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Hans Kasdorf's Contribution to Mission Theology

Henry J. Schmidt

Missiologists within the North American Mennonite Brethren Church are rare. In our one hundred and thirteen years of mission history, only four missiologists have risen to prominence, both within and beyond denominational ranks, all within the last fifty years: George W. Peters, Jacob A. Loewen, Paul G. Hiebert, and Hans Kasdorf. The focus of this essay is to highlight Kasdorf's unique contribution to mission theology in his own Anabaptist Mennonite Brethren tradition as well as to the larger church.

Students and colleagues respect Kasdorf not only for his expertise in mission theology, history, strategies, and future trends, but for his humble spirit, modest self-assessment, and a style that "talks less but says more."

HANS KASDORF'S UNIQUE PREPARATION AS A MISSIOLOGIST

How God providentially shapes individuals for unique kingdom tasks is intriguing. Professor Kasdorf's academic record, scholarship, and writings reflect both breadth and depth in his preparation as a missiologist. His formal education includes two earned doctorates (missiology, theology) and three masters degrees (historical theology, German language/literature, religious education). He speaks English, German, Portuguese, and Spanish fluently. His studies have also given him reading proficiencies in Greek, Hebrew, Danish, Dutch, French, Russian, and Italian. What makes his story so remarkable is that Kasdorf's early for-

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mal education was cut short, during the second grade in Brazil, by World War II. Though he never owned his first book until age eighteen, and only returned to formal studies when he was twenty-one, he has been a lifelong learner and student.

The global mission perspective he so clearly articulates in his writings is deeply rooted in his commitment to Christ, educational pursuits, and in background as a global Christian. Born in South Russia, he was educated in Brazil, Canada, Germany, the United States, and South Africa. He is a "global" professor, having lectured in Brazil, Paraguay, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Canada, Scotland, Kenya, South Africa, Romania, Hungary, the CIS, and beyond. His writings and vision for global mission reflect an integrated analysis from his broad range of experiences, interests and studies: history, missiology, literature, linguistics, anthropology, and theology.

In reflecting on the major influences that have shaped his missiology, Kasdorf identifies three theological currents that have converged to form his "hybrid missiology."¹ First his Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, deepened through years of studying and teaching at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, has shaped his ecclesiology in general and his understanding of the believers church in particular. Anabaptist scholar J. B. Toews of Fresno, California, was his mentor. Second, from Reformed Theology he embraced the aspects of God's grace, goodness, glory, and greatness plus the spirituality dimension of missiology through Arthur Glasser, Fuller Theological Seminary, and David Bosch, University of South Africa. Third, Kasdorf was influenced by Lutheran Pietism, with its stress on repentance and faith, the life-changing power of God's Word, and the biblical focus on the Holy Trinity. This came primarily through the writings of Philipp Jakob Spener, Gustav Warneck, Georg Vicedom, and his ten-year correspondence with Arno Lehmann, his mentor at the Martin-Luther-Universität at Halle.

Kasdorf's mission perspective was also shaped through a "wide angle lens" in his reading, research, and participation in mission consultations that were both national and international, conciliar and nonconciliar. In God's providence these "hybrid" influences, along with Kasdorf's broad experience and disciplined scholarship, have produced a missiologist whose greatest gift to the church is his ability to analyze, synthesize, and clearly articulate issues in mission history and theology.

HANS KASDORF AS A MISSION HISTORIAN/SCHOLAR

For Kasdorf, missiology, history, and theology are complementary partners in understanding God's mission in the world. He writes about

their interrelationship in a recent essay:

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 serious commitment, biblical studies, and practical experience I am concerned about the relationship between mission and theology We need both to missionize the world 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.²

Kasdorf, along with other missiologist/theologians, believes that our biblical hermeneutic is largely shaped by our understanding of history. But his struggle with two basic questions in interpreting history is also clear: "Which theory of history should we choose? And by what criteria can we make the most intelligent choice?"³ In his search for a theology of history he came to reject dispensationalism as an inadequate principle of hermeneutics. He did find the linear concept of history as *chronos* and the event character of *kairos* helpful in understanding God's revelation and mission. He writes,

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."⁴

His writing, lectures, and messages carry a uniform theme: "The Bible is a missionary book."

Perhaps Kasdorf's greatest contribution to missiology is yet to be realized in the untapped treasures of his extensive research and publications. His 706-page dissertation, "A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking, 1885-1984," is a careful and helpful analysis of the shifts in mission theology, philosophy, and thinking in a denomination's mission history.⁵ Many of his writings are in German, and his works have influenced missiology worldwide. His numerous books cover such subjects as conversion and historical and theological perspectives on missions. The one hundred plus published journal and religious periodi-

cal articles, book reviews, and book chapters are a commentary on his solid scholarship and contribution to the larger field of missiology. He continues to think and write about the history of missiology and a biblical theology of mission.

THREE IMPORANT CONTRIBUTIONS

Kasdorf's historical dimension in missiology serves his denomination and the larger church in three specific ways. First, Mennonite Brethren have never spelled out a systematic theology basic to their faith, let alone an explicit theology fundamental to their missional involvement. Their theology overall has been more implicit than explicit, more by implication than by expression. They have operated more on given assumptions than on formal pronouncements. Their history reflects a greater concern to "obey the great commission" than to formulate essential biblical principles underlying the missionary nature and action of the believers church. Their theologizing process has been clearer in statements on mission philosophy and policy than on theology. Kasdorf's writings are a major contribution to Mennonite Brethren self-understanding historically, missiologically, and theologically.⁶

Secondly, Kasdorf's scholarship addresses the problem of "a distorted church and mission history." He writes, "The lamentable disregard for Anabaptist mission during the Reformation has given a distorted picture of mission history."⁷ He clearly articulates the fundamental concepts which undergird the motives of Anabaptist mission consciousness and evangelistic witness in the world. These include an understanding of a new life in Christ as a voluntary commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord, a believers church marked by voluntarism, free submission in a covenant relationship, and separation of church and state. Interpreting the Bible was a "hermeneutical community" process. Their understanding of church history was different than that of the Protestant and Roman Catholic Reformers in not merely calling for a "reformation" in the existing church-state system, but for a "restitution" to the first-century church model. The centrality of and obedience to the great commission (Ps. 24:1; Matt. 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-20) is clearly focused in Anabaptism, which is not the case with the Lutherans or Roman Catholic reformers.⁸ Kasdorf's writings not only correct a distorted mission history but document Anabaptism as a dynamic missionary movement.

Thirdly, Kasdorf's work provides an enormous resource for scholars and church/mission leaders in learning lessons from past mission leaders/movements that are relevant for the present and can shape a better mission future. For example, his analysis of the legacy of Gustav War-

neck (1834-1910), called the originator of Protestant missiology, gives valuable insight into the formation and work of one of Germany's great missiologists.⁹ Kasdorf's "Current State of Missiology: Reflections on Twenty-Five Years 1968-1993," is a comprehensive document on how global missiology has experienced a remarkable resurgence and revitalization of global research and scholarship from its bleak beginning in 1968.¹⁰ And finally, his journal article entitled, "Pietist Roots of Early Mennonite Brethren Spirituality,"¹¹ helps those within and beyond his own church tradition understand other theological influences. Kasdorf carefully delineates how four varieties of Pietism—Reformed, Lutheran, Moravian, and Roman Catholic—influenced the theological, spiritual, and missiological formation of Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren over several centuries.

HANS KASDORF AS A MISSION THEOLOGIAN

What are Hans Kasdorf's major contributions to a theology of mission? They are too numerous to be comprehensive here, but I will highlight four areas in which he has been a kingdom servant, enhancing both the stature of missiology as an academic discipline and the mission of the church.

Clarifying Mission Vocabulary

In a vision statement prepared for Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in 1984, Kasdorf writes,

It is imperative for our purposes to define world mission in terms that are biblically sound, missiologically acceptable, and theologically defensible. God's object in mission is the lost and alienated kosmos of broken humanity in America as well as every other continent on the globe. There can be no world mission without evangelism and reconciliation. Therefore, I suggest that Christian world mission is best understood as the Church sent into the world, crossing frontiers in order to witness about Jesus Christ on the other side of those frontiers.¹²

Three terms are central to his definition: "sentness," "crossing frontiers," and "witness." Mission as "sentness" is biblical bedrock. It grasps the biblical meaning since the word "to send" occurs over one thousand times in the Scripture, with more than eight hundred references in the Old Testament. Mission is an ongoing sending process, originating with the Triune God: God sent the Son and the Holy Spirit; Jesus sends the Church in the power of the Holy Spirit; and the church sends its "called out" members equipped with the Spirit and the Word. For Kasdorf, to

understand mission as “sentness” also implies crossing frontiers, be they geographic or religious, social or cultural, linguistic or academic, theological or spiritual, economic or ethnic, to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ. “Witness” describes the actual content of the wholistic mission. It is witness of being (character), doing (healing and helping ministries), and telling (proclaiming good news). Witness cannot be viewed as geographic since Acts 1:8 refers to a simultaneous witness in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, rather than to a sequential witness.

Kasdorf’s linguistic skills, along with his education in German literature, have served missiology well in terms of his detailed and definitive vocabulary. For Professor Kasdorf, “mission” is always singular, never plural “missions.” He never missed an opportunity to make that corrective comment on student papers or in classroom dialogue.

What is at stake by pluralizing mission? For Kasdorf, the difference is more than grammatical, it is the philosophical and theological implications. He writes, “The most common agenda demanding balance in missiology includes 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 or home mission.”¹³ His helpful response to the danger of emphasizing one truth or one aspect of mission at the expense of another is again one of vocabulary and language. One is to insist on the use of the conjunction “and” instead of the disjoining couplet “either/or.” Another is to speak of the centrality of mission rather than the priority of mission. Only when the gospel receives full centrality in preaching and teaching, healing and helping, serving and feeding can it exercise its power to transform individuals and social structures.

The Church in Mission for the World

As an Anabaptist-Mennonite Brethren historian/theologian, Kasdorf’s ecclesiology makes it difficult for him to think of mission apart from the church. He quotes Karl Hartenstein’s maxim and applies it to how the Mennonite Brethren church understands mission: “Whoever says church, says mission; whoever says mission, says church.”¹⁴ The church is not mission, but it has a mission. Mission is the entire Church’s task in its witness to the kingdom. Kasdorf writes,

Without the Church there can be no mission, and without mission no Church. The Church has been called out of the world, but it is continually sent back into it for missional purposes The Church is the center of God’s cosmic

agenda for redemption, but the world is the arena of conflict and the theater of all missionary action.¹⁵

Using Hans-Werner Gensichen's couplet term "mission dimension and mission intention," Kasdorf articulates the double missionary purpose of the church. Mission dimension is the very nature of church; it is its otherness from the world, or in biblical terms God's special possession, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod. 19:5-6; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). Missiologist George W. Peters describes this as the "centripetal nature of God's people," i.e., Israel as a light to the nations in the Old Testament. But the church also has a missionary intention. It is the "centrifugal nature of God's people," active in putting the missionary dimension into society, people moving out and being involved in the world in personal interaction with Christians and nonbelievers. Although Kasdorf is a strong advocate of a church-centered missiology, he does not believe mission should be rooted in the church ultimately, or even in Jesus Christ. For him, a biblical mission theology must always be rooted in the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—who created the church for mission.

In addressing mission structures, Kasdorf builds on Ralph Winter's sociological "modality" (church membership) and "sodality" (Paul's missionary band) paradigm, and on Paul Hiebert's more theological language in describing "the church in mission" (missionary church) and "the church and mission" (missionary society). He provides a helpful analysis of strengths and weaknesses of three functional mission models.¹⁶ The church-centered model has the church or denomination involved in wholistic mission, with a mission board as the responsible operating vehicle. It has a strong ecclesiology, produces churches that have a missionary dimension and intention, but its weakness is that it often loses its commitment to evangelism and church planting in its own context.

In a mission-centered model, which is expressed in parachurch, independent, or faith mission organizations, the mission agency becomes primary and the local church becomes secondary. In this model individuals and local churches provide a prayer and financial base; it allows for doctrinal flexibility, and missionaries plant "indigenous churches" with which they often never identify. Its weaknesses are a low view of the church, yet it uses the resources of the church for its own kind of missionary purpose, plus it often becomes mostly missionary-centered ministry.

A third structure is the double-centered model which includes both the previous models and permits both to function within the same organizational structure. The weakness of the double-centered model is how

it impacts human and financial resources in the sending church or denomination.

Kasdorf actually adds a fourth, international model which he believes is one of the greatest challenges facing the church, building a structure with increased mutuality, partnership, and equality in mission. His missiological writings repeatedly call the church to think biblically and practically about mission vision, strategies, and structures that effectively mobilize God's people.

An Emerging Theology of Mission

Kasdorf's study of a century of Mennonite Brethren mission history shows how a theology of mission provides insight into the way a theology actually emerges in a tradition that is characterized by mission activity but has little explicit theology or critical reflection. It is instructive for understanding how theological formulations emerge in the development of new churches and religious movements.

He observes that Mennonite Brethren have experienced three dynamic stages in the development of their theology of mission over the past century. The first is best described as salvationist theology, the second as kingdom theology, and the third as trinitarian theology. Kasdorf notes that the Mennonite Brethren at no time abandoned one theology for another. Instead they built a three-layer theology of mission, always retaining the former layer while emphasizing the latter.¹⁷

The salvationist theology in early Mennonite Brethren mission was in tune with the broader theological currents of mission thinking in the culture. The consuming passion of this theology is saving lost souls. Samuel Moffett observes, "It was simple as the command of Jesus Christ and urgent as life and death for millions upon millions are dying without Christ."¹⁸ Salvationist theology is christologically anchored in a theology of the cross rather than the resurrection; it is rooted in Jesus as Savior rather than Jesus as Lord. Obedience to the great commission is motivated by the lostness of humanity and ensuring that people have an opportunity to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The kingdom theology of mission emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in conjunction with major cultural shifts: the collapse of the colonial mission era, the independence of developing nations, missionaries becoming disciples in addition to being soul-winners, a clearer focus on Christ's lordship, a mission emphasis on deeds of compassion and ministry to the whole person. The kingdom theology never replaced the salvationist theology, but complemented it and became the first layer on which other layers could be built. Kingdom theology is anchored in the

Lordship of Christ. The connection between the kingdom of God and world mission, Kasdorf notes, has five missiological implications:

- (1) We recognize the gospel of the kingdom to have spiritual, social and ethical demands for conversion and a life of discipleship.
- (2) We accept the challenge that the gospel must be preached to all unreached people.
- (3) We believe that all those who hear the gospel, repent of their sin, become disciples of Jesus, the Savior and Lord, will be saved, and those who willfully reject him will be lost.
- (4) We understand that the Church's worldwide mission is limited to the historical era between the resurrection and the return of Christ; with that event the time of mission is over.
- (5) We hold that the second coming of Christ is imminent, making the preaching of the gospel and the labor of love for justice and righteousness exceedingly urgent.¹⁹

In the kingdom approach commitment to Jesus as Lord means identification with God's people—the church. Mission is motivated by Jesus' incarnational, wholistic ministry model. The calling of the church, individually and corporately, is to minister the whole gospel to the whole person.

The trinitarian approach to a theology of mission has three theological foci: The Father initiates mission because he loves the world; the Son ventures out on his mission because he is sent; the Holy Spirit executes mission because he is the Spirit of wisdom and power. Kasdorf makes the point that the trinitarian approach does not weaken but strengthens both their salvationist and kingdom theology. In this model, the motivation for mission is acknowledging the triune God in his sovereignty and love and responding to his call, resources, and mission.

Kasdorf's analysis of how a three-layer theology emerges provides valuable insight into what happens in many mission-centered models of global evangelization. It means that all indigenous churches and religious movements develop a theology over time. Indigenous churches over time must develop beyond the "three selves" stage of self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating to the actual self-theologizing stage.

Mission and Cultural Context

A fourth major theme and contribution of Kasdorf's theology of mission addresses the gospel and culture agenda. The church-culture and mission-culture agenda is a primary concern in missiology. How do dif-

ferent people hear the gospel? How does the gospel change culture? What does the church look like in different cultures? How does one communicate effectively across cultures? Kasdorf's missiology reflects both cultural understanding and careful attention to cultural context in mission. His work skillfully incorporates the insights of anthropologically informed missiologists into the ways a missionary God seeks to redeem his people in different cultures.

Kasdorf's book, *Christian Conversion in Context*, is an example of an ethnotheological as well as an exegetical study. He uses conversion "to describe the religious and ethical processes of man's spiritual transformation in terms of his values, relationships, and attitudes to God, himself, and others within the matrix of his own culture and social structure."²⁰ Adapting the work of anthropologist Charles Kraft, Fuller Theological Seminary, Kasdorf delineates the distinctions between the theological, anthropological, and ethnotheological understandings of God, culture, and humanity. According to Kasdorf ethnotheology has a four-fold purpose:

- (1) to more adequately understand humanity as God's creation and the *imago Dei*—the abiding point of contact—in each person;
- (2) to become cognizant of the human cultural milieu and the complexities of humanity's alienation from its Creator;
- (3) to bring about a more balanced understanding of human lifeways, attitudes, and relationships shaped not only by sin, but also by culture; and
- (4) to discover more effective ways and means to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ as the message of a supra-cultural God to a culture-bound humanity so that persons might respond and be reconciled to their Creator and Redeemer.²¹

For Kasdorf an ethnotheological perspective has serious implications for the church in mission. Culture must be taken seriously. That the gospel transforms people and culture is clear, but what is the process and the time frame? While the content of the gospel remains constant, the forms in which it is communicated are determined by the context of culture. His essay, "Lessons from a Christian Anthropologist's Approaches to Communication,"²² illustrates how important cultural understanding is in effective communication.

His ethnotheological understanding also helps the church in different cultures to address missiological issues such as the meaning of reconciliation and relationships, individual and group conversion, personal and

multipersonal decisions, individualism and community in the church, the meaning of conversion in "guilt" and "shame" cultures, and the development of churches indigenous to their culture. Understanding urbanization, unreached people groups, world religions, and third- and fourth-generation nominalism in established churches are also frequent themes in Kasdorf's concern in contextualizing mission. His chapter on "Revitalization and Renewal" provides invaluable insights into how the gospel of the kingdom transforms individuals, churches, cultures, and social systems.

A CONCLUDING TRIBUTE FROM A COLLEAGUE

My reflections on Professor Kasdorf's legacy as a mission historian and theologian end with a personal tribute. We were mission faculty colleagues at the seminary for fifteen years. He directed the denominational missionary candidate training program for thirteen years. The 1980s at the seminary became the decade of mission, in large part through Kasdorf's vision. Through his influence seminary curriculum became more mission-centered. Its current focus on contextualization, globalization, and internationalization is a tribute to his work.

As a missiologist, Kasdorf brings a rare combination of gifts: exceptional intelligence, eagerness to learn, solid scholarship, and dogged self-discipline, plus a personal grace, humility, and deep piety. His students and colleagues respect him not only for his expertise in mission theology, history, strategies, and future trends, but for his humble spirit, modest self-assessment, and a style that "talks less but says more." International students knew him not as "advisor" but as a good listener, a friend, and an encourager. Faculty and mission board members remember him not for being outspoken in meetings, but for his careful and insightful response to issues. In numerous mission department meetings over the years, I have benefited both from Kasdorf's probing questions about mission philosophy, theology, teaching methodologies, and strategies, and from prayer times and his brotherly encouragement. He clearly viewed himself more as a servant than as a leader. Thanks Professor Kasdorf, for your servant-leader model in the church as friend, churchman, missiologist, theologian, and historian. ✨

NOTES

1. Hans Kasdorf, "A Personal Journey of Missiological Formation," *Direction* 23:1 (Spring 1994): 109-10.
2. *Ibid.*, 105.

3. Ibid., 103.
4. Ibid., 104.
5. Hans Kasdorf, "A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking 1885-1984," 2 vols. (Th.D. in Missiology diss., University of South Africa, 1984).
6. Ibid.; Hans Kasdorf, "The Church Concept of the Mennonite Brethren in Anabaptist Perspective" (Master's thesis, Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California, 1972); Hans Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1980).
7. Kasdorf, "A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking 1885-1984," 1:61.
8. Ibid., 50-94.
9. Hans Kasdorf, "Gustav Warneck's missiologisches Erbe" (D. Miss. diss., School of World Mission of Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, 1976). See also Hans Kasdorf, "Gustav Warneck: His Life and Labor," *Missiology: An International Review* 8:3 (July 1980): 269-84.
10. Hans Kasdorf, "Current State of Missiology: Reflections on Twenty-Five Years 1968-1993," *Direction* 23:1 (1994): 61-81.
11. Hans Kasdorf, "Pietist Roots of Early Mennonite Brethren Spirituality," *Direction* 8:3 (July 1984): 44-55.
12. Hans Kasdorf, *It's Sunrise in World Mission* (Fresno, CA: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1984), 5.
13. Kasdorf, "A Personal Journey," 108-9.
14. Kasdorf, "A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking," 2:592.
15. Kasdorf, *It's Sunrise in World Mission*," 15.
16. Kasdorf, "A Century of Mennonite Brethren Mission Thinking," 2:568-75.
17. Ibid., 606-21.
18. Samuel Moffett, "Theology of Missions," *Ashland Theological Journal* 18 (Fall 1985): 17.
19. Kasdorf, *It's Sunrise in World Mission*, 4-5.
20. Kasdorf, *Christian Conversion in Context*, 23.
21. Ibid., 32-33.
22. Hans Kasdorf, "Lessons from a Christian Anthropologist's Approach to Communication," *The Journal of Church and Society* (Fall 1970): 35-53.