

Mission Theology for the 21st Century

Colleagues,

One of you readers tweaked me to stop beating around the bush and start to show and tell what I learned about mission theology during my Spring Semester term (January to May) at the Overseas Ministries Study Center (New Haven, Connecticut). OK, I will, and I'll start with the book review below, which I just completed for the OMSC journal, the International Bulletin of Mission Research. For the journal I was asked to stick to the word limit specified by the editor, and that was restrictive, though wholesome, I'm sure. However, for ThTh, the editor (yours truly) has imposed no such limit—though you readers may often have wished there were one. So this is expanded a bit from the one I sent to the head office. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

MISSION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY.

Edited by Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder.

Chicago, IL: CCGM

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On the 125th anniversary of the Society of the Divine Word [Societas Verbi Divini, SVD for short], members from around the world and invited guests gathered to reflect on "Mission in the 21st Century." This book's contents come from the symposium—eleven essays and a concluding statement. Editors

Bevans and Schroeder are SVD missiologists.

Two surprises awaited this reviewer. Surprise #1: the pluralism in these essays. On one end we have Jacob Kavunkal (SVD India) with his claim—backed by citations from both the prophet Amos and the Gospel of John (yes!)—that “God’s salvation reaches all peoples through their own religions.” (p.165) At the other end is Josef Cardinal Tomko, Prefect of the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples in Rome [= the Vatican’s prime mission guru] maintaining the “unequivocal biblical” affirmation that “Christ is the only Savior of all . . . there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name . . .” (p.27f.)

Surprise? Not exactly. Pluralism is at home in all the churches today. Rome is no exception. Neither is the SVD.

Surprise #2: “forgiveness of sins” never gets mentioned in these 202 pages. Not even in the essay from the guest Protestant, who even has a special section on “the Word,” do we ever hear that the Divine Word for mission might be: “Be of good cheer. Your sins are forgiven.” So what Divine Word, if not this one, is proposed in these essays as the mission message for the 21st century?

Most often the Good News term is “God’s reign.” Yet what is “God’s reign” if not God’s “new regime” in the Friend of Sinners, a.k.a. forgiveness? The notion of “God’s reign” pervading these essays, and widespread in the Christian world today, doesn’t pay much attention to sin, nor the forgiveness thereof. In Crossings lingo it bypasses D-3, the depth diagnosis, humanity’s conflict with God, the root-problem. Consequently Christ’s forgiveness of sinners, though not denied, is no big deal. If forgiveness once was central to the Good News, it’s now a done deal, and maybe not even necessary to mention in our day.

Instead the agenda for God's reign focuses on humankind's "horizontal" problems (and their name IS legion), our life together in a self-destruct world. In Crossings lingo it's all (and only?) first and second level diagnostic data: personal and structural un-love of the neighbor (D-1) and centripetal human hearts that perpetuate such evil (D-2). But if a sick tree's roots (D-3) aren't healed, the fruits won't be either. Jesus said that.

Both of these so-called surprises signal a new wrestling mat for missiology. It's biblical hermeneutics—how do you read the Bible? And just what is THE Gospel in that Bible? For most of the years that I've been hob-nobbing with missiologists, the big question was not biblical hermeneutics, but cultural hermeneutics: How do you read culture? The primary mission agenda then was to get Gospel wine into the unique wineskins of vastly different particular cultures—and do so without losing the wine or the skins. Culture is still the major motif—though highly refined and nuanced—for crafting the wineskins of the SVD's vision for mission in the 21st century. But the wine, I think, is in danger. "New skins for new wine," was Jesus's counsel, lest the new wine get lost. If the new wine is seeping away, then it may be that the skins proposed for the 21st century are not "new enough."

There has been growing among missiologists a consensus that the Kingdom of God, or "God's reign," is THE Gospel, and Luke 4, Jesus' enigmatic Nazareth sermon on Isaiah 61, is the foundation text. However, neither Jesus himself, nor Luke, ever links "God's reign" to this Isaianic text. Yet that Nazareth sermon has now become the canon within the canon, almost a shibboleth, for "reign of God" missiology.

The biblical hermeneutics for this conclusion are fuzzy at best. All the more so when such "God's reign" missiology gives short

shrift to Jesus' own words about forgiveness of sins in the "Great Commission" in Luke [24:47]. Here he specifies what the reign of God is for missiology, viz., "that repentance and the forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations." Well, is it or isn't it? Just for past centuries? Or for the 21st century as well?

It's a strange hermeneutics that hypes God's reign and ignores the forgiveness of sins. At least for Luke's own canon, mission proposals that sidestep Christ's mission mandate of repentance and forgiveness aren't good enough to promote God's reign for any century. The debate is about biblical hermeneutics. It's all about the Divine Word, how you read the Bible. And we're all involved, for the society of this divine word of forgiveness is the society (lower-case svd) that all Christians are in.