

The Relationship between Theology and Missiology: The Missiological Hermeneutics

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Die Bibel ist ein missionarisches Dokument, das über Jahrhunderte hinweg eine Botschaft und ein Zeugnis von der *Missio Dei* entwickelte. Gott war mit einer Mission an die Menschheit befasst, die ein Mandat empfing, sich um die Schöpfung zu kümmern (ein ökologisches, ökonomisches und kulturelles Mandat). Gottes Erwählung Israels ist ein missionarischer Akt, der zum Segen für alle Nationen führt. Jesus war von Gott gesandt, um seine Mission zu erfüllen und die Kirche ist dazu da, die Mission des Gottesknechts fortzusetzen. Die ethische Dimension des Lebens des Gottesvolks – ein Licht für die Nationen zu sein – ist ebenfalls Teil der missionarischen Aufgabe.

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Weil das Programm der Welt kein glaubwürdiger hermeneutischer Schlüssel zum Text der Bibel ist, argumentiert dieser Artikel für eine missionarische Hermeneutik. Wie Leslie Newbigin und Stanley Hauerwas betonen, ist die Kirche die hermeneutische Gemeinschaft, die mit der Interpretation des Evangeliums mit Worten und im Leben beauftragt ist. Wie ich andernorts argumentiert habe, erhalten viele Wörter im Evangelium ihre Bedeutung vor dem Hintergrund des Kampfes um Glauben und soziale Tätigkeit sowie im Kontext der kirchlichen Gemeinschaft. In *The Mission of God* hat Chris Wright gezeigt, dass hermeneutische Kohärenz eng mit der messianischen (christozentrischen) Leseweise des Bibeltextes verbunden ist, in Verbindung mit der *Missio Dei*.

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RÉSUMÉ

La Bible est un document missionnaire élaboré au fil des siècles avec un message sur la *Missio Dei* et un témoignage rendu à celle-ci. Dieu s'est investi dans une mission en faveur de l'humanité qui avait reçu pour mandat de prendre soin de la création (un mandat écologique, économique et culturel). L'élection d'Israël par Dieu était un acte missionnaire ayant pour objectif la bénédiction de tous les peuples. Jésus a été envoyé par Dieu pour accomplir sa mission et l'Eglise est là pour poursuivre cette mission du Serviteur du Seigneur. La dimension éthique de la vie du peuple de Dieu, appelé à être la lumière des peuples, fait aussi partie de sa vocation missionnaire.

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Les préoccupations du monde ne constituent pas une clé herméneutique crédible pour interpréter le texte de la Bible. Une herméneutique missionnaire est bien plutôt requise. Comme l'ont souligné Leslie Newbigin et Stanley Hauerwas, l'Eglise est la communauté herméneutique à qui a été confiée la responsabilité d'interpréter l'Evangile à la fois par ses paroles et par sa vie. Comme l'auteur l'a exprimé par ailleurs, de nombreuses paroles des évangiles trouvent leur sens en fonction du combat pour la foi et l'œuvre sociale qui leur sert d'arrière-plan et dans le contexte de la communion de l'Eglise. Dans son ouvrage sur la mission divine, Chris Wright a montré que la cohérence herméneutique dépend étroitement d'une interprétation messianique (christocentrique) du texte biblique en lien avec la *Missio Dei*.

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SUMMARY

The Bible is a missionary document which developed over centuries as a message and a testimony about the *Missio Dei*. God has been engaged in a mission towards humanity, which received a mandate to care for the creation (an environmental, economical and cultural mandate). God's election of Israel is a missionary act leading to a blessing for all nations. Jesus was sent by God to fulfil

his mission and the Church is here to continue the mission of God's servant. The ethical dimension of the life of God's people – to be the light to the nations – is also part of the missionary task.

Because the agenda of the world is not a credible hermeneutical key to the text of the Bible, this paper argues for a missionary hermeneutic. As Leslie Newbigin and Stanley Hauerwas emphasize, the church is the hermeneutical community charged with the interpre-

tation of the gospel both by words and life. As I have argued elsewhere, many gospel words get their meaning against the background of the struggle for faith and social work and in the context of the church fellowship. In *The*

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Before we start discussing the relationship between theology and missiology we must briefly look at their content and the development of their mutual understanding.¹

1. Theology

The understanding of what theology is has gone through a long historical development; individual definitions oscillate from an everyday thinking about one's faith to highly academic expressions and terms. Wolfgang Trillhaas, for example, sees theology as a "reflective self-understanding of faith."² Theology implies the wish to think about the reality of faith as deeply as possible and about its relationship to other sources of knowledge about life.³ Other authors look at theology from a more intellectual perspective and emphasize rational thinking or speech about God or an intellectual discourse on God. According to this concept, theology is a discipline helping the trained mind come to a more comprehensive and justified judgment about the claims of faith.⁴

The Enlightenment forced the Christians of the Western world to defend their understanding of theology and its position within the university. It was the beginning of attempts to defend theology as a legitimate science. The Reformed theologian Charles Hodge calls theology "a science about the facts of God's revelation", while E. H. Bancroft claims that theology is "a science about God and the relationship between God and the universe".⁵ The situation changed in the 1960s with the development of a number of liberation theologies. The emphasis is more often put on the practical character of theology; theology becomes a reflection on practice. Theology is no longer just the field of study of narrow intellectual groups but becomes a theme of a dialogue. Gustavo Gutiérrez understands theology "as a critical reflection on historical praxis in the light of the Word" and this definition became quite well known and accepted.⁶

2. Missiology

We should remember that until the 16th century the word *mission* was used for describing the

Mission of God Chris Wright has shown that hermeneutical coherence is closely connected with the messianic (Christocentric) reading of the Bible text in relation with the *Missio Dei*.

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doctrine of the Trinity. The verb *mitto* (to send) referred to the task of Jesus Christ who was sent to Earth by God the Father to complete the work of salvation. It was the true and real *Missio Dei* – God's mission in this world.

When in the 16th century the word mission starts to appear in the terminology of the Jesuits, it denotes the spreading of the Christian faith among people who are not members of the Roman Catholic Church – therefore among the Protestants as well. The word was soon adopted by the Protestants as well as a description of their journeys to overseas countries. In Western thinking the word then got quite closely connected with the colonial expansion of the European countries.

Until 1950 the word *mission* described the sending of missionaries into a given territory and also their activities. The word was also used for the mission agencies that sent them, the mission field or centre from which the missionaries went to other places, or for a mission station (a church without a regular pastor, therefore dependent on its "mother church"). By extension, the word mission describes a series of meetings focusing on deepening or amplification of the Christian faith among nominal Christians. This overview clearly shows how much of the meaning of the expression *Missio Dei* was lost over time.

If history tells us that the ecumenical movement was born out of missionary work, then it is also true that the mission movement supported the renewal of the theology of mission. A number of factors and events certainly played a role here: the developments in science and technology and also the effects of secularisation which attempts to present faith in God as irrelevant. In more recent times we have started to hear the shocking message that Europe itself has become a mission field again. Churches in Europe and North America are sending missionaries who have to identify the mission fields in their own countries. At the same time, the missionary activities and methods of other religions are rather aggressive on occasion.

A large number of indigenous churches has sprung up in the so called Third World countries (now the 2/3 or majority world) which represents another turning point in the overall situation. In

the previous centuries, missionaries from the West set the norm of theological development and the form of the church life. This situation has changed and the young churches reject the dictate of the Western denominations. Much Western theology is now being viewed as speculative and irrelevant. New theologies have emerged: African, Asian, black, contextual, liberation, Korean minjung and others. All of that had a significant influence on the further development of our understanding of mission.

3. The relationship of theology and missiology

The first pioneers who understood the importance of missiology in the framework of theology were the Protestant Gustav Warneck (1834-1910) and the Roman Catholic Josef Schmidlin (1876-1944). Their writings made it possible for missiology to really start meeting theology. The first departments of missiology were established in European and American schools of theology. It is no accident that the mission conference which was held in Edinburgh in 1910 has been linked with the subsequent development of ecumenism and theological dialogue. Consecutively, more biblical and theological studies were written proving that

In the beginning mission was more than just an activity. It was the foundation of the church life. The beginnings of the theology of mission are therefore the beginnings of the Christian theology as such.⁷

The New Testament scholar Martin Hengel summarizes his survey of Paul's concept of mission and the origins of the missionary orientation of the early church by stating that the history and theology of Early Christianity are in the first place "the history of mission" and "the theology of mission".⁸ Hengel also says:

A church and a theology that forgets or denies the missionary calling of the believers as the messengers of salvation in the world threatened by a disaster gives up on its foundations and effectively surrenders.⁹

No wonder that some authors, like for example Martin Kähler, are quite emphatic about this issue and argue that "the oldest mission was the mother of theology".¹⁰ Kähler adds that theology started to develop as "a supporting manifestation of the Christian mission", not as a "luxury of a church that ruled the world."¹¹

In spite of those important observations and statements we are still often faced with the serious issue that the separation of theology and missiology in history had a devastating influence on the understanding of the missionary calling of the Church and on its later theological developments. This fact now leads some theologians to stipulate that "theology cannot exist without mission", or in other words, "there is no theology which would not be missionary at the same time".¹² It was Karl Barth who said in a provocative manner that the theological work must be done with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other.¹³ He wanted to suggest that theology cannot be developed only for its own sake but that it carries the serious task of reflection on the faith and the life of the church. Theology is a continuous process of understanding the relationship between God's revelation and the reality of the world.¹⁴

As theology developed, missiology was usually seen as a part of practical theology and viewed as a way of self-realisation of the church in a mission situation. On the other hand, there are good examples of the establishment of departments of missiology on some universities in Europe and America. Nevertheless, as David Bosch said, missiology was pushed to the side and turned into "a secretariat of foreign affairs" that concentrated on other countries, not the home country.¹⁵ Even today some theologians do not understand why they should think about their work in connection with missiology. In reality I am convinced that all theological disciplines need to incorporate the missionary dimension in their fields. Every theological specialist ought to be challenged to look at his or her discipline from the point of view of mission.¹⁶ The main reason is the fact that God makes himself known as the God of mission. The Bible grew over time as a book about God's mission. It was written by missionaries and the reason of its creation was the continuing mission of God's people and the church.

The study of every theological question and topic is put in a new light when we look at how it relates to God's purposes. Christology gives us a normative understanding of God's historical project – establishing his rule over the created world in justice, reconciliation, peace and compassion. The theology of missionary acts can be used for evaluating, correcting and setting up better foundations for the motives and actions of those who want to participate in responding to the request "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven". Mis-

siology helps to check both theory and practice in relation to the gospel and to comprehend history from an eschatological point of view.¹⁷ The church cannot consider itself to be apostolic and catholic (universal) in the sense of “church for everyone” without mission. Mission is not just an activity of the church. It is the very expression of the existence of the church. This was gradually recognised for example by the mission conference in Willingen (1952) and then at the assembly of the WCC in New Delhi (1961), where the International Mission Council was incorporated in the organisation. The church realized it cannot exist “above” the world or “against” the world but it must exist for the world.

4. Missiological hermeneutics

Recent biblical studies from a mission point of view suggest some serious facts. Mission is not just an emphasis on the so called Great Commission at the end of the Gospel of Matthew. Mission is far more than just a task to be performed by the followers of Jesus. That would be a serious narrowing down of what we call *Missio Dei*. Missiological hermeneutics is founded on the very existence of the Bible. The whole canon of the Scripture is a missiological phenomenon, especially for those Christians who admit an existence of a relationship between the Bible texts and self-revelation of our God and Creator.¹⁸ The Scripture suggests that God himself acts in a self-giving way to his creation including us, human beings, who were created in his own image and yet were self-willed and rebellious. The writings that constitute our Bible are products and testimonies of God’s mission. The different processes that led to the writing of the biblical texts were deeply missionary in their essence. Many biblical texts came out of the struggles, crises and conflicts in which the people of God tried to live on the basis of their understanding of God’s revelation and his redemptive act. Sometimes they were internal battles, at other times highly polemic struggles face to face with offers and demands of other religions and world-views.

A missiological reading of such texts is certainly not a matter of looking for the true meaning through an objective exegesis. Yet their missionary meaning is not just a homiletic *post scriptum*. The text itself often stems from a problem, a need, a controversy or a threat that the people of God had to deal with in the context of their mission. The biblical text itself is a product of mission in action.

The most systematic answer to the question of missiological hermeneutics was provided by Christopher Wright in his comprehensive book *The Mission of God*. As an Old Testament scholar and a mission theologian he presents persuasive evidence that the individual parts of the Old and New Testament clearly reflect a missionary context. Even biblical ethics derives its meaning from the context of the mission of Israel and the Church of Christ. The dynamics of the hermeneutical process is provided by the great story of the Bible (the meta-narrative) itself. Mission is about what the Bible is about.¹⁹ Wright considers the story about the disciples on the road to Emmaus to be a very apt example of the missionary hermeneutics.

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:45-47)

The introductory sentence of Jesus, “This is what is written”, is not based on one text in particular. The whole Scripture gives a testimony to the command that the mission of preaching repentance and forgiveness of sins must go to all nations in the name of Jesus. It shows that for Jesus the whole Old Testament concentrated on the life and death and resurrection of the Messiah of Israel and on a mission to all nations. Luke suggests that Jesus opened the minds of the disciples by these words so that they were able to understand the Scriptures. In contemporary theological language, we can say that the Messiah himself showed his disciples what hermeneutics they should apply. The disciples of the crucified and resurrected Jesus were to read the Scriptures *messianically* and *missionally*.²⁰

The hermeneutics of the apostle Paul expresses a similar dual emphasis. When speaking with Festus Paul claims:

I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen – that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles. (Acts 26:22b-23)

This hermeneutical approach shaped Paul’s ministry as apostle of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles.

Wright could not keep from remarking that during most of history Christians have been good at their messianic reading of the Old Testament but inadequate (and sometimes utterly blind) at their

missional reading.²¹ The promised Messiah was incarnated in the identity and missionary calling of Israel as its representative – King, Leader and Saviour. Under the Abrahamic Covenant Israel was to be a light to the nations and a means of the redemptive blessing of God to them. Christ gives us a hermeneutical matrix for our reading and interpretation of the Bible. Besides the Christological matrix there is also the missionary matrix. This approach shows the meaning and reason for the existence of the Bible: God who is presented by the Bible, and the people in whose identity and mission we are to join. The narrative of the Bible talks about God, people, the world and the future.

5. Multicultural hermeneutical perspective

The Western academic world is very slow in accepting theologies from other parts of the world and does not seem to be too keen to do it. Nevertheless, the influence of missiology presented the theological community of the West with a wide range of theological and hermeneutical perspectives which (at least in some cases) are a product of the missionary success of the past. Mission changed the map of global Christianity. In the beginning of the twentieth century, 90% of all Christians lived in Europe and North America. In the beginning of the twenty-first century, at least 75% of the world's Christians live in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific region. The centre of gravity of Christianity moved south. We hear about the phenomenon of "the next Christendom". We live in an age of a multinational church and multidirectional mission.

Multicultural hermeneutics are developing on top of these developments. People will insist on reading the Bible for themselves. Wright thinks it is a great irony that the Western Protestant theological academy, which has its roots in the hermeneutical revolution of the Reformation (separation and independence from the authoritative scholastic theology), has been slow to give ear to those of other cultures who choose to read the Scriptures with their own eyes. The phenomenon of hermeneutical variety goes back to the Bible itself, though. The New Testament was born out of a hermeneutical revolution in reading the Old Testament. It can be demonstrated that even the early church interpreted the same passages from the Scriptures in various ways. For example, the Jewish and the Greek interpretations of the Christian identity were different according to the missionary situations. The apostle Paul deals with such differences

in Romans 14-15. He identifies himself theologically with those who call themselves "strong" but in general encourages the readers to accept others without condemnation and contempt. The unifying elements for him are Christ and the gospel.

Missional hermeneutics must include the multiplicity of perspectives and contexts in which people read the biblical texts. It is possible to speak about the hermeneutical richness of the global church. In this context Wright quotes a statement of James Brownson about the diversity of contexts and perspectives:

I call the model I am developing a missional hermeneutics because it springs from a basic observation about the New Testament: namely, the early Christian movement that produced and canonized the New Testament was a movement with specifically missionary character.²²

This approach is in many ways similar to the well-known hermeneutical spiral emphasizing the necessity of reading Bible passages not only in the context of other passages but also in light of the relations between the author, the original readers and contemporary readers. It is also necessary to consider the world of a given topic and the problem of speech as the medium of communication.²³

Since we are placing heavy emphasis on the space for diversity in contextual readings of missional hermeneutics, we must also point out that it does not equal relativism. Both Brownson and Wright argue strongly for a hermeneutics of coherence.²⁴ Beyond the plurality of certain interpretative emphases, the Bible itself contains a point of orientation: Jesus Christ himself provides the hermeneutical coherence. All his disciples must read these texts in the light of the story that leads up to Christ (messianic reading) and of the story that leads on from Christ to ministry and service and the fulfilment of the missionary calling (missional reading). This is the story of the gospel that flows from the mind and purpose of God into all the Scriptures for all nations. It is the missional hermeneutics of the whole Bible. This hermeneutics has certain sympathy for the post-modern emphases on diversity but it includes safeguards against exegetical license and disregard for the context of the great meta-narrative of the whole Bible.

When we put the elements of missional hermeneutics together, we can summarize that we need to read all parts of the Bible:

- "in the light of God's purpose for all of creation, including the redemption of people and

- the creation of a new heaven and a new earth;
- in the light of God's purpose for human life on this planet in general and in the light of what the whole Bible teaches about human culture, ethics, relationships and behaviour;
- in the light of God's historical election of Israel, its identity and role in relation to the nations and in the light of the requirements on their worship, social ethics and the overall system of values;
- in the light of the central position of Jesus of Nazareth, his messianic identity and mission in relation to Israel and the nations, his cross and resurrection;
- and in the light of God's calling of the Church as a fellowship of believing Jews and Gentiles who make up an extended people of the Abrahamic covenant to be a means of God's blessing for the nations in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and for his glory.²⁵

To summarise, missionary (missional) hermeneutics flows out of a right relationship between theology and missiology. It provides us with an interpretative key which respects the divine inspiration of the biblical text and gives us a freedom and variety of authors at the same time. It also enables us to take into consideration the different contexts of the readers. Missionary hermeneutics makes plurality possible but does not allow for relativism. Missionary hermeneutics provides enough space for the diversity of human cultures and interpretative approaches wherever possible, on the basis of two matrices: messianic (Christocentric) and missionary.

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Notes

- 1 This article is based on a paper delivered at the International Conference of the Central European Centre for Mission Studies, Prague, Czech Republic, in 2007.
- 2 Quotation based on J.A. Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999, repr. 2002) 8.
- 3 Cf. P. Helm, *Faith and Understanding* (Edinburgh: University Press, 1997) 3-76.
- 4 Kirk, *What is Mission?*, 8.
- 5 Cf. D. Wells, "The Theologian's Craft" in J. Woodbridge and T. McComiskey (eds.), *Doing Theology in Today's World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991) 182.
- 6 Cf. J.A. Kirk, *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press, 1997) 14-18.
- 7 H. Kasting, *Die Anfänge der urchristlichen Mission* (München: Kaiser, 1969) 127.
- 8 Cf. P. Cerny, *Kristovo dílo spásy jako základ a imperativ misie* [5] (Brno: Marek, 2006) 15.
- 9 M. Hengel, *Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983) 64.
- 10 M. Kähler, *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission* (München: Kaiser, 1971) 190.
- 11 Kähler, *Schriften zu Christologie und Mission*, 189.
- 12 Kirk, *What is Mission?*, 11.
- 13 K. Barth, Interview with Fredy Klopffentein in *La Vie Protestante* (May 6, 1966).
- 14 Barth, Interview, 14.
- 15 D.J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991, 9th ed. 1995) 492.
- 16 An example in the area of New Testament studies is E.J. Schnabel, *Early Christian mission. Volume 1: Jesus and the Twelve; Volume 2: Paul and the early Church* (Leicester: Apollos, 2004).
- 17 Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 21.
- 18 Cf. C. J. H. Wright, *Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically* (Cambridge: Grove 2005) 5-7.
- 19 Cf. C.J.H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Nottingham: IVP, 2006) 29.
- 20 Cf. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 29-30. (Missional reading or missional hermeneutics are Wright's terms.)
- 21 Cf. Wright, *The Mission of God*, 30. For a christological interpretation of the Old Testament, see also J. Heller, *Bůh sestupující: Pokus o christologii Starého zákona* [God Descending: A Tentative Christology of the Old Testament] (Praha: Kalich, 1994).
- 22 J.V. Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic" in G.R. Hunsberger and C. Van Gelder (eds.), *The Church Between Gospel and Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 232-233.
- 23 Cf. e.g. M. Oeming, *Úvod do biblické hermeneutiky: Cesty k pochopení textu* [Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: Way to Understanding of Text] (Praha: Vyšehrad, 2001) 17-18, or G.R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991) 321-326.
- 24 Brownson, "Speaking the Truth in Love", 257-258; Wright, *The Mission of God*, 40-41.
- 25 Wright, *Truth with a Mission*, 15.