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Evangelical Missiology: An Overview

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Evangelicals are a “restless” people, committed to an activist role in evangelizing the whole world. The tasks of proclamation and invitation often override any other concerns, including reflecting on the impact of what we are doing. In some evangelical circles, evangelical missiology would still almost seem like an oxymoron since many are more concerned about action, results, and movement than analyzing the task. Many evangelicals around the world do not stop to “reflect” on what they are doing and if they do reflect it is for pragmatic purpose; they are looking for “better results.” For them, missiology is one more tool to improve the work being done and produce better results. Activism is the driving concern.

Nonetheless, throughout the twentieth century evangelicals around the world have reflected on what mission means today and on the impact Christian mission is having in the world. During the last century evangelicals expanded their mission efforts, and also developed several important ways of thinking about the task and



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these set the parameters for evangelical missiology today. To understand how these broad missiological categories developed we will briefly review the development of evangelical missiology during the twentieth century, catalog the broad categories of evangelical missiology drawing from Samuel Escobar's typology and enumerate some of the tasks pending for an evangelical missiology today.

Evangelicals and Missiological Reflection in the 20th Century

Evangelical mission efforts gained new energy and impetus toward the end of the nineteenth century. Younger denominations from the US and the English-speaking world, as well as faith mission agencies, joined existing European mission agencies in sending out missionaries to the "non-Christian" world. Added to these formal efforts were the myriads of lay people who were impacted by the Pentecostal awakening of Azusa Street, and the Pentecostal awakenings in various parts of the world, such as Brazil, India, and Sweden, and who took the message of their Pentecostal experience with them around the world.

The Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910 was a crucial touchstone for a large segment of Protestant missions around the world. The older historical mission agencies and some of the newer ones brought together their leaders to reflect on their watchword: the evangelization of the world in this generation. The conference addressed important questions related to the relationship between gospel and culture, contextualization, trinitarian framework for thinking about the task, the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility, and the role of dialogue in evangelism. Almost all of the participants were from the "Christianized" Western world. The conference reflected the optimism of European countries that were at the zenith of their imperial expansion. The documents that came out of the conference stated that the time was right to create a new impulse for the evangelization of the whole world.

World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution started soon after the Edinburgh Conference and eventually created a crisis of faith in Europe. That war also marked the beginning of the end of the European imperial effort, a breakdown that would greatly accelerate after World War II. The mission-sending countries of Europe would lose their mission focus as the missionized former colonies became politically independent and as the younger Christians began to reflect on the missionary task on their own. It was in this environment that what Escobar calls post-imperial missiology developed.

While Edinburgh represented one group of Protestants and evangelicals, many others did not participate. Protestant missionaries to Latin America, and Latin American Protestants, were not invited to Edinburgh and they organized a series

of mission conferences in that region (Panama 1916, Montevideo 1925, Havana 1929) that would shape missiological thought in Latin America. Pentecostals, who were already growing in many parts of the majority world, were not accounted for in any of these conferences. Also, even as Europe was going through a crisis, a new generation of evangelical missionaries, mostly from North America, went around the world-after World War II.

Among these missionaries were many who had social science training, particularly as anthropologists. They began to apply social sciences to their mission work around the world. Two missionaries who worked in India became paradigmatic of this process: Donald McGavran and Leslie Newbigin. McGavran studied the complexities of sharing the gospel in Indian society, and realized that the gospel spread most easily within castes. This observation led him to the homogeneous unit principle. Eventually he drew together other missionary social scientists and developed what would become Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission (now School of Intercultural Studies). Other seminaries, like Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, would also begin their own schools of mission creating spaces for the development of an academic evangelical missiology involving both theological and social science disciplines. These schools of mission brought academic rigor to the task, but also began to ask difficult questions about how mission had been done and how mission efforts might best respond to the complex needs of the human experience.

Leslie Newbigin reflected on his India experience when he returned to England and called on Christians to recognize that they now lived in a post-Christian world. His missiological reading of late modernity made it possible to understand how the Enlightenment had influenced English society, such that they were becoming a pagan society with false gods. He invited English (and Western) Christians to learn from Christians in India as to how to live as a faithful minority people. His writings have served as the basis for what is now called the missional church movement.

Events in Latin America created another important influence on evangelical missiology. The East-West tensions of most of the second half of the twentieth century played out through proxies in the region. Brutal right wing dictatorships were often supported by the US because they were anti-communist, particularly after the Cuban Revolution in 1959. Many evangelical missionaries either favored these anti-communist governments or kept silent when they saw the abuses they committed in the name of national security. A growing number of young Latin American evangelicals questioned the stance of US and Western missionaries. They called for the preaching of a gospel message that responded to the injustices against the poor

and that sought change throughout society. A young Samuel Escobar was one of the key people in that movement of “radical” evangelicals that would eventually develop *critical* missiology from the peripheries.

In 1966 evangelicals, mostly from the United States, organized the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin that was intended as a spiritual successor to the Edinburgh Conference and as a recovery of evangelism which many evangelicals felt had been lost in the ecumenical movement. This conference was the precursor to the 1974 International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland. That became a watershed moment for evangelical missiology. The Lausanne Covenant, written by John Stott, with influence from the Latin American radical evangelicals, brought together evangelization, understood as verbal proclamation, with the importance of a commitment to a holistic gospel, one that called for change in all areas of life. It also recognized that all cultures are fallen and that the gospel needed to be incarnated in each culture where it was proclaimed.

The Covenant focused on holistic mission, but the connection between evangelism and social concern was not clear for many evangelicals. Some questioned whether social action was integral to the gospel, or merely a good means for verbal proclamation and a call to accept Jesus Christ. This tension continued to be seen in Lausanne II (Manila 1989) and the various evangelical mission efforts at the end of the twentieth century. Movements like AD2000 continued to put the focus on verbal proclamation and the call for individual conversion. Other movements were more closely linked to the Lausanne Covenant and sought to have a stronger connection between evangelism and social action. Toward the end of the century there were also a growing number of evangelical movements that put their principal focus on addressing social ills.

While evangelical movements continued to grow, Pentecostal movements were growing even faster around the world. But during most of the twentieth century, Pentecostals were not counted as evangelicals, so they were not a key part of many of these conversations. But little by little, many Pentecostal groups began to participate, though they were not given a voice commensurate to their size.

The World Evangelical Fellowship held a major conference in Brazil in 1999, out of which came the Iguassu Declaration. It included statements on culture, religious pluralism, the world economic order and ecology. The next series of conferences were all directly or indirectly linked to the 100th anniversary of Edinburgh. Cape Town was a continuation of the Lausanne movement, while the conferences in Tokyo, Edinburgh and Boston reflected various interpretations of the Edinburgh

Conference. The fifth conference CLADE V (the Fifth Latin American Congress on Evangelization) was not held in 2010 as originally planned because of the other four conferences.

Academic evangelical missiology broadened the scope of mission research throughout the twentieth century. The usage of social sciences expanded the ability to analyze the task and to bring new questions to bear. It also encouraged students to address a broader set of issues. Of course, it also complicated the task because the success of schools of mission in the broader academy meant that their research was now available to everyone. Studies that seemed “obvious” in the Christianized world often raised complex issues for Christians in countries where they are a small minority and therefore often suffer for their faith.

Escobar’s Typology of Evangelical Missiology

Peruvian missiologist Samuel Escobar has often spoken of three types of evangelical missiology: post-imperial, managerial and critical. This typology points to the major ways that evangelicals are doing mission and thinking about their task. Though one can point to more categories, or sub-categories of these three, the typology gives as a starting point for thinking about the various ways evangelicals are thinking about, and using, missiology.

As stated earlier *Post-imperial* missiology was born in the changing relationships between Christian missionaries from formally imperial powers and Christians from formally colonized countries. It points in various important directions. On the one hand, this category requires us to recognize that, during the modern period, evangelical mission has usually been tied to empire and power. Mission and missiological reflection was done from a position of power to non-power and post-imperial missiology is about recognizing that mission is now being done from the whole world to the whole world. The missiological questions raised from the majority world are fundamentally different from those that come from the centers of power. Mission also looks very different when done from a position of human power, from when done from below.

Escobar uses the term *managerial* missiology to describe the missiology that has developed from the church growth movement in the United States. He uses this term in a negative way, but nonetheless points to an important aspect of this type of missiology. This type of missiology is managerial in that it focuses on the management of tasks and results. It also tends toward a definition of mission that focuses on verbal proclamation and conversion. Though Escobar’s analysis is uniformly negative, he

does describe a pragmatically-oriented missiology that uses research and reflection to produce better results.

Critical missiology refers to the type of reflection that was born in Latin America among the radical evangelicals. The focus of this type of missiology is to ask questions related to a holistic view of mission. From this perspective, if mission does not address the injustices of the context, then it is not truly or fully the gospel. These types of questions tend to be asked by those on the traditional peripheries of missionary work. It often stands over against the previous category, in that the church growth movement is often seen to be proof of a proclamation that does not call people to profound change.

Of course, these are not exact or pure categories. They are ways that evangelicals are thinking about the task of mission. During the first part of the twenty-first century evangelical missiological reflection is often reflecting some of each of these categories, to a lesser or greater extent. Because Mennonite Brethren and other Anabaptist mission groups have until recently done mission from within a North American evangelical framework they often reflected a managerial missiology. But when mission agencies have had a strong Anabaptist focus, they have drawn on some of the same sources as a critical missiology. At times these two perspectives have pulled in different directions among Anabaptist mission groups, with each questioning the other, directly or indirectly.

Each of these missiological perspectives also invites us to address issues important to a robust evangelical missiology. On the one hand, post-imperial missiology calls us to recognize that during the modern period mission has often been linked to Western power. Christendom developed a model of mission that went from the center to the periphery, power to non-power. But mission from power has focused on the role of money, education, and planning and has often lacked dependence on the Holy Spirit. This model has often also created triumphalism among those doing mission and dependency among the receptors of those missionary efforts. Post-imperial missiology also challenges us to recognize that God is at work in the whole world and that evangelical missiology needs to reflect from the perspective of the majority and those that have been missionized in the past.

Evangelical activism has often led to a view of mission that assumes that success is within our reach and that it is easily measurable. A managerial missiology can sometimes give the impression that if one can count the number of missionaries, converts or “significant” converts, then one can measure success. Yet it calls us to remember that we want more people to confess faith in Christ and we need to be sure that the ways we share the gospel are effective.

Critical missiology challenges us to recognize that the gospel has to impact all areas of life. A gospel that does not transform life, in all its aspects, is an incomplete gospel, at best. The church is to live as a sign and sacrament of God's future in this world today. Too often we have been captivated by the political and social agendas of our world and have been ready to accept less than a total conversion that brings profound change to all of life. If the church is truly to point toward God's future it needs to reflect change in all aspects of life on earth.

Evangelical schools of mission have taught us the usefulness of using the tools of the social sciences to understand the task and its complexities. This has been one of the important contributions of evangelical schools of mission. But Pentecostals remind us that the mission is God's and that transformation has to happen through the work of the Holy Spirit. We can neither use the Holy Spirit as an excuse for shoddy mission, nor academic excellence as a substitute for dependence on God.

Missiological Issues for 21st Century Evangelical Mission

Evangelicals confess that God is still working in the world. The key question for mission is, how do we recognize God's work and become a part of it, particularly in a rapidly changing world? What does the proclamation and practice of the gospel look like today? Where is the Spirit working and how do we become a part?

Some evangelicals have placed the motivation for mission on the expectation of Christ's return. The assumption is that Christians will only be sufficiently motivated to mission by the urgency created by the *parousia*. Yet, even as we await the second coming, we need to remember that our call is to be faithful to God's mission, in which our role as part of the church is to be sign and sacrament of God's future for humanity.

The issues raised by evangelical missiology during the twentieth century point us to the questions we need to ask as we serve God's purposes in the first part of the twenty-first century. What difference does the gospel make in the lives of people? How should the gospel influence the social, political and economic orders? What is the church's prophetic mission? What is the relationship between proclamation and living the gospel?

These questions need to be addressed within a global context. Christians from around the world are involved in mission around the world. Evangelicals need to include more voices so that our cultural, ethnic, social or national blinders do not limit our missiology. We also need to recognize that the church is growing the most in places outside the West, places where Christians are often a minority. We also

have to recognize that evangelicalism is growing most among those that have not traditionally been included in missiological conversations.

As evangelicals we also need to address the changing religious landscape of our time. Most of the traditional Christian world is becoming post-Christian. This shift is linked to a growing secularization and various forms of paganism. This means that Christendom is now a mission field. On the other hand Christianity is growing in areas where it is a minority and where it is constantly in the midst of other religions. More than ever, evangelicals need to consider the implications of our encounter with the religions of the world.

But we also need to develop a robust missiology that can connect our evangelical commitments to the issues of our world, as reflected in the Capetown Commitment.¹ If the gospel does not speak to injustice, to creation care, to bioethics, to globalization, to issues of sexual identity, to children at risk, and to the myriad issues of our twenty-first century world, how can we call it God's good news for humanity?

We started recognizing that evangelical activism guides evangelical mission. This is one of the four characteristics of evangelicals mentioned by David Bebbington (the others being the focus on the Bible, the importance of the atonement and the need for conversion).² Evangelical missiology is an important means for guiding evangelical activism toward Kingdom goals.

Notes

¹ The Lausanne Movement, "The Cape Town Commitment – A Confession of Faith and a Call to Action," accessed February 11, 2015, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/ctc/ctcommitment>.

² "David Bebbington," accessed February 11, 2015, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Bebbington.

Recommended Reading

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Sunquist, Scott W. *Understanding Christian Mission: Participation in Suffering and Glory*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013.

Taylor, William, ed. *Global Missiology for the twenty-first Century The Iguassu Dialogue*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000.

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Study Questions

1. With which category of missiology (understanding and reflecting on mission) do you most identify: post-imperial, managerial, or critical? Why?
2. For evangelicals, much of the twentieth century was given to debating the relationship between verbal proclamation and the social action aspects of the gospel. Put another way, is evangelism the priority, the center, or just one half of the gospel? Is this debate still necessary, or in your circles is there agreement about the whole gospel?
3. The author affirms that evangelicals are known for their activism, but calls evangelicals also to careful reflection about the gospel in our world. Where are you on this pendulum? Where is your church?

