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Demystifying Missions: Exposing the Madness of Our Method

J. Robert Reynolds

In the twentieth century the study of missions and evangelism has become increasingly scientific, specific, and institutionalized in nature. Unfortunately, while it has served to promote mission endeavors and to provide an increased understanding of evangelistic tasks, ironically it may have also inadvertently hindered effective evangelism and contributed to the growing secularization of the North American Church of Christ. The intent of this article is to describe the trend toward scientific and methodological studies in missions and to suggest alternative avenues in order to recover a biblical concept of world evangelism. Most important, an attempt will be made to pursue the demystification of missions and evangelism as a field of study and as a biblically mandated endeavor of the North American Churches of Christ.

The Development of Modern Missions

The Church of Christ, as it is affected by this malaise of methodology and specificity in missions and evangelism, has developed a particular problem consistent with the larger pattern of mainline Protestant and Evangelical missions history. Our foray into the scientific field of missiology has been influenced by and reflects the developments among other Christian movements over the last 200 years. For that reason we will begin with a brief overview of the movement toward missions as a science within the American Protestant churches before tracking developments in the Church of Christ.

Missions activities, of course, have been going on for almost 2000 years. Approximately 200 years ago, however, as the vast continents of Asia and Africa became open for the first time to Europeans, a wave of missionary fervor seized branch after branch of

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the Protestant church. This was especially true in England, America, Germany, and Scandanavia.

With the development of modern weapons, nations of Europe captured and ruled colonies in Asia and Africa. Ardent Christians began to organize missionary societies that sent missionaries to these colonial possessions and to other parts of Asia and Africa which were still independent nations. A Christian missionary movement began to sweep the world. What had been accomplished by the Roman Catholics between A.D. 1500 and 1800 in Latin America, the Philippines, and other places, now became commonplace from Japan to Nambia. The consequences of this great dispersion may be categorically summarized through the discussion of three resulting phenomena.

The first consequence was an increased emphasis on organization and preparation. Many lessons were learned by churches from the first foreign evangelistic sendings. When the various Christian movements began to realize the monumental scope of world evangelism and the inevitable shortage of resources they would face, parachurch societies were founded and global missions efforts turned to more ecumenical paths.[1] By late in the nineteenth century the first international missions conferences were convened and organizations like the Student Volunteer Movement and the Intercollegiate YMCA were claiming thousands of educated missions workers. Through these and similar efforts in cooperation and organization, funding for foreign missions also increased dramatically.[2]

As Christian organizations, along with the western world, moved out of an isolationist posture, they discovered that the lands beyond their borders were strange and unknown. As a result, the second consequence of the post-Enlightenment missions fervor among Protestants was a greater interest in missions information and education. The two-volume Encyclopedia of Missions (1891), edited by Edwin M. Bliss, and the two-volume work, Christian Missions and Social Progress: A Sociological Study of Foreign Missions (1897-99), by James S. Dennis, ushered in an era of statistical awareness and analysis in missions. Books by Robert W. Speer and William Owen

Carver in the first decade of this century became standard texts for the study of foreign evangelism.[3] This trend in information and training affected higher education to the extent that, in 1900, Charles Cuthbert Hall, president of Union Theological Seminary, reported that "the study of missions is slowly rising to the rank of a theological discipline."[4] By the time of the Edinburgh Conference in 1910 there were already four professorships for the teaching of missions in American seminaries.[5] In the decade following Edinburgh, six new professorships were established. In 1911 the Hartford School of Missions was established, and by 1917 informal meetings of those teaching missions and related subjects were started along the eastern seaboard, which became the Fellowship of Professors of Missions of the Middle Atlantic Region.[6] This aspect of the institutionalization of missions, along with the missions conferences between 1800 and 1938 contributed more than any other cause to the early fomentation of methodology and methodological biases in foreign missionary endeavors.

The third consequence, to which we have already alluded, was an overt infatuation with and bias toward methodology. As missions and evangelism became a subject of inquiry and study, and as information on foreign cultures flooded in from all over the world, the analysis and interpretation of data became a marked priority. On the academic front the emerging social sciences of anthropology, sociology, and psychology afforded students of missions with the necessary tools for their new investigative tasks. These tools, added to the zeal of the endeavor and the reigning scientific climate of the times, set an early backdrop for what would later become a veritable methodological explosion.

The match that actually tindered this initial methodological combustion in missions studies was a crisis in theology of missions due to the confrontation with other religious faiths. The issue of the authority and the sanctity of national cultures sparked the widespread methodological fragmentation of missionary forces and contributed more than any other factor to the birth of the new social-science of missions called missiology.[7] Some centered their discussions on the debate over biblical and sociological approaches to other

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cultures (Hocking, Baker, White, and Kraemer), while others attempted to present general strategies andmodels from the New Testament for all missions efforts (Allen).[8]

After the interruption of World War II there was a renewed surge in missions interest and the primary effort was to get as many missionaries as possible back on the field. The conservative evangelical missions movement experienced rapid growth and emerged as the leading Christian missionary movement. Also emerging at this time were definitive schools of theology and methodology in missiology. The boundaries of debate in missions were drawn not so much along denominational lines as between the popular schools of missiological philosophy and their originators. Thus it was that people began to identify themselves with the theologies of Church Growth, the Indigenous Church, or the Biblical Church, etc. Men like McGavran, Hodges, Lindsell, Cook, Kraft, and Nida wrote important methodological treatises and rallied the various troops to their sides.[9] Modes of analysis became more sophisticated and the social sciences emerged as the primary force in the formation of new methodologies.

The Church of Christ and Modern Missions

The North American Church of Christ, in spite of its autonomy, did not emerge unscathed by these currents flowing within other Christian movements. On the contrary, while she was slow to respond to the foreign missions fervor, the Church of Christ, once it entered the fray, proved rather amenable to missiology as a science with its methodological emphasis.

The Church of Christ effectively entered the "modern" era of missions after World War II and, in particular, with the development of the "team" concept and the sending of fifteen families to Sao Paulo, Brazil in 1961 for a church planting effort.[10] This was a pivotal moment for the Churches of Christ because it constituted a real awakening among the members and leaders of many churches regarding missions efforts. As with any new vision, however, this revived zeal for foreign missions faced several obstacles on its way to realization. The barriers were, in fact, essentially the same dilemmas

that other groups had encountered seventy-five years earlier. Not surprisingly, considering the cultural and academic environment of the times, they also managed to arrive at most of the same conclusions as their predecessors.

Like their earlier counterparts the Churches of Christ became aware of their ignorance concerning foreign peoples, their religions, and their cultures. In a North American culture that stressed specialization and expertise, the Churches of Christ found themselves wallowing in a theological and methodological vacuum with regards to missiology. To offset these deficiencies attempts were made at both church and institutional levels to organize, educate and gather valuable information concerning missions enterprises.

Educators attended seminaries that specialized in missions studies in order to learn the latest methods and theories. Institutions collected data bases of information on foreign cultures and missions work in foreign nations. Churches formed missions committees and helped bring specialization down to the local level where new lay experts might teach the ignorant congregational masses. Missiological terms and vocabulary were adopted as a subset of the Church of Christ's official language. Eventually entire departments were formed at Church of Christ educational institutions and acknowledged spokesmen and experts emerged within the new, adopted science.

The resulting hierarchical structure moved the general interest in method and analysis one step further. The Church of Christ, following the lead of other movements, found itself subject to the whims of methodological and academic fads and personal charisma. A more negative result was that these developments in the Church of Christ increased the distance between the average church member and the missions process. Most problematic was the creation of an exclusive guild of specialists with its own mystique.

The Mystification of Missions in the Church of Christ

This mystification process, while seemingly inevitable, is a force detrimental to Church of Christ missions and undermines the

intent and implementation of her efforts in foreign evangelism. To clarify this assertion we will outline briefly three characteristics of this mystification process.

1. The creation of an exclusivistic closed guild with its own rights of passage. The mystification of an organization or process insists that it become off-limits and incomprehensible to those who are not directly involved in the group or discipline. The greater the specialization and emphasis on method the more closed is the resulting guild. Such specialization induces "in a population general incompetence and helplessness rooted in a sense that it is dangerous to act except in professionalized, role defined, and credentialed settings."[12] Missiology has been susceptible to these forces. Missions is no longer open as a viable practice or an understandable study to faithful and pious believers. Highly specialized training and testing become prerequisite. Success is tied as much to proper methodology as it is to results.

2. The development of a mysterious and distinctive language. With respect to language these elite guilds encourage "a never-ending examination of technical vocabularies and their uses for social control through mystification." [13] They create specialized languages intelligible only to those specialists within the guild. Missiology has developed its own language that includes such terms as contextualization, praxeology, church growth, homogeneous units, ethno-theology, ethno-linguistic groups, message credibility, cells, receptive and non-receptive, etc.[14] At a recent retreat a missions student was engaged in a conversation with a fifteen-year missionary home on furlough. After the conversation had concluded the missionary confided to several others in the group that he had no idea what the discussion had been about. The student was speaking a scientific language he could not understand.

3. The institutionalization of an organization or process. What cannot be achieved through organizational structure and language can be effectively realized through institutionalization and bureaucracy. Should a persistent non-member of the guild manage to overcome the structural or linguistic codes of the organization, he or she

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is still doomed to failure at the hands of intense bureaucratization. This is true because at the institutional level the structure and language are intensified. Once courses are developed instructors must be engaged to teach those courses. Once instructors have been hired more courses are developed to accommodate the specialization of each individual instructor. This process of fragmentation through specialization continues beyond reasonable and plausible limits.

We have seen all of these symptoms of mystification develop in the Churches of Christ with regards to its missions efforts. Missions is increasingly defined and authorized at the institutional level. Mission committees, in spite of their design to provide better information to congregations, generally serve only to create another level of missions specialists in the local church and to deprive the church membership of involvement, participation and information. [15] We have witnessed the willing recognition of missions specialists who often perplex us with their mysterious language. Finally, we have participated in the mystification of missions through our wholehearted endorsement of method and analysis above all else. We have drunk the elixir of scientific methodology and having liked it, we have developed a dangerous addiction.

As a result, when our evangelistic efforts fall short of our goals and as we become frustrated in particular areas of missions thrust, we become convinced that at the heart of our failures and weaknesses is an inadequacy in our method. While we have made rapid advances into the missions field we have also become convinced that with the right plan or with the perfect method the Great Commission is readily within our grasp.

Between Method and Message

It is true that prior to this new specialization in missiology the Church of Christ was woefully inadequate in its foreign missions efforts. Nor is this writer opposed, per se, to a discipline of study titled missions or evangelism. In fact, the argument here is not that we should not develop expertise, but rather that we need to pursue a different kind of expertise. There needs to be a definitive shift from our current reliance on method to a renewed confidence in message.

Ultimately it is the message that defines us as Christians. As sociologist Peter Berger has noted, "What the church is all about is that one old story of God's dealing with man, the story that spans the Exodus and Easter morning." [16] Elsewhere he writes, "What the Christian community says to the world should be based on criteria of truth, not of sociocultural market research or public relations."[17] In order to visualize the implications of such a shift from method to message let us consider four brief contrasts between the two concepts.

1. Method concerns itself with action while message emphasizes character. A community focused on method is most concerned with what it does as dictated by its particular method. The community centered on message is defined by who it is with relation to the truth of its message.

2. Method is judged ultimately in terms of success while message judges in terms of fidelity. Success is determined by statistics concerning membership, finances, and facilities.

> Success equals the number of participants multiplied by the degree of their satisfaction and support. Success, then is directly dependent upon what might be called 'technique-efficiency'--the shrewd calculation and application of sociological principles. 'Fidelity', on the other hand, is faithfulness to the gospel, conformity to the mind of Christ, being what the biblical revelation calls the church to be.[18]

3. Method is vogue and message is visionary. Methodologically oriented groups are driven by fads. Even methods that are completely functional must be changed at timely intervals to remain current with the changing whims of taste and research. People oriented on message are most concerned with things beyond the present time. They share a common vision and goal.

4. Method emphasizes process while message emphasizes personnel. Method is concerned with itself and the correctness with

which its individual parts are manipulated. Message focuses on people and its effect on their individual and corporate lives.

Recovering the Message

Our only hope, in light of the circumstances, is to recover the message in our missions efforts. We must regain our sense of direction in a world where Christians prosper and Christianity seems to perish. The message is our identity and the only hope for all men. We offer here some suggested steps for the recovery of a message-centered vision for the expansion of God's kingdom.

1. The message must be taught catechetically and committed to heart by every member of the church. We must be more successful in our attempts to pass along our faith and tradition as it is embodied in the message.

2. The message must be lived in an exemplary manner by all members of Christ's body. The living message is at least as powerful as the spoken message and it needs no acquired specialization to be manifested.

3. The message should be the emphasis of all institutional missions and evangelism training. We must come to the realization that cultural awareness and methodological preparation can never be substituted for both commitment to and understanding of God's message.

4. The message must be used to plant new churches and not to grow old ones. We must sustain the zealous movement of our community toward a common eschatological goal. We must not be stagnant and thereby susceptible to methodology that preaches an emphasis on form over content.

Conclusion

Our observation is that missions, like the church of which it is a part, is designed to be an enterprise of message and not of method.

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> When all is said and done, the Christian community consists of those people who keep on telling this story (message) to each other, some of whom climb up on various boxes to tell the story to others. [19]

At our very core we are a caravan of believers who live out and share our message, one person to another, over fences and across every conceivable boundary. And the essence of "that Christian message will remain the same whether we imagine its communication to take place in catacombs or in the cathedrals of a new religious culture."[20]

The fact is that a real bomb lies waiting to explode in our "missions basement." It is in a nicely wrapped package with a fancy methodological bow. We take it out and show it to our guests. We point out the neat edges of the wrapping and the fine texture of the paper. We even convince ourselves that the package contains a fancy music box.

In actuality the decorations are poison. They hide the real item inside. In the same way, we allow method to distract our attention in missions. We mystify and are mystified by appearances while the reality of the item, the message, is hidden and lost.

NOTES

[1] Both the Student Volunteer Movement and the YMCA were interdenominational in terms of their memberships. The Interdenominational Conference of Foreign Mission Boards and Societies in the United States and Canada was formed in 1893. The first major ecumenical missions conference took place in New York City in April, 1900. It is important to note that at the ecumenical conferences between 1900 and 1938 doctrinal matters were scarcely discussed. The major question being discussed at these conferences was "how" and not "who" or "why".

[2] Income for foreign missions from living donors of fifteen major denominations in the United States soared from $5,300,100 in 1901 to $21,288,749 in 1919.

[3] Speer's publications included Missionary Principles and Practice (1902), Missions and Modern History (2 vols., 1904), and Christianity and

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the Nations (1910). Carver's most significant contributions were Missions in the Plan of Ages (1909), and Missions and Modern Thought (1910).

[4]Charles Cuthbert Hall, Ecumenical Missionary Conference: Report, 1 (1900) 151.

[5]World Missionary Conference, 1910, Report of Commission VI: The Home Base of Missions (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1910), p. 175. It was reported at the Edinburgh Conference that "at Yale University the courses of study of the Missionary Department number one hundred-and-three items under thirteen heads!" (W. H. T. Gairdner, "Edinburgh 1910": An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference [Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson, and Ferrier, 1910], P. 227).

[6] Olav Guttorm Myklebust, The Study of Missions in Theological Education, 2 vols. (Oslo: Egede Institutte, 1955, 1957), 2:71, 185.

[7] Gerald H. Anderson, "American Protestants in Pursuit of Mission: 1886-1986," in International Bulletin of Missionary Research 12 (July, 1988) 105-108.

[8] Ibid.

[9]The men listed, along with others like them, were field missionaries who wrote textbooks, articles, etc., in order to teach others based on their own experiences. Indeed, one very real alternative for the well-educated missionary is to enter the field of academia and do research. The problem with this, however, is that the very act of structuring, cataloguing, and analyzing field experience for the benefit of others leads one dangerously close to the maze of methodology.

[10]The Sao Paulo, Brazil Mission Team, Steps into the Mission Field (Austin: Firm Foundation Publishing House, 1978), p. 5-6. Thirteen families of the original fifteen family team arrived June 1, 1961. Three additional families arrived in January, 1962.

[11] Manfred Stanley, The Technological Conscience: Survival and Dignity in an Age of Expertise (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), p. 253.

[12] Ibid.

[13]This is just a very short list of the many specialized terms developed within missiology as a field of study. As with any social science, the proliferation of technical terms often makes it difficult for even the experts to understand the dialogue.

[14] As one who has served on mission committees, advised them, and conducted seminars for them, it has been my observation that these committees, in opposition to their design, severely restrict the necessary flow of decisions and information from the eldership to the congregation.

[15] Peter Berger, "A Call for Authority in the Christian Community," in Facing up to Modernity: Excursions in Society, Politics, and Religion (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1977), p. 192.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Vernard Eller, The Outward Bound: Caravaning as the Lifestyle of the Church (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdman's Publishing Co., 1980), p. 39.

[19] Berger, op. cit.

[20] Ibid.

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CONTRIBUTORS

The following contributors to this issue are faculty or staff members of the Institute for Christian Studies.

Holloway, Gary, B.A., Freed-Hardeman College; M.A.R., Harding University; Ph.D., Emory University. Librarian. Church History.

McNicol, Allan J., Pat E. Harrell Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. New Testament, Biblical Theology.

Reynolds, J. Robert, B.A., Abilene Christian University; M.A., Texas Tech University. Ph.D. candidate in Spanish at the University of Texas. Director of Admissions.

Thompson, James W., A. B. Cox Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University. President of ICS. New Testament, Hellenistic Literature, Homilitics.

Weed, Michael R., Billie Gunn Hocott Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University. Ethics, Theology, Church History.

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