

WHAT IS MISSIOLOGY?

by

A. Kravtsev

Box # 1555

A PAPER

Submitted to Dr. Harold Netland
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the course ME 9050
Prolegomena: Missiology as a Discipline
at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

Deerfield, Illinois

December 2012

Introduction

Etymologically, the word “missiology” simply means “the study of mission,” which invites at least two further questions: “What is mission?” and “What are the methodology and goals of this study?” This paper will attempt to answer the questions above based on the material from the class, assigned reading, and personal reflections on what missiology is as a discipline. First, I will look at the church’s missionary calling in light of the *Missio Dei*. Then I will focus on the methodology, or better, elements or components of missiological studies. After that I will briefly comment on the goals of the discipline. Finally, based on definitions offered in class, I will attempt to formulate my own working definition of missiology as an academic endeavor.

The *Missio Dei* and the Mission of the Church

Usually the term “mission” refers to evangelistic and church planting efforts, primarily done overseas. And indeed, the mission work of the church is the focus of missiological studies. However, to properly understand the church’s mission, we need to put it in perspective of a broader biblical concept of the *Missio Dei*, or the Mission of God. Ultimately, what the church is called to do depends on what God is doing in the world.

The essence of the *Missio Dei* is that God has a plan to restore His creation to its original purpose and wholeness, and that He is working in the world to complete this plan. Three major characteristics of this plan are important to highlight for the purposes of this paper. First, it is comprehensive, i.e. salvation is not only concerned with “human souls” but includes restoration of humanity in all its aspects: spiritual, physical, communal, as well as the transformation of the whole world. God is “creating everything new,”

so his mission begins with the original creation (Gen 1-2) and culminates in the new creation (Rev 21-22).¹

Second, it is focused on the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. Although it is Trinitarian in the sense that it involves each person of the Trinity, it is focused on the work of the Son whom the Father sent into the world (lat. mitto – to send). Christ stands at the center of God’s plan both in the past as the atoning sacrifice, and in the future as the King, “when the times will have reached their fulfillment - to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ” (Eph 1:10).

Finally, this plan is progressively unfolding in history, beginning with Abraham, through the death and resurrection of Christ, and to the final apocalyptic act of God at the end of age. The total consummation of the kingdom of God still lies in the future. However, in a certain sense, the kingdom has already come through Jesus, and is present here and now through the work of the Spirit.² The church, as the new humanity in Christ, is the firstfruit of the Kingdom (Jam 1:18).

The mission of the church is closely tied with the *Missio Dei*. As the people of God, we have a privilege of participating in His work in the world.³ When it comes to the exact forms of how the church is to be involved, missiologists often disagree: for some, the emphasis falls on the proclamation of the Gospel, for others the focus is on social work and justice, whereas for still many others it is some combination of both. I believe that the church’s task is twofold, and its essence is very well captured in the words of J.D. Hunter, “the vocation of the church is to bear witness to and to be the embodiment of the coming kingdom of God.”⁴

¹ “Comprehensive” here does not imply “universalistic.” In this respect, I side with the “evangelical inclusivism” of C.E. Van Engen (“The Uniqueness of Christ in Mission Theology,” in *Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity*, p. 176).

² “In Jesus the kingdom has come into history. God has done a new thing. He has visited his people in Jesus’ mission, bringing to them the messianic salvation” (George Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 80).

³ “Our mission... means our committed participation as God’s people, at God’s invitation and command, in God’s own mission within the history of the world for the redemption of God’s creation” (Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God*, p. 23).

⁴ J.D. Hunter. *To Change the World*. p. 95.

Bearing witness has to do with sharing the Gospel, which is “the unchanged story of what God has done to save the world, supremely in the historical events of the life, death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus Christ.”⁵ Essentially, it is the narrative of the *Missio Dei* which also includes an invitation to submit to God through Jesus Christ. Every biblical text dealing with Jesus’ commission to his disciples emphasizes the centrality of the Gospel.⁶ God has made this story a powerful vehicle of salvation for those who would believe, because its proclamation is accompanied by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.⁷ Therefore, this unchanged story will always need a “fresh telling”⁸ within every cultural and ethnic setting until Christ comes again.

However, witness is not limited to the proclamation of the Gospel. The church is to disciple new followers of Christ and to foster the creation of new communities of believers who in turn become responsible for bearing witness to, and embodying the kingdom in their specific contexts. “Embodying” the kingdom assumes that ethically and socially the church is called to be an alternative community while remaining incorporated in a wider society. It is to demonstrate peace, justice, and unity in all relationships between its members.⁹ Furthermore, the works of mercy and justice are to be extended beyond the church borders for the benefit of the whole society. As Orlando E. Costas put it, the basic purpose of the Christian mission is “to be a channel of wholeness and liberation” wherever it is proclaimed.¹⁰

An important question arises here as to whether political liberation can be an appropriate means of the church’s mission. I am deeply convinced that the church can, and in certain cases should be involved in the structural transformation of society, but only as long as this does not actually undermine its witness. By this I mean that the methods Christians use for advancing the cause of the kingdom are not to contradict the essential character of the kingdom itself. Whenever Christians have a chance to promote

⁵ “Cape Town Commitment.” For some reason, this great definition looks mainly into the past. The Gospel is the story of what God has done, and will yet do to save the world and bring it under His liberating reign.

⁶ Mat 28:18-20; Mk 16:15-17; Luk 24:46-48; John 20:21-23, 31; Acts 5:42, 1Cor 1:18.

⁷ John 15:26; 2 Cor 3:6; Rom 1:16.

⁸ “Cape Town Commitment.”

⁹ “Already, in anticipation of the end, a new humanity has been created in Jesus Christ and those who are incorporated in him form a unit wherein all the divisions that separate people in the old humanity are done away with” (C. Rene Padilla, “The Unity of the Church and the Homogenous Unit Principle” in *Landmark Essays*, p. 76).

¹⁰ “Captivity and Liberation in the Modern Missionary Movement” in *Landmark Essays*, p. 34.

more justice in society without recourse to violence and oppression of its others members, they need to use these opportunities.¹¹

In totalitarian societies, however, any opposition to the authorities can lead to violent oppression, and, as a result, to significant barriers in accomplishing the church's foremost task of witnessing to the Gospel. The NT epistles, written in a similar context of the Roman Empire, strongly suggest that even in such circumstances Christians still have significant ways to influence their society. Appropriate respect and submission to authorities, even to unkind and unjust, paradoxically, will be able to "make the teaching about God our Savior attractive" (Tit 2:10).

For this reason, I am somewhat cautious in using the word "participation" when speaking about the church's role in God's plan of redemption. While the concept is no doubt true, in my view it should not be used in such a way as to suggest that we are called to do everything God does, but just on "a lesser scale." Rather, being "God's fellow workers" (synergoi, 1 Cor 3:9) means that we have been given a unique part of the whole, in which God does His own unique part. As the Creator and the Judge, He alone owns the prerogatives of truly impartial power and vengeance.¹²

Components of Mission Studies

As seen from above, the church's mission is a multi-faceted task. As an academic discipline, missiology attempts to systematically study its various aspects.¹³ First of all, it focuses on biblical themes dealing with the mission of God and his people. As Escobar puts it, missiology is "a reflection of God's

¹¹ 1 Cor 7:21.

¹² John Meyendorff, a Russian Orthodox theologian, poignantly raises this question as he reflects on the experience of a Christian empire: "Understood as a reflection of the heavenly kingdom of God, [the Byzantine empire] has a history of bloody revolutions, of wars, and — like all Medieval states — of social injustice... [a] reminder that there could not be any real and permanent "symphony" between God and the world, only an unstable and dynamic polarity" (John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes*. New York: Fordham University Press, 1979, p. 241)

¹³ In the discussion of whether missiology is a discipline or an interdisciplinary field, much depends on how we define what a discipline is. Sometimes it also seems to be a case of "all chairs taken" by historically earlier disciplines. Along with R. Priest, I believe missiology is an "interdisciplinary discipline" which has its own field of studies, a specific subject matter, goals, and methodology (<http://www.missiology matters.com/2012/03/07/what-in-the-world-is-missiology/>)

people as they engage in acts of obedience to God’s missionary call, under the light of God’s world.”¹⁴

Therefore, biblical studies – in the sense of a thorough missiological reading of the inspired and authoritative biblical narrative - have preeminence in mission studies.¹⁵

This leads to two important observations. First, any serious attempt to construct a biblical theology of mission should take into account the historical experience of the church. How did other Christians interpret the Bible as a missionary document in the past? Also, how did they actually practice mission in their specific contexts? Our predecessors’ experience can significantly enrich our understanding of both the Bible and mission practice, as well as keep us from multiplying their mistakes.¹⁶

Second, missiology will significantly benefit if done in dialogue with contemporary scholars from the whole spectrum of the worldwide Christian movement. It will help missiologists to reduce the effects of their cultural blindness that inevitably affect their theology.¹⁷ In my view, this is one of the reasons why the Lausanne movement is so important. From its beginning in 1974, it went beyond the limits of motivating the worldwide Church to evangelism and has become a kind of a theological coordinating movement that helps the worldwide evangelical church to keep its eye on the central truths of the Gospel.

But missiology cannot limit itself to biblical, theological, and historical studies. If mission is “taking the whole Gospel to the whole world,”¹⁸ then an understanding of the world is no less important than an understanding of the Word. Borrowing a well-known metaphor by John Stott, proclamation of the Gospel is an act of “bridge-building” which requires strong foundations on both sides of the river.

Therefore, missiology as a discipline draws insights from social sciences, such as linguistics, sociology,

¹⁴ “A Pauline Paradigm of Mission: A Latin American Reading” in *The Good News of the Kingdom* (quoted from a classroom handout).

¹⁵ As was recently done by Christopher J. H. Wright in *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

¹⁶ David J. Bosch’s classic study of the mission paradigms in church history, *Transforming Mission*, is a very helpful tool in this regard. A more recent helpful text dealing with similar issues is Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder. *Constants in context*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004.

¹⁷ See Wilbert R. Shenk, “Recasing Theology of Mission: Impulses from the Non-Western World” in *Landmark Essays*, pp. 116-32.

¹⁸ “Lausanne Covenant.”

communication theory, cultural anthropology, and religious studies. Economics and political studies sometimes can have a direct bearing on missiology as well.

Missiology seeks to translate the message of the Gospel not only into the language but also into the culture, stories, and thought forms of its recipients. But no translation is possible unless both “languages” are well understood. For this reason, cultural anthropology enjoys a prominent place among the above mentioned disciplines as it seeks to understand humans in their varied cultural contexts. Given the fact that we live in a multicultural world, in missiology there is room for contextual missiologies that arise when biblical and theological principles are applied in particular socio-cultural settings.¹⁹

In dealing with other disciplines, missiologists strive to holistically integrate their findings and theological principles. An area of debate here is whether there is what can be called “normative” missiology. Following Scherer, I believe that the biblical and theological meaning of missions is to be at the center of the discipline as a whole.²⁰ Without such a center or a set of controlling principles, other disciplines cannot properly contribute to missiology; instead, they might dictate their own agenda. While our interest in social sciences is based on a valid belief in general revelation and common grace, as fallen creatures we must allow special revelation to set our priorities and perspectives.²¹

The Practical Goal of Missiology

Many missiologists stress that the discipline exists for practical purposes. In addition to the fact that it is a critical reflection on “doing of missions”;²² it also “applies”²³ its data. In this sense, missiology is both theoretical and practical, so there is no dichotomy here. On the one hand, missiology is called to enhance our understanding of God and his work in the world. On the other, it aims at helping the church

¹⁹ Varied theological and ecclesiological traditions also account for the existence of multiple missiologies.

²⁰ J. Scherer, “Missiology as a Discipline”, *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization*, p. 183.

²¹ There is certain dialectics here because we are in a position to better understand the Word when we approach when armed with better knowledge of the world. My point here is the primacy of Scriptures as the divinely inspired authority for faith and practice.

²² Allan Neely, “Missiology” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, p. 633.

²³ Allan Tippet, “Missiology, A New Discipline” (quoted in a classroom handout).

in its local expression shape its ministries in the most biblically effective ways. Thus, its ultimate purpose is to serve as a theoretical underpinning of missionary practice in the church.

Having said this, I believe we cannot reduce missiology to a branch of what is sometimes called “practical theology.” Instead, missiology itself is a form of theology which is done from a different methodological angle:

A missiologist does not merely apply hard intellectual work done by systematic theologians. Rather, a missiologist engages the same biblical text that a theologian engages but in the context of a dialogue with anthropology and diverse human experience rather than in the context of a dialogue with philosophy.²⁴

Toward a Working Definition of Missiology

Based on the material offered in class and definitions suggested by several missiologists, I have attempted to come up with my own working definition of missiology that intends to integrate some of the observations presented earlier in this paper. In the process, I worked mainly with definitions by W.R. Shenk and R.J. Priest, because their formulations, while being concise, tend to be most specific and comprehensive. After presenting each definition, I will mention some aspects that, from the standpoint of my purposes in this paper, I would like to add to them.

Mission theology is the effort to understand and interpret the *Missio Dei* in the light of Scripture, the experience of the church throughout history, and the present sociopolitical context in order to give guidance to the church in fulfilling its missionary calling.²⁵

While R.W. Shenk speaks of mission theology, the content of his article suggests that what he means is missiology as a broader discipline. His excellent definition includes the *Missio Dei*, Scripture, historical studies, the present context, and the practical goal of missiology. Yet, for my purposes, it fails to distinguish between the *missio Dei* and the mission of the church. Also, cultural and ethnic contexts

²⁴ Robert J. Priest, “Experience-near Theologizing in Diverse Human Contexts” in *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, p. 194.

²⁵ W.R. Shenk, “Recasting theology of Mission,” p. 131.

seem to be more important for the Christian mission than socio-historical (but is his term all-inclusive?) as they are more decisive for human identities and less susceptible to change.

Missiology is an interdisciplinary discipline which, through research, writing, and teaching, furthers acquisition, development, and transition of theologically-informed, contextually-grounded, and ministry-oriented knowledge and understanding, with the goal of helping and correcting Christians, and Christian institutions, involved in the doing the Christian mission.²⁶

R.J. Priest's detailed definition highlights missiology's interdisciplinary nature, theological awareness, and contextual and practical character. For my purposes, it needs an emphasis on biblical studies and history, though it may well be implicit in the way Dr. Priest uses the word "theologically." Based on the observations in this paper, I came to the following working definition of missiology which helps me to hold in view its numerous aspects:

Missiology is an academic discipline aimed at understanding and explaining the specifics of the church's missionary calling in light of the *Missio Dei*. Being biblically based, it is historically informed, theologically balanced, and grounded in particular cultural contexts with the ultimate purpose of directing the practice of the Christian mission in its specific settings.

²⁶ <http://www.missiology matters.com/2012/03/07/what-in-the-world-is-missiology/>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bevans Stephen B. and Shroeder. Roger P. Constants in context. A Theology of Mission for Today. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004.

Costas, Orlando S. "Captivity and Liberation in the Modern Missionary Movement." In Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity, edited by R.L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 33-45. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009.

Hunter, J.D. To Change the World. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Ladd, George. A Theology of the New Testament, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000.

Meyendorff, John. Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends and Doctrinal Themes. New York: Fordham University Press, 1979.

Neely, Allan. "Missiology." in Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions, edited by A. Scott Moreau, Harold Netland, and Charles Van Engen, 633-35. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000.

Padilla, C. Rene. "The Unity of the Church and the Homogenous Unit Principle." In Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity, edited by R.L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 73-94. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009.

Priest, Robert J. "Experience-near Theologizing in Diverse Human Contexts." In Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity, edited by G. Ott and H.A. Netland, 180-95. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academics, 2006.

Scherer, James A. "Missiology as a Discipline and What it Includes." In New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2, edited by James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, 173-90. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992.

Shenk, Wilbert R. "Recasing Theology of Mission: Impulses from the Non-Western World." In Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity, edited by R.L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 116-32. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009.

The Cape Town Commitment. At <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/ctcommitment.html>

The Lausanne Covenant. At <http://www.lausanne.org/en/documents/lausanne-covenant.html>

Van Engen, C.E. "The Uniqueness of Christ in Mission Theology." In Landmark Essays in Mission and World Christianity, edited by R.L. Gallagher and Paul Hertig, 160-78. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downer Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.