

The Relationship between Theology and Missiology: The Missiological Hermeneutics

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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. Theology

The understanding of theology has gone through a long historical development and the individual definitions oscillate from an everyday thinking about one's faith to highly academic expressions and terms. Trilhaas, for example, sees theology as a "reflective self-understanding of faith."¹ 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.² Other authors look at theology from a more intellectual point and emphasize rational thinking or speech about God or an intellectual discourse of God. Theology is, according to this concept, a discipline helping the trained mind come to a more comprehensive and justified judgment about the claims of faith.³

The Enlightenment of the 18th century forced the Christians of the Western world to defend their understanding of theology and its position within the university framework. It was the beginning of the efforts 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".⁴ The situation changes in the 1960s with the development of a number of liberation theologies. The emphasis is more often put on the practical character of theology and a reflection of the practice. Theology is no longer just a 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.⁵

2. Missiology

We should remember that until the 16th century the word *mission* was used for describing the 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 fulfill the work of salvation. It was the true and real *Missio Dei* – God's mission in this world.

¹ Quotation based on KIRK, J. A.: *What is Mission? Theological Explorations*. Darton, Longmann and Todd, London 1999, rep. 2002, p. 8

² Cf. HELM, P.: *Faith and Understanding*. University Press, Edinburgh 1997, p. 3-76

³ KIRK, 2002, p. 8

⁴ Cf. WELLS, D.: *The Theologian's Craft*. In: WOODBRIDGE J. and McCOMISKEY, T. (Eds.): *Doing Theology in Today's World*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids 1991, p. 182

⁵ Cf. KIRK, J. A.: *The Mission of Theology and Theology as Mission*. Trinity Press International, Valley Forge 1997, p. 14-18

In the 16th century the word mission starts to appear in the terminology of the Jesuits and it denotes the spreading of the Christian faith among the people who were 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 the overseas countries. The word then got quite closely connected with the colonial expansion of the European countries in the Western thinking.

Until 1950 the word *mission* described sending missionaries into a given territory and also their activities. The word was also used for the mission agency that sent them, the mission field or center from which the missionaries went to other places, or a mission station (a church without a regular pastor, therefore dependent on its “mother church”). The word mission also described a series of meetings focusing on deepening or amplification of the Christian faith among “formal” 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 the mission 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 secularization attempting to present the faith in God as irrelevant. Now we have started to hear the shocking news that Europe itself has become a mission field again. The churches in Europe and North America are sending missionaries who have to identify the mission fields in their own countries. Also the missionary activities and methods of other religions are sometimes rather aggressive. 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, the missionaries from the West set up the norm of theological development and the form of the church life. Now the situation has changed and the young churches reject the dictate of the Western denominations. The 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 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 the European and American schools of theology. It is no accident that the mission conference called to Edinburgh in 1910 had been connected 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."⁶

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 the early Christianity are in the first place "the history of mission" and "the theology of mission".⁷ Hengel 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."⁸ No wonder that some authors, like for example Martin Kähler, are quite strong about it and say that "the oldest mission was the mother of theology"⁹ Martin 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."¹⁰

Now we are faced with a serious question if this separation of theology and missiology did not have a devastating influence on the understanding of the mission calling of the church and a future theological development. This fact is now leading some theologians to stipulating that "theology cannot exist without mission", or in other words, "there is no theology which would not be missionary at the same time".¹¹

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. He wanted to suggest that theology cannot be developed only for its own sake but that it carries the serious task of the reflection of faith and the life of the church. Theology is a continuous process of understanding the relationship of God's revelation and the reality of the world.¹²

As theology developed, missiology was usually seen as a part of practical theology and viewed as a way of self-realization of the church in a mission situation. On the other hand there are good examples of establishing departments of missiology on different 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.¹³ Even today some theologians do not understand why they should think about their work in connection with missiology. In reality, all the disciplines of theology need to incorporate the missionary dimension in their fields.

⁶ KASTING, H.: Die Anfänge der urchristlichen Mission. Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München 1969, p. 127

⁷ Compare: CERNY, P.: Kristovo dílo spásy jako základ a imperativ misie. (Christ's Work of Salvation as a Foundation and Imperative of Mission) L. Marek, Brno 2006, p. 15

⁸ HENGEL, M.: Between Jesus and Paul: Studies in the Earliest Christianity. Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1983, p. 64

⁹ KÄHLER, M.: Schriften zu Christologie und Mission. Chr. Kaiser Verlag, München 1971, p. 190

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 189

¹¹ KIRK, J. A.: 2002, p. 11

¹² Compare ibid, p. 14

¹³ BOSCH, D. J.: Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission. Orbis, Maryknoll 1991 (9. ed. 1995), p. 492

Every theological specialist ought to be challenged to look at his or her discipline from the point of view of mission. 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 each theological question 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. 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". Missiology helps to check both theory and practice in relation to the gospel and to comprehend history from an eschatological point of view.¹⁴ 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. It was gradually recognized 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 organization. The church realized it cannot exist "above" the world or "against" the world but it must exist for the world.

4. Missiological hermeneutics

Recent studies of the biblical texts 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 of what we call *Missio Dei*.

The 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.¹⁵ The Scripture suggests that God Himself acts in a self-giving way to His creation including us, human beings, who were created to His own image and yet were self-willed and rebellious. The writings that constitute our Bible are a product and testimony of God's mission. The different processes that lead to the writing of the biblical texts are 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, and at other times highly polemic struggles face to face with offers and demands of other religions and world-views.

¹⁴ Comp. *ibid*, p. 21

¹⁵ Comp. WRIGHT, C. J. H.: *Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically*. Grove Biblical Series, Ridley Hall, Cambridge 2005, pp. 5-7

Missiologial 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 out of 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 missiologial hermeneutics was provided and summarized 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 in the context of the mission of Israel and the Church of Christ. The dynamics of the hermeneutic process it then provided by the great story of the Bible (meta-narrative) itself. Mission is about what the Bible is about.¹⁶

Wright considers the story about the disciples on the road to Emmaus to be a very apt example of the missionary hermeneutics. Luke 24:45-47: *“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.’”* 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. We can say, in our contemporary theological language, 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*.¹⁷

The hermeneutics of the apostle Paul expresses a similar dual emphasis. When speaking with Festus Paul claims (Acts 26:22b-23): *“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.”* This hermeneutical approach shaped Paul’s ministry as apostle of the Messiah Jesus to the Gentiles.

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

¹⁶ Comp. WRIGHT, C. J. H.: *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative*. IVP, Nottingham 2006, p. 29

¹⁷ Comp. *ibid*, pp. 29-30. (Misional reading or hermeneutics are Wright’s terms. – transl. note)

blind) at their missional reading.¹⁸ The promised Messiah was incarnated in the identity and missionary calling of Israel as a representative – King, Leader and Savior. It was already part of 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 story 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 20th century, 90% of all Christians lived in Europe and North America. In the beginning of the 21st century, at least 75% of the world's Christians live in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific region. The whole center 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. The multicultural hermeneutics is developing on top of that. 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 through 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 different ways. For example the Jewish and the Greek interpretations of the Christian identity were different according to the mission situation. The apostle Paul deals with these differences in Romans 14-15. He identifies himself theologically with those who called themselves “strong” but in general encourages the reader to accept others without condemnation and contempt. The uniting elements for him here are Christ and the gospel.

The 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. Wright in this context 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*

¹⁸ Comp. WRIGHT, C. J. H.: *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. IVP, Nottingham 2006, p. 30. For a christological interpretation of the Old Testament, See also: HELLER, J.: *Bůh sestupující: Pokus o christologii Starého zákona*. (God Descending: A Tentative Christology of the Old Testament) Kalich, Praha 1994.

the New Testament: namely, the early Christian movement that produced and canonized the New Testament was a movement with specifically missionary character."¹⁹

This approach is in many ways similar to the well-known hermeneutical spiral emphasizing the necessity of reading the Bible passages not only in the context of other passages but also in light of the relations between the authors, 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.²⁰

Since we place a strong emphasis on the space for the diversity of the contextual readings of the missionary hermeneutics we must also point out that it does not equal relativism. Both Brownson and Wright argue strongly for a hermeneutics of coherence.²¹ The Bible provides a point of orientation that goes with the plurality of certain interpretation emphases. Jesus himself provided the hermeneutical coherence within which all disciples must read these texts, that is in the light of the story that leads up to Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads on from Christ to ministry and service and fulfilling the missionary calling (missional reading). This is the story of the gospel that flows from the mind and purpose of God in 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 includes safeguards against exegetical license and disregard for the context of the great meta-narrative of the whole Bible.)

When we put all this perspective of "missional hermeneutics" together we can summarize that we need to read all the parts of the Bible:

- "in the light of God's purpose for all of creation, including the redemption of people and creation of a new heaven and a new earth.
- "in the light of God's purpose for the human life on this planet in general and in the light of what the whole Bible teaches about the human culture, ethics, relationships and behavior.
- "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.
- "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

¹⁹ BROWNSON, J. V.: *Speaking the Truth in Love: Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic*. In: HUNSBERGER G. R. and VAN GELDER, C. (Eds): *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids 1996, pp. 232-233

²⁰ Comp. e.g. OEMING, M.: *Úvod do biblické hermeneutiky: Cesty k pochopení textu*. (Introduction to Biblical Hermeneutics: Way to Understanding of Text) Vyšehrad, Praha 2001, pp. 17-18. Nebo: OSBORNE, G. R.: *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*. IVP, Downers Grove 199. pp. 321-326

²¹ BROWNSON, 1996, pp. 257-258; WRIGHT, 2006, pp. 40-41

means of God's blessing for the nations in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and for his glory."²²

Summary

The Bible itself 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 man and man 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 fulfill his mission. The Church is here to continue in the mission of God's servant.

The ethical dimension of the life of God's people – to be the light to the nations - is a solid part of the mission task as well. The agenda of the world is not a credible hermeneutical key to the text of the Bible. As Leslie Newbigin and Stanley Hauerwas emphasize, the church is the hermeneutical community charged with the interpretation of the gospel both by words and life. A number of words of the gospel get their meaning on the background of the struggle for faith and social work and in the context of the church fellowship.²³ Hermeneutical coherence is tightly connected with the messianic (Christocentric) reading of the Bible text in relation with the *Missio Dei*.²⁴

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

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²² WRIGHT, 2005, pp. 15

²³ Comp. CERNY, 2006, pp. 211-212

²⁴ Comp. WRIGHT, 2006, p. 41