

Current Trends in Missions

In this session, we will interact with past and current missiologists to understand where missiology has been, is and could be headed over the next few decades. We will discover that in the end we are not just talking about missiology but of where evangelical Christianity as whole may be headed. Critical issues are at stake in the debates that are shaping twenty-first century missiology.

Early Missions

While this time period is normally not associated with missions, we will begin our study here because there were concerted efforts to expand the reaches of Christianity. Beginning with Constantine (4th century), the organized state church was viewed as the only legitimate interpreter of Scripture, the locus of God's activity on earth was the church. Salvation depended on a person's relationship to the formal church. Therefore, official membership in the church and regular participation in the sacraments was of primary importance. The church sought to expand its reaches by any means possible (including the use of preaching, politics, force and even torture). As a result, many people who were members of the church had not experienced any sort of spiritual transformation. Also, the influence of human tradition and political rulers produced a church that strayed significantly from biblical Christianity and often focused more on political power than on spiritual ministry.

Early American Missions (Colonialism)

Although things changed somewhat with the Reformation, the real change in missiology did not occur until the 17th century. There was growing emphasis on having only redeemed people as part of the church. However, Covenant theology encouraged the membership of the unsaved children of adult members and a desire to re-create a theocratic nation. Since most politicians in the United States were believers, the church played an active role and had the earnest expectation that they would create a "Christian nation." Missionaries sought to establish churches that were similar to the parent churches by using "word" evangelism, verbal Gospel proclamation. They sought to "Christianize the savages" which was sometimes more about Westernizing them since Christianity was associated with Western civilization (the mission station approach). Missionaries often tried to gain access to politicians and native power structures of their mission fields to bring about social change. To become a Christian was to become an American (or Westerner). Thus the Chinese saying, "One more Christian, one less Chinese". The imposition of Western culture caused sharp conflict with the indigenous people in many places.

American "Revivalist" Missions (Colonialism)

In the mid-19th century, some major changes took place in missiology. While holding many of the same perspectives as the previous era of missions, two major factors contributed to a change of approaches. First, the mass arrival of European immigrants, who were often Catholic only in name and lived extremely immoral lifestyles, meant that Christians were no longer the majority in many communities. The possibility of a "Christianized" society not seemed more remote. In addition, the rise of Dispensationalism, with an eschatology that emphasized that the world

“shall wax worse and worse,” caused many Christians to completely abandon the political/social arena. The focus was no longer on society at large but on God’s work in the church. Missionaries continued to transplant American culture, resulting in conflicts with nationals (including the Boxer Rebellion in China). Later on, many reacted strongly against the social gospel of the liberals in the early 20th century and rejected virtually every kind of mercy ministry.

Radical Contextualization

Radical contextualization sprang from theological liberalism, which rejected the previously uniformly held belief that the Bible was the inspired Word of God. Consequently, there was no theological foundation for missions and even for Christianity. This radical contextualization came to missiology in **two waves: beginning in 1910s and again in the 1960s** (which is when it really moved into Evangelical missiology and which we will focus on more).

View of truth and Scripture

The radically new view of Scripture held by liberalism also reflected a new view of truth. Reflecting the civil unrest and revolutionary sentiment of the day, many within the movement rejected any kind of authority and refused to work within existing power structures (whether denominational or political) in favor of a more subversive approach. *This rejection of authority resulted in the rejection of absolute truth claims and the belief that truth is relative.* Therefore, Scripture and Christianity were merely Western tradition and culture. As a human book, the Bible was not superior to other sources of knowledge.

In the early 20th century, the acceptance of Darwinism by secular *scientists* began to influence Christian theologians and radically changed many perspectives regarding Genesis, creation and man himself (instead of being viewed as made in God’s image, man was little more than an highly evolved animal). *Anthropology* became more important for missiology than Scriptural exegesis. Attempts to find a missiology based on the Bible were rejected and scoffed at. Fashionable understanding of *linguistics* taught the relativity of communication. If communication is relative, two people cannot truly communicate because each individual’s mindset completely prejudices him. He cannot know for sure what the other person is saying. He can only know what he thinks the other person is saying. Applied to Scripture, this is devastating. Man cannot know what God said. Man only knows what he understands God to say. But his understanding is preconditioned by his cultural context and may not accurately reflect what God really said. Therefore man cannot make absolute truth statements based on the authority of the Bible. There can be no certainty in theology.

In the end, if Scripture is not absolute truth and Christianity is merely Western tradition, other cultures have their traditions that are equally valid. Therefore Christianity should dialogue with and learn from their religions and find the truths they possess.

Key theological concepts

The main theological justification for the redefinition of mission can be captured in the popularization of three concepts.

1. **Missio Dei.** This is a Latin expression that emphasizes that God himself initiated and sustains his purpose to restore all of creation. This restoration is universal, extending to social justice and rescuing people from cultural, political, social and economic dehumanization, as well as from their spiritual alienation from God. Believers today are to carry that out the divine mission of redemption and restoration.¹
2. **Trinitarian Ecclesiology.** Missiologists rejected a “Christocentric” missiology (which emphasized personal salvation from hell by belief in Christ’s atonement and viewed mission primarily as the continuation through history of the community established by Christ) as too narrow. Trinitarian ecclesiology emphasized God’s sending of his Son, the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father and Son, and the Trinity sending the church to carry out a “holistic” mission, wherein one seeks to redeem every aspect of society. On the basis of the Commission passage in John 20:21, Christ’s sending of the church should emulate the Father’s sending of Christ (which included healing the sick, feeding the poor, freeing the captive, etc.).
3. **The kingdom of God.** By over-emphasizing the ALREADY aspect of the “already-not yet” view of the kingdom, missiologists sought to justify the extermination of every form of evil and suffering. Since God’s kingdom is universal in extent, believers should bring in the kingdom in every way. Writing decades later, but sharing the same view, David Bosch wrote that “in its mission, the church witnesses to the fullness of the promise of God’s reign and participates in the ongoing struggle between that reign and the powers of darkness and evil.”²

These terms emphasized that *God was working not primarily through the church but through divinely guided immanent historical process.*³ The locus of God’s working is the world, not the church itself.⁴ In order to eradicate this “ecclesiocentric” and “reductionistic” view of missiology, some even called for the church to cease to exist.⁵ As Christianity followed this holistic approach to mission, *shalom* (peace, well-being) would be ushered in.

¹*Diccionario Hispano-Americano de la Misión*, s.v. “Missio Dei,” accessed in Logos 4.

²David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology and Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 390-91.

³J. A. Scherer, “Church, Kingdom, and *Missio Dei*: Lutheran and Orthodox Correctives to Recent Ecumenical Mission Theology” in *The Good News of the Kingdom: Mission Theology for the Third Millennium*, ed. C. Van Engen, D. S. Gilliland and P. Pierson (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 82-88. Quoted by Charles Van Engen, “‘Mission’ Defined and Described” in *MissionShift: Global Mission Issues in the Third Millennium*, ed. David J. Hesselgrave and Ed Stetzer (Nashville, TN: B&H, 2010), 19.

⁴C. Wright seeks to justify this position by stating that “we cannot simply relegate the powerful message of events such as the exodus or institutions like the jubilee to a bygone era. They are an integral part of the biblical definition of God’s idea of redemption and of God’s requirement on his redeemed people” (*The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2006], 306).

⁵“The focus of mission is the world, not the church. That is perhaps the simplest way to describe the turning from ecclesiocentric to Trinitarian mission” (Darrell L. Guder, “Defining and Describing ‘Mission’” in *MissionShift*, 56).

⁵J.C. Hoekendijk, *The Church Inside Out* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966).

View of the church

This missiological perspective viewed the Western church as simply a recruiting, funding and mobilization agency which should strive to heal the world from poverty, sickness, and injustice. In other cultural settings, the same could be accomplished by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists or atheists. Since Christianity is merely Western tradition, *people from other traditions no longer need to be personally saved from sin. They need to be corporately saved from a society of injustice and poverty.* In fact, many “Christians” did not even believe in a God who would condemn people to hell.⁶

The task and means of mission

In missions, the focus was now on “*deed*” evangelism (doing acts of mercy that showed God’s love to other human beings).⁷ Missionaries sought to avoid infecting local cultures with Western culture. Instead they sought to *integrate into local cultures*, indiscriminately adopting any and all indigenous customs and even religious practices. Some would even go to local temples and participate in their religious observances.⁸ In this way, the missionaries would demonstrate cultural sensitivity by not disrespecting local religions. *Sharing the Gospel became secondary or even detrimental to the real goal: redeeming society and healing the world.* Instead of basing their missional efforts on God’s Word, the needs of the world set the agenda for the church and for missiology. In fact, the World Council of Churches adopted the theme “Let the world set the agenda” for its 1968 assembly.⁹

Consequences and aftermath

The consequences of rejecting the authority of Scripture were devastating. Overreacting to colonialism’s wholesale transplantation of Western culture, radical contextualization ejected everything Western, including a “Western” understanding of the Gospel. Without the Gospel message, Christianity lost its essence. As a result missions became *radically secularized* to the point where the Gospel message was lost.¹⁰ The focus became almost exclusively on *doing good*

⁶David Hesselgrave comments that one of the motivations for creating the Evangelical Missiological Society as a separate entity from the American Society of Missiology was that many in the ASM debated whether the lost were actually lost apart from Christ and whether Christ was the only Savior (“Conclusion: A Scientific Postscript—Grist for the Missiological Mills of the Future” in *MissionShift*, 268).

⁷For a thorough analysis of the evangelical shift towards the social activism, see Rolland McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled: The Failed Strategy of Modern Evangelicalism* (Greenville, S.C.: Ambassador International, 2004), 231-57.

⁸Keith E. Eitel shares a story of a missionary to India who would bow and pray before an image of Shiva so as to not offend the Hindus around him (“On Becoming Missional: Interacting with Charles Van Engen” in *MissionShift*, 30).

⁹Hesselgrave, “Scientific Postscript,” 264.

¹⁰“There was an inherent secularization process in missions during this time because *the world, and its overwhelming social needs, set the premise for engaging missions* rather than the need to proclaim or evangelize lost souls” (Eitel, “Becoming Missional,” 33, emphasis added).

for good's sake without Gospel proclamation. In 1972, Donald McGavran protested that “from this new angle, mission ceases being gospel proclamation to non-Christians and becomes inter-church aid or good work done anywhere.”¹¹ The missionary focus on contextualization and accommodation produced the complete assimilation of Christianity into the local cultures. It melted into the culture leaving nothing behind that could be remotely identified as Christian.

Critical Contextualization

Critical contextualization is an evangelical response to theological liberalism and its radical contextualization. It is also a reaction against Fundamentalism's missiology (represented by the section on Revivalist Missiology). J. Mark Terry explains, “If Fundamentalists neglected the bodies of the poor, the liberation theologians neglected their souls.”¹² Evangelicals realized the essence of Christianity had been lost and sought to correct that error by preserving Scriptural authority while adopting the social agenda of Radical Contextualization. The philosophical foundations for this shift in missiology began to be laid in the **mid-1970s** but really began to flourish in practice in **the 21st century**, especially in one of its most evident manifestations: the emergent church.

View of truth and Scripture

This missiological perspective sought to *return to a belief in absolute truth and the authority of Scripture*. While different from liberalism, which denied that the Bible was God's Word, this missiological viewpoint retains the *linguistic skepticism concerning objective communication*. If objective communication between God and man is difficult or impossible, it remains difficult to make categorical affirmations of truth. *Theology, therefore, is merely man's personal or corporate understanding of the Bible*. That understanding is skewed by the particular culture and traditions of that person or group. Christians must dialogue with other “Christian” traditions to arrive at a truly “universal Christianity”.¹³

Key theological concepts

Several key theological distinctives highlight the missiological perspective that dominates evangelicalism today.

First, this perspective *preserves and updates the theological justification for social action promoted by radical contextualization* (Trinitarian ecclesiology, *missio Dei*, kingdom of God, holistic mission, etc.).

Secondly, *theology is considered suspect, while anthropology and linguistics are equal in weight and value* (at least in practice).

¹¹Donald McGavran, *Crucial Issues in Missions Tomorrow* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 190.

¹²J. Mark Terry, “In Response to Ralph Winter's ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission’” in *MissionShift*, 237. Terry continues saying, “The dichotomy between evangelism and social ministry is a false one. In fact the two emphases can combine to produce a ministry that is true to the Scriptures and effective.”

¹³A. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 235.

Avery T. Willis, Jr. shares his skepticism of theology and speaks of “inherent conflicts between theology and anthropology.”¹⁴ After describing how anthropology had gained supremacy over theology in previous years, he says, “Both theology and anthropology are creations of man. Theology is man’s reasoned response to revelation, and anthropology is man’s reasoned response to the social sciences. In both, man’s reason attempts to become the judge over God’s revelation.”¹⁵ Even when recognizing that theology is man’s systematization of God’s revelation and will therefore always be incomplete and imperfect, I find it astounding to put theology on the same level as anthropology. A person who truly believes in the inspiration, perspicuity and sufficiency of Scripture will give greater value to conclusions that come as directly as possible from God’s Word over those that come from social sciences.

Ed Stetzer, as editor of *MissionShift*, practically scoffs at Andreas Köstenberger when he calls for missiologists to base missiology on theology. “He [Köstenberger] responds as a New Testament scholar, whose theological concern is to apprehend the theology of the biblical writers in their historical context and in the very terms they use. Then, for him, systematic theological reflection and presumably missiological reflection must be based solely on this work.”¹⁶ If missiology is not based on the theology of the biblical writers, on what *should* we base our missiology?

Stetzer continues, “It might appear from Köstenberger’s chapter that the issue that distinguishes him and Van Engen concerns the doctrines of biblical authority and sufficiency (and it may be true that they may have differing views on these doctrines). However, I believe the issue that distinguishes them is how Köstenberger applies and integrates his discipline of biblical theology with another disciplines, such as missiology.”¹⁷ Stetzer wants to divorce missiology from biblical theology. One must wonder if Köstenberger’s view of Scripture, theology and missiology is not only significantly different from Van Engen’s but from Stetzer’s as well. Later Stetzer writes, “The core conviction is ‘biblical authority over contextual thinking in every situation.’ *In principle*, I affirm this statement...if it allows for contextually conditioned thinking to interact with the interpretation of Scripture”.¹⁸ Stetzer seems to imply that the principle of biblical authority is fine as long as it doesn’t really control hermeneutics and missiology.

Stetzer finishes with a parting shot at Köstenberger. “What I like best about Köstenberger’s chapter is his final analysis—really, his own contextual description—of what the church should be doing. That description comes out of his own multicultural

¹⁴Avery T. Willis, Jr., “Response to Heibert’s Article” in *MissionShift*, 145.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 147.

¹⁶Ed Stetzer, “Responding to ‘“Mission” Defined and Described’ and the Four Responses” in *MissionShift*, 75-76.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 76, emphasis added.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 78.

context, which establishes for him its biblically true nature.”¹⁹ Notice the subtle swipe at objectivity. It is true *for him*, but it may not be true for anyone else. And one most certainly dare not affirm that it is true based on the authority of Scripture!

Third, “*self-theologizing*” is viewed as an essential part of missiology and theology. “Self-theologizing” asks each culture to develop its own theology or version of Christianity. Then, this local theology should be brought to the dialogue table where it can contribute to a truly universal and Christian theology (“metatheologizing”). Any claim to having an accurate grasp of theology is rejected.

Stetzer attacks Norman Geisler’s take on missiology, calling it “colonial.”²⁰ He restates the question Geisler asks of modern missiologists and tries to answer it. “Is there objective truth so humanly understandable and indubitable that it cannot be questioned? Of course there is...Jesus Christ. This question does not bother ‘missional’ types; it is the way intellectual ‘truth claims’ are equated so certainly with God’s revelation....The difference between God’s revelation and human theology does not appear to be recognized by Geisler.”²¹ Stetzer has serious reservations about theology and absolute truth claims and defines objective truth not as Scripture but as Christ. This sounds almost “Barthian.” In fact, Karl Barth is a sort of philosophical father for many modern missiologists.

Stetzer also criticizes Geisler’s view of truth by saying, “He takes issue with any dialogue regarding other worldviews, inasmuch as his worldview is true; and noncontradiction means that they must, therefore, be false and subject to attack.”²² Notice that Stetzer is talking about “worldviews,” not just minor theological differences. What is the worldview that Geisler affirms is the true worldview? “A theistic gospel” that contrasts with other worldviews such as a “nontheistic philosophical worldview” and “atheism and pantheism.”²³ Apparently Stetzer feels uncomfortable asserting with finality the superiority of a Christian worldview and is uncomfortable calling other worldviews false.

Fourth, *contextualization in message and practice is valued above theology.*

In his chapter in *MissionShift*, Norman Geisler lays out doctrines that are “enduring and transcultural” and express “unchangeable and uncompromisable truths of the Christian faith.”²⁴ While responding quite strongly to Geisler, the other authors in *MissionShift* fail

¹⁹Ibid., 79.

²⁰Stetzer, “Responding to ‘The Gospel in Human Contexts: Changing Perceptions of Contextualization’” in *MissionShift*, 160.

²¹Ibid., 161.

²²Ibid., 162.

²³Norman L. Geisler, “A Response to Paul Heibert” in *MissionShift*, 141-142.

²⁴Ibid., 137.

to affirm Geisler's proclamation of a-cultural truth. In calling for theological dialogue and "metatheologizing," Paul Heibert writes, "We dare not equate the gospel with any human theologies."²⁵ If this is true, we cannot know what the Gospel is! Keith Eitel is right when he evaluates the desire to contextualize held by many today and says, "While the sentiment is right, the DNA will breed theological error. Scripture must always critique cultural experiences and never the reverse."²⁶

In addition to theological contextualization, cultural contextualization is taken to previously unheard of levels. Adapting to cultural customs is a necessary and healthy part of missionary ministry. "The cross is going to be hard enough for people to accept. Why block people from receiving the gospel by insisting that they accept *our* cultural eccentricities?"²⁷ It is true that Western missionaries have frequently failed to make the necessary adjustments in regards to cultural practices. However, the current debate about appropriate levels of contextualization, exemplified by the C1-C6 spectrum presented by John Travis (in an article describing various levels of contextualization by believers in Muslim settings), shows an excessive level of accommodation.²⁸ Many missiologists defend C5 contextualization, wherein Arab believers continue to worship at mosques, pray the same prayers, continue the same practices as other Muslims and are even viewed as Muslims by their Muslim counterparts. In their prayers and worship, these believers simply replace reference to Mohammed and Allah with "Isa al Masih" (Jesus the Messiah).

Fifth, "*acts of mercy*" are equal partners with *Gospel proclamations*. Refusing to engage in a "bait and switch" approach to missiology,²⁹ acts of mercy are now viewed as an independent activity of the church, justifiable apart from Gospel proclamation and which provide legitimacy for missionary endeavors before humanity

By attacking every manifestation of evil, the church shows the love and goodness of God and accomplishes his purpose of redeeming the world. Ralph D. Winter writes, "A return to a full-spectrum gospel could mean an enormous change. It will no longer be the case of missionaries thinking that they have to use adroit language to cover up the 'real

²⁵Heibert, "The Gospel in Human Contexts" in *Mission Shift*, 95.

²⁶Eitel, "Becoming Missional," 38.

²⁷Stetzer, "Responding to 'The Gospel in Human Contexts'", 157, emphasis original.

²⁸This article first appeared in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 34:4 (October 1998: 407-8). For a reproduction of C1-C6 spectrum and an application to the emergent church in America, see Gregg R. Allison, *An Evaluation of Emerging Churches on the Basis of the Contextualization Spectrum (C1-C6)*, http://theresurgence.com/files/pdf/gregg_allison_2006-11-17_an_evaluation_of_emerging_churches_on_the_basis_of_the_contextualization_spectrum.pdf, accessed December 16, 2011. Internet.

²⁹Missionaries were often accused of using a "bait and switch" approach in missions, where acts of mercy were used as a form of pre-evangelism or as means of gaining a hearing for the Gospel. This accusation is only justified if the "bait" is truly "switched" (*i.e.*, the promised benefit [food, medicine, etc.] is not delivered) or if people are not told from the beginning that it is a Christian endeavor that involves Gospel proclamation.

purpose' of their work. Their real purpose will be to identify and destroy all forms of evil, both human and microbiological, and will thus be explainable without religious jargon. This will provide common ground in almost any country."³⁰

The task and means of mission

Modern missiology seeks to correct previous imbalances by *merging "word" and "deed" evangelism*. For example, Winter believes that Christian mission involves the eradication of all species of evil, specifically mentioning the eradication of poverty and hunger, and even includes sickness, mentioning AIDS, cancer and the Guinea worm. All of this is included under the heading "Defeating the 'Works of the Devil.'"³¹

Now missiologists conclude that unbelievers will *not be saved without such deeds*. Winter reflects this concept when he states that "in our outreach to unbelievers, *those works displaying God's glory better come first*. We see this clearly when we recognize that the usual way in which individuals come to faith is primarily by viewing the good works of those who already believe.... Works are necessary to authenticate and demonstrate the true character of God. That is the true basis for *empowering evangelism*."³² John Stott believes that "when they're that poor, they can't respond to the gospel."³³ Yet when one looks at Scripture, especially at the book of Acts, these affirmations can hardly be defended. Paul typically arrived in a city and started preaching the Gospel. Many times slaves, many of whom lived in abject poverty, responded more receptively to the Gospel than the richer demographic groups. While Paul occasionally performed miracles, acts of mercy were not the missiological key he used to open every cultural door.

In addition to merging "word" and "deed" evangelism, current missiology seeks to spread the Gospel by *synthesizing local culture and the Gospel message*. Often the "incarnational" mode of ministry is emphasized. This style of ministry teaches that just as Christ became a man and adopted Jewish practices, believers should adopt local customs. Additionally, just as Christ came proclaiming the Gospel and meeting physical needs, the task of mission includes a definite social agenda.³⁴ In this paradigm, missionaries do not adopt the culture wholesale (radical contextualization) or reject it wholesale (colonialism). Missionaries allow indigenous believers to remain a part of the culture, helping guide them in understanding what aspects of local culture must be rejected, adapted or accepted. This allows for truly indigenous communities of believers.

³⁰Ralph D. Winter, "The Future of Evangelicals in Mission" in *MissionShift*, 190.

³¹*Ibid.*, 184-187.

³²*Ibid.*, 183, emphasis original.

³³Roy McCoughry, "Basic Stott: Candid Comments on Justice, Gender and Judgment" in *Christianity Today* (Jan 8, 1996), 25.

³⁴For a comprehensive and critical analysis of this approach to ministry, particularly as it relates to John 20:21, see Andreas J. Köstenberger and P. T. O'Brien, *Salvation to the Ends of the Earth: A Biblical Theology of Mission* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2001), 203-26. Also, see McCune, *Promise Unfulfilled*, 269-72.

Paul G. Heibert describes this process: “We need to involve people in evaluating their own culture in the light of the Bible. They know their old culture better than does the outsider, and they are in a better position to critique it and live transformed lives once they have biblical instruction. We can bring outside views that help them see their own cultural biases, but they are involved in making the decision.”³⁵ While helping nationals to develop biblical discernment is essential for a healthy Christianity in any cultural setting, Heibert’s faulty view of Scripture, mentioned below, combines with his contextualization paradigm to create a cocktail that may ultimately poison the Gospel.

Questions and forecasts

It remains difficult to predict where these major presuppositional shifts will take the Evangelical missions community. Yet careful analysis may suggest several questions that should be asked and may provide a forecast of what is coming in the future.

First, *will current evangelical missiology remain doctrinally pure?* Will doubts regarding the objectivity of the interpretation of God’s Word ultimately be its undoing? As long as anthropology and linguistics continue to be on par with Scripture, no foundation or theological mooring exists to anchor modern missiology. Hesselgrave mulls over Paul Heibert’s missiology and concludes that at times the theological commitments that Heibert possessed and professed were overshadowed by his anthropology.³⁶ Other missiologists will follow Heibert’s example as long as skepticism about theology remains

Second, *will the emphasis on “self-theologizing” and dialogue open the back door for theological relativism?* David Hesselgrave warns that “Evangelical mission thinkers and practitioners tend to become overly creative and unduly adventurous. Intentionally, but often unintentionally, missionary activism and pragmatism tend to impinge on Evangelical theology...The lesson of this bit of missionary history seems clear: biblical theology is logically and practically prior to mission vision and missiological exploration.”³⁷

Third, *will the lack of a strong biblical foundation and the strong emphasis on contextualization result in accommodating syncretism?* The levels of accommodation approved by many missiologists do not seem to represent the emphases or patterns of Scripture.

Several relevant biblical examples of “failures to contextualize” come readily to mind. 1) In Ephesus, Paul did not go bow at the temple of Diana in Ephesus. In fact the Gospel message so threatened local culture that the silversmiths caused a riot (Acts 19:24-31). This would probably be called “colonialism” by modern missiologists! 2) Ephesian believers did not contextualize their magic books, incorporating them into their “local expression of Christianity.” They burned them (Acts 19:19). 3) I would think that 1 Cor 9:22 (the “all things to all men” passage) would be the primary contextualization passage

³⁵Paul G. Heibert, “The Gospel in Human Contexts,” 99.

³⁶Hesselgrave, “Scientific Postscript,” 281.

³⁷Ibid., 278-79.

in Scripture. Yet it is not often used by missiologists in this debate. Why? Because a few verses later, Paul says “You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons” (1Cor 10:21). 4) In his second epistle to the same church, Paul forbids yoking up with unbelievers and prohibits fellowship between light and darkness (2 Cor 6:14). He then calls them to come out and be separate (6:17). 5) When a demon possessed girl announced truth about the nature and mission of Paul in Philippi, Paul did not laud this pronouncement as a “point in common and a manifestation of the truth inherent in this culture that should be dialogued with.” Paul recognized that even when the girl was speaking truth, the truth was energized by demonic powers and should be rebuked and expelled (Acts 16:17). Such activities today would provoke the outrage and disdain of twenty-first century missiologists.

Fourth, *will the emphasis on social action displace Gospel proclamation?* In practice, the Gospel may become secondary to social work. Social work will soon begin to take a majority of the money, personnel and focus.

This is may already be happening. After comparing statistic from 2001 and 2005 that showed that a significant jump in funds for social relief and development, almost reaching the point of overtaking funding for evangelism and discipleship, Christopher Little says, “Assuming the continuation of this trend, one can be fairly certain that the missions community in the USA is presently spending more on alleviating human suffering than on addressing the eternal destiny of the lost.”³⁸ The Student Volunteer Movement (early 20th century) had as its theme “The evangelization of the world in this generation.” Today, one is more likely to hear more about “the eradication of malaria in this generation” than about the evangelization of the world. For all my criticisms of Stetzer earlier, he does get this point right. He decries the move towards prioritizing “deed” over “word” by highlighting the problems Evangelicals had with the World Council of Churches “because they sought to replace evangelism with a *missio Dei*/kingdom of God approach that ignored evangelism and disenfranchised the church.”³⁹

Fifth, *will the redefinition of mission to include the eradication of all forms of evil truly help missionary endeavors or ultimately create disillusionment?* The redefinition of missions to include and even prioritize the eradication of all forms of evil and suffering creates unrealistic expectations. Even if Christian missions could eradicate all disease, this would not result in the wholesale conversion of the world. “The average person would simply chalk it up to the abilities of humans to overcome their own challenges, and in doing so, they will glory in themselves rather than in God.”⁴⁰ We should also highlight that deeds of mercy are not what made Christianity attractive to people of the first three centuries of the church. It was the beauty of

³⁸Christopher R. Little, “In Response to ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission’” in *MissionShift*, 205.

³⁹Stetzer, “Responding to ‘The Future of Evangelicals in Mission’” in *MissionShift*, 249.

⁴⁰Little, “In Response to ‘The Future,’” 214.

their redeemed morality and character that was so powerfully attractive.⁴¹ Furthermore, evil will never be eradicated as long as man continues to be a sinner, Satan continues to carry out his evil work and nature still groans awaiting eschatological redemption (Rom 8:22-23). If missionaries hold these premises, will they not become disillusioned if/when they do not attain the expected results?

Last, *how will missions interact with secular institutions, including government?* Interestingly enough, some missiologists are calling for Evangelicals to once again with and within institutional power structures to help achieve societal transformation. If modern missions decides to work hand in hand with politics, government and secular organizations, can they remain free from the political entanglements that made the medieval Catholic church a cesspool of corruption and intrigue. Is such an outcome in the forecast for modern missions?

Conclusions

A missiology that relinquishes the authority of Scripture has lost its anchor and will inevitably be pushed along by the inexorable tide of human opinion. Ultimately human wisdom will be always be in conflict with the heavenly wisdom that comes from an all-wise, all-knowing God who wrote what He wanted mankind to know in a book called the Bible. In order to avoid drifting with the tide of human wisdom, let me provide some suggestions to help guide you as you develop your own missiology.

Believers should demonstrate the love of Christ to their neighbors as they have opportunity (Titus 3:14). We recognize that Christians have often been silent and passive when faced with evil and suffering and have refused to engage them when they could and should have. Yet even when faced with poverty and hunger, remember that our responsibility is primarily to other believers (Gal 6:10).

Priority should be given to Gospel proclamation. New Testament understanding of the mission carried out by Christ (freeing the captive, helping the poor, etc.—Luke 4:18 is a primary text for social action missiologists—is correctly understood by the apostles as preaching the Gospel.⁴² The apostles prioritized preaching over deeds of mercy in Acts 6.⁴³ We do not see Paul going into a town and setting up a medical clinic or installing a water filtration system before preaching the Gospel. We do not see Paul appealing to Caesar to eliminate slavery or the gladiatorial games. The proclamation of the Gospel was Paul's ultimate priority. Everything else was subordinate.

⁴¹A. Harnack, *The Exposition of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 1:460.

⁴²Little, "In Response to 'The Future,'" 215.

⁴³ In addition, notice two things: 1) they did not dismiss deeds of mercy completely from the realm of church ministry (as some today seek to do); 2) however, one can hardly call this missions, since it was for the widows belonging to the church.

Maintain an ecclesiocentric missiology. If you choose to engage in “acts of mercy” (and I personally encourage you to do so), use these acts of mercy to work hand in hand with local church ministry.

Maintain a proper bibliology. Believe in the inspiration of Scripture. Believe in the sufficiency of Scripture. Scripture is sufficient to give us the guidelines for our theology and practice. But also believe in the perspicuity of Scripture. God spoke so that man could understand. It IS possible to understand what He wrote. While we must remain humble and recognize that we will never know everything completely, there are some things we can know are completely true. We should hold them with unblushing boldness.

I want to quote David Hesselgrave as a fitting conclusion to this topic.

“The only theology that will sustain Great Commission mission is a theology that takes seriously biblical teachings having to do with the lostness of mankind, the uniqueness of Christ, the necessity of conversion, the ‘perfecting’ of the saints, and the establishment of churches that are truly Christian.”⁴⁴

⁴⁴Hesselgrave, “Scientific Postscript”, 266.