
Missional Theology

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The authors argue that missionaries and ministers do not simply apply theology, they do theology in a third way. Missional theology draws on and complements systematic and biblical theology. Systematic theology uses the methods of philosophy to study the ultimate structure of reality. Biblical theology uses the methods of history to study the cosmic story. Missional theology uses the methods of American law, which examines specific human situations in the light of constitutional, statutory, and precedent case law.

In recent years, missiologists have increasingly drawn on the insights the human sciences provide for their work. One key question keeps arising: how can missions keep from becoming captive to the sciences, and how can the findings of the sciences be integrated into missions while keeping solid theological foundations? This problem of relating theology to science is not unique to missions. It underlies much of the discussion surrounding the inclusion of psychology in training ministers and Christian counselors, the integration of medical sciences and Christian healing, and the use of modern business sciences in the administration of churches and church institutions. Despite these discussions, a big chasm often exists between theology and the sciences.

At a deep level, the problem of integrating theology and the sciences is a worldview issue. It is due, in part, to our definitions and perceptions of what constitutes 'theology' and 'science.' We will examine these and suggests avenues for a rapprochement between these two critical bodies of knowledge.

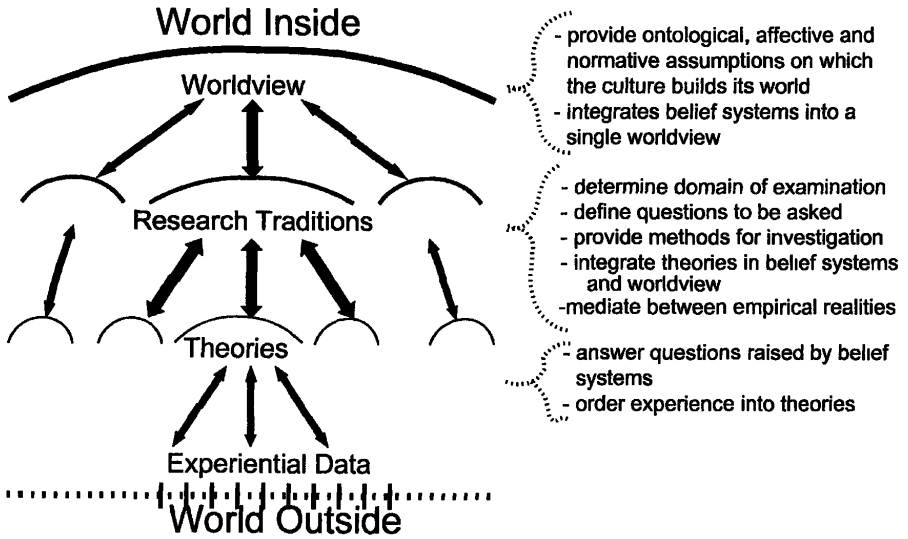
Research Traditions

Larry Laudan (1977) classifies the sciences as 'research traditions' — bodies of knowledge shared by communities of scholars seeking to understand the truth in their fields. Each research tradition is determined by: 1) the critical questions it seeks to answer, 2) the body of data it examines, and 3) the methods it accepts as valid means of discovering answers (figure 1). Each is embedded in a worldview — the fundamental

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Figure 1
LEVELS OF CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE



assumptions it makes about reality. Different answers or ‘theories’ are offered to the key questions, and competing ones are debated until one or the other emerges as accepted doctrine until it is further questioned. For example, physics, as a research tradition, is the study of the building blocks of the material world, which it assumes to be real. It examines material objects using experiments, electron microscopes, ion chambers and other means to find answers to questions such as what are the basic components of matter, what are the major physical forces, and how do these interact.

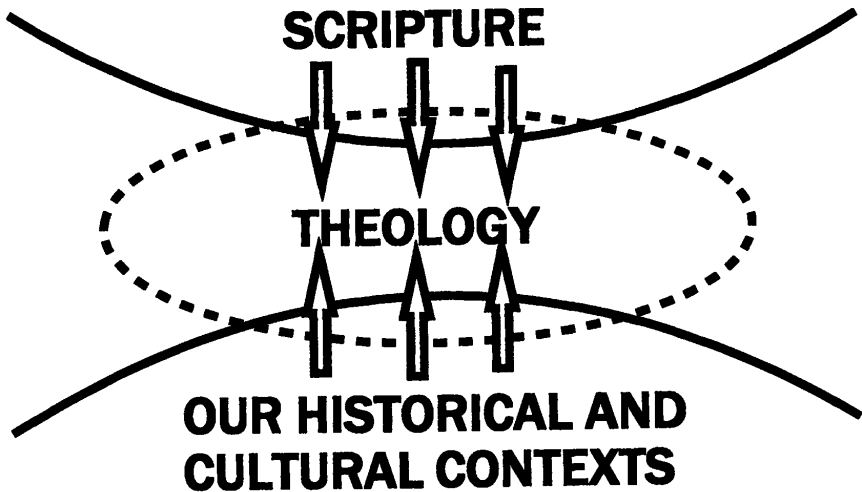
Theology, too, is a research tradition. It is a body of knowledge debated by a community of scholars seeking to answer certain critical questions. On the level of theories, there are debates over Calvinism and Arminianism; pre-millennial, post-millennial and amillennial eschatologies; and orthodoxy, liberalism, and neo-orthodoxy. These are true arguments because the different proponents are seeking to answer the same questions using accepted methods. In other words, theology is a research tradition not because it has arrived at one universally agreed upon answer, but because those in the field are seeking to answer the same questions by using accepted methods of inquiry and examining the same data.

Ways of Doing Theology

If theology is a research tradition, how does this change our perception of it as a discipline, and its relationship to the sciences? Before answering this, we need to

Figure 2

THE NATURE OF THEOLOGY



clarify what we mean by theology. We are assuming here that Scripture is divine revelation given to us by God, not our human search for God. Theology, then, is our attempt to understand that revelation in our historical and cultural contexts (figure 2). As Millard Erickson notes, it is a second level activity (1986). It is important, therefore, that we study Scripture carefully so that our theologies are biblically informed. We must remember, however, that all our theologies are shaped by our societies and cultures. We must remember, too, that there are great gulfs between biblical times and our times, between universal theories and the particulars of everyday life, and between synchronic theologies which examine the unchanging structure of reality and diachronic theologies that study cosmic history. It is important in any theological reflection to work to bridge these differences.

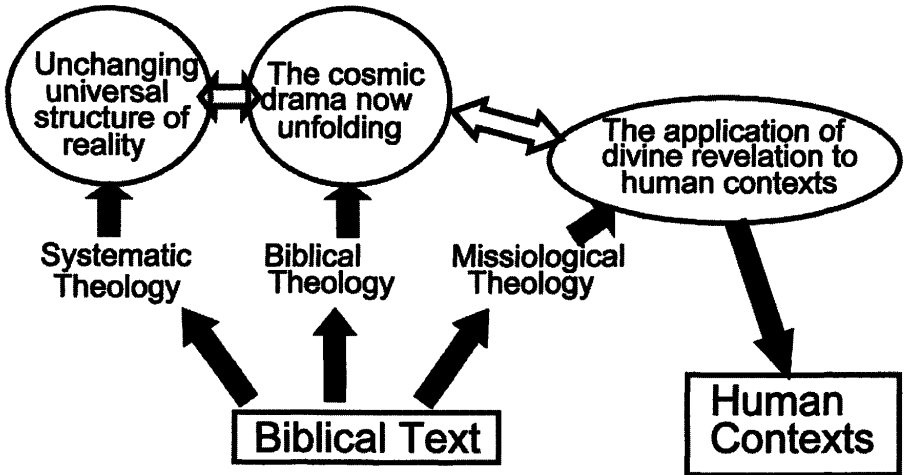
Theology, like the sciences, is divided into different research traditions, each seeking to answer specific questions, making certain assumptions, and using different methods of research (figure 3). We will examine two of these types briefly, and suggest a third way of 'doing theology' that complements the other two.¹

Philosophical Theology

One approach to the study of Scripture is to use the assumptions, questions, and methods of philosophy. This has led to systematic theology, which emerged in the twelfth century with the reintroduction of Greek logic from the universities of the

Figure 3

TYPES OF THEOLOGY



Middle East and Spain (Finger 1985:28–21).² At first, systematic theology was seen as the “queen of the sciences,” but over

time it became one discipline among others in theological education — alongside biblical exegesis, hermeneutics, history, missions, and other disciplines.

The central question systematic theology seeks to answer is: “What are the unchanging universals of reality?” It assumes that there are basic, unchanging realities, and if these are known, we can understand the fundamental structure of all reality.³ It also assumes that ultimate truth can be known by means of human reason, and that this truth is ahistorical and acultural — it is true for everyone everywhere. Philosophical theology uses the abstract, algorithmic logic, digital categories of Greek philosophy, which are propositional in nature. It rejects all internal contradictions and fuzziness in categories and thought.⁴ Its goal is to construct a single systematic understanding of ultimate truth that is comprehensive, logically consistent, and conceptually coherent.⁵ To arrive at objective truth, it, like the modern sciences, separates cognition from feelings and values, because the latter are thought to introduce subjectivity into the process.

The strength of systematic theology is its examination of the fundamental elements and categories in Scripture. It gives us a standard to test our knowledge, and helps us understand in some measure the biblical worldview — the view of reality as God sees it, and as he has revealed to us in Scripture.

Systematic theology has its limitations. Because, like Greek thought, it focuses on a synchronic analysis of the ultimate, unchanging structure of reality, it loses sight of the cosmic drama or plot in the Scriptures, and the place of history and historical

events in that drama. It cannot adequately deal with change, and must see changes in God's attitudes and responses as surface phenomena, not intrinsic to God's ultimate nature.⁶

Because systematic theology focuses on universals and an ascent to knowledge through contemplation divorced from everyday life, it does not tell us how to deal with the beliefs and practices found in different cultures or times, or with the particularities of our own lives. Its focus on abstraction and rational coherence has often turned it into an intellectual exercise remote from life's everyday issues. Moreover, the Greek distinction between 'pure' and 'applied' knowledge has relegated the problems of everyday life to a position of lesser importance because they deal with the subjective and changing messiness of human lives.

Philosophical theology is also in danger of becoming captive to the methods of philosophy.⁷ In the West, the search for a comprehensive system based on digital sets and algorithmic logic implies that humans can grasp the fullness of truth with clarity. It leaves little room for the particularities and ambiguities of life, the mysteries that transcend human comprehension, and the wisdom that can deal with the contradictions and paradoxes of a rapidly changing world (Yancy 2000).

Systematic theology too often has a weak sense of mission. Thomas Finger notes, "Systematic theology arose as a branch of academic study pursued in universities and not primarily as a task of the church involved in the world at large" (1985:20–21). Missiology is not a category in systematic theology, and systematic theology is not the driving force behind missions.⁸ Missiology is commonly relegated to the category of practical theology.

Finally, systematic theology was itself a product and reflection of western intellectual history. Calvin, Luther, and their successors appealed not only to *sole scriptura*, but logic, rhetoric, and other methods available to them to shape their theologies. In so doing, they allowed scholasticism in at the back door. G. Ebling notes,

What was the relation of the systematic method here [in the post-Reformation] to the exegetical method? Ultimately it was the same as in the medieval scholasticism. There, too, exegesis of holy scripture went on not only within systematic theology, but also separately alongside of it, yet so that the possibility of a tension between exegesis and systematic theology was *a priori* excluded. Exegesis was enclosed within the frontiers fixed by systematic theology. (1963:82–83)

Systematic theologians need to examine the cultural and historical contexts in which they formulate their theologies to discern the biases that these might introduce in their understanding of Scripture. All theologies are human creations seeking to understand divine revelation, and all theologies are embedded in histories and world-views that shape the way they see things. There are no culture-free and history-free theologies. We all read Scripture from the perspectives of our particular context. This does not mean we can know no truth. It does mean that we must never equate our theology with Scripture, and that we need to work in hermeneutical communities and draw on those who have gone before us to check our personal and cultural biases.

Philosophical theologies are now being done by committed evangelical theologians around the world. But different human contexts raise different questions that require theological reflection. Donald Schultz writes,

The time is also past when Western theologians had all the “definitive answers.” Asian theologians now bear the responsibility and willingly accept it. The latter have discovered that Western definitive answers do not automatically fit the Asian situation and often answer questions not asked in Asia. (Schultz 1989:23)

Biblical Theology

A second theological research tradition that emerged in the West was biblical theology. Reacting to the scholasticism of post-Reformation theologians, Johann Gabler advocated a new way of doing theology. He saw theology as a practical science and stressed experience and the illumination of the Spirit. His central question was, “What did the biblical passages mean at the time of those writing them, and what lessons can we learn from them today?” In so doing he advocated a return to the Bible as history, and an emphasis on the unfolding of the cosmic story.

Biblical theology examines the narrative nature of Scripture. It assumed that the heart of revelation is historical in character — that there is a real world with a real history of change over time which is ‘going somewhere,’ and which has meaning because it has a plot and culminates in God’s eternal reign.⁹ Biblical theology argues that this view of truth as cosmic story is fundamental to the Hebrew worldview and to an understanding of Scripture. To describe ultimate reality, the Jews told and reenacted in rituals the acts of God in their lives. Wolfhart Pannenberg reminds us that God is not only the ground of all existence, but all of history is a revelation of his existence and reign (1968).

Biblical theology uses the questions, methods and assumptions of modern historiography.¹⁰ It uses the temporal logic of antecedent and consequent causality, and accepts teleological explanations in which God and humans act on the basis of intentions. Biblical theology is important because it gives us the diachronic dimension of a biblical worldview. It gives meaning to life by helping us see the cosmic story in which human history and our biographies are embedded.

Biblical theology also has its limits. It focuses on diachronic meaning, leaving the unchanging synchronic structure of reality in our peripheral vision. It focuses on past biblical history, not on present events. It looks at the universal story, not the particular lives of individual and communities outside the biblical narrative. It does not directly help us apply biblical truth to the problems we face in specific cultures and persons today. If we are not careful, it can become a study unto itself with little relevance to us today. We must focus on the cosmic story, but we need to remember that God speaks to us through Scripture in the context of concrete settings of human and personal history, and that our stories as individuals and as the church are part of that cosmic story.

Biblical theology is essential to our understanding of Scripture, but like systematic theology, God’s mission in the world, particularly as that relates to us today, is not a central theme in its analysis. It has not been a strong motivating force driving people and churches into missions.

Missional Theology

To communicate the Gospel in human contexts, we need a third way of doing theology — a way of thinking biblically about God’s universal mission in the context of the world here and now, in all its particularities, paradoxes, and confusions. We will refer to this as “missional theology,” although the same principles of studying

Scripture, studying humans, and incarnating the Gospel in human life apply equally to pastors, church elders, and, indeed, every Christian.¹¹

Missionaries, by the very nature of their task, must become theologians. Almost a century ago Marti Kähler wrote, "Mission is the mother of theology." Theology began as an accompanying manifestation of Christian missions, and not as a luxury of the world-dominating church. David Bosch notes, "Paul was the first Christian theologian precisely because he was the first Christian missionary" (1991:124). Elwood points out (1980:75), "Asian theology cannot afford to be purely academic and philosophical, but rather it is valid only if it is produced not primarily in between piles of books, but in the "field" where it is put to the test every day."

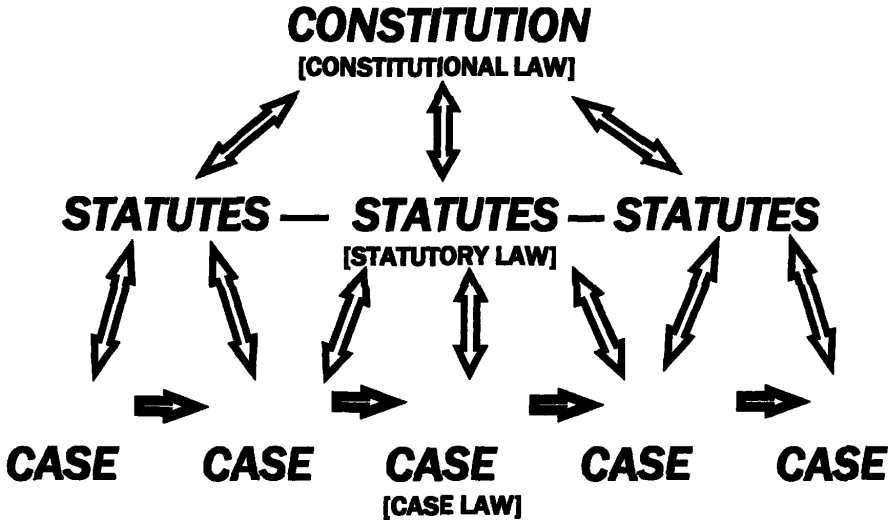
The question arises, how do mission theologians do theology, and how is this different from other ways of doing theology? Their central question is: "What is God's Word to humans in their particular situations?" Mission theologians assume that God is a missionary God, that mission is the central theme in God's acts on earth, and that all Christians are to be a part of this mission. They also assume that all humans live in different historical and sociocultural settings, and that the Gospel must be made known to them in the particularity of these contexts. Eugene Peterson writes,

This is the gospel focus: *you* are the man; *you* are the woman. The gospel is never about everybody else; it is always about you, about me. The gospel is never truth in general; it's always a truth in specific. The gospel is never a commentary on ideas or culture or conditions; it's always about actual persons, actual pains, actual troubles, actual sin; you, me; who you are and what you've done; whom I am and what I've done. (1997:185)

The task of the mission theologian is to translate and communicate the Gospel in the language and culture of real people in the particularities of their lives so that it may transform them, their societies, and their cultures into what God intends for them to be. Missional theology seeks to build the bridge between Biblical revelation and human contexts. It seeks to remove the gap between orthodoxy and orthopraxy,¹² and between truth, love, and holiness.

One systematic logic and methodology that missional theology can use by way of analogy is that of American law.¹³ In the United States there are three levels of law: constitutional law, statutory law, and case law (figure 4. See Romantz, and Vinson, 1998). The Constitution is the unchanging foundation on which the legal system is built. Constitutional law examines statutory and case laws to see if any violate the Constitution. If they do, they are declared invalid. Statutory laws are laws passed by legitimate government bodies such as Congress, state governments, and government agencies. They seek to interpret constitutional principles in a changing world. For example, federal agencies determine what is private property with the introduction of new technologies and information. Case laws are the legal guidelines that emerge out of legal rulings in precedent cases on specific instances. Judges are bound by the principle of *stare decisis* which calls for them to make their judgments in accord with the legal findings by judges in the past on similar cases, except where such precedents can be shown to be misinterpretations of the constitution or legal statutes. In other words, judges must take into account the community of law around them, including

Figure 4
MODERN LEGAL SYSTEM



those who have gone before. Their findings contribute to a growing, dynamic body of case law that applies general principles to specific cases.

In missional theology, systematic theology plays the role of constitutional law. It helps us understand the ultimate realities with which all reflections regarding human contexts and specific human cases must take account. It is important to remember that systematic theology is our understanding of unchanging universals based on our study of Scripture, and does not carry the authority of Biblical revelation. Consequently, we must constantly test it against Scripture as we deal with the realities of life.

Biblical theology and church creeds and confessions play the role of statutory law. They show how the universal principles revealed in Scripture have been manifest in biblical history, and interpreted by God’s people down through history in an ever changing world. Both systematic and biblical theology are the reflections of the church in its attempt to understand divine revelation.

Missional theology draws on systematic theology and biblical theology to understand the Gospel. It also draws on precedent cases in the life of the church — on how other Christians have reflected and ruled in similar situations. There are three essential steps in missional methodology (figure 5).

Phenomenology

The first step in missional methodology is phenomenology — a careful study of the specific case at hand — the participants, the events, and the sociocultural and

Figure 5

STEPS IN MISSIONAL THEOLOGY

PHENOMENOLOGY:

- study the situation as we see it
- seek to understand how the people see it (*emic* view)
- develop an *etic* comparative frame to compare and evaluate different views

ONTOLOGY:

- do “reality” checks on the facts
- study Scriptural teachings on the case
- evaluate and make decisions on the case

MISSIOLOGY:

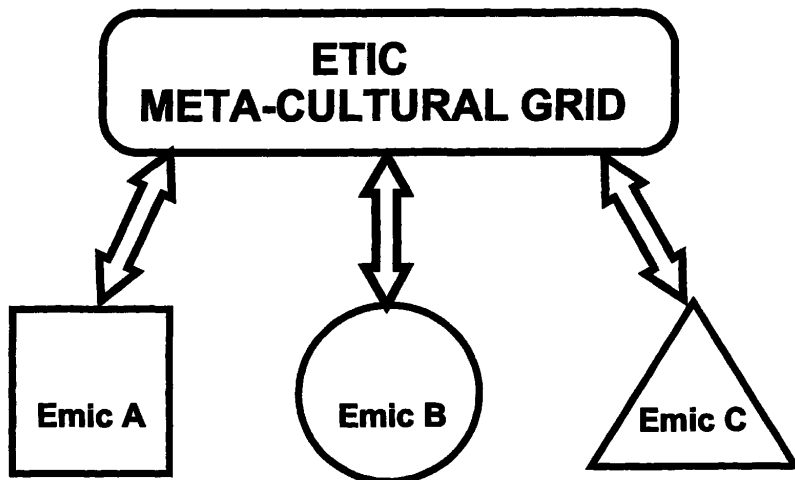
- act on the immediate case
- begin procedure to deal with the underlying issues in the long run

historical context. This is the crucial fact-finding stage, the “pain and anguish of giving birth to the facts which are compared with those in earlier cases (Levi 1949:v). Most missionaries and ministers are well trained to study Scripture, but few have training in exegeting humans. Consequently, their message is misunderstood by the people they serve. An example illustrates the great cultural gaps we need to bridge. After teaching about the parable of the sower and the seed to local women, the missionary asked what lesson they could learn from the story. They laughed and said that that was what happened if you let men plant seed. They simply threw it everywhere on the ground. As women they would never do that. They would carefully dig holes in good soil and plant a seed or two in each. For effective missions we need to understand humans as much as we understand the Gospel.

In the examination of human realities the human sciences, particularly anthropology because of its global view, its comparative approach, and its focus on the social and cultural contexts in which people live, and the particularities of real human life, are of vital importance. We begin by studying the situation as we see it. We must then seek to understand the situation as the people involved see it (*emic* views). This involves studying their practices, rituals, beliefs and worldviews, because these inform

Figure 6

CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISONS



their behavior. This emic analysis, however, does not provide us a full understanding of situation, nor a bridge for deciding on a biblical solution. We need to compare these different perspectives, ours and others, and develop a metacultural *etic* framework to compare and evaluate the different points of view (figure 6). Because it studies different social and cultural systems, anthropology helps us build bridges of understanding and of evaluation between them.

Ontology

The second step in missional methodology is to examine the phenomenological claims in the light of reality checks and Scripture and to judge the situation in the light of reality as we understand it. We need systematic and biblical theologies to understand the structure and story underlying the biblical narratives. Here the human studies can also help us to understand divine revelation which was always given in particular historical and sociocultural contexts.

We need, also, to examine how other Christians have dealt with similar situations. Case law is based on the process of reasoning by comparison to precedent cases. This requires the presentation of competing examples, and the articulation of similarities and differences between them. Levi writes, "A working legal system must therefore be willing to pick out key similarities and to reason from them to the justice of applying a common classification" (1948:3). In the process classifications are created and refined as the relevant classification is made. Moreover, the categories must be left to be ambiguous to some extent in order to permit application to new and different cases, and

to allow growing understanding of the laws themselves. Laws are not rigid formulae mechanically and blindly applied to human situations. They are the reflections of people seeking to build a moral community. Morality is not based on a set of impersonal laws that exist apart from God. They are Gods moral commands, and righteousness is living in right relationships with God, and with one another and the world. Missional theology is God's people seeking to live as God's people in a fallen and ever changing world, and to bear witness to God's Kingdom to the world around them.

As in the case of legal reflections, it is important in our theological reflections to realize that the mechanism of theological reasoning should not be concealed by the illusion that theology is a system of know rules that simply need to be applied in a specific case. Levi notes that too often we have seen the legal process as though it were "a method of applying general rules of law to diverse facts — in short, as though the doctrine of precedent meant that general rules, once properly determined, remained unchanging, and then were applied, albeit imperfectly, in later cases (1949, 2)." In fact, legal rules change from case to case and are remade in each case. These changes are an indispensable dynamic quality of law. Levi adds,

In an important sense legal rules are never clear, and, if a rule had to be clear before it could be imposed, society would be impossible. The mechanism accepts the differences of view and ambiguities of words. It provides for the participation of the community in resolving the ambiguity by providing a forum for the discussion of policy in the gap of ambiguity. . . . The mechanism is indispensable to peace in the community. (1949:1)

Like modern law, missional theology seeks to formulate and communicate universal truth (cognitive), love (affective) and holiness (moral) in particular human contexts which are very diverse.¹⁴ Like modern law, missional theology must deal with human contexts that are ever changing. To assume that general rules, once properly determined, remained unchanged, and needed simply to be applied in later cases overlooks the changing nature of human life and the dynamic quality of theology that must be extended to new situations.

Finally, like modern law, missional theology must done in a community that functions even when people do not agree completely. It needs structures that enables it to give meaning ambiguities and to test constantly whether the community has come to deeper understandings of truth, love and holiness, and how these are embodied in the individuals, societies and cultures in this fallen world. The effort to find complete agreement before going to work is meaningless. It is to forget the very purpose for which theological reflections must be done, namely to make know the Gospel to humans in their contexts so that it can transform them.

Missiology

The final step in missional methodology is to decide on a course of action in the specific case at hand, and to carry it out. This must be biblically shaped and culturally sensitive. Too often, however, we stop with dealing with immediate cases, and do not use them to stimulate long range reflections on the underlying issues at hand, and to initiate procedures for discussing and dealing with them. Specific cases should stimulate further reflections in systematic and biblical theologies that facilitate long-term, well-grounded responses to the social and cultural systems at hand.

The analogy to American law is not perfect. Missional theologians must go beyond the role of modern judges. We have divine revelation that shows us truth — how God, not we, sees things. But we must remember our theologies are our human understandings of that revelation done by humans using human languages living in particular contexts, and, therefore, should never be equated one-to-one with divine revelation. We are also have a mission to help transform the church and the world move from where they are to where God wants them to be. This process of transformation includes individuals and corporate social and cultural systems. We cannot expect people simply to abandon their old ways and adopt new ones. They can only move from where they are by an ongoing process of transformation.

One strength of missional theology is its focus on mission. It takes humans seriously, in the particularity of their persons, societies, and cultures, and their ever-changing histories. It integrates cognition, affectivity, and evaluation in its response to biblical truth, and defines faith not simply as mental affirmations of truth, nor as positive experiences of God, but as beliefs and feelings that lead to response and obedience to the word of God. It rejects the division between pure and applied theology and sees ministry both as a way of doing theology and as a form of worship.

Missional theology also has its limitations. It begins by studying particular cases and people in the realities of their everyday lives. In doing so, it must develop theoretical and methodological ways of studying humans as individuals and societies, and the cultures they create. Here missiology can draw on the insights provided by the humanities and human sciences, but many of these are built on assumptions that omit or reject biblical foundations. It is important, therefore, for missional theologians to examine carefully the underlying premises of the theories and methods they use, just as systematic and biblical theologies must examine the theories and methods that inform their disciplines.

Complementarity

We need systematic, biblical, and missional theologies. To leave one out is to omit an essential dimension of the Gospel. The first danger is reductionism. This assumes that two of these are secondary and can, ultimately, be reduced to one underlying theology. Biblical philosophers assume that if we have the correct systematic theology, the others will follow. Biblical theologians assume the same for biblical theology. Practicing missionaries and pastors assume that what we need are practical methods because we know the Gospel and all we need is effective ways of communicating it.

A second approach is stratigraphic. We admit the importance of each of these and study each separately, assuming that a proper knowledge of each will automatically lead, in practice, to their integration. There are two flaws in this. First, there is implicit in this a hierarchy in which one is more foundational than the others. Second, true interdisciplinary dialogue and integration rarely take place, neither in individuals, nor in the academic and ecclesiastical communities.

All three theologies are essential to understanding and living out of the Gospel, but they must be brought together. Given our human finiteness, we cannot (at least at this stage of our theological understandings) develop an overarching Grand Unifying Theory (GUT) that subsumes the three. Rather, we need to see that all three

are essential and have their own identity and integrity, and that they complement and interact with one another (Grunbaum 1957, MacKay 1974). In missional theologizing, it is important that we draw on the understandings of systematic and biblical scholarship. Similarly, systematic and biblical scholarship must study the insights of missional theologians and their studies of human contexts with all their diversity and particularities to reexamine the questions they seek to answer, and the categories and logics they use. They must deal with the questions arising out human lives, and with the theories, methods and answers people give to these questions.

It is important, therefore, that missionaries and missiologists study biblical and systematic theology to know the basic cognitive (truths), affective (love and beauty), and moral (holiness, righteousness) nature of the Gospel. This informs them in their ministry, and helps them draw on biblical and systematic theologians in dealing with specific cases. It is equally important that systematic and biblical theologians be trained in the theories and methods of the humanities and human sciences so that they can understand the people they serve, and the way they themselves are shaped by their own historical and sociocultural contexts. Otherwise theologians will answer questions people do not ask and be seen as irrelevant, and they will not be aware what of the Gospel they proclaim is from Scripture and what is from their sociocultural contexts. Moreover, they must help missiologists dealing with the bewildering array of particular issues that the missiologists face in order to bring biblical critique to bear on them.

In the process of incarnating Divine Revelation in human contexts, we begin with classifications, methods, and theologies, and in the process we not only seek to communicate the Gospel to humans in the particularities of their lives, we also reexamine the classifications, methods, and theologies we use. In this process the classifications change as the classifications are made, and theological understanding change as theology is applied (cf. Levi 1949:4). In other words, our theologies are open to examination and new insights even as we use them in life in an ever changing world. What keeps theologians of any kind from becoming the final arbiters of truth? In law (constitutional, statutory, and case) judges are accountable in a community of law that gives authority to the constitution, statutes, and precedent cases.¹⁵ In theology, we must give ultimate authority to God, and his revelation, given as it is through and to humans, and not to human understandings, which are always limited and approximate.

A complimentary approach to drawing on systematic, biblical, and missional theologies recognizes that as human we all live in and are shaped by particular cultural and historical contexts. We can only begin with our existing systems of thought. We must then consciously reflect not only on the task at hand, but also on our questions, assumptions, methods and theories in the light of revelation and human realities. This reflection needs to be done by the community of theologians — including systematic, biblical and missional theologians, because each can help correct one another's biases. This hermeneutical community should involve theologians from different cultures and from the past to correct cultural and historical biases. To build a bridge between universals and particulars, between past revelation and the gospel to the present requires a continual dialogue between them all.

Cases

Two cases can help us understand missional theology and the methods it uses. The first is from Scripture, the second a hypothetical case from modern missions, but which draws on thousands of real cases.

Acts Fifteen

The first major case in the early church is recorded in Acts 15. The problem of neglecting the Hellenist widows was handled by an administrative decision made by council of the twelve apostles (Acts 6:1–2). Now a new problem arose that called into question the very identity of the church and threatened to split it apart. The crisis arose in Antioch, and the church sent Barnabas, Paul, and others to present the case to the apostles and elders, who met together to consider the matter (15:6). The question was clear: did Gentiles have to be circumcised and become practicing Jews before they were admitted into the church?

First the council gathered information from different witnesses on the events leading up to the crisis. The facts were clear. After persecution set in at Jerusalem, Philip went to preach to the Samaritans (8:4–25), and many were healed and believed. When the apostles heard about this they sent Peter and John to investigate. They reported back that the Holy Spirit had indeed come and that these could legitimately be seen as new believers. Some may have argued that the Samaritans were half Jews, and that God was gracious in letting them back into the fold. Then Philip, claiming to be led by the Holy Spirit, baptized an Ethiopian (8:26–40). Some may have argued that he was a “God Seeker” who had come from Jerusalem where he was probably looking into becoming a Jew through the prescribed process. But he was a eunuch, and eunuchs were not allowed into the temple. However, the Ethiopian resolved the problem himself by leaving the scene and not disturbing the status quo in the church. Then Peter witnessed to Cornelius (10), a godly man, but fully a Gentile. This raised the anger of circumcised believers who criticized him when he came to Jerusalem. He had to explain himself to them at length. What could they say? Peter was one of the apostles, and who were they to challenge him? But then some unnamed people began to witness to the Hellenists in Antioch, and many of them and of Gentiles turned to the Lord and began to meet in fellowship together (11:19–21). The elders sent Barnabas to investigate, and he decided on the spot that God indeed was bringing Gentiles into the church. In fact, Barnabas and Paul had gone out on a mission journey and openly invited Gentiles to follow Christ and join the church. Now the matter had come to a head, and a decision was needed to resolve the problem.

There was little disagreement about the facts of the case. There was much disagreement on what should be done. All the parties involved argued their briefs before the council, seeking to persuade the elders that they were right (15:7). After Peter gave his closing statement, the assembly asked Barnabas and Paul to retell the central facts surrounding the issue. Then James announced the verdict. After citing Scripture to lay the foundation for theological reflections on the matter, he decided that a Scriptural interpretation of the facts justified the admission of Gentiles into the church, and that without becoming Jews by circumcision and keeping the law. He then issued instructions on implementing the findings, and urged Gentile converts, for the sake of maintaining unity, to abstain from behavior that was an unnecessary offense to the

Jewish Christians. This was not a new law, but an exercise of their freedom in Christ to show love to their fellow Christians.

James and the elders, in fact, were doing missional theology. They began by studying the facts in the case, and hearing arguments from various factions in the church. Then James used theological reflection to reach a decision and pass judgment based on the situation at hand.

A Case of Polygamy

A second case can help us understand the methods of missional theology. It comes from Africa (Hiebert and Hiebert 1987:62–65), but the same questions it raises are found around the world. What should the church do with polygamy, whether one husband and many wives, or one woman and many husbands?

The facts of this case are clear. Amadu is the chief of the village. When the missionaries came, they asked him for permission to stay, and, out of hospitality, he allowed them to do so. After three years of ministry, a small church of believers was formed made up of two singles and five young couples, all monogamous. Having heard the Gospel and seen its effects on new believers, Amadu came and wanted to be baptized into the church, along with his five wives. What should the church and missionaries do?

If we turn first to systematic theology for an answer, we are in danger of passing judgment on situations we do not understand, and, therefore, to fall into a blind legalism. If, on the other hand, we turn to biblical theology, the answer is more ambiguous. All the heroes of the Old Testament were polygamists, and there is no divine sanction of their actions. If we start with a careful study of the culture and the real life issues involved, we may come to an answer that is biblically based and culturally sensitive.

First, we need to examine the reasons for Amadu having five wives. The first was arranged by his family because as the to-be chief the matter is a political and social matter. The first wife had no children, so Amadu took a second wife. It is imperative that a chief have an heir, and a man's greatness is measured, in part, by having many descendants who remember and honor him. Amadu inherited two wives when his brother died. Each society must make provision for widows and orphans, and in Amadu's society it is the responsibility of a man to take care of his deceased brother's wives and children. This gives him the right to cohabit with them, but, more important, it provides them with food, shelter, companionship, offspring, parenting, and role models. In his old age, as a renowned chief, Amadu took a young wife to help at home and to add to his prestige.

Second, we need to look at the theological and sociocultural issues involved in the case. A few of these are:

- Are traditional marriages true marriages or should Christians be remarried with Christian rites? In other words, are any of Amadu's marriages true marriages in the sight of God?
- Is polygamy [in this case polygyny] sin?
- Is divorce sin?
- Which is the greater sin — polygamy or divorce [if traditional marriages are true marriages and we ask Amadu to 'put away' all but one wife, we teach monogamy but also divorce]?
- If we ask Amadu to put away all but one wife, which one should he keep: his first, the mother of his children, one of those he inherited, the youngest?

- If we ask Amadu to put away some wives and children, which will become of them [often they become prostitutes or are sold into slavery]?
- Can the church baptize the wives of a polygamist [they are all monogamous, but if we do so the church will be made up largely of women]?
- How should the church deal with the sins people commit before they become Christians?
- What are the evangelistic consequences of our decision [forcing men to put away wives has been a great hindrance to the growth of the church]?
- If Amadu is baptized with his wives, can he be a leader in the church [1 Timothy. 3:2, 12]?
- Can a leader who is widowed remarry [Paul's instructions are that a leader is to be "a one woman man." This can be interpreted as a prohibition of digamy — remarriage of a widower — as well as polygamy].
- Who should make the decision [the missionary, the young church, the mission board]?
- What should the missionaries do if their mission board has given them specific instructions not to baptize polygamists [they may be fired if they disobey]?

The next step is to study Scripture for principles that determine our judgments. Here we should begin by studying how the character of God himself informs our judgment. God is a covenant keeper, so Amadu should honor the covenants he made, even though he made these before he became a Christian. God is compassionate, so the decision must take into account the wives and children, who are the real victims if they must be sent away. God is concerned that none should perish, so the judgment must be such that the door to forgiveness and salvation is open to all.

We should then examine specific issues that arise in this case. There is no question that monogamy is God's ideal, but is polygamy a sin, and, if so, what do we do with non-Christians who come with several wives? Is divorce a sin, and, if so, how do we avoid making Amadu sin by divorcing wives to whom he is legitimately married so that he can be monogamous? After extended biblical studies, theologians such as Karl Barth find no compelling certainty that polygamy is a sin. The Old Testament makes no issue of it, and the instructions in the New Testament are for leaders in the church. On the other hand, divorce is condemned in both the Old and New Testaments.

There are other issues that must be decided. If we ask Amadu to put away all but one of his wives, what should Amadu or the church do for them? Is it realistic for Amadu to continue to support them — including his own children, and not to treat them as wives? They will be looked down upon, and gossiped about. The young ones can have no children and will be condemned by a society in which women are honored for their children. And what will the church do with widows when the traditional solution has been rejected? Each of these, and many more issues, need extended theological reflections.

We need also to look at how polygamy has been viewed throughout history. In the Old Testament little is said about it. In the New Testament Paul makes reference to it with regard to elders. The church in the West followed Greek morality and condemned polygamy outright. In modern mission history, missionaries from the west have traditionally required polygamists to put away all but one of their wives. The Lambeth Conference decreed:

After we evaluate the case in the light of the findings of systematic theology, biblical theology, and church history, and of the ways other mission agencies have handled such cases in that and other parts of the world, we need to formulate principles that

inform the case, make a decision, and provide ways in which to carry out the judgment and deal with its consequences.

We will not pass a final judgment on the case here. Our purpose is to illustrate the methods of missional theology. What is clear is that a careful study of both Scripture and specific cases can help us apply biblical teachings to the realities of everyday life. It makes theology live for us, because theology is no longer an abstract understanding of truth, but a map for living our lives.

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Notes

1. We will not examine the doxological or tropological theology of Eastern Orthodoxy which is done in the context of worship and stresses the mystical, sacramental, and iconic nature of truth. The key question it addresses is, "How can we comprehend complex, transcendent truths about God and reality that lie beyond words, logic, and human reason?" It uses nondiscursive signs and tropes such as icons, metaphors, types, and parables to communicate transcendent truth. For an analysis of doxological theology see Wainwright (1980), of tropological or metaphorical theology see McFague (1982), and of spiritual theology see Peterson (1994).

2. It is based on the resurgence of Platonic realism that gave rise to scholasticism and later the humanistic school of Erasmus and culminating in the Enlightenment school. For a historical summary of its emergence see Fuller, 1997. See also McGrath, 1998.

3. This is rooted in the Newtonian assumption that everything is composed of basic building blocks and put together as a machine. This view leads to determinism and an engineering approach to reality based on technological solutions. It also leads to the division of the sciences into disconnected disciplines which creates a division of labor and a gap between experts and laity.

4. An algorithm is a formal logical process which, if carried out correctly, produces the right answer. Algorithmic logic is sometimes called 'machine' logic because it is the basis on which calculators and computers work, and can be done faster and more accurately by these than by humans. For an introduction to fuzzy categories and fuzzy logic see Hiebert 1994:107–136.

5. Peter Lombard founded systematic theology when he sought to disengage key theological questions from their original biblical contexts and to arrange them in a logical sequence of their own that would provide a comprehensive, coherent, and synthetically consistent account of all the major issues of Christian faith, and demonstrate the rational credibility of Christian faith (Finger 1985:19). Lombard's *Sentences*, written in the 1140's, provided the form of much of later Medieval and Reformation Theology (McGrath 1998).

6. Unlike Newton who looked for systems that change over time, in his theory of General Relativity Einstein argues that space and time are not absolute grids within which nature exists, but are part of that existence itself (Bodanis 2000). Moreover, time is not a separate variable apart from the three dimensions of space. It is the fourth dimension. We cannot start with a static view of reality and then introduce time and change. To leave time out of our analysis is like trying to describe a three-dimensional world in two-dimensional terms. Consequently, to speak of unchanging timeless universals in creation is to omit an essential dimension of creation itself. One consequence of this is that when God, the Creator, reveals himself to humans in his creation, he does so not only in space but also time. At the heart of creation and the Gospel is God's Story.

7. For discussions about doing theology from non-western perspectives see Tabor (1978), Schreier (1985), Schultz (1989), and Lee (1978) and Tiéno (1990, 1993). One issue philosophical theology must wrestle with is the fact that different cultures use different logics — each of which is perfectly logical and internally consistent, but differs from the others in the assumptions it makes. For example, much of modern logic is based on digital sets, all things can be sorted into different discrete, non-overlapping categories. In number theory, this sees numbers as intervals. This is true of Euclidian geometry and Cantorian algebra. Other logics, such as Indian logic and calculus, see numbers as ratios — as infinite continua from one point to another (Zadeh 1965). Greek logic is abstract and analytical. Other logics are concrete and function (Luria 1976), and narrative (Fisher 1987). Can we do philosophical theology using different logics, and, if so, what are the strengths and weaknesses of each of these logics?

8. Few trained as theologians go into missions, and many schools with strong departments of theology have no department or vision of missions. On the other hand, all missionaries, of necessity, must become theologians.

9. We use the term 'plot' here in the way Paul speaks of the 'mystery' now revealed to us (Rom. 16:25, Eph. 1:9, 3:3, 6:19, Col. 1:26). This is to say that there is real history, that it is moving in a direction and not changing randomly, and that behind it is a 'plot' or drama — a cosmic story that gives it meaning because it is 'going somewhere.' For us it is the story of God creating a perfect world, redeeming the lost who turn in faith to him, and restoring creation to perfection in which all will bow before Christ the Lord.

10. For G. Vos, *Biblical Theology* is the "History of Special Revelation (1948, 23). *Biblical Theology* is Historical, *Systematic Theology* is logical.

11. The need to “contextualize” the Gospel in human cultures became obvious as missionaries went to other societies. So long as people live and minister in their own cultures, they are largely unaware of their own cultures and worldviews, and how these shape their understandings of the Gospel. Missionaries, on the other hand, confront deep cultural differences immediately, starting with language, culture, theology and worldview shocks.

12. Western theology is deeply influenced by the Platonic dualism of supernatural/natural, spirit/matter, mind/body, evangelism/social ministry, religion/science, faith/fact, and miracle/natural. The biblical view is contingent dualism: Creator/creation, God/humans (in the Incarnation), eternal/temporal. This is dualism, but contingent in that God is eternal and source of all creation, and creation is constantly dependent on God’s ongoing creation for its very existence every moment it exists. In Biblical thought the Incarnation of God is far more profound than as seen in Greek thought where an invisible God in the heaven lies involves himself in a material world.

13. The use of law as a model is based on the fact that legal systems seek to interpret corporate or universal principles in specific human situations. Like all human models, including those of philosophy and history, the method has its limitations and weaknesses. Different cultures handle the legal problems of everyday life differently. Indian villages uses *panchayats*, or councils of elders. *Palavers* are found in West Africa. All these seek to apply moral principles to specific situations using different logics embedded in the broader method of ‘wisdom.’ The relevance of these methods for doing missional theology needs to be studied. Most of them lack a set of eternal absolutes that determine ultimate truth and morality. These are determined by social consensus, not divine revelation that shows us truth and morality as God sees these, and has revealed them to us. The result is situational truth and morality. Christian theologians in nonwestern countries have sought to bridge between theology and concrete human situations. Latin American theologians insist we cannot separate orthodoxy from orthopraxy, which is an important corrective. To bridge the two they set up processes for the doing of theology, but do not provide systematic methods for exegeting Scripture or humans and for bridging the gulf between them. African theologians rightly insist that we must understand God in terms of his relationship with us, but to do so we must know who He is, and who we are in our common humanity and our personal, social and cultural diversity. We use the American legal system here as an analogy not because it is the only or privileged way of doing missional theology, but because it has a fully developed methodology, a requirement for any research tradition that has an absolute reference point which avoids relativism and captivity to human contexts, and because it builds on a deep and careful study of the absolutes and the particularities of human life, and builds a bridge between them.

14. In seeking to develop a comprehensive model for understanding humans, Talcott Parsons, Edward Shills, Clyde Kluckhohn, and other leading social scientists (1952) speak of the three dimensions of persons, societies, and cultures: cognitive, affective, and evaluative. Theologically, these three dimensions are seen in the essence of God Himself. He is “Light,” “Love,” and “Holy.” The Enlightenment, seeking to attain objective truth, divorced truth, defined primarily by the sciences, from emotions and values because these introduced subjectivity, and relegated them to the private spheres of life. Western Christianity continues to struggle with this divorce and tends to stress truth, aesthetic experiences, or morality rather than seeing them as dimensions of a whole.

15. In law this raises the question whether or not judges ultimately make the laws because in interpreting the Constitution and statutes it is they who make the final decisions (Levi 1949). In modern law, however, they are bound by the Constitution, statutes, and precedent cases, and accountability to a community that appoints them and can overrule them.



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