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What Is Missiology?

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Abstract

Should missiology seek the status of a theological discipline? After a brief account of the history of academic missiology it is argued here that a trinitarian missiology is at the heart of all of theology. Missiology should both permeate theology and exist as a subject area to accompany missionary praxis, making theological education at least missiological to the core, if not itself missional. Missiology is part of practical theology, praxis-based and oriented to specific contexts. It draws on both theological and other disciplines (particularly the social sciences) as an interdisciplinary enterprise rather than as a discipline in its own right.

Keywords

Missiology, theological education, trinitarian, *missio Dei*, practical theology

Missiology as a separate focus of study is a relative newcomer in theological education. In many theological circles it is still marginal. There are some, particularly in Europe, who argue that it will not develop further unless it gains greater legitimacy as an "independent, officially recognized branch of theology" (Findeis, 1997: 302).

I would like to suggest, however, that missiology ought to celebrate its interdependence with the rest of theology, prod theological education to be missiological throughout, draw more on resources beyond the theological, and accept that it is a field or focus rather than an academic discipline. As the global church in many ways recovers its sense of mission there is a need for missiology—both as a dimension of all theological studies and also as a subject area—to assist in providing a strong missional direction to the whole enterprise of theology and theological education.

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The Development of Missiology

The church has always reflected on its mission. Much of the theological debate of the first few centuries arose from the need to clarify doctrine as Christianity spread rapidly into different contexts and cultures. But although mission gave birth to theology (Bosch, 1991: 16; Kähler, 1971 [1908]: 190), missionary-oriented theology fell into decline during the long centuries of Christendom, when mission was paired with conquest or relegated to the edges of the empire (Mead, 1991: 14).

The separate study of mission began in theology only in the late nineteenth century, stimulated by the growth of cross-cultural mission from the West. Alexander Duff, usually regarded as the first professor of mission, taught "evangelistic theology" at Edinburgh between 1867 and 1878. Gustav Warneck pioneered the teaching of "mission theory" at Halle in Germany from 1896 to 1910. And from 1910 Josef Schmidlin was the first Catholic missiologist, at Münster in Germany, promoting "mission science" (*Missionswissenschaft*) (Oborji, 2006: 41–45).

This was a period of great energy for world mission, seen as the task of the whole church. The World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh in 1910, although dominated by Europe and North America, gave impetus to both ecumenism and the introduction of mission studies in theological education (Langmead, 2010: 50–56). It also led to the publication of what is now known as the *International Review of Mission*, a focus for ecumenical missiology for a hundred years now.

The European emphasis on mission studies being scientific or theoretical was matched in North America by a more pragmatic emphasis on the task and method of mission, as missiology grew rapidly after the Second World War. The American Society of Missiology was formed in 1973, with its journal *Missiology* (American Society of Missiology, 2012; Scherer, 1994: 175).

In recent decades, however, European and North American departments of missiology have been in numerical decline (Bosch, 1982: 13–14), perhaps matching the decline of Western Christianity in general, but also competing with related enthusiasms such as religious studies, ecumenical studies, world Christianity, and contextual theology.

Since the 1970s, some European universities, such as Nijmegen in the Netherlands, have begun referring to missiology as "intercultural theology." This appears to have been partly motivated by a desire of professional missiologists in secular universities to move beyond the European captivity of theology and to speak in terms acceptable to the wider academy (Ustorf, 2008: 230). Intercultural theology appears, however, to be another term for contextualization or inculturation (Hollenweger, 1986: 29), and is in danger of reflecting only on the life of the church rather than the world beyond the church (Ustorf, 2008: 237). It has missiological dimensions, particularly when interreligious dialogue is included in its meaning, but hardly seems to cover the scope of missiology.

The various impulses for the development of missiology as a branch of theological study have not served missiology well. On the one hand, pressure from mission societies for cross-cultural missionary training has often led to a merely practical "how-to" approach, whereas, on the other hand, the desire to establish mission

studies as a scientific body of theory has led to the technical approach of a European university discipline.

The academic aspirations of missiology are reflected in the membership criteria of the International Association for Mission Studies (IAMS), which require that a member normally has doctoral qualifications, is research active, and is recommended by two other members (2000: 5a). By contrast there is perhaps an Australasian egalitarianism at work in the Australian Association for Mission Studies (AAMS), which is open to all who are interested in mission studies (2012).

A widely accepted account of missiology as a "discipline" was written by James Scherer in 1987. He argued that it engages with all the theological questions that are relevant to God's mission and the mission of the church; in other words it is part of theology. Missiology also properly draws on the social sciences in its task of proclaiming and living into the Reign of God. Despite the title of his essay—"Missiology as a discipline and what it includes"—Scherer was cautious about the extent to which missiology is itself a discipline, preferring to emphasize its interdisciplinary nature (1994: 180–82, 185).

Trinitarian Missiology

In the last few decades a wide consensus has been building that Christian mission is not just verbal proclamation, not reducible to justice-seeking and peacemaking, not just one job among many, not merely one aspect of practical theology, not something done only by cross-cultural workers, and not something that happens only at the frontiers of Christendom. It is much deeper, much broader, and more encompassing.

Christian mission has come to be seen as participation in the mission of God (*missio Dei*). Karl Barth was the first to articulate this, arguing that the classic theological idea of God the Father sending the Son, and the Father and the Son sending the Spirit, should be seen as having another movement, the Father, Son, and Spirit sending the church (Bosch, 1991: 390).

Lesslie Newbigin also insisted that mission should be seen in trinitarian terms. He wrote, "The church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission" (1989: 119). Newbigin's key text was John 20:21–22, where Jesus says, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you," and then breathes on them and says, "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Newbigin, 1963: 32–34; cited in Tennent, 2010: 67).

This has several implications. First, God is viewed as outgoing love. God's purposes are the reconciling of the cosmos to Godself (2 Cor 5:19) through the sending of Jesus Christ and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Christian mission originates in the activity of God. So the impulse for mission is not primarily the converting of souls or the expansion of the church but participation in God's cosmic purposes for a new order of relationships at all levels in the universe governed by justice, love, peace, and grace.

Second, as Jürgen Moltmann puts it, "It is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world; it is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church" (1977: 64). As is often said today, it is not so much

that the church has a mission but that God's mission has a church (for example, Bevans and Schroeder, 2004: 8). This means that the church neither shapes mission nor bears full responsibility for it. We are partners with God in God's mission.

Third, the mission of God is at work beyond the church. Cross-cultural workers often say that they do not bring God to unevangelized peoples; they discover God at work there and strive to make explicit, in Christian terms, what is implicit. The Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* also saw the Spirit at work in a hidden manner in the history of the world (1966: no. 26, p. 226). For a period some in the World Council of Churches took this to mean that because God is at work in the wider world the world sets the agenda for mission and the church is not needed. As a result, some evangelicals and the Catholic Church have been wary of the term *missio Dei*, though it has gradually gained almost universal acceptance (Bosch, 1991: 390; Bevans and Schroeder, 2004: 291; Anderson, 1998: 2, 10).

Fourth, the trinitarian basis for mission evokes images of community, dynamism, and mutuality, which enrich and shape mission. The diversity-in-unity implied by trinitarian talk profoundly affects our understanding of God's dealing with humankind. It underlines the importance of contextual mission and the church's calling to be radically inclusive and relational (Johnson, 1992: 223; Lacugna, 1991: 401–402). Reflecting on the role of imagination in mission, Stephen Bevans writes, "If God as a triune communion-in-mission might be imagined as Dance, mission might be imagined as joining in" (2007: 11).

Fifth, this trinitarian basis brings missiology into the center of theology. Whereas once missiology was located on the edge of the theological enterprise as part of our understanding of the church (ecclesiology) or an aspect of understanding salvation (soteriology) it is now squarely at the center of our talk of God (theology, whether seen narrowly, as systematic theology, or more broadly). For example, systematic theologian Stephen Holmes argues carefully that a triune sending is not only what God does—the "economic Trinity"—but who God is—the "immanent Trinity." He concludes that we can call God missionary and that Christian mission therefore flows from the very nature of God from eternity (2006). As Klaus Schulz puts it, "theology is the study of God, but it is the study of a God who is motivated by the purpose to redeem the world" (2009: 87).

This last implication clearly affects not just missiology but also theology, to which I will now turn. (Here I am considering for the moment missiology's engagement with theology; later I will discuss its engagement with resources beyond theology.)

The Interdependence of Theology and Missiology

If God is a missionary God, then the whole of theology ought to be about this sending God. To put it another way, if the Christian faith is centrally about God's Son Jesus Christ being sent to transform relationships through forgiving love, then the task of God-talk is to seek to understand it in order to participate in it. "The first task of theology is to make sense of the whole of life by reference to God," suggests Bernhard Ott. "The second task of theology is to be an agent of transformation, so that the whole of life may reflect God's intention" (2001b: 84).

Theology, speaking broadly, exists "critically to accompany the *missio Dei*" (Bosch, 1991: 494). In an overarching sense, all of theology is missiological. The biblical revelation is the story of God's outgoing and transforming love. The history of the church is the history of the mission of God through the ups and downs of the followers of Jesus. Systematic theology is orderly reflection on who God is, who Jesus Christ is, God's creative and redemptive purposes, and the hope we hold because of who God is. We could go on. It is not to say that each focus of theology should immediately serve the purpose of proclamation, rather that in an overall sense theology is faith seeking understanding in order better to praise and serve the God who above all reaches out and invites us to join the movement.

I am not arguing that we should conflate theology and missiology. Missiology has a double role in theology: to permeate theology with a missiological dimension and to serve mission praxis with specific intention. In practice this means that missiology should both infuse the whole curriculum and offer separate subjects with a specific focus on mission practice (Bosch, 1991: 494–96). Schulz labels these the "integrative" and "complementary" roles of missiology in a curriculum (2009: 86).

In insisting on the missiological dimension in theology, missiology is—in Bosch's delightful words—"a gadfly in the house of theology, creating unrest and resisting complacency" (1991: 496). Missiology accompanies other theological disciplines, learning from them and putting questions to them. To take two simple examples, missiology may help theology not to become inward-looking or complacent, by keeping a focus on the world and its deep needs; theology, on the other hand, may help missiology not to become triumphalist, with reminders that God is a mystery and we "know only in part" (1 Cor 13:9).

In providing intentional, specific study of mission, missiology also draws on contexts, secular disciplines, missionary practice, and the stories of cross-cultural engagement. Missiologists are partners alongside all those on mission, prodding them to reflect theologically, and learning together in reflection and action.

Ott represents the difference between a missiological "dimension" and "intention" in a helpful diagram (Figure 1), which leads us well into considering the task of theological education. The first is a suffusing perspective while the second is a focused action. The diagram moves from the nature of God to the nature of the church and then of theology, noting finally that the implications for theological education are the need for a missionary theology across the curriculum, as well as specific mission-oriented training (Ott 2001b: 82).

Theological Education as Missiological

If Ott's diagram accurately charts the flow from a missionary God to a mission-oriented theological education then all types of theological schools ought to feel the challenge. A mission-shaped theological education will exist primarily to form and mobilize disciples in mission (Rozko, 2012: 18, 20).

Whether a school is a seminary (training professional ministers), a university divinity school or faculty (pursuing critical inquiry in an academic setting), or a Bible

	Dimension	Intention
Missio Dei ⇩	God's missionary nature	God's act of sending God's Son and the Spirit
Ecclesiology ⇩	The missionary nature of the church	The church's specific missionary actions
Theology ⇩	The missionary nature of theology	Specific reflection on the church in mission
Theological education	The missionary center of all theological education	Specific mission-oriented training

Figure 1. Dimension and intention in mission.

school or mission-training center (mainly preparing lay Christian workers for mission service), there are factors that militate against a missiological perspective as a unifying center for theological study (on types of theological education, see Kelsey, 1993; Farley, 1983; Banks, 1999; Ott, 2001a; Edgar, 2005).

One is the classical fourfold division of theology, since the Enlightenment, into three areas of "theory"—biblical studies, church history, and systematic theology—and "practical theology," the last being further divided into specific aspects of church-related ministry. Missiology is one of the practical theology subjects. This division, which we owe to Friedrich Schleiermacher (1966 [1881]), has grown and spread into many branches and has sometimes been called the "theological encyclopedia," which suggests an array of information found in a long list of subjects.

How is it possible to experience theological education as a process of formation for mission and ministry when having to master an encyclopedia? How do we overcome the split between theory and practice implied in this division? How do the "practical theology" subjects avoid becoming the mere application of the "weightier" theological subjects? When the Bible, history, theology, and philosophy are the sources at the center how does theological education engage actively with factors such as experience, the world, context, and life stories? How do the voices of the poor, the uneducated and the marginalized get to be heard in the academy?

Another factor making it difficult for missiology to be a unifying factor is the power of academic accreditation to shape theological education in ways that are alien to missional formation. Students become consumed with essays, books, theories, technical skills, and assessment. Their learning happens in classrooms, divorced from church, work, home, and places where people meet across boundaries. Teachers work long and hard to gain higher qualifications, publish in academic journals, speak at conferences and administer increasingly complex institutions. The academy trains educated elites, fragments knowledge, and values critical inquiry over integration and praxis (Ott, 2001b: 77).

Despite these tensions, many theological institutions have tried to swim against the tide, with thorough curriculum revisions that aim to integrate study and form disciples for mission and ministry.

The Catholic Theological Union in Chicago reshaped its Master of Divinity in 2004 to require all students to take a core curriculum, which covers four areas: pastoral practice: the theology of ministry (P); the art of theology: theological method (A); religion in context: diversity in dialogue (R); and tradition: sources through history (T)—known by the acronym "PART." Missiologist Stephen Bevans teaches a unit called "The God of Jesus Christ," which explicitly integrates theology and missiology (Bevans 2008: 76).

At Whitley College, where I teach, the great majority of students are lay Christians equipping themselves for ministry and mission, studying alongside a smaller group of candidates for Baptist ordination. As a missiologist at Whitley College I am fortunate not to experience the marginalization of missiology reported in many places. Mission has always been a strong dimension of the college's ethos and teaching. All faculty integrate missiological perspectives into their teaching, so that the whole theological curriculum is engaging with faith-sharing, justice issues, peacemaking, sociology, anthropology, politics, economics, interfaith dialogue, and cultural theory. As well as the missionary dimension to Whitley's theological teaching there are also about twenty specifically mission-oriented units, from evangelism to justice, from peacemaking to ecological mission, and from local missional church to global mission.

Theological Education as Missional?

Robert Banks, in *Reenvisioning Theological Education*, would want to push us further than this. He argues that a biblical approach to knowing also involves relating and doing—to know affects the mind, heart, and will (Banks, 1999: 74). To know God is to worship and obey God, so to learn theologically is also to respond in mission. If theological education is formation for discipleship and mission—something to which most of us pay lip service—it needs to learn from the way Jesus taught his disciples (1999: 94–111). Banks argues that theological education is itself an expression of mission, not merely a preparation for mission (1999: 130). That is, theological education itself is missional and not just missiological. Brian Edgar explains Banks's proposal as follows:

> A missiological approach to theological education may demonstrate the importance of mission to the life of the church, but if it does this by providing a particular content rather than by transforming the process itself, then it is not a missional model. For Banks the new content demands a new style of theological education. (Edgar 2005: 212)

Banks argues that theological education should be available to more than a small elite. It should be oriented around in-service ministry. It should use experienced people offering themselves to less experienced people. It should consider a residential

requirement, involving a break from living in our normal context. It should reflect strong links between college and church (Banks, 1999: 126). Theological teachers should share their lives, and not just their knowledge, with students (1999: 171). They should each be actively engaged in mission and invite students into that context as part of the learning process (1999: 175).

I find myself drawn to Banks's missional approach. He challenges the prevalent academic model in which teachers are primarily those who have higher degrees, rather than first and foremost being experienced in life, mission, and leadership and chosen for their ability to inspire, mentor, and empower others. I want to share my own mission commitments with students. Where I teach we are working hard on field-based ministry while studying, supervising of various types, creating college–church links, engaged in praxis, and intent on an integration of faith and life.

But I am not convinced that specialization is either wrong or avoidable. Therefore the requirement of all who teach to be active in mission and ready to share their lives with students as mentors and guides in mission as well as in theology seems a high bar. All Christians are called to love God and neighbor and engage in some way in the worship, community, and mission of the church. But they will each express their mission in different ways so that some are full-time peacemakers, evangelists, justice campaigners, or pastoral leaders. And some are teachers by gifting and training. The other aspects are present in their lives, but not necessarily to a large extent. While a teacher ought to seek congruence in his or her life, I accept that there will be aspects of theological education that are one remove from the coalface.

I also doubt that the model as outlined by Banks is fully achievable in our social context, at least by mainstream theological institutions caught up in academia. Banks is aware of this and helpfully spells out ways to at least begin the journey. In the end he believes that the impulse for these changes is most likely to come "from the bottom up," from networks and movements that have been "peripheral, dissident and innovative" (1999: 134).

The college-based (or seminary-based, or university-based) approach to theological education is here to stay in my judgment. But it will always need to be prodded strongly by the missional theological education movement.

In response to Banks's provocative challenge to missiologists and other theologians, I count myself committed to a theological education that is at least missiological and on the way to becoming missional.

Missiology as (at Least) Practical Theology

I have suggested that missiology is properly a dimension of all theology and also a subject area in which specific missionary praxis is addressed. In this subject area we find all sorts of units, from evangelism to interfaith dialogue, from church planting to cross-cultural understanding. Specific mission studies such as these are usually grouped in "practical theology."

A Redefined Practical Theology

Missiology can own the practical theology label if we are clear about what we mean by it. Schleiermacher's classification of theology into biblical studies, church history, systematic theology, and practical theology has been very influential. But as Don Browning argues, "practical theology in this model simply applied the results of exegetical, church historical and systematic theology to the concrete operations of church life or, more narrowly, to the activities of the clergy" (Browning, 1984: 135).

Browning and others have reclaimed practical theology as theology that self-consciously places itself in the midst of practical concerns (Pattison and Woodward, 2000). It is shaped by immediate issues and, ideally, shapes our response to those issues. Practical theology is situation-based and lives in interplay with other theological disciplines (Campbell, 1990: 18). Browning argues—as I have done in the context of all theology being mission-oriented—that while all theology is ultimately practical in nature theological reflection lies at the most practical end of it. He calls this activity "strategic practical theology," because it is concerned with strategies (1991: 230). It places itself in the two-way crossfire between ideas and the pressing choices we have to make in ministry and mission. It does not isolate itself from biblical, historical, and broader theological concerns; indeed it is in constant interplay with them, depending on them in order to be truly theological and not merely practical.

Practical theological method brings to the whole enterprise of theology the priority of praxis, the dialectical interplay of action and reflection. Its concern with human liberation and growth, whether pastorally or politically, is deeply missional. Its willingness to begin with specifics and to move to broader questions reflects the correlational theological method of Paul Tillich and David Tracy while tending to be more grounded in events and stories. It begins with particular people, cultures, and events in their variety (Tiénou and Hiebert, 2006: 230). It tends to move through phases similar to the simple framework of "see, judge, act"—followed by the Young Catholic Worker movement—which begins with the situation, plunders theological and other resources in forming a response, and then engages in action (Hally, 2008). Missiology as a subject area clearly fits comfortably within practical theology understood following Browning rather than Schleiermacher.

Drawing on the Social Sciences and Other Secular Disciplines

Practical theology, more than biblical studies, history, and systematic theology, draws on the social sciences. All theological branches have conversation partners. Theology particularly uses philosophy, while biblical studies uses linguistics, hermeneutics, and archaeology amongst others. In practical theology, homiletics uses communications theory, while pastoral care uses psychology, sociology, counseling, and systems theory, just to name a few.

Missiology as practical theology draws heavily on anthropology, sociology, and cultural analysis to better understand culture, context, and how people act in groups (Taber, 2000: 93–102). It draws on linguistics and communication theory to better

understand the dynamics of translation and faith-sharing. In its commitment to justice, peace, and the integrity of creation it draws on politics, economics, law, international relations, peace studies, and ecology. In its commitment to understand and work with those of other faiths it draws on religious studies. In its practical outworking in mission situations it may draw upon community development, international aid, health sciences, education, agriculture, language teaching, aviation—and on it goes. These are only illustrative, as there is no limit to the academic disciplines and areas of expertise that potentially assist Christian mission in participating with God in transforming the world towards the fullness of life in God.

The conversation between missiology and the social sciences needs to be an ongoing, critical, and open one. Tensions between missiology and anthropology, for example, have cropped up regularly, as anthropologists have accused missiologists of only studying cultures in order to change them and missiologists have accused anthropologists of naively believing that they are value-neutral observers. It is possible for missiology to domesticate and distort social sciences in appropriating them (Scherer, 1994: 182). It is also possible to import into missiology values or methods from the social sciences that are at odds with the gospel (Rommen and Corwin, 1996). For example, critics of the Homogeneous Unit Principle of the Church Growth Movement—which observes that people become Christians most easily when they don't have to cross racial, linguistic, or class barriers (McGavran, 1990: 163)—have argued that this sociological description of human behavior should not override the biblical call to proclaim the gospel across all barriers (Costas, 1974: 138). (And then the missiological discussion begins.)

A Field Rather than a Discipline

Can missiology claim to be an academic discipline, with its own ideas and ways of testing them? Is it mission science, as Schmidlin argued?

Philosopher Paul Hirst argued that forms of knowledge, or academic disciplines, are distinguished by distinctive concepts, a network of relationships between them, testable propositions, and techniques for testing these propositions against experience (1974). Leaving aside the problems with these criteria, it is clear that missiology is not a discipline because it is so intertwined with other disciplines (differing here from Rodewald, 2005: 66; and agreeing with Schulz, 2009: 89).

Using Hirst's language, missiology is closer to a field of knowledge, unified by its common interest and a community of scholars, drawing readily on a range of disciplines. In the case of missiology it is driven not only by the desire to understand but also by the desire to change the world (praxis). It is thoroughly and willfully interdisciplinary.

In the discussion above, I have argued that missiology ideally both permeates a broad missionary theology and acts as a focus for exploring missionary praxis in specific mission studies. In neither case, I would suggest, should it have pretensions to being a distinctive discipline. When there are specific mission studies, they are still merely a focus, not a science or a form of knowledge. In the form of a diagram the relationships could be set out as in Figure 2.

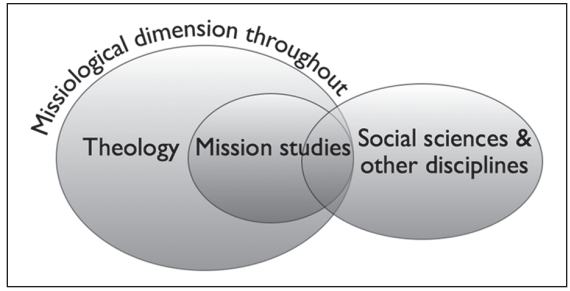

Figure 2. The relationships of mission studies.

Conclusion

Labeling the entire theological enterprise "essentially missiological in character" does not represent a takeover bid on the part of missiology. Rather, it is simply reminding theology, particularly where it has lost its missional edge, that the whole of Christian faith is a response to a missionary God and that faith's search for understanding is a response in worship and mission by the whole community of faith. Theological education is privileged to be a part of that response and, properly understood, has a permeating missiological dimension. That is, it is suffused with the recognition that the church is called to participate in the mission of God. Indeed, if Banks is right, theological education can even have a missional dimension, where theological education is itself one aspect of the mission of the church.

While reminding theology (in its broadest sense) of its missiological character, missiology recognizes its own need to depend on and learn from all other areas of theological study. The missiological dimension will be embedded in biblical subjects, church history, systematic theology, and the whole range of practical theology subject areas. As well, mission studies will serve missionary praxis by drawing on both the rest of theology and on the social sciences and other academic disciplines.

Missiology's disciplinary standing in academia is of little concern, whereas its role in calling the church to participate in the mission of God in a reflective and active way—a role that is important in theological education, in the local church, in networks and movements, and wherever Christians are engaged in mission—is its central concern.

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