

# A PERSONAL JOURNEY OF MISSIOLOGICAL FORMATION

*Hans Kasdorf*

It began in what once was the soil of hearth and home. But then, while I was yet a child, the family was made homeless. We escaped during Stalin's initial reign of terror from the steppes of northern Siberia in the Soviet Union to the jungles of Santa Catarina in southern Brazil. The terrain was rugged, erosion massive, soil unproductive. Despite incredible odds people were grateful to be free and to have a place they could again call home.

My godly parents of Mennonite faith and peasant stock considered industriousness a virtue, idleness a vice. Daily Bible reading and prayer were indispensable ingredients for family living. We were fortunate to own one Luther Bible and one Mühlheimer New Testament (which I inherited); but we had no other books. With only two years of elementary schooling and no books to read until I was 19, my theological horizon remained as narrow as the valley where we lived.

## *Preoccupation with Salvationist Theology*

From my earliest days as a Christian I became preoccupied with saving souls for heaven. My focus was on what has been called a salvationist theology. I talked to people and invited them to a personal conversion to Jesus Christ as

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Savior and Lord and showed them in simplest terms how they could be born again.

I found the thought of lostness in hell as God's judgment for nonbelief simply unbearable.

Samuel Hugh Moffett, prominent Korean missionary and Princeton missiologist, has described the salvationist theology in words with which I can identify: "It was as simple as the command of Jesus Christ, and as urgent as life and death for millions upon millions who are dying without Christ. Every second saw more souls slipping into a Christless eternity. No one had ever given them a chance. No one had ever told them that they could live forever—in Christ. And faced with a challenge as simple as that, the Christian church exploded into what has been called the 'modern missionary movement.' It could be almost described as a race against time and against the devil for the greatest of all prizes, the eternal salvation of the human soul."

I hasten to add that I hold today as then to the cardinal teachings on salvation, but my approach has broadened and my understanding deepened. Men and women must be converted and reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. The gospel message, however, is not only for eternity; it is also a promise with a challenge to live a godly life on earth by following him, regardless of the cost. While the gospel is free, fleshing it out in a life of discipleship is costly.

### *A Quest for Assurance and Holiness*

While I have never gone through a period of doubt about the inspiration, trustworthiness, and authority of the Scriptures or about the existence of God, I had to cope with such issues as assurance of salvation and a life of sanctification. A question that tormented many believers in Brazil during the early years of my Christian walk was this: "Are you sure you are saved?" If one said yes, a second one was sure to follow: "How do you know you are saved?"

When I later discovered that this was also an issue in our Canadian churches I began to wonder why. While the emphasis is biblical, the questions themselves were often understood as a call to sanctification and holiness without knowing exactly what either the criteria should be or the implications could be. The basis was a literal reading of the biblical injunction expressed by the apostle Peter: "Just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: 'Be holy, because I am holy'" (1 Pet. 1:15-16).

During my first year in Winkler Bible School (Manitoba) I read Ruth Paxson's book, *Life on the Highest Plane*. Its content intrigued me. It

contained charts and graphs showing the reader how to arrive at that **highest plane**. I am not sure whether or not Paxson was advocating theological perfectionism. What I am sure of is that I did not achieve it, though hard I tried.

I came to a point in life when I considered nearly everything to be sin. One gloomy day I even decided to burn my cherished notebook which I had brought from Brazil with more than 200 handwritten poems, folksongs, and some hymns in High German, Low German, and Portuguese, most of which I had memorized. When I saw this treasure go up in flames I went to fetch my diary and a Grimm's fairy tale book only to submit them to the same fate.

It finally dawned on me that my quest for assurance of salvation and holiness had taken me near the brink of religious fanaticism. I began to realize that life on the highest plane is expressed in a consistent walk of obedience to Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In terms of my Anabaptist legacy that means discipleship under Messiah's lordship, not enslavement in pious legalism.

### *In Search of a Theology of History*

Missiologists and theologians like Gustav Warneck, Martin Kähler, Ernst Troeltsch and, more recently, Walter Freytag, Oscar Cullmann, Ludwig Wiedenmann, Lesslie Newbigin, Olaf G. Myklebust, Juan Luis Segundo, Arthur F. Glasser, Kwame Bediako, Wilbert R. Shenk, Jürgen Moltmann, Hans-Werner Gensichen, Andrew Walls, and David J. Bosch, to mention only a few, have reminded us repeatedly that our biblical hermeneutic is largely shaped by our understanding of history. I believe they are right. But which theory of history should we choose? And by what criteria can we make the most intelligent choice?

Bosch and Cullmann contend that revelation of our ever-acting and saving God is the prime criterion. Troeltsch maintains that cultural progress of Europe unlocks the historical secret for the rest of the world. Segundo argues in favor of "experience in the concrete historical reality." Freytag and Moltmann focus on eschatology—though from different perspectives—as the key to understand history, to which Glasser and Shenk each add a special emphasis on the kingdom of God.

There was a time when I was fascinated by still another viewpoint, namely dispensationalism. This is as much a principle of hermeneutics as it is an understanding of salvation history. It is a method of interpreting the Bible based on fairly defined periods of history called *dispensations*. The term is derived from *aionas* used in Heb 1:2 and 11:3 and *oikonomia* which occurs in 1 Cor 9:17; Eph 1:10; 3:2; and Col 1:25.

Dispensationalists claim that the central focus is on the literal meaning of those biblical terms which deal with past ages, the present age, and the age to come. Their concept of history is generally—though not consistently—divided into seven periods covering the time from creation to consummation. God reveals himself salvifically in ways that allow men and women to be saved in each dispensation.

Initially, I decided to adopt the dispensationalist teaching. I expected to find in it clear demarcations for a theology of history, a simple key to interpret the Scriptures, and a greater understanding of the missionary enterprise in the light of things to come. Yet I was never entirely sure of the biblical validity with regard to the interpretation of Israel, the church, and the millennium. I could not substantiate from their larger context the periodization of history with such a rigid system of theology as was put forth by men like J. N. Darby, C. I. Scofield, and others. That led me to look elsewhere to nurture my interest in history, to develop skills in hermeneutics, and to understand more adequately the affinity between revelation, salvation, mission, and the future destiny of humankind.

While I find the linear concept of history as *chronos* rooted in the Judaeo-Christian tradition quite biblical, I am also indebted to African theologians who have helped me equally to appreciate the event character of the *kairos*.

Newbigin likes to define history as “the conversation of the present with the past about the future.” It is that—and more. It is at the most serious level, according to Bosch, a faith commitment to both, the transcendence and the immanence of God who is always manifesting himself through salvific acts in behalf of humankind. This God has revealed himself in historical terms as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And, as Wiedenmann suggests, it is the revealed story of the Christ event that forms an integral part of that larger, secular history which would be unintelligible without it.

The word *revelation*, then, most aptly describes a theology of history by telling the story of our sovereign God making himself known in historical acts of salvation that encompass the entire spectrum of time from creation to consummation. The Christ event together with the coming of the Spirit constitutes the main story at the midpoint of history to usher in the church in world mission.

### ***Toward an Understanding of World Mission***

I know of no other concept at the academic level that has been subjected to so much criticism in the polemical arena of theology since World War II as that of mission. At the popular level just the opposite is

true: the average church member gives little thought to the academic meaning of mission and is content whether it is neglected, rejected, or misinterpreted.

## Personal Decisions and Concerns

First of all, I have sometimes felt that discussions at conferences and consultations both national and international, conciliar and nonconciliar were more destructive than helpful. That has led me to a deliberate decision to join the many men and women around the world who take a critical, yet positive and balanced approach to the theory and practice of mission. There is an ongoing commitment to learn and to teach what global mission means in the contexts of changing times in a changing world. That has been freeing and challenging in my missiological formation. Furthermore, I also carry deep concerns with regard to world mission as an abiding biblical mandate. Today's generation of church and school has the tendency to be ahistorical. That is dangerous. Today's mission has a long history. It is imperative to understand yesterday's mission in order to be missionarily fruitful in tomorrow's world. This demands serious theological and historical reflection as much as spiritual commitment, biblical studies, and practical experience.

Then, too, I am concerned about the relationship between mission and theology. Unless we keep constant vigil at our theological institutions and work at integration we run the risk of neglecting one at the expense of the other. Yet we need both to missionize the world. Martin Kähler once said that mission is the mother of theology, and theology the daughter of mission. It is only as the church is missionally involved with the world that its theologizing task becomes essential. When the church is not intentionally missionizing it has little need for theology.

## From Many Books to One Book

Throughout my sporadic academic journey from Bible school to graduate studies many years later, mission and related courses were always at the top of my interest list. Such texts as Scarborough's *With Christ After the Lost*, Glover's *Progress of World-Wide Missions*, Edman's *Light in Dark Ages*, and Brown's *The Foreign Missionary-Yesterday and Today* shaped my early mission philosophy. I was profoundly moved when I read Scarborough's observation that God "had only to speak the word" to create the world, but to save it he had to sacrifice his only Son. Glover's definition of mission as "the proclamation of the gospel to the unconverted everywhere according to the command of Christ" impacted me in a similar way. Such understanding of mission was entirely spiritual

in nature. It called for life-long commitment, not short-term experiment; it demanded obedience, regardless of convenience.

My early theological thinking was molded by Evans' *Great Doctrines of the Bible* and Strong's *Systematic Theology* supplemented by Thiessen's *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. What impressed me in the last two books apart from arguments about divine election and personal choice was their stress on making known the gospel to all peoples.

During years of teaching, studying, and the reading of many great and not-so-great books I have found one book that overshadows all others: I discovered the Bible as a missionary book. In reading it as such, I have learned to refrain from proof-texting and instead to read larger portions—often entire books—historically, contextually, and even metatheologically, as Paul Hiebert has taught me to do.

Another valuable lesson in this regard is Albrecht Bengel's "golden rule" for Bible readers found in the foreword to his *Gnomon*: "Te totum applica ad textum: rem totam applica ad te." (Apply yourself wholly to the text, and the text apply wholly to yourself). Reading the Bible this way has been one of the most rewarding and liberating experiences in my entire missiological development. Living missiologically with the Bible is as challenging as living academically by the Bible.

### Trinitarian Anchor of World Mission

The trinitarian idea is woven into the biblical warp and woof from beginning to end. Christian belief in the classical trinitarian formulation in terms of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is a faith position anchored in the Scriptures. Documentation for the position lies in Isaiah's vision of the LORD Almighty (Isa. 6:1ff), or the common baptismal formula (Matt. 28:20-21), or again the trinitarian scenes described by John the Seer (cf. Rev. 1:4-6; 22:6-17). But other passages should also be noted.

The writer of the drama of creation, for example, talks about God as Creator of the heavens and the earth; he names the Spirit (of God) as the Mover in the firmament and the Giver of life; he also speaks of the Word as the causative Force in the creative process. The best commentaries on the Spirit as Life-Giver and the Word as creative Force are supplied by Job's friend Elihu (Job 32:8; 33:4), the writer of Psalm 33(vv. 6-9), the Evangelist John (1:1-3), and the Apostle Paul (Col. 1:15f.)

The so-called gift passage of 1 Cor 12:4-6 is, in the larger context (chaps. 12-14), another trinitarian structure:

- The various types of the gifts of grace (*charismaton*) come from the one same *pneuma*—Spirit.

- The many kinds of services (*diakonion*) emanate from the one same *kyrios*—Lord.
- The varieties of tangible manifestations (*energmaton*) proceed from the one same *theos*—God.

It is the Triune God who is gifting his people for ministry among themselves and a comprehensive mission in the world. The late Arno Lehmann of Halle once wrote: “From the *missio Dei* alone emanates the *missio ecclesiae*.” He is right. The entire missionary enterprise must first and foremost be recognized as God’s, not ours. Mission is theocentric, not ecclesiocentric, as leading missiologists like Warneck, Kähler, Newbigin, Myklebust and others strongly confirm.

### Sentness from the Lord to the World

First of all, to define mission as sentness is to grasp its essential biblical meaning. Some form of the verb *to send* occurs over a 1000 times in the Scriptures, with more than 800 references alone in the Old Testament. Not all, to be sure, have to do with salvific or humanitarian mission. But some 400 cases in the Old and close to 200 in the New Testament do.

Mission as sentness is biblical bedrock. It is also a challenge to the postmodern church that has a tendency to look more inward than outward, to think more local than global, to focus more on the gathered than on the scattered church. Here is a lesson to be learned from history: whenever the church ceased to be a sending church it ceased to be the church.

Second, the very idea of mission as sentness, contends Warneck, is so majestic that it can be anchored only in the equally majestic Triune God. He is the subject of mission, his created world its object. Mission is an ongoing sending process: God the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit; Jesus sends the church in the power of the Spirit; the church sends its own sons and daughters equipped with the Spirit and the Word for the world. And the world is everywhere—east and west, south and north; it is across the sea as well as across the street, across the lane as well as across the land. Wherever there are women and men who do not know Jesus the Messiah as Savior and Lord there is the world. The church is sent to missionize the world.

Third, the church has a double missional purpose. One is its missionary dimension, the other its missionary intention, to borrow a word couplet from Gensichen. The missionary dimension is the very character of the church; it is its otherness from the world; it is what the Bible refers to as “God’s treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exod. 19:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). In Old Testament times the gentile nations came to Jerusalem to behold something of God’s grace, greatness, and

glory evidenced by the people of Israel. This is referred to as the centripetal nature of God's people. Genuine Christians have something the world does not have.

But the church also has a missionary intention. That means putting the missionary dimension into action. It is the centrifugal nature of God's people moving out into the world; it is involvement with the world; it is deliberate and personal interaction of Christians with non-Christians. In other words, it is the missionizing activity of the missionary believers among unmissionized nonbelievers.

Fourth, to understand mission as sentness involves the crossing of frontiers. The Swedish missiologist Bengt Sundkler reminds us that mission in the biblical sense is "the church crossing frontiers toward the world." The purpose of crossing frontiers—be they geographic or religious, social or cultural, linguistic or academic, theological or spiritual—is to witness on the other side of those frontiers.

Fifth, every act of missional sentness assumes either being a witness or bearing witness. While such witness includes compassionate service and compelling preaching by the church, it is much more than the sum total of the two: it is the missionary demonstration by life and labor as well as by word and deed—even by death—of the love and compassion, justice and judgment of God in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. Regardless of the nature of the frontier, the gospel must remain the central focus in every aspect of our witness—be that preaching, teaching, healing, helping, or serving; be that in Brazil, China, the United States, Poland, Afghanistan, or Austria.

Finally, the understanding of mission as sentness has helped me overcome what I call a geography syndrome on the one hand and a Jerusalem syndrome on the other. Our Lord's injunctions of Acts 1:8 are connected by the conjunction *and*, not by the adverb *then*. The missional task of believers is to be witnesses simultaneously in Jerusalem *and* in Judea *and* in Samaria *and* to the ends of the earth. The missional call is from the Lord to the church in behalf of the world, both local *and* global at the same time.

## Holding Mission in Delicate Balance

Language has always been a powerful tool in theological debates. This was also true for missiological discussions between various conciliar and nonconciliar persuasions from the 1960s through the 1980s.

The most common agenda items demanding balance include issues such as either proclamation or social responsibility; either kerygma or diakonia; either the Great Commission or the Great Commandment; either

verticalism or horizontalism; either foreign mission or home mission. Instead of connecting the issues in our debates by the single conjunction **and** we tend to sever them instead by using the disjoining couplet **either/or**.

The danger lurks in emphasizing one truth or one aspect of mission at the expense of another. We have highlighted priority rather than centrality language. For example, the Lausanne Covenant states that evangelism is primary in the church's mission of sacrificial service. That means that the proclamation of the gospel is a spiritual concern whereas diaconal ministries is a social concern. But does the debate address the real issue? In my judgment it does not. The question should be one of centrality rather than priority. Only when we give the gospel full centrality in our missional preaching and teaching, helping and healing, serving and feeding can it exercise its God-given power to transform individual lives as well as social structures. What is more, when the gospel is central in all we are and say and do we never have to prioritize or choose between evangelism and social responsibility: we simply evangelize as we missionize.

Loss of balance is also evident in what has traditionally been called "foreign missions" and "home missions." The idea that mission far away in a "foreign land" or "overseas" was most authentic has resulted in the geography syndrome mentioned earlier. During the 1960s there emerged an equally skewed notion: mission must begin at home; we first evangelize and missionize neopagan Anglo America and let Christians in other parts of the world reach their own people for Christ. No missionizing church can afford to engage in one while leaving the other undone. World mission always embraces the world near and far and inbetween. The Western church must guard against onesidedness and keep a delicately balanced perspective with a global vision for world mission.

### *As the Journey Continues*

Three theological currents have converged to form what I call a hybrid missiology. First, my Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, deepened through years of studying and teaching at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, has shaped my ecclesiology in general and my understanding of the Believers' Church in particular. The biblical emphasis on the mission of the church has become an indispensable legacy for life and the foundation for denominational loyalty.

Second, I have also embraced certain aspects of Reformed theology. Studies at the School of World Mission and at the University of South Africa have given me a profound appreciation for the grace, goodness, glory, and greatness of God. These attributes—especially the grace of

God—were focused more in the Reformed than in my own tradition. Men like Glasser and Bosch have not only added a missing dimension to my Anabaptist theology, but have also formed my spirituality.

Third, I cannot overlook the Lutheran influence, particularly its stress on repentance and faith, the life changing power of God's Word at all levels, and the biblical focus on the Holy Trinity. The most fertile resources have been the writings of Philip Jakob Spener, father of Lutheran Pietism; my study of Gustav Warneck, founder of the science of mission we call missiology; books by Georg Vicedom, renowned missionary statesman of Neuendettelsau; and 10 years of correspondence with Arno Lehmann, my esteemed mentor at the Martin-Luther-Universität in Halle, the original theological and missiological center of Lutheran Pietism.

Only Divine Providence could have brought together such a unique triad of scholars as the Reformed Arthur F. Glasser of Pasadena, the Anabaptist J. B. Toews of Fresno, and the Lutheran Arno Lehmann of Halle who supervised my dissertation on "Gustav Warnecks missiologisches Erbe." The product is a hybrid missiologist of the road.

Along with other evangelical missiologists of our time I have concluded that in the midst of theological pluralism we must work toward an irreducible core of biblical nonnegotiables in mission theology. That, too, remains an ongoing agenda item in my missiological formation.

I am profoundly grateful that this is not the end of my journey and not the completion of my missiological development. A German proverb comes to mind: "The mills of God are grinding slowly to make a product mighty fine." In my case, the mill is still grinding, the product still unrefined and unfinished, the journey still ongoing.