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## The Missiological Perspective: What Does it Mean to Do Theology Missiologically?

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## The Missiological Perspective

### *What Does It Mean to Do Theology Missiologically?*

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The first question is: Is there any other way to do theology? A cogent argument can be made that to do theology is to do mission. And an even more cogent argument can be made for the reverse: That to do mission is to do theology. These arguments usually start with a quote from Martin Kahler—"Mission is the mother of all theology"—and historical evidence is then offered: At every point in church history where significant articulation of an important theological principle occurred, it was preceded by a cultural clash whose net effect was to challenge some key church teaching, forcing a more definitive theological formulation.

There is truth in this argument. Mission is the mother of all theology. Acknowledging this truth leads to an exciting way to read church history on the one hand and to do theology on the other. Read this way, church history becomes high drama. And doing theology is transformed from an ideological, exclusively intellectual exercise to an essential element of living and acting in the world today.

But in a narrower sense, perhaps, we can identify a more missiological view of the world and of the theological task. In this narrower sense we can distinguish missiological theology from, say, systematic theology or pastoral theology or historical theology. Let me illustrate this way of looking at the world by distilling a missiological argument from a brilliant book by Curtis Chang, *Engaging Unbelief: A Captivating Strategy from Augustine and Aquinas* (InterVarsity 2000). I read this book recently with our doctoral students in the Seminar in Missiology here at Asbury Theological Seminary.

In his book, Chang argues that in order to do theology in a meaningful way today we must open ourselves to cross-cultural difference. We must be willing, he says, to enter into the other person's experience.

To illustrate his method, Chang chooses two Christian theologians usually identified as systematic theologians and shows how they can be read as missiological theologians. He shows how Augustine wrote the *City of God* in response to a letter from one of his bishops asking for guidance in how to cope with the demise of the Roman Empire and its ensuing secular confusion. Chang then documents how Aquinas wrote *Summa Contra Gentiles* in response to the challenge of Islam in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Both books, Chang argues, are by their nature missionary. Both are written to enable the church to not just weather our epochal shift in the world *Zeitgeist*, but to see these shifts as ideal opportunities for communicating the gospel in culturally relevant ways.

What are "culturally relevant" ways? Chang suggests that people doing missiological theology must first enter into the story of the culture in which they are communicating the gospel. This means understanding its thought forms and then using those thought forms and especially the language of that culture to understand their paradigmatic stories.

Second, the missiological theologian "retells" the story. "Retelling" does not mean "stealing" the story for one's own. It means empathetically understanding it to

the extent that identification occurs with the people indigenous to that culture. It means that one can use the language and thought forms of that culture to communicate one's own ideas. It means that one resonates with the content and values of another culture. It means that we discover hints of God's working throughout history in all cultures to achieve the divine purposes. It means that the culture's paradigmatic story can be used as a basis for telling the gospel story.

The third stage, "capturing the story," means that we add gospel value to the story so that the story is not countered but enhanced—or even transformed. Instead of saying "No" to their story, the missionary theologian says, "Yes, but. . . ." "Yes, but have you thought of this? Let me explain."

Whether or not Curtis Chang's model for doing theology from a missiological point of view is the one you chose, three essential features characterize such theologies:

1. Recognition that all theology, all theologies, are culturally conditioned. Each is an attempt to express God's truth as faithfully as possible. But each falls short because there is no culturally perfect thought form. This does not mean that these theologies are false. It does not mean that they should not be championed as truth. It simply means that we should have some humility about them. We must realize every perspective is limited.
2. Missiological theologians tend to see "theologies" and especially the stories in which they are embedded as complementary rather than contradictory. Points of contradiction certainly will be present and these contradictions must become part of wider and wider discussions. But the common expectation is that because of God's revealing nature these stories will have much in common. God has and continues to reveal everywhere, in all cultures. As a result, each culture will have much to offer other cultural expressions of theology.
3. Acknowledgment that theology, both geographically and temporally, is a never-ending task. There will always be new cultural expressions of theology. And even in a single culture, each generation has a new theological challenge to meet.

In today's world of theological challenges and intermingled cultures, the missiological perspective is essential to the theological task.

—Terry C. Muck, Editor