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Missiology after *Mission*?¹

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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 where we are, every inclination toward provincialism and parochialism, every fragmentation of humanity into regional or sectional blocs

Missiology's task, furthermore, is critically to accompany the missionary enterprise, to scrutinize its foundations, its aims, attitude, message and methods – not from the safe distance of an onlooker, but in a spirit of co-responsibility and service to the church of Christ. (Bosch 1991 p.496)

One effect of the success of the theological project to place mission at the centre of the Church's self-understanding has been that the language of mission has gained currency across the disciplines. This currency has been encouraged by missiology itself, including through the language of missional churches, and the role missiology was given in debates over social action and evangelism. However while the theology itself may be secure, the currency of the language of mission may not. Mission is widely invoked. Its nature is assumed to be known and understood. Yet if people tire of hearing about mission, as they are likely to do, or come to realise that its undifferentiated invocation solves neither the problems of the world nor of the church, what will be the future of missiology?

There are difficulties in the relationship of missiology to theology and to the practice of mission which remain intractable, yet require attention if missiology is to be seen as a promise to the church more than a threat or an irrelevance. In discussing the history of missiology in the theology curriculum David Bosch noted that “The basic problem . . . was not with what *missiology* was but with what *mission* was.”(Bosch 1991, 492). If the theological place of mission now appears secure and the social scope of mission less divisive, one might hope that with the removal of these two problematic factors, the future of missiology has become more certain. Yet it is evident challenges remain. There were also some benefits for missiology in being concerned with a subject that was debated. When mission was contentious people looked to missiology to resolve the differences or to provide support for one view or another. If those needs are removed other functions need

¹ See “Missiology after Bosch” (Roxborough 2001) and “Missiology, theology, worship and the church”(Roxborough 2008) also (Kasdorf 1994).

to come to the fore if missiology is to be seen as relevant. This situation may also suggest why despite its achievements and its maturity as a discipline, the theological study of mission may still feel itself under threat.

Historically part of the problem with missiology was seen to be that the division of theology into biblical studies, systematic theology, church history and practical theology had no self-evident place for a new subject that championed the intentions of God, the purpose of the church, and the challenges of engaging with culture and religion. The major alternatives of incorporation into practical theology or the creation of independent teaching positions failed to address a disconnect from the life of the church and purposes of God. Attempts at integration which recognized the missionary dimension of all the theological disciplines were theoretically promising, but in practice were frustrated by a lack of shared understanding about what such a dimension required (Bosch 1991, 489-492). Integration and its implications remains an area for serious reflection, but it might be noted that some of the issues are of course problems for theological education generally if not education generally. When disciplines are differentiated they need also to be connected. Pedagogical experience suggests that identifiable sets of disciplines need a combination of specialists and recognition of how each discipline supports and is part of other disciplines.

It is difficult to avoid the fact that missiologists want to tell other people they should be doing things differently. That this parallels the evangelistic tasks of Christian theology and Christian mission provides a certain irony, and maybe some solutions, but the range of evangelistic temptations from arrogance to quietism apply also to missiology in relation to the worlds of church and theology. The self-understanding Bosch articulates may be inspiring for those who identify with missiology, but it also highlights a problematic relationship with both theology and practice. Gadflys cannot expect to be made welcome, and having a desire to “critically accompany the missionary enterprise” is a hard sell if one wants to win friends with mission practitioners, whatever may be said about humility and service.

As long as the general understanding of mission and of theology related to mission were conflicted, particular over social action, missiologists were valued as those expected to lend support to one or other competing sets of understanding and practice. Missiology may still be valued where churches are uncertain of their role in the face of cultural and political change or see themselves as threatened minorities. Where these internal differences and social needs have lost their force, the underlying difficulties remain to be addressed.

Missiology has to take some responsibility for its place in the life of the church. It needs to be in a position that makes it less vulnerable to changes in the popularity of the language of mission. To do that it may be useful to look at some of the successes with which it may be linked, as well as challenges it faces which may be in its own hands to address.

1. Missiology: a success story?

For at least over half a century there has been a consistent effort to restore mission to the centre of the church's thinking and to establish missiology and mission studies as respectable academic disciplines. In 1952, the Willingen meeting of the International Missionary Council found in the formulation of *Missio Dei* an answer to the problem of the theological location of mission. If mission was understood as outreach across frontiers, should it be located in the agencies or in the being of the church, or somewhere else? By locating mission in the nature of God rather than the activity of the church it managed to solve, theologically if not practically, the problem of where responsibility for mission lay.

Despite the formulation of the problem itself reflecting the constraints of Enlightenment rationalism and the answer looking somewhat like kicking the ball upstairs, the theological formulation of *Missio Dei* was discovered to have deep roots in Christian tradition and it has proved itself robust. It is now difficult to conceive of any other foundational theological statement about Christian mission.

Missio Dei rates highly on the scale of simply being useful. The solutions it facilitated addressed dichotomies between social and evangelistic dimensions of mission which also appear enduring. Its reception across denominational divides has been extraordinary. Catholics and Orthodox, as well as Conciliar, Pentecostal and Evangelical Protestants, have some significant missiological language in common. The language of Trinitarianism is now reinforced by a common missiology as of the essence of the faith. The scope of mission is now bounded only by the range of interests God has been revealed as having in the world.

In 1961 the integration of the IMC with the World Council of Churches reflected this theology and the belief that it needed to be directly reflected in the structures of the Council by bringing mission into the Council alongside "Faith and order" and "Life and work".

Fears that mission would be swallowed up by church in the WCC may not have been realised, but assumptions about what constituted mission were quickly challenged. Concern that European lethargy would suffocate North American and non-Western missionary energy was addressed by a heightened vocabulary of mission, albeit one whose content was reshaped by the political and this-worldly focus of the Council's interests in a post-colonial age. The polarizations that followed Uppsala 1968 and the mutual bewilderment between the Evangelical and Ecumenical worlds David Bosch and others observed in the early 1980s proved less absolute and less enduring than expected. By the time his epic *Transforming Mission* appeared in 1991, formally at least, though differences of emphasis and pockets of

hostility remained, a Trinitarian theological basis of mission found a common voice across Protestant and Catholic traditions.

In 1992 James Scherer and Stephen Bevans introduced the first of their three volumes on *New Directions in Mission & Evangelization* with an overview of “Statements on Mission and Evangelization, 1974-1991” (Scherer and Bevans 1992 p.xv). The end date of 1991 was easy to explain – it was close to the present and the year of David Bosch’s *Transforming Mission*. But why 1974?

Their summary of significant documents for missiology reached back to Liverpool in 1860, London in 1888 and Edinburgh 1910, and included the meetings of the International Missionary Council in 1921, 1928, 1938, 1947, 1952 and 1961 followed by those of WCC Council of World Mission and Evangelism in 1963, 1973, 1980 and 1989. None of these took place in 1974, nor was there a Catholic event at that time. The significant event was outside the Catholic and Conciliar worlds - the International Congress on World Evangelization held at Lausanne in July 1974.

The Lausanne Covenant may need some updating and the consensus behind its formulation was fragile (Chapman 2009), but it remains one of the core influential missiological statements of the 20th century. In 1972, the International Association for Mission Studies and in 1973 the American Society of Missiology came into being to provide open and committed communities of scholarship self-consciously including Roman Catholics, Conciliar and Evangelical Christians. Both represented the cordial and scarcely restrained joy of discovery across liberal, evangelical and catholic divides. The emphasis was on respectful exchange of views not negotiated conformity, yet many contributed to the embedding of an emerging consensus about what constituted missiology (Escobar 1996)². The tools of a respectable international academic discipline were gradually put in place with these associations, their journals, and an expanding range of serious publications (Anderson 2009). Often done by the same people, mission studies provided models of critical analysis which were less likely to be marked by idealised piety, a guarded defensiveness, or concerns to either prove or disprove the dark side of the missionary enterprise. Without an agenda of seeking to prove that Christianity in non-Western cultures was either good or bad, significant or insignificant, it gave permission to explore the complexities of cultural and religious interaction. When they later appeared, books like Barbara Kingsolver’s *Poisonwood Bible* and critical studies of Christianity and colonialism were seen as essential texts rather than dangerous literature.

Of course Edinburgh 1910, the IMC, and Vatican II had laid the foundations for these developments, and the discovery that Christianity was a world-wide and post-colonial phenomenon not a European religion of empire made it essential.

² Also in (Gallagher and Hertig 2009 p.219-243).

In the aftermath of Lausanne, numbers of Evangelical and Conciliar missiologists worked to resolve the differences in perspective of their traditions. In the early eighties some saw the contrast as a crisis (Hutcheson 1981), yet a decade later formally at least the degree of accommodation between the polarizations of social action and evangelism was astonishing. Bosch's writings both documented the starkness of the contrast in 1980 between the CWME meeting in Melbourne and the Lausanne Consultation in Pattaya, and the terms of an emerging ecumenical paradigm documented in *Transforming Mission* and the San Antonio CWME meeting and that of Lausanne again in Manila in 1989. Were the parallels to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War just co-incidence (Koschorke 2009)?

As long as people remained to be converted, the story of global Christianity remained to be corrected by the inclusion of the parts of the world with which missiologists had some familiarity, ethical and theological issues required inter-cultural skills that others appeared to lack, and someone was required to facilitate meeting with the people of other faiths who migrated to the West, those who taught missiology could feel useful. They can also point to a number of success stories.

- Whatever the frustrations, missiology has facilitated dialogue between mission theory and mission practice. There are those who value the ideal of being “reflective practitioners”.
- As noted, missiology has contributed to the breaking down of the polarization over social action and evangelism.
- It has encouraged cognate disciplines to ask missiological questions. Biblical studies started reading the bible as a missionary text – even if not *all* the Bible is primarily missiological.
- Missiology has encouraged Christian anthropology and seen a reduction in tension between missionaries and anthropologists.
- It has faced the flaws in the theology of Church Growth while allowing its questions and concerns to continue to stimulate.
- Has helped ensure that religious studies and inter-religious dialogue is grounded in the experience of lived religious traditions.

2. Missiology under threat

There are however some worrying signs alongside the good news stories and the degree of recognition that missiology has enjoyed. Contextualisation, another missiological child of the 1970s, was championed by theologians and then in some cases sidelined. It has in places been disregarded by those it was intended to help in their quest for cultural authenticity. Mission was seen to be at the heart of the purposes of God and of the nature of the Church, whether or not support for missiology and mission studies is seen as a logical consequence

of this affirmation. If theology and other disciplines tire of the language of mission as a source of relevance for them, and as noted, if popular use of the language of mission falters, will missiologists be invited back to carry the discipline further? Is there missiology after mission?

a) Problems and anxieties

These achievements are substantial, but there are also problems. Despite promising exceptions, it is not clear where the next generation of missiologists is coming from, or what is the life experience and critical dissonance that will inform their academic development.

The redrawing of the maps of global Christianity continues to struggle to find a place for all major cultural blocks as partners around the theological table. We seem to move through a succession of potential hegemonies from the West, to Latin American Liberation Theology, to a choice between re-invigorated Western theologies (Catholic and Reformed), and an African paradigm for all that is non-Western. Asia's theological voices seem to need a new generation of creativity despite a strong heritage. Oceania is problematic – called on to illustrate other people's theories about what ought to be going on and uncertain how to do justice to its Polynesian, Melanesian and European narratives.

The recurring anxieties that surfaced at ASM and IAMS meetings during my experience as a member of IAMS at their international conferences from 1992 to 2008 and at a number of ASM meetings during the 1990s had less to do with theology of religions, about which there was a surprising degree of confidence, than to do with concerns about different sets of colleagues in the mission enterprise:

1. How can we convince colleagues in the academy and seminary that mission is God's and therefore the most important topic in the curriculum deserving of better resources? How at the same time do we convince them that missiology is a scientific discipline?
2. How can we convince the church that it should live up to its identity and reinvigorate its missionary commitment? What part do we have to play in the missionary reanimation of the church? What role do we have helping all the players understand that the indices of missionary commitment have changed?
3. How can we convince missionary pragmatists and mission agencies that there are missiological questions they ought to be thinking about?
4. How do we convince theologians that mission is "the mother of theology" without appearing to be wanting to tell them what to do?
5. How do we sustain a relationship between theology and praxis?

b) Removal of a threat is good, but it also reduces a sense of relevance

While it lasted the contrasts in missiological emphasis and missionary and political vision between mainline and Evangelical Protestants reflected by the Lausanne movement and the WCC helped fuel the study of missiology and its overlapping parallel, mission studies. People looked to missiology to provide the answers they wanted.

As denominations in the West struggled, missiology promised the answers of what we needed to do: help critique church growth, ensure social action was based on theology more than politics, claim the identity of being missionary by our very nature, wrestle with our understanding of other faiths and a theology of religions that did justice to the faith we found in surprising places, struggle with syncretism at home and contextualisation in other cultures, help mission agencies adjust their policies to the new demographic of Christianity as a non-Western religion.

Some of these are ongoing, but they also raise the question whether there are other felt needs in the church that missiology should be well placed to address – not just the needs missiology feels the church ought to be recognizing, but is slow to pick up.

c) A need for definition remains.

A stubborn issue has proved to be the basic one of definition. At the 1987 meeting of the Association of Professors of Mission James Scherer sought to pick up the task of defining missiology (Scherer 1987). He noted that such a task had proved elusive despite his and others best efforts and its importance. “Those of us who teach and do research in this area need closer agreement on what missiology is to be able to pursue our goals in a collegial manner, given both the interdisciplinary nature of our subject, and the interconfessional stance we have purposely adopted.”

He noted that Europeans from the time of Warneck (1834-1910) had desired to make the study of missions a science in order to gain academic recognition. Americans from the time of the Student Volunteer Movement and Edinburgh 1910 were primarily concerned to prepare missionaries for overseas service and pastors to support them. Neither ASM, founded in 1973, nor its journal, *Missiology*, ventured to define “missiology” other than to indicate that it included practically anything of interest or relevance to mission, itself undefined.

In 1978 the Dutch missiologist, Verkuyl, gave a lengthy definition which focused on “the study of the worldwide church’s divine mandate to be ready to serve . . . God who is aiming his saving acts towards this world.” He related missiology to all the theological disciplines as

complementary. His approach “mainly related toward theological foundations and goals” in contrast to that of Alan Tippett, the first editor of *Missiology*, who was more concerned with process, context and method. In 1995 Laurent Ramambason proposed that the missiology should be defined by the activity of those who were seen to be doing mission (Ramambason 1999). This grounded missiology in the reality of praxis, and adds a dimension which should not be ignored, yet perhaps begs the question about what ought to be considered Christian mission and how that should be determined.

Clarity about the definition of the concept and content of mission continues to be problematic. It is common for works on mission not to define the term at all. I find it helpful to work with some simple working statements. These are unremarkable except that I am concerned to define the concept before addressing its usage in relation to the church. I also find it useful to separate the overall purpose of the church from the mission of the church outside of itself. I am attempting to avoid the tautology of saying that the mission of the church is mission and of affirming Christian mission as part of the nature of the church without saying that mission outside of ourselves is God’s only or even over-riding purpose for the church.

1. **Mission:** as a concept mission refers to a particular task or responsibility, and by extension a means by which the task is carried out.
2. **Christian Mission:** the purpose of the Church outside of its own community.
3. **Missiology:** the study of Christian mission and the issues that arise through commitment to it.
4. **Mission Studies:** the study of Christian mission including its social and cultural effects.
5. **Purpose of the Church:** includes worship, community and Christian mission.

d) The recognition of the theological centrality of mission has not translated into appreciation for what mission studies can yet offer the church.

Andrew Walls has highlighted the importance of mission studies for theology and church history if the church is to understand how it got to be where it is today (Walls 1991). His article is as prescient as ever, though the “structural problems” he refers to seem to lie in a failure of other disciplines to recognize the scope and implications of missiology rather than internal problems – other than lack of nerve – within mission studies itself. The danger is that of a superficial understanding of what the study of mission and the non-Western church has to offer, thinking that a theological appreciation of the importance of mission is the same thing as coming to terms with its intercultural implications and its relativization of the Western tradition.

There are legitimate concerns about the place of mission in theology and ecclesiology, the place of missiology and the study of mission in the seminary including issues of curriculum and faculty arrangement, and the difficulties of keeping churches “on task” with respect to their call and responsibility outside of their own community life. At the same time it seems to me that efforts to champion the restoration of an over-riding sense of God’s purpose for the church run the risk of theologically overstating the role of mission in the nature of the church, complicated relationships with other disciplines in the theological academy, and failing to achieve the aim of energizing churches preoccupied with liturgy, morality and politics to rise above it all as missional congregations whose identity is fused with the *Missio Dei*. I cannot see a sustained commitment to mission that is not rooted in worship. I can see a church tired of being driven by a missionary identity it does not comprehend or feel inspired to fathom.

e) The desire to integrate missiology with other theological disciplines takes theology seriously but may blur the contribution that each has to make to our overall understanding of the mind and purposes of God.

Bosch considers the integration model to be theological preferable to independence or being subsumed under an existing discipline, but considered that integration struggled with the practical reality that other disciplines do not understand what it is about missiology that they are expected to incorporate (Bosch 1991, 492). Bernhard Ott is one who has worked through what a mission-centred curriculum might look like (Ott 2001) having in view an institution which placed a high value on training for mission. Stephen Bevans has reflected on the process of curriculum development at the Chicago Theological Union (Bevans 2005). More recently John Corrie’s *Dictionary of Mission Theology* (Corrie, Escobar, and Shenk 2007) places a high value on integrating mission and theology.

Missiology should not be seen merely as an outpost of theological investigation, compartmentalized in the curriculum and tacked on alongside biblical theology, hermeneutics, ecclesiology and so on. It is rather that all theology is intrinsically missiological since it concerns the God of mission and the mission of God. This means that all theological categories are inherently missiological and all missionary categories are profoundly theological. This way of thinking . . . has highlighted the Western theological problem of a failure of integration. . . . This book therefore sets out to encourage us all on that journey of integration. (Corrie, Escobar, and Shenk 2007, xv)

There are problems here as well as a perspective to be taken seriously. If this is Bosch’s missiological gadfly in action does it bring us closer to the ideal that missiology is looking for, or does it create a loss of distinctions between the subdisciplines of theology? Is this avoiding turning everything into mission or a well-meaning exercise in missiological imperialism? It seems to go beyond correcting disconnects between faith and action without appreciating some of the benefits of rational analysis. I find it interesting that James Sherer regarded the attempt to correlate missiology to every “discipline in the theological

encyclopedia, not to mention the social sciences” to be *a priori* self-defeating. “Missiology must find a way to be holistic, integrative, inclusive, and complementary to human learning without becoming *exhaustive*” (Scherer 1987). Categorization and the formulation of distinctions may be overdone, but it is not of itself an Enlightenment failure, it is rather a necessary task if we are to talk meaningfully about anything. Of course missiology should not be an outpost of theology (though missiology often reminds the church of the importance of what goes on at the margins), but neither should any other dimension of theological thought be disconnected from the whole.

Questions

Should missiology be defined by its championing of Christian outreach or differentiated from other disciplines by its multicultural interests and internationalist perspectives? Missiologists need a dialogue of disciplines, we do not need to take them over. Many of us will have a primary discipline in another field, and perhaps missiology is at its best when it encourages this. We can all recognize the importance of the purposes of God without feeling it is our sole responsibility to capture it. Unless missiology seeks to be the servant not the master of matters of concern for the church about its mission it will be deemed either triumphalist or redundant.

Are we facing a lack of interest in missiology because its theology is the new orthodoxy, the markers of identity of the evangelical tradition have moved from mission to morality, mission has not re-energized the church and in any case everyone takes it for granted? Can there be missiology when interest in mission in and from our culture appears to have moved on? Did missiology over-reach itself by its claims to be about what was central to the will of God and the nature of the Church? Are we tarnished by a shift from church growth as concern for lost people to schemes for the salvation of the church presented as concern for the salvation of the world?

Has missiology promised too much to the church and delivered too little? Have statements such as “the only reason for gathering the church is mission” (Kalu and Low 2008, p.3) driven away commitment to Christian outreach more than inspired a new generation?

Is there a need to apply some classic missiological principles to our own discipline? Does the “euthanasia of the mission” suggest there is a time for missiology to move on from one set of questions to other areas? Does “Missionary methods: St Paul’s or ours?” suggest there is temptation to missiological paternalism which might be ameliorated by trusting the Holy Spirit to provide missiological gifts to others and inviting us to trust the church to be able to answer its own missiological questions?

Does the value of being “reflective practitioners” contain the trap that we really wish that everyone was like us except that we would not know what to do with them if they were? Have we failed to acknowledge that there are different gifts – some of us are better missiologists and some of us are better church planters and evangelists – and that the real need is not for us to all be “reflective practitioners” but to appreciate and learn from one another? Is this a question about what is good for the Kingdom (which it may be) or a desire to reduce the necessary pain of missionary and missiological liminality?

What does it tell us to look at the people who identify themselves with missiology and with mission studies. What do they do? What have we done? What is the glue that holds us together? Where is the next generation of missiologists going to come from, especially as fewer numbers have long term missionary careers involving language learning and cultural adaptation? It is a question to be tested not assumed, but I have the impression that historically people in mission studies:

1. Have another discipline – theology, church history, anthropology, sociology, biblical studies
2. Have an interest in the dynamics of change as people and cultures are affected by Christianity. Are marked by cultural curiosity.
3. Have experience or interest in Christian mission outside the church.
4. Wish to engage others in Christian mission globally and locally.
5. Are willing to ask awkward questions about what is really going on.

Conclusion

The validity of missiology continues to lie in the validity of mission and the importance of the questions it addresses and the intercultural perspectives it brings. There is a sense in which it has to believe in itself even when others may not. Yet we might just do everyone a service by affirming the other disciplines - biblical studies, history, theology, pastoral - before sharing our ideas of the centrality of mission or offering to help others out from our experience of crossing boundaries of faith and culture.

Like witness to Christ, missiological witness to his mission never ceases to need to earn the right to speak and have a sparing attitude to the divine authority which underlies its calling.

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