

Response

by

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Thanks Dean for an excellent paper on missional theologizing. Your ability as a scholar is joined with your missionary vision and it is apparent in this paper.

I appreciate the way in which Dean emphasizes the close link between mission and theologizing in Paul's ministry and the need for these to be closely linked in our church today. For too long theology has been seen as something produced by experts in Western seminaries and then exported via missionaries and national church leaders, who have been seen as distributors of carbon-copy theologies to the churches around the world. But "carbon-copy theologies" do not meet the heart needs of the people of the two-thirds world.

People want to hear God speaking directly to their life situation in their vernacular. If this does not happen then God remains a foreigner and a stranger. The miracle of the incarnation only becomes real when God enters a culture and speaks in the vernacular to the deep hungers of the people's hearts. Carbon-copy theologies often miss the mark.

Dean outlines four main features of Paul's model of missional theologizing.

1. Paul targets his message for the context.
2. Paul's theologizing is dynamic and flexible in that he uses a wide variety of metaphors and images to convey his meaning.
3. Paul's mission shaped theology is consistently rooted in the "truth of the gospel."
4. Paul's articulation of the gospel is shaped by the culture, but at the same time challenges the socio-cultural context.

It is obvious that culture is very significant and has a large influence on our theology. Too often Western missionaries have answered questions that no one was asking, and left unanswered questions that people desperately wanted to have answered.

The cultural context will influence our theology in the following ways.

1. Culture will greatly influence the theological agenda for it raises the questions that people will bring to the Scriptures. For example, the spirit world and

spiritual power is very high on many people's theological agenda and yet largely ignored by many Westerners.¹

2. Culture will greatly influence the way theology is expressed. Some Methodist churches in Fiji actually sing the questions and answers of the catechism. The word pictures, metaphors, and ways of thinking and analyzing Scripture will differ from culture to culture.
3. Culture must never supplant the Scripture as the base on which our faith stands.
4. If we succeed in the first three points, the end result will be that culture is transformed from within by the gospel. No culture on the face of the earth can absorb the gospel without being challenged and transformed by it.

Albert Outler² did Wesleyans a great service, I believe, by drawing attention to Wesley's four parameters of Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience. The so-called "Wesleyan quadrilateral." Flemming has emphasized the importance of the socio-cultural situation in Paul's theologizing. But how does this fit into Wesley's theologizing?

We need to recognize that Wesley was working in a mono-cultural situation. Yet Wesley was very concerned about the socio-cultural conditions of his parishioners and did everything he could to assist them in a multitude of ways. It is time to add culture to the Wesleyan quadrilateral. If we do this, however, the quadrilateral becomes a theological "pentagon," and that immediately raises cultural problems of military overtones. Flemming has, however, provided a way out, for he also mentions another very significant phrase – "guided by the Spirit." This takes us beyond the pentagon to a hexagon, which reminds us of a honeycomb. Surely honey is a symbol of sweetness and delight in almost any culture.

Dean has presented us with an excellent model. We must move beyond merely teaching theology, to missional theologizing, where people actually do theology and think through the socio-cultural issues theologically. But, if we do this, what will happen to our distinctive theology? Will it be destroyed or drastically altered? But this is what Paul did and what Wesley did. And when the holiness revival began in America Wesley's theology was re-contextualized to fit the pioneer life of rural America.

If we keep the six sides of our hexagonal in balance we have nothing to fear. The six points are: (1) Scripture; (2) church tradition including creeds, statements of faith, theologies, liturgies and the writings of the church fathers; (3) reason; (4) human experience; (5) cultures with their myths, legends, fears, hopes, questions, symbols and rituals, and (6) the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will help us as he helped the early church leaders, so that at the end of their first theological and missional conference, they were able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." (Acts 15:28).

¹ Neville Bartle, "Developing a Contextual Theology for Melanesia with Reference to Death, Witchcraft and the Spirit World," D. Miss Dissertation, 2001, Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, Kentucky.

² Albert C. Outler "The Wesleyan Quadrilateral—in John Wesley." *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 20:17-18.

I like Dean's statement; "We must have the courage, guided by the Spirit, to find fresh ways of articulating and embodying the gospel that draw upon our stories and cultural resources while remaining faithful to the witness of Scripture." To this statement I have only one word to say, and that is, "Amen!"