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# The future of mission and missiology in a radical-changing world

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## **Abstract**

*Mission and missiology are facing a rapidly changing and an extremely challenging world. In the past theologians—from Voetius and Warneck to Bosch and Van Engen—engaged the world from their perspectives of mission. The globalised and postmodern world poses new challenges. A Christological approach is needed. The cross of Jesus must be central in the missiological endeavour. The missio Dei must always be regarded from this perspective. The confession that Christ is Lord must not be disregarded in the world of decolonisation and the fourth industrial revolution. The task of teaching missiology at a public university must take this into consideration.*

## **Opsomming**

*In hierdie vinnig veranderende wêreld is daar groot uitdagings vir sending en sendingwetenskap. Teoloë soos Voetius en Warneck en later Bosch en Van Engen het vanuit hulle bepaalde perspektiewe van sending die wêreld benader. Globalisering en post-modernisme bied inderdaad nuwe uitdagings. 'n Christologiese benadering is noodsaaklik. Daarom moet die kruis van Jesus sentraal staan wanneer daar sendingwetenskaplik nagedink word. Die begrip missio Dei moet ook vanuit hierdie benadering*

*hanteer word. Wanneer die uitdagings van postkolonialisme en die vierde nywerheidsrevolusie hanteer word, moet die belydenis dat Jesus die Here is steeds bevestig word. Onderrig in sendingwetenskap aan 'n openbare universiteit sal steeds vanuit hierdie belydenis moet geskied.*

## **Key words**

**Missiology; Changing world, Cross, *Missio Dei*; Public university**

## **Trefwoorde**

**Missiologie; Veranderende wêreld; Kruis; *Missio Dei*; Openbare universiteit**

## **1. Introduction**

Mission is one of the most wonderful endeavours on earth. Missiology, the scientific discipline studying all aspects of mission, is equally wonderful. Without mission there would be no church. Without missiology there would be no theology. But is missiology not a latecomer in the theological field? Can we then say that mission is the most essential aspect of the Christian Gospel and that theology without missiology is dead, especially in the new environment where mission and missiology are greatly challenged? ... To answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate the different aspects of mission and missiology.

## **2. Mission from inception until today**

Mission did not only start with Paul. Mission started with God reaching out to humans. It culminated when Christ became human and sent out the church to glorify Him in all aspects. In Christ, mission and missiology found its true grounding. As an academic discipline, many aspects of missiology have been discussed and explained. Voetius' threefold explanation of the goal of mission, namely the conversion of the unbelievers, the planting of the church, and the glory and manifestation of the grace of God (see Verkuyl, 1978:21) and his engagement with mission as such, played an important role in putting the scientific study of mission forward. One must still emphasise the importance of Voetius' last goal to the extent that the first two goals must always serve the last goal. Presently more emphasis

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on the glory and manifestation of the grace of God is needed. Missiology was, however, in essence only regarded more fully in Warneck's important contribution in 1903, *Evangelische Missionslehre*. Warneck emphasised that there is a twofold basis for mission, namely the sending God and the desiring human in need. God is the *auctor primarius* for mission, but not the church; however, the circle within the church (*ecclesiola in ecclesia*) is the vehicle for mission (see Bavinck, 1977:6). One can hardly overestimate Warneck's contribution. The emphasis on the desiring human should, however, be challenged. God makes mission possible. With his introduction to missiology, JH Bavinck (1977) emphasised very important aspects with his view on *elenctics* as the way to approach religions, other than Christianity, as relevant. In some ways *elenctics* closes the door to dialogue but still remains essential in missions. Verkuyl (1975), with his new introduction to missiology, made a new relation to missiology possible with his emphasis on the then called third world theologies. This led to a new perspective on mission and a change in the main relevant questions asked in missiology. Verkuyl therefore opened the door to many new perspectives. Jongeneel (1991) put forward extensive missiological aspects, and explains that mission is one of the most comprehensive theological disciplines and the benediction of Jesus: "peace be unto you" should be regarded as essential for missions for the world (1991:336). This aspect of mission needs much attention. One should regard peace as essential to mission.

Bosch (1991), referring to the new ecumenical paradigm in missions with his magistral missiology, *Transforming Mission*, opened up a total new relation of missiology among the churches. Although ecumenical mission is highly relevant, Bosch's emphasis on the life and work of Jesus is more appropriate. Bevans and Schroeder (2006) took their cue from Bosch and developed it much further with their explanation that missiology is constants in context. In the present challenging world constants are much needed and their emphasis on it is largely acceptable. With the emphasis on the mission of God, Christopher Wright (2006) underlines the value of deep exegetical encounter. He engages the biblical text and explains appropriately that mission is God's mission. One may criticise his emphasis on grand narratives. Skreslet (2012) brings a new perspective regarding mission from everywhere to everywhere (2012:15). The new world in which we live calls for the perspective of mission from all believers to all in the world. Van Engen (1996:105-126) puts the church in the centre of the discussion regarding the church as God's missionary people, and mission as the crossing of borders of God's people with the view of transforming the world. His emphasis on the church as God's people in mission is hugely relevant.

Some other new perspectives also need attention. Roxborough (2014:123) explains that “as a concept, the idea of mission refers to a particular purpose, task, or responsibility as well as to an overall purpose.” This means that the purpose of the church includes Christian mission, in relation with the “Church outside of its own community.” Missiology is then the theological engagement with the given aspects of mission. Roxborough (2014:123) concludes: “The validity of missiology continues to lie in the validity of mission, in the importance of the questions it addresses, and in the intercultural perspectives it brings to the issues of the day. In a sense, missiology must believe in itself, even when others may not. Being under threat is hardly new in its history. Whatever its context, however, missiological witness to God’s mission, like direct witness to Christ, never ceases the need to earn the right to speak.” It is clear that mission still is valid and must be regarded as essential in the church’s endeavours.

Paas (2016:37) also explains that the youthful (sic) character of missiology means that many issues are under discussion. Even the legitimate place of missiology is challenged because of post-colonial and decolonial criticism. Another challenge is the fact that some regard it as much too wide and that everything becomes mission. Langmead (2014:67), however, suggests “that missiology ought to celebrate its interdependence with the rest of theology, prod theological education to be missiological throughout, draw more on resources beyond the theological...” It means that mission should indeed be interdisciplinary to meet the challenge of the globalised world. One must, however, warn against mission losing its specific emphasis in Christ.

In a seminal article, Bunkowske (2018:12-22) lists trends in missiology to reply to these challenges. All these trends are possible reactions to the challenges of the radical-changing world. He comes to the following conclusion:

“Missiology is about the Son of Man (Jesus) coming to “seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:9). It is about God using human beings as His instruments or vehicles for getting His “means of grace (oral, written and visual Word of God)” to the many “lost and dying people” of this world.”

And

“At this point in time Missiology has been established as a special “set of eyes” (a theological discipline) through which we view and do theology.” (2018:21).

In this regard he sees missiology as the mother of all other disciplines. His perspective is indeed very appropriate.

Encountering all these perspectives an own perspective will be explained.

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### 3. A radical-changing world facing missiology today

The present world is a radical-changing and totally new world. In an important monograph, Pocock, Van Rheenen and McConnell (2005) explain the changes mission and missiology were already then facing. They refer first to globalization: New York is now also in New-Delhi, Manila in Los Angeles. The demographic impact is clear where migration, Aids, and children at risk are all relevant issues. There is also a religion quake: a change from world religions to multiple spiritualities is present. Knowledge moved from modernism to postmodernism. Another massive change is the change from Christendom to global Christianity. The motivation for mission changed from the fear of hell to the glory of God. Spiritual warfare is in the centre of discussions. The movement of mission is from operations to creative-access platforms. A new sense of working together also comes to the fore: from individuals to networks. Regarding the use of money there is a movement from self-support to international partnerships. Technologies leading to virtual worlds are present. Some other aspects can be added, such as the present radical implications of decolonization and of the fourth industrial revolution.

Van Gelder (2013:42-45) mentions the following challenges: many Christians now live as minorities in sometimes even hostile environments. There are also challenges in the way in which the emerging Christian communities and the traditional Christian communities in the West regard various issues of faith. This includes the reading of the Bible and the application of it in the lives of the people. "Many of these Christians have an inherent understanding that all of life is spiritual, with the presence and agency of spirits in the material world being self-evident, while also understanding the active agency of God in their midst through the Spirit of God."

George Yip (2014:403) challenges missiology from the perspective of postmodernism and decolonisation. "While postmodern anthropology can lead to nihilism, it does expose the weaknesses of traditional anthropology, including the notion of an objective description of another culture and the notion that culture is homogeneous, coherent, and integrated."

Yip (2014:408) also challenges the notion of contextualization. Many of the theological and missiological concepts of contextualization are challenged. Culture is so diverse that it is impossible to engage in contextualisation as it could be in the past.

An important new trend is how social media influence all aspects of the present environment. In this regard Van den Berg (2018; 2019) refers to many implications for theology. Van den Berg (2018:13) explains: "An orientation

within this hybrid and flexible space is embodied in the analysis of the possible use of Christian motifs on Twitter. This search creates possibilities for a new language, logic and meaning. Digital religion is a significant expression of contemporary lived religion. To negotiate the use and meaning of Christian motifs used on Twitter implies a sensitivity to the culture informing daily life.” He then sees in social media new “fluid forms of normativity and authority” (2018:174).

The relation to God in this new world of communication calls for new understanding. The question in this regard remains whether the general revelation may ever become on par with the particular revelation in Jesus Christ and the written word. There is only one true way to know God and that is in Scripture, in Christ. The relevance of social media regarding mission and missiology must however not be underestimated.

There can be no doubt that the recent outbreak of Covid-19 poses a huge challenge; not only to the world, but also to mission. The whole world has changed radically. The questions of the wrath of God, forgiveness of sin, the implications of salvation and eternal life, and the implications of the cross and resurrection are radically important. Humanity is in deep trouble and is facing massive new challenges. A sound theological reply to the challenges is needed. In this regard mission is of the utmost importance. Mission always has been on the forefront of the challenges facing the world.

Venter (2020:70 ff.) regards the new challenges in human civilization as immense and asks if it is not the start of a new Axial age. He calls for dialogue and vision in the encounter with the fourth industrial revolution. He posted six elements of a matrix of a new vision, namely “the reality of a personal Triune God, the cosmos as creation, the human as *imago Dei*, the possibility of transformation or a *novum*, and a teleological historical process.” This new vision is acceptable, but his view on *confessional* theology (2019:6) must be challenged. According to him confessional theology as *method* is not applicable in the new situation of theology, although he still accepts the confessions such as Nicea as fully relevant. He fully regards the emphasis on the Bible text as extremely important, but explains that a new hermeneutic is necessary. To my mind the confessions should underlie the deep confessional theology needed especially in the changing world. Missiology should be confessional, because all theology refers to a certain kind of “confession” and missiology should be clear on the confessional status of its endeavours. Missiology should therefore clarify from which confessional commitment it continues.

A deep Christological vision from the confessions, namely the Apostolic Confession (12 Articles), Nicea, Athanasius, the Belgic confession, The Heidelberg Catechisms and the confessions of Dort, is always needed, as well as emphasising the cross as radical viewpoint in mission, and the resurrection as the culmination of the salvation.

#### 4. Christological approach to missiology

Taking all these challenges and trends into account, there must be a definite view that mission and missiology must be grounded in Christology. This does not mean that the Triune God is not totally involved—but without the eternal existence, the cross, and the resurrection of Jesus, there is no mission. Without the deep Christological implications of the Divinity of the Man Jesus Christ, the clear understanding of mission is blurred. A *Theologia Crucis*, or theology of the cross, must always be the main element of mission and missiology. The theology of the cross must, however, always be linked to Nicea, namely that Christ is verily God and verily human. The proclamation of the Divinity of Christ in the *Theologia Crucis* is essential for understanding mission in the world. It touches on all aspects of life, including the way in which missions should not only be regarded as the salvation of the individual, but also as social justice. To be relevant, missiology must therefore engage this confession deeply. Regarding the Biblical aspects of missiology, a Pauline perspective is all important. Nothing is more essential for Paul than to know Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor 2:2-5).

*And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. [a] <sup>2</sup> For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. <sup>3</sup> I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. <sup>4</sup> My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, <sup>5</sup> so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God's power.*

Thiselton (2000:212) explains how this passage emphasises that Paul did not want to use the rhetorical methods of the ancient Romans, which were well-known at that time, to convey his message, but that he wanted to communicate the gospel of Jesus Christ and that gospel is the gospel of the crucified one. For Wright (2013:1233), Paul conveys a mystery, but it is a revelation of the righteousness of God seen in the justification of the sinner

on the cross. Ellingworth and Hutton (1994:46) refer to the fact that the tense used in the reference to 'crucified' has the implication that it was something that had happened in the past, but is still relevant in the present. Orr and Walther (1976:162), however, emphasise how the Roman world regarded death on the cross as scandalous. This means that Paul paradoxically refers to the wonder of the Gospel. Because the Spirit empowered Paul, there is also a close relation between the gospel of the crucified one and the Spirit (Prior 1985:49). Conzelmann (1981:s.p.) fully explains the implication of the cross: "Rather, the object of theology is the cross, the act of salvation which actualizes itself in the word: the determination of man by the arrival of the word, and the determination of the word by the cross." Mare (1976:s.p.) refers to the relation of the cross of Christ and the salvation: "Paul says he came with the sole purpose of centring his attention on the truth concerning Jesus Christ—on the fact and meaning of his crucifixion. The "for" (gar) introducing this verse confirms the statement of v. 1 about his simple proclamation of the cross. It was not sufficient for Paul to tell about Jesus and his life; he also had to tell about his death for sinners (Acts 10:37-43). Christ died on a Roman cross at Jerusalem and his death was effective then and is effective now to bring forgiveness to sinners (Gal 2:16)." It is Bram van de Beek (1998:150-152) who emphatically explains the fullness of the death of Christ on the cross in his Christology. Jesus continued until the end to bring reconciliation by being a sin-offering, the One given by God for the community to be saved.

The challenges of Covid-19 must also be seen in this regard. Only by looking to the cross can the immense challenge of this virus be encountered. The world is in deep trouble because of sin, but the Son of God yielded Himself on our behalf for the sin of the world. In Him and in the cross we see God's involvement in the world even in huge calamities. Turning to the cross is the way in which missions can deal with the outcry in need of humans and the world.

This message must be proclaimed by Paul regardless of persecution. Therefore, the passage in 1 Corinthians 9:16-18 is all important.

*<sup>16</sup> For when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, since I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! <sup>17</sup> If I preach voluntarily, I have a reward; if not voluntarily, I am simply discharging the trust committed to me. <sup>18</sup> What then is my reward? Just this: that in preaching the gospel I may offer it free of charge, and so not make full use of my rights as a preacher of the gospel.*



Paul's apostleship must be understood from the "dimension of necessity or compulsion." (Thiselton, 2000:55). He could not have remained silent. This is one of the most essential aspects of mission. Wright (2013:1510) writes that Paul could not escape it even if he wanted to. Mission is indeed compelled by God. Missiology testifies to that.

## 5. The Triune God and mission

From the deep Christological emphasis, it must also be explained that the mission of God is also Trinitarian. God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are involved in the tremendous movement of God to humans. However, the Father is always the Father of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Christ that is sent from the Father and the Son. Immediately Christ is in the centre of all mission and missiology again. Niemandt (2015:103) regards the *Together Towards Life* document of the World Council of Churches as an explanation of the main aspects of Trinitarian mission: "My conviction is that the TTL document provides mission and Missiology with a dialogue partner that reminds the church, and those who practise theology—especially Missiology—that we are together on a journey towards life. The changing landscapes on this journey remind us that the church finds itself in the liminal space between an institution and a community of sent disciples participating in God's mission. The Spirit is the guide, reminding us that we can find the Father's Son among the least and the marginalized..."

## 6. The *missio Dei/Trinitatis* revisited

Mission is always *missio Dei* or *missio Trinitatis* if understood correctly. Jonker (2008:64) warns against the Barthian interpretation of the *missio Dei* where the *missio Dei* becomes universalism, that all are saved and that the church becomes only a vehicle of general empowerment and not the vehicle of the proclamation of the radical salvation of God IN Christ. Mission as *missio Dei* must always be radically Christocentric—confessing that only in Him there is salvation and eternal life. The implications of the *missio Dei* is of utmost importance. In all aspects of mission, the honour and glory of God should be emphasised. Mission must be about God, who reaches out to humans. He must be honoured as the Father in his glory as Creator. He must be honoured as the Son in his redemption of the world. He must be honoured as Holy Spirit in the renewal of humans and the community. Mission is the full

acceptance of God in his glory. From this honouring of God, mission moves out to the world. As servants of the Triune God, mission is the confession of the eternal hope for the world.

## **7. Missiology at the secular university**

Finally, the post-colonial and decolonial perspectives are important. It is indeed very relevant to ask whether missiology can still be taught at a secular university and how this should be envisaged in a time where transformation and decolonization is prevalent. Although the challenges of transformation, decolonisation, and the fourth industrial revolution are real, missiology must always be true to the most essential aspects of the proclamation of the crucified and resurrected Christ. It is impossible to delete missiology from theology and regard theology as acceptable without it. Missiology is essential to all theology. However, this should be accomplished by a deep biblical exegetical and hermeneutical engagement. From Scripture the challenges of transformation, decolonisation, and the fourth industrial revolution should be engaged. Schoeman (2019:9) envisages a movement towards the future of congregations as missional churches in which a prophetic ministry is all important. The emphasis on the cross in this ministry should be of explicit importance.

Regarding post colonialism and decolonising theology in Africa, Urbaniak (2019) lists three theses, namely

“Thesis one: Giving Africanness, and African religiosity in particular, its due place in theological reflection requires a methodological shift from a postcolonial critique to a decolonial turn “(2019:2).

Thesis two: For Christian theology to be decolonised, African religiosity needs to be considered as a multifaceted phenomenon in its own right and engaged as a proper theological locus, also by white theologians” (2019:4).

Thesis three: Engaging African religiosity as a vital aspect of decolonising Christianity in a context like ours may be fostered by problematising the relationship between the categories of blackness and Africanness and thus also by rethinking the dichotomy of whiteness and blackness as a key theoretical lens for BT in South Africa, post-1994” (2019:7)”.

Taking these challenges into consideration, it must, however, be stated that the essence of the gospel may never be compromised.

It must be mentioned that African theologians such as Turaki (1999) and Afeke (2000 & 2002), are very critical on aspects of decolonial theology, especially the challenge to the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Turaki (1999:328) mentions the danger of watering down the “Biblical affirmation of the finality of God’s revelation in Jesus the Messiah.” Afeke (2002:204-205) especially explains that leadership in Africa needs a new vision from the perspective of the Word of God. He (2000:111) also regards the inculturation in the New Testament as important, because it “does not change the divine revealed message of the gospel.” Mokhoathi (2018), however, regards decolonial understanding of Christ’s relation to African religions as one of mutuality.

The answer for mission and missiology lies in the deep exegetical and hermeneutical engagement with Scripture and to then, from this engagement, proclaim Christ as the Crucified One. The confessions should be acknowledged in this regard. There is no other possibility than to honour Jesus Christ totally in this regard.

## 8. Conclusion

The future of mission and missiology should always be radically Christocentric. The crucified and resurrected Christ is the beginning and end of mission. Missiology should engage from this perspective in the present and future challenges of the world. Only then will it have a future itself.

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