

MISSIONAL THEOLOGY: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

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Introduction

The Bible proclaims the gospel message is for all people, from all lands, across all ages and eras. The gospel is true, timeless, and perfect. However, church attendance in the United States across almost all denominational lines has been decreasing over the last several decades. Whether this is due to regular attenders attending less regularly,¹ or an indicator of a post-Christian culture,² the fact remains that overall church attendance is down in North America. The gospel message the church is proclaiming is not reaching the culture around it. The message is not the problem; the gospel is still relevant and true to all people. That means the problem lies either with the message bearers or with the method or mode of communicating the message. To better reach surrounding communities, churches must begin to revisit their missional theology. If a church's missional theology rests solely on the action of proclaiming the gospel, without taking into consideration *how* to best communicate the gospel, or the dynamics of the culture they are trying to reach, their theology is missing critical components, and the effectiveness will be limited. Gospel proclamation involves more than simply repeating the words of Scripture.

As the culture changes and shifts, churches must change and shift their methodology. A church's missional theology must consider how the culture around them processes information, how they determine what is relevant, and how the church can have the biggest impact on that culture. While this may seem unfamiliar, or even unnecessary, those who study communication, cognitive sciences, and sociology find them imperative to missional theology. The message of the gospel does not change, but the message bearers and the methods must change as the culture changes. The thesis of this paper is that churches today need a more robust missional theology that incorporates an understanding of how insights from other disciplines may speak to and increase the effectiveness of Christian mission.

This paper begins with a look at how cultural paradigms can impact the effectiveness of God's mission, noting some theorists already recognize paradigm shifts in the current culture. A short overview of how missiology already embraces a multi-disciplinary approach follows the paradigms conversation, coupled with encouragement to further expand missional theology by looking to other disciplines. This paper will outline specific examples of how communication sciences can assist churches in increasing the likelihood of people receiving the gospel message. It will highlight how cognitive and linguistic studies can help churches better understand how

¹Thom S. Rainer, "The Number One Reason for the Decline in Church Attendance and Five Ways to Address It," *The Christian Post*, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/the-number-one-reason-for-the-decline-in-church-attendance-and-five-ways-to-address-it-102882/> (last access November 18, 2016).

² Tobin Grant, "The Great Decline; 61 Years of Religiosity in One Graph," *Religion News*, <http://religionnews.com/2014/01/27/great-decline-religion-united-states-one-graph/> (last accessed November 21, 2016). In this article, Grant documents that church attendance has dropped twice as much in the last 15 years as it did throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He attributes this not to declining regular attendance, but to a general culture shift in which religion is viewed as unimportant.

people process and sync new information with previous understandings. Finally, it will consider how sociology and anthropology can guide churches in how to have the greatest impact on the culture around them by partnering with other agencies. This paper concludes with the implications of what could happen if churches today expanded their missional theology to incorporate insights from these other disciplines.

The Culture is Changing

The idea of molding the gospel message around the culture is not a new idea to missional theology. Throughout the twentieth century Lesslie Newbigin, and many others, wrote numerous books and papers encouraging the church to pursue an “authentic encounter” with the Western culture.³ Unfortunately, despite all the research, writing, and talk about contextualization throughout the past decades, church attendance continues to decrease at an alarming rate. Churches throughout the country are closing their doors, indicating that the church has been unable to engage the culture at large in an “authentic encounter” with the gospel message.

David Bosch recognized the importance of a cross-disciplinary approach to missional theology and incorporated the work of physicist and historian of science, Thomas Kuhn, into his own missional theology. In his ground-breaking work *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission*, Bosch describes Kuhn’s concepts of cultural paradigms as incorporating all a community’s belief systems, values, symbols, assumptions, and frames of knowledge. Kuhn argued that new paradigms come about when “a few individuals begin to perceive reality in ways that are qualitatively different from their predecessors and contemporaries.”⁴ Paradigms do not come about overnight but like a wave roll over each other, one building before the previous one has completely expired. Published in 1991, Bosch argued that the Western culture was operating from two different paradigms, the end of the enlightenment era and the beginning of the post-modern era.⁵ Now over 25 years later, it seems clear the culture is on the cusp of a new paradigm. The enlightenment has ended and a new way of thinking and processing information has come about. Now is the time for churches to figure out the best way to communicate the gospel message within this new paradigm.

The culture is changing faster than the church can adapt. On November 16 of this year, Oxford Dictionaries released their word of the year. The 2016 word of the year is “post-truth.” It means, “Relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.”⁶ This is not a new word, it first appeared approximately 10 years ago, but the use of the word increased over 2000% this

³ Patrick Franklin, “Missionaries in Our Own Back Yard: Missional Community as Cultural and Political Engagement in the Writings of Lesslie Newbigin,” *Missionaries in Our Own Back Yard*, 163

⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shift in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 188

⁵ Ibid, 357

⁶ Oxford Living Dictionary, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>, (last accessed November 18, 2016).

past year, often, though not always, used in political contexts. Though hardly scientific, this is a significant indicator that the culture is changing; it is operating from a new paradigm. And when a culture changes this significantly, the message bearer and method must also change. The church could learn a lot about *how* to change its communication methods to meet the changing cultural paradigm by looking to other disciplines.

A Cross-Disciplinary Approach

Looking to other disciplines is not a new approach for missiologists. Missional theology has always been a cross-disciplinary study. Since its inception, missiology has sought to integrate perspectives and data from multiple disciplines, such as theology and biblical studies, and a few social sciences.⁷ Yet, the broader the base the more knowledge one can find. It is time for the Church to look beyond its borders and its own resources to other disciplines for help in navigating this new cultural paradigm. There is much to learn by looking at communication sciences, cognitive and linguistic sciences, and sociology and anthropology. The church must become better message bearers and find more effective methods and modes of communicating a message the culture desperately needs. This can happen with a cross-disciplinary approach to missional theology.

Communication Sciences

A truly robust missional theology considers studies in communication, which empower churches to better understand how people receive a message, how to code a message and how to read a context. Like many things in life, there are rules, patterns, and principles to the communication process, many of which people generally take for granted. By increasing one's understanding of the process of communication, one becomes a significantly better communicator. While many missional theologians, such as Christopher Wright and Michael Gorman, study the Bible from a missional lens, adding to our missional theology the innate missional nature of God, Charles Kraft studies the Bible through a communicative lens. Using the branch model of missiology from Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile,⁸ studies in communication can extend and enrich the missional conversation. Part of understanding the nature of a missional God is understanding how God chose to communicate with human beings; why did God chose this method; and what about the method churches should imitate to become better message bearers in the contemporary culture.

Kraft describes the communication process as a gap and a bridge. Those who are communicating the message are the "source" on one side; and those who receive the message are the "receptors" on the other side. There is a gap between the two elements that one must bridge by "communication." Both the sender and the receiver participate in the narrowing of the gap when they both see the relevance of the communication. However, it is often the case in gospel proclamation that the bridging of the gap occurs primarily by the source, or the church.⁹ This is

⁷ Daniel Shaw, "Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first Century Model for Enabling Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 34 no 4 Oct 2010, 208

⁸ Craig Van Gelder & Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 10-11

⁹ Charles Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness*, Rev. Ed. (Nashville; Abingdom Press, 1983) Kindle location 57-66 and 160-163, Orbis Books, Kindle Edition

after all, God's way of communicating. God came down to humankind and spoke in their language, on their level, completely bridging the communication gap. God met the receptors on their end of the communication bridge, making sure the message was not only communicated, but also received. The Church is called to imitate this method and mode of communication.

Most missiologists would agree that the Church is called to be missional in their very nature just as God is missional in God's nature. One can expand this understanding to include the idea that the Church is to communicate as God communicates. Churches need to be "receptor-oriented communicators,"¹⁰ sharing the receptors frame of reference, meeting them on their side of the communication gap, and being willing to be inconvenienced if necessary to assure that the receptors understand the message. Churches must also be "discovery-oriented" in their communication, helping people to discover for themselves who Jesus is, not just telling them who Jesus is.¹¹

Communication bridges are not built on words alone. Though the words of the gospel message and Scripture itself are powerful, it is rare that they, in and of themselves, bring about life transformation. Jesus did not come just to *preach* the gospel, he *was* the gospel. The significance of Christ is not that he spoke to us, but that he dwelt among us. Any missional theology that focuses exclusively on the proclamation of the gospel to people who don't know Christ, without taking into consideration all the other aspects of communication is a limited theology. Communication is a coded message that incorporates words, voice, tone, context, body language, physical proximity, life experience and the actions of the source. All of these aspects significantly impact communication.¹² According to Kraft, receptors will only go to the effort to understand the message when they believe the message has relevance or value to them. It would behoove churches to study what they can do to increase the likelihood the receptor will participate in the communication of the gospel.

Cognitive Sciences

Churches' missional theologies must include room to consider how new developments in cognitive and linguistic sciences might impact how the gospel message is conveyed. Cognitive studies include all aspects of human comprehension and can help churches understand how people in shifting paradigms go about processing and syncing new information with previous understandings. This could potentially change the method and mode of how churches communicate the gospel message. Fuller Theological Seminary professor, Daniel Shaw, argues, "These two - the conditions of our world as disclosed by the human sciences and God's Good News that Christ is the source of our reality - form twin point of references as I seek to apply recent cognitive models of cultural understanding to mission practice."¹³ Understanding the cognitive processing of those whom the church is hoping to authentically engage can increase the effectiveness of missional practices.

¹⁰ Ibid, kindle location 1791

¹¹ Ibid, kindle location 562

¹² Ibid, kindle location 2107

¹³ Daniel Shaw, "Beyond Contextualization: Toward a Twenty-first Century Model for Enabling Mission," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 34 no 4 Oct 2010, 208

Throughout the first half of the twentieth century the Church's model for missional cross-cultural communication was based on Eugene Nida's source - message - receptor (SMR) model of information processing. The source of the message would encode the message and then send the message; the receptor would then decode the message, thus receiving it.¹⁴ It was a very linear model that failed to take into account the relational nature of the Triune God. And how humanity, who was made in his image, must also be relational to fully process the gospel message. The SMR model only looked at the surface level of meaning and comprehension, focusing on how the church could translate a verbal understanding of God across cultures.

In the late twentieth century the work of cognitive linguists such as Eleanor Rosch, Anna Wierzbicka, and Roy D'Andrade contributed to a new model of how the brain processes information called the connectionist network theory. This theory took into account a much more robust understanding of communication, that went beyond the surface level to deeper understanding that brought about transformation. This theory reflects the reality that as a new idea enters one's awareness, it is processed based on previous experiences in the schema that has been elicited. Ideally, this processing is done with the least amount of effort possible by the receptor. The receptor's perception of value or benefit that is related to this new idea is directly correlated with what is considered pertinent or relevant within a particular context. What is significant for churches to recognize is that, "what is considered pertinent is culturally conditioned, which means that all kinds of information - psychological, linguistic and cultural - are forced to interact simultaneously."¹⁵ The culture determines what is relevant.

In order to have the "authentic encounter" with the culture that Newbigin encouraged, the gospel message must be considered relevant and pertinent to the culture. Since the gospel will be processed based on previous experiences in the schema that has been elicited (anything in their experience pertaining to "church," "religion," "faith," etc.), the words of the gospel must match the culture's experience with the church, or the message will be irrelevant. The more relevant one deems a new message, the more energy they are willing to extend to properly receive the message.

The gospel message *is* relevant, but in order for the culture to begin to recognize it as relevant the Church must change the method in which it communicates. It can no longer simply talk missionally, it must *be* missional, like God is missional. The connectionist network theory focuses on how the church can make, "God's intent cognitively relevant to and understood by human beings."¹⁶ This type of communication goes beyond speaking the gospel to, as Michael Gorman stresses, to *becoming* the gospel.¹⁷ It enables the culture to just not believe, but also to become, because they have not just heard, but experienced the gospel.

Understanding recent developments in cognitive studies can help churches move from a missional theology that is based on proclamation, to one that is based on relationship and transformation. It can move the church from an individualistic theology to one oriented to the group or culture at large. It can move the Church from a form of contextualization in which

¹⁴ Ibid, 209

¹⁵ Ibid, 210

¹⁶ Ibid, 210

¹⁷ Michael Gorman, *Becoming the Gospel: Paul, Participation and Mission*, 4

Christianity mirrors the culture, to a theology that goes beyond contextualization and allows the culture to see the gospel lived out, inspiring transformation. It can move the Church from a theology focused on church growth to one focused on an interactive biblically functioning community. Like Gorman, Shaw calls the church to, move beyond preaching the gospel, to *living* the gospel. Shaw calls for a missional theology that reflects God’s intention for human beings to be transformed into his image. Shaw claims,

“At this point, cognitive studies become highly significant for contemporary mission: we must value the ‘receptional apparatus’ God has created. Human beings everywhere were created by God with a mind-brain for processing, through language and psychosocial awareness, all manner of human experience, including new transculturated conceptualizations.”¹⁸

The gospel message *is* able to transcend cultural barriers , when the message bearers and method of communication do not hinder it.

Sociology and Anthropology

Finally, a church’s missional theology should consider findings from sociology and anthropology. These disciplines can guide churches in understanding how they might have the greatest impact on the culture around them through a holistic missional approach, creating a positive Christian presence in the community around them. By partnering with other local agencies to provide for local or even global communities, churches can increase the material resources to the community, magnify the impact, and build partnerships and relationships not only with the community being served but with other organizations.¹⁹ This is known as Collective Impact. It consists of cross-discipline philanthropic work by multiple entities to address large scale social issues.

This type of mission puts aside the agenda of the source (the church) and focuses on the needs of the receptor (the community). It focuses on the church living out its missional calling through action, not words, in a dialectical or dialogical mode with the community. The dialogical mode of relating can be quite powerful, leading to transformation of both the senior and the receptor. Based on concepts developed by anthropologist Muneo Yoshikawa, dialogical modes of communication focuses on the connection of two entities which sharpen the uniqueness of each partner.²⁰ This model is not easy; it highlights contradictions and challenges between the communication partners. But it does bring about a type of paradoxical unity between the partners, that is similar to the paradoxical nature of the gospel.

This mode of communication, when done well, can lead to a fourth mode in which both parties involved are equally transformed. This happens when “A’s thesis is met by B’s antithesis and a new synthesis is created which is unique and transcend the differences of A and B which

¹⁸ Ibid, 212

¹⁹ David Wesley, “Collective Impact in Mission,” <http://didache.nazarene.org/index.php/volume-12-1/863-didache-v12n1-03-collective-impact-mission-wesley/file>, (last accessed 11/22/16), 1

²⁰ Ibid, 4

are lost in C.”²¹ When this happens the lines between the sender and the receptor become blurred and they become interdependent on each other. This type of relationship is difficult to develop and quite rare in missional work; but it is deserving of consideration in a church’s missional theology.

Collective impact is more than simple collaboration. It is an intentional, disciplined approach to transformational impact. It is a holistic response to a complex issue. But there are some things churches must be aware of. Churches cannot enter into this model with their own agenda in place. They cannot focus on their own denominational goals or church planting. They must be willing to work with organizations that have distinctly different doctrinal standards. Historically, churches have opted for a more isolated impact for the reasons listed above. But when this type of deep communal relationship is built on missional action, the words of the gospel message will match the experience the community has had with the church and the gospel message is much more likely to be received.

Conclusion

Considering the current decline of church attendance in our post-Christian, perhaps even post-truth, culture, churches must begin to rethink how they are communicating with the culture around them. Cultural and individual paradigms are shifting, which means the way the church communicates the gospel must shift too. That doesn’t mean there are not some tried and true methods that must remain. The church has always been and always will be called to live out the gospel, not just to proclaim it.

Just as God communicated in a “receptor-oriented manner, so we must focus on how the receptors receive the message, not just on how we want to send the message. Receptors of a message must exert a certain amount of effort or energy to accurately receive the message. They have to *want* to receive the message. They will only desire to receive the message if they believe the message is relevant or worthwhile. And the gospel message will only be viewed as relevant when the Church is able to demonstrate by its actions that it is.

By researching and studying other disciplines, we can learn what Jesus, being God, innately knew to do. Just like missional theology, these disciplines are continually developing new theories, discovering new concepts, and learning new methods about humanity, and the Church needs to pay more attention to these new discoveries, and incorporate them into their missional theology.

²¹ Muneo Jay Yoshikawa, *The Double-swing Model of Intercultural Communication Between the East and the West in Communication Theory, Eastern and Western Perspectives*, ed., D. Lawrence Kincaid, (New York, Academic Press 1987), 320

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