

Doing Theology Across Cultures: A New Methodology for an Old Task

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Theology has been “done” ever since Adam and Eve first began to try to understand the God who had created them. Down through millennia this task has been continued and eventually refined to the point where today various “types” of theology exist—systematic, historical, and pastoral, to name but a few. All of these types are attempts to accomplish the crucial task of helping humankind to better understand God and their relationship to God. The primary vehicle used in this process has been the Bible, God’s Word to and for humankind.

Typically, this task of understanding God and His Word has been left to the “experts”—the theologians. These experts, whether academicians or ministers, have been trained—usually quite rigorously—to study God’s Word and communicate the results of that study to the laity, the people in the pews. Such communication, as Figure 1 illustrates, has been attempted from the top down. The academic theologians in the seminaries have passed on the results of their theological understandings to the ministers (ministerial theologians) who, in turn, have tried to communicate all of this in understandable ways to their various congregations.

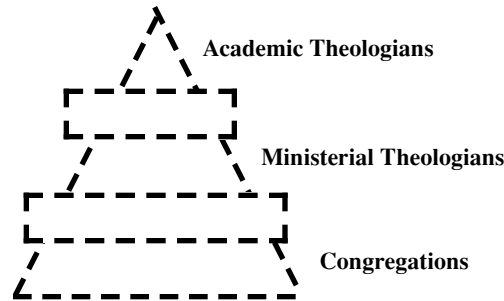
This “trickle-down” theology, though well-intentioned, has not been very successful. Unfortunately, the fact is that in most churches today very little theology has trickled down to the people sitting in the pews each Sunday morning. Typical church-goers today have little knowledge of theology, nor, on the whole, are they concerned about the current (or past) issues which the professional theologians are debating.

This is due primarily to the fact that the vast majority of academic theologians are attempting to answer, and, in turn, training ministers to answer, questions which average Christians in the pew are not asking. As a result, the typical theology being “done” today in seminaries and churches is incomplete at best, totally irrelevant at worst. How many seminary



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Figure 1: Typical “trickle-down” theology



graduates, in their first year of the pastorate, bemoan the lack of relevancy in their educational experience when they say, “I sure wish they would have taught me about *this* in seminary!”

This lack of relevancy is accentuated tenfold when Western-trained missionaries attempt to take their Western theology and transplant it into non-Western cultural situations. In the past it has been simply assumed that Barth and Bultmann, *et. al.*, have as much to say to the non-Western world as to the Western (if, indeed, they have much to say even to Christians in the West outside those in Germany!). Unfortunately, this assumption is as erroneous as it is paternalistic.

To the contrary, the theology needed in the non-Western world—as in the Western world—is a theology not of the professional theologians and their cohorts, but rather a theology of and for the people who are being ministered to. Such theology is not done by an elitist group in isolated settings. Rather, it is actively done right where the people and the missionary are, with the missionary vicariously attempting to apply God’s Word to the practical needs of the local community—their issues, problems, and questions.

It is precisely for this reason that this new cross-cultural discipline is called “doing theology.” It is not theology already done, readily available in some textbook. Rather, it is theology in process. It is meeting the people’s needs exactly where *they* are, not where the theologians are. Instead of a “trickle-down” theology, it is, as Figure 2 illustrates, a “transfer-up” theology. Theologians doing this type of theology attempt to understand the issues, problems, and questions of the people *first*, and then they go to the Bible in an effort to find

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relevant answers.

All of this is in no way to imply that what Western theologians have already accomplished is totally irrelevant in a non-Western cultural context. Yes, indeed, some of it is very relevant, especially those aspects of Western theology which deal with the major doctrines of salvation. But even these major doctrines will be emphasized differently.

For example, theologians in the West have typically spent much time and energy trying to prove the existence of God in the belief that Western people need to have it concretely proven that God does indeed exist. However, in many cultures of the world today such proof is not necessary, for these peoples already believe in the existence of the divine Being whom we call God. What *they* need to know is how this God operates in their daily lives and how to escape the bondage of the evil spirits all around them. Thus, they will obviously place evil spirits and demonology higher up on their doctrinal hierarchy and the existence of God, though important, farther down. The typical Western theological text has next to nothing of relevance to this type of cultural situation. Other, similar issues come quickly to mind: polygamy, ancestor worship, and animal sacrifice, to name but a few.

Just how does one attempt to “do” this type of theology today? While it is an immensely complicated subject—too much for an introductory article of this nature—it is safe to say that perhaps the best tool for this task is anthropology. By understanding the people—who *they* are, how *they* act, what *their* questions are, in other words, *their* worldview—an individual can better relate theology to their situation. Not only

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will anthropology and its application to the people of a particular culture benefit the missionary, it will also be of great value to Western theologians and ministers in their own Western cultural context.

In the final analysis, though, there are no “hard and fast” rules to guide a person in the doing of theology in one’s own, or in another’s, culture. It comes down to the individual Christian, the culture, the Bible, and the Holy Spirit’s leading and guidance. The ultimate goal is not to merely “do theology.” Rather, the ultimate goal is to bring people in that culture to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

What follows in this issue of the *International Journal of Frontier Missions* are revised papers originally written for me by my students over the past several years in a course I teach entitled, appropriately enough, “Doing Theology Across Cultures.” The purpose of the course is to acquaint veteran missionaries, as well as missionary candidates, with some of the material I have just described. Some of the authors have had much experience in another culture, some have had very little. But in all of the articles a common theme unfolds: each author is attempting to discover the heartfelt needs of individuals in a particular culture and through this analysis apply relevant Biblical answers which will meet those needs.

Read on! I am sure that what you read will be of benefit to you and your ministry. Perhaps it won’t be of direct benefit. But at the very least these articles will expose you to what others are attempting to do, and that may get you to thinking about how *you* can better “do theology” where you are. That is my prayer.

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