

I'll Have a Cheeseburger with No Cheese, Please

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“In the early 1700’s a young German Lutheran named Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg worked as a pioneer missionary in South India, [among the Tamil people]. Before trying to communicate the Gospel, he set out to master the Tamil language, to understand the Hindu religious beliefs and to study the culture. He wrote a long and masterly manuscript for his mission executives” (Whiteman 1985, 3–4). However, at that time in history, most European mission senders considered the knowledge of other religions and cultures to be irrelevant, or even blasphemous. Consequently, “they shelved [his report] and rebuked him for wasting his time. He had been set to preach the Gospel!” (Whiteman 1985, 3).

Some missionaries today may continue to hold onto some form of this understanding, thinking that only good will and the love of God are needed to be effective witnesses to those of other cultures. Learning the local language or understanding the indigenous culture are nice if we can do it but not essential for ministry.

However, I maintain that because missiology is a discipline that values a thorough understanding of language and culture, the study of missiology is not just an option for the cross-cultural minister. Discipleship and ministry are impossible without it. Trying to make disciples using only theological and biblical understanding without anthropological and cultural discernment is like ordering a cheeseburger with no cheese. You cannot do it!

Those who are called by God to share Jesus Christ with people (any people) must realize that witnessing always occurs within a cultural context. Just as cheese is integral to a cheeseburger, cultural knowledge is essential for all discipleship and ministry.

In this installation message, I intend to address three ideas associated with the place of missiology within academia. (1) The hamburger—the place of missiology as a theological discipline. (2) Cheese—the place of evangelism as

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the heart of missiology. (3) Pickle—the place of missiology in theological education. I will not draw out the cheeseburger analogy any further.

Missiology as a Theological Discipline

Missiology is a relatively new discipline that arose from the need of the church for serious reflection on its mission. It is informative to recognize that theology and mission have always been closely interconnected. Theology grew in the early days of the first century church as a result of its missional outreach. And as the church spread rapidly into new areas and new cultures, debates sprang up naturally to give clarity to this new doctrine of God and Christianity. It is not surprising then that the discipline of missiology would turn back to theology as it searches for an academic home. It should feel most comfortable within the discipline of theology. It has been suggested by James Scherer in 1987 and reiterated by Ross Langmead that because “missiology engages with all of the theological questions that are relevant to God’s mission and the mission of the church,” missiology is properly placed as part of theology (Langmead 2013, 67–69).

I like the term “Intercultural Theology” to argue for the place of missiology within theological studies. I do not know the origin of the term but I first saw it applied to missiology in an article in *Christianity Today* (Paas 2016, 37–54). To me the idea of intercultural theology captures the idea that the church within each culture becomes a theologizing church to give voice to its own specific concepts of self, God, society, and the environment. In this brief chart, I am raising several questions that arise in every culture that need to be investigated through biblical and cultural contextual lenses.

Self	Where did I come from? What happens to me after I die? Do all people have a spirit/soul? Where are the spirits of our departed loved ones?
God and the spiritual realm	Who is God and where is he? Does God know about me or care about me? Does God control the world? What power and control do the spirits have?
Society	What is my ethnic identity? Who are we as a group? What is my responsibility to those within my group? Outside my group?

	Who are the “others” of the world?
Environment	Is there a creator of this world? What is my relationship to creation? What is God’s or the gods’ relationship to creation?

Universal Questions

As an evangelical believer and missionary, I trust the Bible is true and I hold strong theological convictions (especially from the teaching of John Wesley). However, I must be careful not to equate the two even though our theology is rooted in our study of the Bible. Here is the distinction. The Bible is God’s revelation to humankind. Although we translate it into many languages, its principles and truth remain. On the other hand, theology is our systematic interpretation at a historical point in time (in a particular cultural context) to give a clear explanation of the truths of the Bible. Paul Hiebert, a respected US missiologist, describes theology as that point of contact between the Biblical revelation of God and a specific cultural context. It is the divine revelation understood in human contextual terms (Hiebert 1985, 197–198). He goes on to suggest that all human theologies are flawed because of human sinfulness and all theologies are only “partial understandings of Theology as God sees it” (198). Therefore, in order to develop good theology, we need careful exegesis of the Bible and a careful exegesis of our cultural and historical contexts as well.

We may argue that missiology has a place in theology, but not all theologians accept that because missiology has at times been seen only as a practical “how-to” approach to cross-cultural training for missionaries rather than a rigorous theological study of the Bible. I believe this dispute has grown because of the inter-disciplinary nature of missiology. It calls on the insights of the behavioral sciences, especially drawing from the studies of sociology, communications, and anthropology. Every academic discipline has dialogue partners among the other disciplines. For example, theology talks to philosophy. Biblical studies talks to linguistics, hermeneutics and archeology. Pastoral studies has a host of conversation partners in psychology, sociology, counseling, and others. Likewise, missiology talks to anthropology and sociology in order to understand culture, context, and behavior. It talks to linguistics and communications theory to prepare for translating scripture and sharing the faith among diverse peoples. It sometime has serious discussions with politics, economics, law, and ecology because of its strong commitment to justice, peace, and creation. Missiology often holds discussions with other faiths in

religious studies. Finally, because missiology is often searching for practical solutions rather than concepts only, it talks openly with community development, education, international aid, agriculture, aviation, and health sciences. Missiology has many partners and is often on the lookout for others with whom it can participate to move the world toward more abundant life in God.

Missiology could also legitimately be placed within the area of applied anthropology. Anthropology is a vast study of people past and present, and it is divided into several areas such as archeology, forensics, linguistics, physical anthropology, and cultural/social anthropology. Each area encourages a field of study that applies some of the methods and theories of anthropology to the analysis and solution of practical problems. Thus, the term “applied anthropology” is used, and missiology is accurately associated with applied cultural anthropology. This suggests that the models and methods of anthropology can aid Christians and the church in its mission.

Thinking of missiology as an applied cultural anthropology implies that one aspect of mission is to become involved in communities for the purpose of solving practical problems of the society. Missiology, as an applied cultural anthropology, would embrace ministry to the poor, healing of the broken, restoration of the oppressed, and attending to all of the felt needs of people in a society. Most importantly, missiology assists the church to address the real need of each person, to be restored to relationship with God, and for this reason it should be firmly founded on theology. (This idea is discussed more in the following section.)

Missiology Has Evangelism as Its Heart

A very insightful article was written by Samuel Hugh Moffett, a former missionary to China and Korea, and published in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (Moffett 2009, 598–600). In the article, he argues that there was a time when Christians believed that evangelism was the only priority in mission, but they were wrong. He looks at the historical swing the other way in which many churches took up the cause of social justice and said that it is the top priority. They were also wrong. By trying to minister only to worldly needs, some nearly lost their distinction as the church.

Today, most people see evangelism and social justice issues as practical, working partners. Moffet declares that evangelism should be perceived as the “leading partner” in mission, or a “first among equals” (2009, 599). His suggestion brings together the vertical and horizontal relationships of the Great

Commandment. The first is to love God with all of one's being (the vertical relationship), and the second is to love our neighbor (the horizontal relationship). The priority in mission is clear that to improve the human condition one must first have a relationship to God. But the second "is like it" and is also indispensable to mission. "Our evangelists sometimes seem to be calling us to accept the King without His kingdom; while our prophets, just as narrow in their own way, seem to be trying to build the kingdom without the saving King" (Moffett 2009, 599). The first priority of the church is to proclaim the gospel, but not at the expense of Christian actions and compassionate ministry. Missiology advocates the Kingdom of God and the announcement of a future kingdom where things are as God wants them to be. It also advocates a Kingdom of God and an invitation to enter that kingdom now by faith through repentance.

Theological Education as Missiological

Bernhard Ott suggests that theology and missiology depend on each other. If God is a missionary God, then the whole of theology ought to be about this sending God. He says, "The first task of theology is to make sense of the whole of life by reference to God. The second task of theology is to be an agent of transformation, so that the whole of life may reflect God's intention" (Ott 2001, 84). Understanding God's revelation leads one naturally to seeking to participate in it.

The traditional structure of theology is to first divide it into three theoretical parts. They are Biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology. The fourth division of theology is practical theology and is structured by various church-related ministries. Missiology is one of these practical theology subjects, and consequently we see mission in the church as just one of its many ministries. What we need to ask is, How do we overcome the split between the theory and the practice of theology that is implied in this division? Can theological education be experienced more as a process of transformation that does not position practical matters as only applications of the "weightier" theological subjects? A critique of some theological education is that if the "heavy" conceptual subjects become the central sources of education, how is a student led to engage actively in the arena of the world of diverse contexts, life stories, and experiences of the poor, the uneducated, and the marginalized?

In an article entitled "What is Missiology" the author, Ross Langmead, suggests but does not give outright support to the idea that a missiological

approach to theological education will help reduce the divide between concept and practice. (Langmead 2013). We may think through a line of reasoning like this: The Bible teaches that knowing God means worshipping and obeying God. To know involves relating to and doing what is known. Knowing affects the mind, and also the heart and the will. A complete reference to this approach to theological education can be found in *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models* (Banks 1999). If learning is bound by classrooms and excludes the experience of church, work, home, and social spaces, then educated elites are formed who value fragmented knowledge and critical inquiry over integration of knowledge and praxis, an application of that knowledge. Theological education should be perceived as more than just a preparation for mission; it should be missional itself.

What might a missional theological education look like? I think it looks a lot like education at APNTS, but I would also caution us to continually evaluate our epistemology, our philosophies of teaching and of learning. A missiological framework for education helps to reconnect the theoretical with the practical. It might mean expanding our reach into new areas or possibly offering programs that build the church by opening to students who are outside of the normal Western-regulated educational system. Experienced teachers make themselves available to those with less practical experience. Education would be centered around service to others and would provide numerous opportunities for experiential learning. It might also require a residential break from the normal educational environment to promote prolonged internships or supervised ministries. Professors need to be enlisted with a mentoring mindset who share their lives as well as their knowledge with their students. Professors should be actively engaged in ministry and able to invite their students into their ministry context to prepare students in much the same way as Jesus prepared his disciples for a time when he would no longer be with them.

Missiologically based theological education is an effort to integrate faith and life by creating more field-based education where we share our own mission commitments with our students. Teachers are active in mission and are ready to mentor and guide their students by sharing their own ministries, as well as by teaching theology.

Conclusion

There are many reasons for missiology's place in academia and in the church,

but the most important reason is a theological one. The Incarnation is the model for cross-cultural ministry, and this is where missiology becomes invaluable to the church and its mission. (The concept of Incarnation as mission is detailed in the Luzbetak Lecture on Mission and Culture by Darrell Whiteman on May 5, 2003, titled “Anthropology and Mission: The Incarnational Connection.”) The theology of Jesus becoming human is deep and mysterious, but clearly God decided to come, not in a general way but in a specific way to become a first century Jew. Have you ever thought about the implications of Jesus being a human Jew? He did not eat pork, as taught by the Torah. He spoke Aramaic with a Galilean accent. He did not know about germ theory as the cause of disease, because it was not discovered until 1865 by Louis Pasteur. He was thoroughly immersed in the Greco-Roman and Hebrew culture of Israel at that time in history. Philippians 2:6–8 says,

He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a human being and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience all the way to death—his death on the cross (Good News Translation).

We learn something very great about God through the Incarnation. God has used humans throughout history to work out his plan of salvation. He uses people like you and me to tell the blessed story of the cross to people of other cultures. And even when it came time to make known his supreme Revelation, God chose an imperfect culture with all of its limitations to reveal Christ. Someone once said, “Jesus is God spelled out in language humans can understand.” That language is the language of human culture. The mystery of the Incarnation teaches us that God takes both humanity and culture seriously.

The Incarnation also becomes our model for ministry. Just as Jesus entered into Jewish culture, we must be willing to enter other cultures to serve the people. We must be willing to “learn their language, adapt our lifestyle to theirs, to understand their worldview and religious values, and to laugh and weep with them” (Whiteman 2003, 31). This is where the insights drawn from missiology, as an applied anthropology, speaks loudly to mission. They are summed up in this poem by Lao Tsu, an ancient Chinese philosopher and the founder of Taoism,

Go to the people
Live among them
Learn from them

Love them
 Start with what they know
 Build on what they have

This is mission in the model of the Incarnation and to carry it out we need the insights of missiology, the mindset of Christ, and the overwhelming presence of the Holy Spirit.

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