

# The Discipline of Missiology in 2016

## Concerning the Place and Meaning of Missiology in the Theological Curriculum<sup>1</sup>

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### What Is Missiology?

Developed in the last decades of the nineteenth century<sup>2</sup> missiology is one of the most recent theological disciplines. This youthful character may be the reason why its tectonic plates are still in full movement, as demonstrated by the ongoing debate about missiology's proper object of study, its methodologies, and even the question of whether it should be called "missiology." Some regard missiology to have an interest in almost everything theological and, therefore, it is more relevant than ever. Others regard missiology as barely having a legitimate area of study, and, is a by-product of colonial and imperialistic times. All this raises the issue of missiology's own identity and meaning as a theological discipline.

Andrew Walls, the Scottish historian of missions, defines missiology as "the systematic study of all aspects of mission."<sup>3</sup> The value of this definition lies in the clarity of missiology's object of study: all aspects of mission. There is, however, a downside: missiology as a separate discipline loses a clear profile. In this approach missiology is not so much a discipline with identifiable methodologies as it is an area of research in which all kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> The first to add the study of missions (*Theorie des Missionswesens*) to the theological curriculum was Friedrich Schleiermacher. His discussion is found in the second edition of his *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums* (1830), §§ 291–98. See *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* 1, no. 6 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1998). In general those who have been regarded as the first academic missiologists are the Protestant theologians Alexander Duff (1806–1878; professor in Edinburgh, in 1864), Gustav Warneck (1834–1910; professor in Halle, 1896), and the Catholic theologian Joseph Schmidlin (1876–1944; professor in Münster, 1924).

<sup>3</sup> Andrew F. Walls, "Missiology," in *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement* (Geneva: WCC, 2002), 689–90.

disciplines—theological and others, each with their own methodological approaches—work together in order to gain insight into the dynamics of missionary movements. Perhaps, then, it would be better to speak about “mission studies” or the “science of mission” (*Missionswissenschaft*) analogous to, for example, medieval studies. That is, just as scholars and practitioners from a variety of disciplines delve into different areas of research and by working together form a community of knowledge, so mission scholarship can be understood as an interdisciplinary community of theologians, social sciences researchers, missionaries, historians, philosophers, and political scientists who for one or another reason engage in professional research on the phenomenon called mission. According to Stanley Skreslet, this kind of scholarly community distinguishes itself by scholarly habits such as an interest in the processes of religious change, a respectful attitude toward the reality of religious belief, and a continuing search for the integration of the plurality of possible scientific perspectives on the multilayered, multicultural phenomenon we call “mission.”<sup>4</sup>

This review of the problems illuminates the question of missiology’s object of study and also makes clear that this object requires an interdisciplinary approach. Acknowledging the significance of this approach, however, does not yet address missiology’s own contribution to scholarship as a theological discipline. Theological faculties who offer missiology must answer these questions: What is missiology as a discipline within the theological curriculum? What are the questions this discipline asks? How does this discipline approach its subject matter and what are its methodological tools? Finally, and especially for theological training and preparation for ministry: Why should future preachers know anything about missiology?

### Missiology as Intercultural Theology

Recent discussions in Germany provide a useful starting point for the discussion about the nature and significance of missiology, especially a position paper on the function and place of missiology for a theological curriculum.<sup>5</sup> The authors argue that the contemporary public and theological debate about the concept of mission is often characterized by irritation and lack of understanding. In itself this is nothing new because many inside and outside of the church associate mission with modern colonialism. They see organized attempts to evangelize the world in the name of Jesus Christ as nothing less than attempts to impose a particularly Western set

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<sup>4</sup> Stanley H. Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission: The Questions, Methods, Themes, Problems, and Prospects of Missiology* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2012), 12–14.

<sup>5</sup> “Missionswissenschaft als Interkulturelle Theologie und ihr Verhältnis zur Religionswissenschaft,” *Zeitschrift für Mission* 31 (2005): 376–82. Authored by the missiological section of the *Academic Society for Theology: German Society for Mission Scholarship*.

of religious ideas and ways of life on the whole world. At a time when the non-Western world has been emancipated from the colonial powers, and secularism and pluralism increase in the West, it is not difficult to see mission as superfluous or even a direct threat to world peace.<sup>6</sup> With this in view, the German missiologists propose a new name for the discipline, or rather, an expansion of the traditional nomenclature. Instead of the traditional science of missions (*Missionswissenschaft*) they prefer the broader term “science of missions or intercultural theology” (*Missionswissenschaft beziehungsweise Interkulturelle Theologie*), in which the prepositional phrase clarifies and extends the phrase “science of missions.” The addition of “intercultural theology” reflects the changes in the world consequent on globalization and a growing religious pluralism. Given these phenomena, the German proposal sets forth a definition of intercultural theology as a theological discipline that reflects on (1) the relationship of Christianity to non-Christian religions and worldviews, and, (2) the relationship of Western Christianity to its non-Western “variants.” According to the position paper, the interreligious competence of theologians assumes a deep knowledge and understanding of religious studies (*Religionswissenschaft*), but the actual theological character of intercultural theology remains somewhat vague.

In 2011, Volker Küster, professor of Crosscultural Theology at the Protestant Theological University in Kampen from 2002–2012 pointed out that almost all the Dutch university chairs in missiology had become positions in intercultural theology, a development he used as an example for German theological faculties.<sup>7</sup> However, a review of the websites of theological faculties in the Netherlands and Belgium suggests that this conclusion is premature.<sup>8</sup> Even so, maintaining a particular nomenclature (in this case, missiology) does not guarantee that the content of the discipline remains the same. I suspect that an analysis of the content of what these chairs and institutes teach with regard to missiology would show Küster to be more right than wrong. Almost everywhere the focus of attention has moved to the study of non-Western Christianity and the issue of how it relates to “our” version of Christianity. Why some researchers described this as intercultural theology and not, or no longer, “ecumenics” is worth a study in its own right. I suspect, however, that this has to do with implicit suspicions of hegemony and uniformity in the title “ecumenics.” A potentially critical

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<sup>6</sup> Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission*, 1. For a thorough discussion and analysis of the crisis of (Western) mission, see James A. Scherer, *Gospel, Church, and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1987), 21–38.

<sup>7</sup> Volker Küster, *Einführung in die Interkulturelle Theologie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2011), 10–11.

<sup>8</sup> At this writing there is only one chair in intercultural theology in the Netherlands. Benno van den Toren, “Interculturele theologie als driegesprek” (Inaugural lecture, Protestant Theological University, Groningen [the Netherlands], November 11, 2014).

and non-Western point of view is too easily incorporated and neutralized in a symbol system of complementary harmony suggested by the term “ecumenics.”<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the case may be, it appears that intercultural theology, whether in name or content, is making inroads at the cost of the older understanding that missiology is a theological discipline in the service of the expansion of the Christian faith. Where missiology used to entertain “cross-cultural” or “trans-cultural” questions (with the implicit understanding that the roles of sender and receiver were clearly defined), the current use of the preposition *inter* tends to understand the relationship between the parties to be more reciprocal. Insofar as intercultural theology is primarily a new name for “ecumenics,” and, as such, studies the relationship between Christians and religions from a variety of cultures, it serves as a necessary correction of the older models of superiority and dependency. Within this approach it is much easier to incorporate the self-theologizing nature of the non-Western churches.<sup>10</sup> The above-mentioned German proposal, however, is also emphatically concerned about the relationship between Christianity and other religions and views of life. This raises the question: What precisely is reciprocal in the theologizing of Christians and non-Christians? As used to describe a conversation between Christians and non-Christians, the term “intercultural theology” sounds ideologically more burdened than “dialogue” because intercultural theology assumes that Christians and non-Christians can cooperate in producing a theology that overcomes religious differences. It also assumes that Christian theology can find its sources in a variety of religious traditions, all of which enjoy equality (interreligious theology or comparative theology).<sup>11</sup> Applying the term “intercultural theology” to the relationship with non-Christian ways of life is less than helpful from a missiological point of view.

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<sup>9</sup> See Jan van Butselaar, “An Uneasy Relationship: ‘Old’ and ‘New’ Churches in Western Europe,” in *A New Day Dawning: African Christians Living the Gospel*, ed. Kwame Bediako, et al. (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2004), 185–87. He points out that such an ecumenical approach has the tendency to understand the contributions of the African churches on the sociocultural level, thereby negating the African emphasis on mission, evangelism, and moral reform in Western Christianity.

<sup>10</sup> Henning Wrogemann, *Interkulturelle Theologie und Hermeneutik: Grundfragen, aktuelle Beispiele, theoretische Perspektive* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2012), 37–41.

<sup>11</sup> See James L. Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004); Francis X. Clooney, “Comparative Theology as Theology,” in *Interreligious Hermeneutics in Pluralistic Europe: Between Texts and People*, ed. David Cheetham, et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 355–77. See also Perry Schmidt-Leukel, “Interkulturelle Theologie als interreligiöse Theologie,” *Evangelische Theologie* 71 (2011): 4–16, cited in Andreas Feldtkeller, “Missionswissenschaft und Interkulturelle Theologie,” *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 138 (2013): 6.

The German proposal does not address such questions. According to the position paper, missiology as intercultural theology dedicates itself to three areas of thought. First, it examines the history of theology and Christianity in non-Western nations. Second, it concerns itself with intercultural theology in a narrow sense. That is, it studies questions of North-South Christian relationships, contextual theology, and intercultural reading of Scripture. Third, the discipline focuses on the theology and hermeneutics of interreligious relationships, which concerns itself with the formulation of theological criteria for mission within the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue.

It is remarkable, then, how much this position paper continues to employ distinctions such as that between the West and the South. That is rather old-fashioned, given the fact that the last several decades have made it clear that mission is no longer a movement from a group of Christian nations in the West to their non-Christian colonies in the South (e.g., Africa, Indonesia, South America). Recent literature emphatically points to two new realities. First, we speak about global Christianity, or perhaps better, world Christianity.<sup>12</sup> Second, mission is an issue of mission from everywhere to everywhere.<sup>13</sup> Christianity has found a home among countless cultures such that the world is no longer one of senders and receivers. No longer does the West produce the Christian faith—one that the South in turn receives and assumes. Today it is produced in countless places, reworked, and sent out anew. Mission is no longer a uni-directional movement. This new situation illuminates how much the German proposal is framed within a model of the Western and a Southern church, in which the latter is labeled as only one of many cultural variants with Western Christianity as the norm. Add to that the condition, mentioned in the paper, that missiologists

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<sup>12</sup> Lamin Sanneh distinguishes between “world Christianity” and “global Christianity.” He defines the first as “the movement of Christianity as it takes form and shape in societies that previously were not Christian, societies that had no bureaucratic tradition with which to domesticate the gospel”; and the second as “the faithful replication of Christian forms and patterns developed in Europe.” Lamin Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel Beyond the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 22–23. See also, Michael Pocock et al., *The Changing Face of World Missions: Engaging the Contemporary Issues and Trends* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005); Craig Ott and Harold Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006); Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Andrew F. Walls, “The Rise of Global Theologies,” in *Global Theologies in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission*, ed. Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012), 19–34.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “Christian Mission in a Five Hundred Year Context,” afterword to *Mission in the 21st Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*, ed. Andrew F. Walls and Cathy Ross (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 202; idem, “The Ephesian Moment: At a Crossroads in Christian History,” in his *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 72–81.

should have foreign experience or should have worked in one or another of the southern mission fields, and you see that this proposal to consider missiology as intercultural theology, in spite of its good intentions, does not satisfy the new reality.<sup>14</sup>

Among other things, this new reality includes the fact that Europe has become a mission field; German theologians argued so at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup> This recognition, combined with the emancipation of the non-Western church, has contributed to the understanding that Christianity is a world religion whose mission crisscrosses the planet. Whoever takes this seriously (and it is impossible to return to a *status quo ante*) must also accept that missiology as an academic discipline cannot receive its content unilaterally from Western theologians based on their own cultural experiences (or frustrations). In 1939, it was still possible for J. H. Bavinck to assume the professorship in Amsterdam and Kampen with a lecture on the nature of the Asian (Eastern) soul and how we must understand it in order to have a more effective mission in the East.<sup>16</sup> Today we must do justice to the fact that tens of thousands of Africans and Asians see Europe as a mission field, a signifier not lost on Europeans' sensitivities. These non-Europeans see Europe as a continent ripe for learning about Jesus again in order to be converted from its enslavement to the dark powers and redeemed from both its cynical and hypercritical spirit and its coldness and moral decadence.<sup>17</sup> It is strange then, when Western theologians, by reason of their guilt (in part justified) about Western colonial missions, seek to establish a new form of European hegemony by excluding from missiology all that exudes transmission of faith and conversion. This does not do justice to Christian missions, which in itself had and has a greater depth, width, and multicolored character than the relatively brief period

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<sup>14</sup> Francis Anekwe Oborji responded to the German proposal in his "Missiology in Relation to Intercultural Theology and Religious Studies," *Mission Studies* 25 (2008): 113–14.

<sup>15</sup> The first theologian who deemed his own nation a "mission field," as far as I know, was Gerhard Hilbert, professor of theology in Rostock (1916); see Stefan Paas, "The Making of a Mission Field: Paradigms of Evangelistic Mission in Europe," *Exchange* 41 (2012): 44–67. This more or less official position was preceded by similar affirmations from representatives of marginalized Christian groups, such as the Anabaptists who declared their co-Europeans to be "pagan." See chapter 2 of my *Church Planting in the Secular West: A Critical View from Europe* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Bavinck, *Christusprediking in de volkerenwereld* ("Proclaiming Christ to the Nations," John Bolt et al., eds. *The J. H. Bavinck Reader* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013], 110–42) (Kampen: Kok, 1939). Bavinck delivered the lecture at the Free University of Amsterdam (Vrije Universiteit) on October 12 and the following day at the Theological University of Kampen (Oudestraat).

<sup>17</sup> For a recent discussion of non-Western European mission in Europe ("reversed" mission), and the images these missionaries have of Europe, see Stefan Paas, "Mission from Anywhere to Europe: Americans, Africans, and Australians Coming to Amsterdam," *Mission Studies* 31, no. 1 (2015): 4–31.

within which Europeans and Americans exercised mission in the Majority World.<sup>18</sup> Nor does it do justice to the theological self-understanding of a large part, perhaps the largest, of today's Christianity.

For that reason, I agree with Andreas Feldtkeller that a true intercultural theology—and therefore hearing and listening to Christians from other cultures—will bring us to the point of taking mission seriously, not only as a transcultural witness but also as a proclamation and conviction of faith.<sup>19</sup> Christianity's missionary character is the origin of its mobility and intercultural character. It is therefore all the more strange that a justifiable attempt to give intercultural relationships greater weight results in a careless neglect of missions as evangelism. The idea that all people and nations are linked interculturally is expressed first through mission, by means of the simple and revolutionary idea that all people not only have the right to the insight that is given to few but also that they are in every way capable of receiving, absorbing, and understanding this insight. When this reality is rejected, mission disappears and tribalization begins.

### Evangelism as the Heart of Mission

Therefore, witnessing to the faith, that is, evangelism, must occupy a central place in a culturally sensitive and historically aware approach to missiology as a theological discipline. Although the collective memory of missiology as an academic discipline recalls a time when evangelism was suspect, since the 1970s an impetus toward and renewed interest in evangelism as the heart of Christian mission has surfaced. The World Council of Churches' 1982 *Mission and Evangelism: An Evangelical Affirmation* presents a renewed appreciation for evangelism alongside its traditional emphasis on social justice. In *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (2013) the Council maintained this interest and acknowledged the influence of Pentecostalism and Eastern Orthodoxy.<sup>20</sup> Among evangelicals, an interesting turn has taken place: a variety of documents display a growing interest in holistic or integral missions (social justice, ecology) alongside the traditional accent on evangelism.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For overviews of early Christian missions; for example, from Africa, India, and China, see Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement 1: Earliest Christianity to 1453* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001). The goal of this series is to present the history of non-Eurocentric missions.

<sup>19</sup> Feldtkeller, "Missionswissenschaft," 3–12.

<sup>20</sup> For an analysis and comparison of these documents, see Jan A. B. Jongeneel, "Mission and Evangelism" (1982) and "Together Towards Life" (2013), *Exchange* 43 (2014): 273–90.

<sup>21</sup> For an overview of this development, see C. René Padilla, "Integral Mission and Its Historical Development," in *Justice, Mercy, and Humility*, ed. Tim Chester (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 42–58; idem, *Mission between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

The contextual aspect in this growing emphasis on evangelism surfaces clearly when we look at Europe as a specific example. Prominent Christian-Democratic politicians now and then speak to the need for a renewed search for the soul of Europe. Theologians and other intellectuals point to a growing speechlessness concerning religion in general and Christianity in particular. The increasing pluralization of Europe and the immigration of non-Western Christians to this continent raise questions of a missionary nature. Add to this the gripping developments in the Roman Catholic Church wherein a flood of theological reflection about mission and evangelism confronted Catholics through the post-Vatican II documents such as *Ad Gentes* (1965), *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975), *Redemptoris Missio* (1990) and *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013). In addition, popes since the 1990s have emphasized the re-evangelization of Europe.

It appears, then, that the growth of non-Western churches and an increasing secularization of the West has led to a recovery of speech about the heart of Christian mission. This development does not require us to abandon the twentieth-century discussions about the breadth and depth of mission, but it does raise a question: Is it possible—given it has not been the case for decades—that mission can regain its authentic edge, especially among the secularized peoples of Europe?

Instead of defining mission and evangelism more clearly, I join the conversation about three mutually supportive and clarifying propositions, worked out variously by different missiologists.

### *Mission Is Broader than Evangelism*<sup>22</sup>

Stephen B. Evans and Roger Schroeder describe three theological paradigms that have determined theological reflection about mission: (1) in connection with the Early Church's doctrinal development, mission as participation in the mission of the Trinity (*missio Dei*); (2) based on the Gospels and Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom, mission as liberating service in the kingdom of God; and (3) connected to apostolic proclamation in Acts and the Epistles, mission as proclamation of Jesus the Savior.<sup>23</sup> Together, these theological paradigms form a rich biblical and theological underpinning for a variety of activities. Thus, the Anglican Church speaks

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<sup>22</sup> See, for example, David J. Bosch, "Evangelism: Theological Currents and Cross-Currents Today," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 3 (1987): 98–103 (reprinted in *The Study of Evangelism: Exploring a Missional Practice of the Church*, ed. Paul W. Chilcote and Lacey C. Warner [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008], 4–17); idem, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 409–20.

<sup>23</sup> Stephen B. Evans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 283–347. They base these paradigms on their analysis of Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Evangelical and Ecumenical ecclesiastical declarations.



of five characteristics of worldwide mission: proclamation of Jesus as Savior, formation of disciples, loving service, seeking justice, and care of creation.<sup>24</sup> From this point of view mission includes everything the church is called to say, do, and be in the world as the witness to what God has done in Christ in order to transform the world.<sup>25</sup>

*Mission Is Broad and Deep but Is Not without Limits*

David Bosch writes that “the missionary task is as coherent, broad and deep as the need and exigencies of human life.”<sup>26</sup> This definition presents the risk that the idea of mission is without limitations. Some might say that if everything is mission, then nothing is mission. This is a risk worth taking, according to Bosch. Indeed, the frenzied attempts to place limits on something that is in fact limitless, may in fact present a greater risk.<sup>27</sup> I agree with Bosch. If there is truth in the great discovery of the twentieth century that the church is missionary in essence, then we should not be overly concerned with the issue of where precisely the church is busy in mission and where it is not. At the same time, I find it theologically problematic to pose a correspondence between mission and the need and exigencies of daily life. It is theologically more solid to describe mission, along with Andrew Kirk, as being included in the realization of God’s purposes in the world, “as demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus Christ.”<sup>28</sup> This focus on the Gospels is crucial for keeping missiology close to its source. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection—not human needs and questions—provide the norms for understanding God’s purposes with his world. In my opinion, this still allows for a broad understanding of mission: Jesus proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, healed the sick, offered bread to the poor, included the marginalized in his circle, accused those in power, formed a community, and urged a sober lifestyle; whoever does these things in his name, is engaged in mission. At the same time, this focus on Christ’s ministry places a fence around what we may call mission in Jesus’ name. For example, Jesus did not resort to weapons, not even for a good cause, and he was quite reserved about questions of earthly politics; not so much an avoidance as a certain indifference. Although Jesus was happy with everyone who followed him, he was remarkably uninterested in developing a huge number of followers.

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<sup>24</sup> Walls and Ross, *Mission in the 21st Century*.

<sup>25</sup> See World Council of Churches, *The Church: Towards a Common Vision*, Faith and Order Paper 214 (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 33.

<sup>26</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 512.

<sup>28</sup> J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 21. Emphasis added.

*Evangelism Is the Heart of Mission*

Rather than attempt a careful description of where mission ends and other types of Christian activity begin, I prefer to continue with the emphasis on the heart, or magnetic pole, of mission: being witnesses of God's good news in Jesus Christ, that is, evangelism. This does not mean that evangelism always has priority over other elements of mission but that with respect to all other kinds of mission activities, evangelism has an ultimate character. Although everything that falls in the category of mission has its own integrity and is a good in itself (just as rearing children includes a range of activities, all good in themselves), mission has only reached its goal when people receive an invitation to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ (just as believing parents love to experience the completion of their parenting with their child's own choice for the faith).<sup>29</sup> In its report *Together Towards Life* the World Council of Churches defines evangelism as the mission activity "that makes explicit and unambiguous the centrality of the incarnation, suffering, and resurrection of Jesus Christ." Furthermore, declares the report, "evangelism is what the church discovers when it unfolds its missionary identity and community."<sup>30</sup> James Scherer writes that mission has to do with those activities that have the specific intention to witness to the saving gospel of Jesus Christ at the junction of belief and unbelief. "The heart of mission is always making the gospel known where it would not be known without a special and costly act of boundary-crossing witness."<sup>31</sup> To be clear, evangelism is not limited to verbal witness. The gospel is both proclaimed and demonstrated; it is a matter of word and deed. Characteristic of evangelism, however, whether by word or deed, is that it invites people to believe in Jesus; to become disciples. This becoming a disciple in turn means to be plugged into the mission of God: "teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt. 28:16–20).

These reflections give direction to an intercultural missiology that is at home in the secular West, the context of which shapes my writing. Again, I have no interest in formulating criteria for a precise definition of what mission is and is not. Moving in this direction causes one to become stuck in the quicksand of classifications and priorities with the result that certain matters become merely functional or get one completely lost. We must

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<sup>29</sup> I borrow the distinction between "priority" and "ultimacy" from Christopher J. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006), 316–19. This position is theologically well worked out and practically manageable.

<sup>30</sup> Jooseop Keum, ed., *Together Towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes* (Geneva: WCC, 2013), 19. The report betrays all the characteristics of an ecumenical document: its many insights into evangelism and mission are summarized without any order of priority and are more or less held together with pneumatological notions.

<sup>31</sup> Scherer, *Gospel, Church, and Kingdom*, 37.

avoid losing the intrinsic worth of the good things Christians can do simply because they are judged by the criteria of functionality or their effectiveness with regard to verbal witness. I am convinced, however, that mission takes place in a field of motivations, intentions, and creative verbal and nonverbal practices that both witness to what God has done in Christ and that focus on the boundary between / of belief and unbelief. Because Western religious speechlessness is so pervasive, it is all the more important that Christian mission not be ashamed of naming the Name.

### Missiology as a Theological Discipline

A theological encyclopedia is traditionally divided into four areas—biblical, historical, systematic, and practical—each of which is subsequently subdivided into various disciplines.<sup>32</sup> That missiology finds itself in each of the four areas is only logical, given that mission is the birth chamber of theology. Moreover, the Bible, especially the New Testament, is largely written as a missionary witness to the non-Christian world. Early church histories of Eusebius and Bede were oriented to the book of Acts, and they saw themselves as a continuation of Acts. Systematic theology has its origins in the creeds and early apologists, and long before practical theology took an empirical turn and even before there was any thought of practical theology as such, statistics, mission geography, anthropological and linguistic studies occupied the minds of missiologists, all with a view to the coming of the kingdom.<sup>33</sup>

Missiology's broad encyclopedic interests can lead to a blurring of the discipline's boundaries, especially in a theological curriculum defined by the classic encyclopedia understanding of how theology is formed. Since the 1950s, the discipline of theology has been addressed by distinguishing between the church's mission that is characteristic of the entire church and mission that is focused on activities directed toward conversion and church planting.<sup>34</sup> This makes it possible for missiology to focus on everything within the curriculum that expresses missionary intention while it expects the other disciplines to pay attention to the missionary dimension

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<sup>32</sup>For an overview of the four encyclopedic divisions, see Stefan Paas, "Theologie en sociale wetenschappen" in *Onder spanning: En veelzijdige kijk op veranderingen in kerk en samenleving*, ed. Pieter Boersema and Stefan Paas (Kampen: Kok, 2011), 53–66.

<sup>33</sup>For literature on "mission geography," "mission sociology," and "mission statistics," see Jan A. B. Jongeneel, *Missiologie I: Zendingswetenschap* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1986), 159–91.

<sup>34</sup>The distinction between the "dimension" and the "intention" of mission belongs to Lesslie Newbigin. See Michael Goheen, "As the Father Has Sent Me, I Am Sending You": J. E. Lesslie Newbigin's *Missionary Ecclesiology* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2000), 276; Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 373.

of theology. Although this distinction has allowed missiology to attain its own contours, three recent developments urge us to rethink its usefulness.

First, this distinction too easily evokes a time when missions happened in foreign places, while evangelism concentrated on the strayed sheep at home. Are we able to maintain the distinction between intention and dimension when sending churches find themselves in a mission field where they are confronted with challenges from increasing secularization and difficulties that arise from within their own social context and members? Is it possible to hold that church education has a missionary dimension but no missionary intention? Is it possible to maintain that Sunday worship should be open to all comers but that it has no evangelistic or faith-creating purpose? It seems to me that Western Christians in general and European Christians in particular are faced with a task that is complicated by the near impossibility of maintaining the distinction between inside and outside, between edifying the congregation and evangelism, and between preaching for one's own congregation and preaching in the marketplace. In the final analysis, the contemporary pulpit is also a soapbox.<sup>35</sup> Given our position in culture and the experience of the world-church, it is important to remember that theology has done its most memorable work at the boundaries of the non-Christian world (however that makes itself known), and it is "essentially communicative, evangelistic and missionary."<sup>36</sup> This does not mean that everything theological has a missionary intention. Rather, the neat distinction between intention and dimension loses its significance with the recognition that the church in all places finds itself at the boundary between belief and unbelief. This means that theological formation, especially training for the ministry, is in need of a good dose of missionary intention in the disciplines that are not specifically missiological. Preachers today, inescapably, are missionaries.<sup>37</sup>

A second development that increasingly blurs the distinction between dimension and intention arises from nontheological areas—theology must demonstrate its social relevance. The contemporary mind is less than willing to grant theology its former position in the curriculum: to subsidize theological studies from taxpayers' money (as is the case in many European nations); to grant it the status of a respectable albeit inner-directed training for ministry; or to accept it as the intellectual extension of Christian faith. At any rate, the contemporary mind is impatient with theology's venerable

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<sup>35</sup> In a certain sense this signifies a return to the New Testament situation. For a broader treatment of this matter, see my *De werkers van het laatste uur: De Inwijding van nieuwkomers in het christelijk geloof en de christelijke gemeente* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2003).

<sup>36</sup> Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1995), 259.

<sup>37</sup> Stefan Paas, "Prepared for a Missionary Ministry in 21st Century Europe," *European Journal of Theology* 20, no. 2 (2011): 119–30.

tradition. Theology as an academic discipline will survive only to the extent that it is able to elucidate its social relevance in a secularizing context. This challenge requires that theology develop a more assertive, outer-directed, missionary posture in general, first in its development of a fuller interdisciplinary approach to teaching and research and second by acknowledging the value of its knowledge for a wider audience.<sup>38</sup> In this matter it is not enough to satisfy the faithful. It is important to convince the outside world to enrich society by studying theology at a university level, which requires that the different theological disciplines seek interdependence, rather than the endless specializations and subspecializations, whose relevance is clear only to increasingly smaller circles of faithful churchgoers.<sup>39</sup> More than ever, these disciplines are confronted by the same questions: How do we present Christian theology to the wider, often agnostic, marketplace of ideas? The response requires conviction, mobilizing power, and seeking out the heart of the matter. In short, it requires missionary competence.

Finally, theology has recently displayed tendencies toward resisting earlier protection of its discipline. Renewed appreciation of faith practices has recently surfaced in Western theological schools, both in systematic and in practical theology. Alongside philosophy, literature, and history, theology has acquired anthropology and sociology as conversation partners. This development reveals the influence of non-Western theologians who both understand Western tendencies to universalization and abstraction as a form of theological hegemony and attempt to escape the intellectual and practical form of Christian discipleship in a particular social context. Here we think of Clodovis Boff's insistence on acting as the constitutive moment of true theologizing, and Gustavo Gutierrez' declaration that theology is nothing else than a "critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word."<sup>40</sup> Both are healthy corrections of the traditional Western tendency to abstract philosophizing and the universalizing of their own insights. Even so, there is no denying that the twentieth-century Western hermeneutical revolution inspired by Wittgenstein and Gadamer has influenced this turn toward the practical. It has become clear that no theologian exists who objectively examines Scripture and the church fathers. They all begin with a set of questions reflecting their rootedness in a particular culture and its practices. Neither do the documents that theologians examine stand alone. They, too, are born from particular historical practices that raise

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, R. Ruard Ganzevoort, "Hoe leiden we anno 2014 goede theologen op?" *Handelingen: Tijdschrift voor praktische theologie en religiewetenschap* 41, no. 3 (2014): 20–30.

<sup>39</sup> See Heitink's argument for a "simplified theology" in *Een kerk met karakter: Tijd voor herorientatie*, by Gerben Heitink (Kampen: Kok, 2007), 244–48.

<sup>40</sup> For the hermeneutical implications, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "'One Rule to Rule Them All?' Theological Method in an Era of World Christianity," in *Globalizing Theology*, 80–126.

their own set of questions. That is, all practice is laden with theology.<sup>41</sup> Theologies, too, are irrevocably bound to particular contextual practices, and in that sense are unavoidably local.<sup>42</sup> Because theologies are locally born and constructed, they can only be examined and evaluated as something developed in a particular practice. Thus, the gospel is not first expressed in well-formulated dogmas but in forms of performance (N. T. Wright), liturgy (James K. A. Smith), drama (Kevin Vanhoozer), or improvisation (Samuel Wells). “Now that you know these things,” said Jesus, “you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:17).

These three developments point the way to the unique nature of missiology as a theological discipline. Insofar as the future of the theological curriculum is of independent disciplines,<sup>43</sup> missiology will remain an independent discipline. Nevertheless, like the other disciplines, missiology will approach its subject matter with an interdisciplinary tactic to Christianity’s faith practices in an overwhelmingly non-Christian context. This approach distances itself from the philosophical slant given missiology by leading scholars such as Lesslie Newbigin and David Bosch. This ideological model, still much appreciated by evangelical and reformed theologians, connects with the worldview approach to missions introduced by the 1928 IMC-Conference in Jerusalem.<sup>44</sup> Nevertheless, suggestions for a more practical and contextually sensitive approach have continued to infuse missiological reflection. There is, after all, no reason to consider worldviews as missiologists’ sole field of research.<sup>45</sup> Rather, communicative missionary practices at the boundaries of

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<sup>41</sup> See Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 5–6.

<sup>42</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (London: SCM, 1985).

<sup>43</sup> Recently, the Theological University at Kampen has developed “integrated modules.” These represent a participation of various departmental disciplines around a particular theme, “preaching in a secular environment,” for example. Such modules may be the first steps toward a more mission-theological oriented curriculum, in which each discipline contributes expertise, but where the leading questions emphasize missionary and witnessing interests. Thus, theology would return home after a long peregrination.

<sup>44</sup> See David M. Gill, “The Secularization Debate Foreshadowed: Jerusalem 1928,” *International Review of Mission* 57 (1968): 344–57; and, Paas, “The Making of a Mission Field,” 62–64. This conference first mentioned a “secular worldview” as powerful and threatening to the West as the “other” great world-religions of India or the Middle East. The ideological model of mission that blossomed under Newbigin, and that focused especially on formulating the gospel as “public truth,” arose from the recognition of this threat. See Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989). On Newbigin, see also Bert Hoedemaker, “Rival Conceptions of Global Christianity. Mission, and Modernity, Then and Now,” in *A Scandalous Prophet: The Way of Mission after Newbigin*, ed. Thomas S. Foust, et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 13–22.

<sup>45</sup> For the one-sided relationship between missiology and systematic theology, see Stefan Paas, “Post-Christian, Post-Christendom, and Post-modern Europe Towards the Interaction of Missiology and the Social Sciences,” *Mission Studies* 28, no. 1 (2011): 3–25. Compare with

belief and unbelief constitute missiology's sphere of research. Hence, there is no emphasis on a precise delimitation of missiology over against other disciplines. Missiology contributes its unique intercultural and specifically missionary competencies to theology's research of practices and thus taps sources not readily available to other disciplines. However, missiology is theology and is therefore not far removed from other theological disciplines.

For the very reason that the emphasis on practices is a recent development, it is possible to conclude that the so-described missiology is in reality a coalescence of missiology and practical theology. Such a conclusion, however, is based on an outdated view of a theological encyclopedia. Rather than reject its historiographical and systematic-theological dimensions, missiology subordinates them to a process focused on the description, clarification, evaluation, and improvement of missionary practices (which are less and less distinguishable from other faith practices). In this structure, a variety of elements find their place: examination of particular historical events, best practices from the present and the past, normative-ethical considerations, and systematic contextual studies.<sup>46</sup> That missiological research procedures overlap somewhat with those of practical or systematic theology is undeniable<sup>47</sup> but is not a problem, given the fact that the recent emphasis on faith practices and the pressure on theology to be more responsive to the community will force a deeper interrelationship on all the theological disciplines. New insight into the fundamentally practical nature of theology will induce a reorganization of the taxonomy of the traditional theological encyclopedia along the lines of practice-oriented methodologies, tested by faithful practices (performance) alongside faithful creedal formulations. Because the West has only begun to confront this development, it needs time to come to grips with this foundational change and its significance for the role of practical theology. Don Browning is justified in speaking of the whole of theology as fundamentally practical.<sup>48</sup>

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Robert L. Montgomery, "Can Missiology Incorporate More of the Social Sciences?" *Missiology* 40, no. 3 (2012): 281-92.

<sup>46</sup> For an extensive justification of this process, see a discussion of these four methodological moves in Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008). Similar methodological moves, for example, "see-judge-act," have been variously formulated by missiologists and practical theologians. See Paul Ballard and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action: Christian Thinking in the Service of Church and Society* (London: SPCK, 2006).

<sup>47</sup> Missiology is closely related to the practice-oriented, normative variants of practical theology, but it cannot remain satisfied with a deeper understanding of faith practices. Rather, it also seeks to evaluate these practices theologically, with a view to their improvement. See, for example, a description of the four tasks of practical theology by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SPCK, 2006), 6-10.

<sup>48</sup> Browning, *Fundamental Practical Theology*, 7-8.

## The Relationship of Missiological Scholarship and Other Mission Studies

Given its theological character, missiology has its own profile within the broader field of mission studies. As has been said before, this does not imply that it is limited to a particular methodology.<sup>49</sup> If that were so, how then could missiology, as a theological discipline, contribute essential knowledge to our mission scholarship? Is an honest and open participation in an interdisciplinary, scholarly conversation about and with the other mission sciences possible? It is both possible and desirable for several reasons.

First, missiology is preeminently qualified to contribute clear insight into faith practices from the inside, an emic perspective that other mission sciences need in order to understand the practice of mission. These sciences will not necessarily accept this inside knowledge uncritically, but they do need theology (missiology), for example, to know why mission is considered necessary, to understand its motives, to become acquainted with the normative constraints it assumes, to value the goals it sets for itself, and to identify the significance it attributes to its tasks. That is, missiology not only studies mission practices, it explains their underlying theories and represents them within the larger community of mission studies. Missiology is the scholarly voice of mission.

Second, it must be remembered that missiology and other mission studies share common interests, undeniably so after the recent paradigmatic changes in theological studies. The descriptive and interpretative phase of mission studies and missiology certainly allow for close cooperation. In the prescriptive phase of scholarship, the other sciences of mission must admit the existence of implicit judgments in the description and interpretation of data; there is no scholarly neutrality. Because missiology as a theological discipline does not shrink from moral evaluation, its scholarly participation in interdisciplinary study impels a common search for a reflection on the unexpressed values of scholarship.<sup>50</sup>

Missiology's voice can also contribute to the concerns of society as a whole. Among the questions raised in Europe's missionary situation is the relevance of theology in the public market of ideas. This quest for relevance forces theology to renewed reflection on its missionary roots. Does

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<sup>49</sup> Skreslet, *Comprehending Mission*, 10, is concerned that a strictly theologically understood missiology will have difficulty engaging historical and sociological scholarship that is engaged in mission studies. Theologians, he argues, tend toward philosophical and abstract thought, with little regard for the complex historical and sociocultural relationships. This position appears to be based on a particular, Anglo-Saxon understanding of "theology" as systematic theology rather than one that is fundamentally practical.

<sup>50</sup> For a discussion about how theological disciplines and religious studies can work together in research, see Boersema and Paas, *Onder spanning*, 343–68.



missiology have anything to contribute to this renewal? I believe it does. Because it is a theological discipline that specializes in the processes of transmission and conviction, missiology's toolbox contains several cohesive, fundamental ideas it can introduce into public debate. Here follow five separate ideas, in no particular order of importance, that are nevertheless intertwined:

1. Truth—at least truth that is not trivial—is universally valid. In the final analysis, cultural relativism is a dead-end street. A world torn apart by ideological violence cannot afford the idea that everyone has a right to his own truth. There is insight and wisdom so crucial and foundational that they must be offered to all.
2. Because people are equal, they have an equal right to the truth. Although not alive in every moment of the Christian tradition, this conviction always shaped missionary practices. No one is too uncivilized or too illiterate to receive the gospel. This understanding has expressed itself in the continuance of loving and modest attempts to give the gospel space in the public arena. However, it also becomes visible in the argument that every serious truth, all truth that inspires and sustains us, immediately raises the question of how to include our fellow human beings. Truth that cannot be shared—because the other is inhuman or uncivilized—is not worth sharing. Thus missiology must be aware of illegitimate forms of communication; the exclusion of groups because of their backwardness, their otherness, their religion, and so on. Rather, missiology will stimulate debate and dialogue just because of its conviction about the truth and its conviction that no one is allowed to keep this truth to himself.
3. Because the truth is universal, and people are equal, missiology is imbued with a longing for the unity of humanity, for *oikoumene*, a longing deeply anchored in the Christian faith, but that also sets up a twofold attitude to human culture. On the one hand, missiology is critical of ethnic, familial, and cultural identities that refuse correction or transformation from outside sources. Human cultures can be oppressive, small-minded, and tyrannical; they can set people over against each other and promote reciprocating violence and exclusivism. On the other hand, missiology empowers human cultural identities as vehicles for expressing the truth. There was a time when children from Ireland to Iran grew up with the same Psalms and the Gospels, but they received them in their own languages and employed them to produce their own cultural repertoire. The history of Bible translation demonstrates that all languages are capable of expressing the truth. Missiology's vision is one of unity in diversity.

4. The belief in universal truth and, ultimately, the unity of humanity, raises a question: What does this mean for those who refuse to submit themselves to this truth? Globalization intensifies this question: What does the increasing unity of the world mean for those who lag behind; who resist or isolate themselves from it? Christianity's missionary practices, with varying success, developed notions of tolerance. To be honest, these practices worked better when Christianity had less political power. It is nevertheless true that there are churches and Christian communities who manage to live in peace with neighbors whose ideas are fundamentally different. Missiology emphasizes that belief cannot be forced and that becoming a believer is ultimately a mystery far beyond the human capacity to engender. In the public debate, missiology will contribute recollections and stories gathered by the Christian tradition, including the painful memories of oppression.
5. Missiology preserves the memory of the incarnation of the truth. Although it holds the conviction that no one can be excluded from the truth, missiology also keeps a watchful eye on the universalization of the truth, on abstract formulations, or culturally insensitive forms of communication (e.g., Eurocentrism). Because it knows that the truth that engages, inspires, and changes people is always particular, incarnational, and personal, it cannot be downloaded. This is the heart of mission: the gospel journeys through humanity only by word of mouth, from one person to the next, to the ends of the earth and the end of time. Love and servanthood are the means by which the truth engages people. Missiology, then, not only holds that truth is universal but also that the process of conversion is local, personal, and diaconal. We can only transmit the truth as we ourselves have received it, in the person of the man who washed feet (John 14:6). For that reason, missiology will always be interested in the local stories, in witness at the margins of life, in the loving sharing of the truth and its insights.

These ideas are of fundamental significance in a world where the ends of the earth are intertwined into an increasingly tighter weave but where tribal and antiglobal identities have also risen to greater prominence. We should not surrender the dream of a unified humanity, but never at the cost of people themselves. It is precisely missiology, as the reflective voice of an age-old journey to the ends of the earth, which can contribute its lessons, based on negative and positive experiences, to a world that needs them so much.