary in Argentina, passes along the challenges he has received from studying Jesuit history—a long and colorful tradition of which Estes earlier had been blissfully ignorant. Estes hopes his article offers an exhortation that "stimulates respect for mission societies and attracts courageous recruits for missionary service" (64). Seipp and Kwon trace the development and implementation of the much-discussed Nevius-Ross strategy in Korean Protestant history, coincidentally pointing to one approach to reconciling today's so-called traditional and movement methodologies, as discussed by the Arlund-Farah and Rhodes articles.

This issue's three book reviews have their own sharpening effects. The books discussed cover a wide range of topics: claims of scientific proofs and paths toward religious belief, Christian conversions of Chinese students in Korea, and implementing Christian management principles in complex contemporary societies. Readers should find both the reviews and the books examined stimulating, fresh, and constructive for equipping others.

When "iron sharpens iron," discomfort and even pain are inevitable. Constructive growth should occur as well. May this issue provide helpful stimulation, challenge, and encouragement to you the readers and those whom you serve.

References

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