

What's Wrong with the Label "Managerial Missiology"

by Levi T. DeCarvalho



A new label has recently been proposed in the field of mission studies. I am referring to the epithet "managerial missiology," which—to my knowledge—was coined as a way of criticizing the kind of missiology that has been produced by the "Pasadena think-tank." The epithet is unfortunate for several reasons, some of which I discuss below.

I intend to make ten observations about the proposed label that I think are relevant to our dialogue as thinkers and doers of Christian mission. I conclude by suggesting ten principles or guidelines that we might do well to consider in the light of such criticism, with a proposal for a consultation to discuss the issue.

Background

Christianity Today recently reported on a missiological consultation held in Iguassu, Brazil, in October 1999, where the term "managerial missiology" dominated the intense debates, under the guidance of William Taylor, WEF's Missions Commission head. David Neff reported:

Peruvian missiologist Samuel Escobar was unable to attend the consultation . . . But in a paper discussed at the meeting, he criticized the 'managerial missiology' practiced by certain North American groups. 'The distinctive note' of this approach to missions 'is to reduce Christian mission to a manageable enterprise,' Escobar wrote. Practitioners of this approach focus on the quantifiable, measurable tasks of missions and ask pragmatic questions about how to achieve goals. Escobar called this statistical approach 'anti-theological' and said it 'has no theological or pastoral resources to cope with the suffering and persecution involved because it is geared to provide guaranteed success.'²

The other two names most readily associated with the use of the term (and who admit to having borrowed it from Escobar) are James Engel (Escobar's colleague at Eastern Seminary) and William Dyrness (a professor and former dean of Fuller Seminary's own School of Theology). Neff states, somewhat paradoxically:

This managerial approach is 'a major leap onto the secular stage of strategic planning,' according to a monograph from retired Eastern College professor James Engel. In the event's opening address, consultation director William Taylor quoted extensively from Engel, who was among the first to foster evangelical adoption of marketing principles.

The critics associate the proponents of "managerial missiology" with the plans fostered by selected agencies to evangelize the world by 2000 AD. Following

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Escobar's lead, Engel and Dyrness have published the controversial *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 2000, 192 pp.), which has elicited some strong criticism from David Hesselgrave and Ralph Winter, among others.³

Guatemalan Rudy Girón, former head of COMIBAM, who was present at the Iguassu consultation, is positive in his evaluation of the kind of missiology that Escobar seems to loathe.⁴ In a private conversation we have had recently, Girón expressed his disappointment at the lack of a more profound dialogue between the scholars involved. If we really want the church, at all levels, to become engaged in mission, says Girón:

We must return to the trenches of the rural and barrio churches and there test our missiological jargon. Then we will realize that unless that jargon is explained and illustrated, whether or not we include elements of 'managerial missiology,' nobody will understand what the Great Commission means. Let us keep a balanced approach to all the elements that combine to formulate a relevant missiology for our 21st century.⁵

On the North American front, the approach has its defendants. Dave Stravers, with The Bible League, USA, says in the GMI World, Spring 2000 Report:

I cannot join those who criticize 'managerial missiology.' Quantitative measurement of ministry results is absolutely essential, . . . and our management-by-objectives commitment is largely responsible for our ability to stay in tune with what God is doing. The problem as I observe it is that so many well-meaning organizations are either unable or unwilling to measure the right things, or to manage their resources based on those measurements.

There is no contradiction between quantity and quality when evangelism and discipleship are done God's way. We have found that far from going too slow, our ministries have gone so fast we are always running to keep up. Those who are looking for a model that combines quantitative outcomes with [gospel] values are welcome to inquire how The Bible League does it.

On the other side of the fence, Richard Briggs, in "Theological issues facing OM in the 21st century,"⁶ discusses what he thinks are OM's most pressing problems at the beginning of the new millennium. In considering what needs to be analyzed as Christians connect "the unchanging Gospel with the changing world around us," Briggs discusses four issues: (1) The collapse of the Enlightenment project; (2) The changing face of evangelicalism; (3) The interpretation of the Bible; and (4) The disaster [sic] of managerial missions. Although this is a long quotation, it reflects the influence of the negative connotation associated with the label "managerial missiology" on OM's strategy:

A particular Western export, which OM needs to confront head on, is the so-called 'managerial missiology'. This is a basic approach to mission in terms of how to manage it as a business, a project, or an exercise in resource deployment. It has dominated a certain wing of evangelical mission activity. It has been an unmitigated disaster.

What typically happens is this. A genuine need is noticed: perhaps there is no church in town A; or there has never been a witness to Muslims in town B; or there are no Christians at all in area C. Plans are made to do something about this: 'We'll plant a church/start a work/develop a project.' At this point, energy becomes focused on making the project (or plant, or 'work') succeed. We start to think in terms of structural result rather than in terms of the gospel of life transforming people's pain and darkness in a confusing world. By the grace of God, good can come out of such situations, but it is not a healthy model. Happily, it is being left behind by a lot of mission agencies today.

Unfortunately, sometimes the perceived need is not even genuine in the first place. Unbiblical ideas like the '10/40 window' have gained priority over explicit biblical models of mission such as Jesus' programmatic statement of Luke 4:18-19 (and indeed the whole model of Luke's gospel). Perhaps the very first challenge of the 21st century for OM will be to repent of all that has been said about focusing on the alleged significance of the year 2000. We do not know when Jesus will return. Until he does,

we are called to be good and faithful servants, not (heaven help us) good and strategic ones.

People are beginning to take sides in relation to the managerial missiology issue. Such polarization is most unfortunate, since the details of the debate remain unclear for most, it seems to me.

Ten Observations

Without going into more detail as to the extent of the debate, I now suggest ten aspects of Escobar's expression that I consider to be detrimental to our discussion. I then conclude by suggesting ways in which we can develop a fruitful dialogue as mission thinkers and practitioners from both North and South.

1. Pejorative Use of the Word "Managerial."

It appears to me that the word "managerial" is being used in a pejorative way. This is most unfortunate since a whole group of Christians who try and develop their God-given managerial gifts for the advancement of God's Kingdom find their vocation placed under such negative light. Management is one of many gifts of the Spirit. Time and again Scripture instructs the believers about the use of their managerial skills (I use the word managerial in a positive sense, following the biblical use) since they have to account for their God-given gifts and ministries to the Lord Himself, who is "the manager over all managers"⁷ (cf. Matt. 24).⁸

In the Bible, management and stewardship (Greek *oikonomia*) are synonymous. Joseph, Moses, Nehemiah, Daniel, Barnabas, Paul, and the Lord Jesus Christ himself are outstanding examples of stewardship in the Bible. The Greek word used in Romans 12:8 for the person with the gift of management or administration, for example, is *metadidous*, meaning the one who has been entrusted to divide or distribute God-given resources, tasks, and responsibilities wisely, so as to extend His Kingdom and build up the Body of Christ.

Kittel speaks of *oikodomein* as "a spiritual task of the community" of faith. The term *oikodomeistha* "is indeed a term for the process of the growth and development of the community in salvation history" (V: 140). Moreover, "the

individual Christian contributes to the building and upbuilding because this is ultimately the true work of God or Christ" (V: 141). In fact, "the term edification comprises two aspects, on the one side inner strengthening in might

Wong, who are professors of management at Seattle Pacific University, discuss "the impact that spirituality has on the fields of management research, practice, and pedagogy" (540). They propose a "Christian approach to man-

practical application of their own model to their managerial vocation:

[We] try to model Christian community on our campus. Although we do not require a particular worldview or faith commitment as a selection criterion for students, we are very explicit about our own worldview orientation. Faculty members, as role models, are selected, in part, in consonance with the faith-mission match and are expected to weave a consideration of ethical issues throughout the curriculum, beyond the typical ethics course.

Our goal here is to communicate to the students that they exist in an interdependent web of people and relationships. To the extent that they can use their talents and abilities to serve others, they will be fulfilling part of their calling (558).

People like Daniels, Franz, and Wong have a lesson or two to teach missiologists—and their critics—about how to use management theory and practice to the glory of God, in both church and mission. We should dialogue with them in order to learn as much as we can in our common struggle to witness to God through our distinct and complementary vocations.

4. Confusion of Ends and Means.

Confusing ends with means is theologically poor and missiologically narrow. Management-dependent approaches are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. No serious missiologist, in his/her sane mind, would advocate such a naïve approach to mission thinking and practice.

5. Reductionist Understanding of Missiology.

Labeling the kind of reflection that has come out of Pasadena as "managerial missiology" is reductionist in terms of an intentionally negative categorization of missiological studies. The so-called "Pasadena group" or "Pasadena think-tank" represents a wide variety of field experiences. The theories or models that have been proposed by both Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission and the U.S. Center for World Mission have been tested by that most demanding group of Christian witnesses, namely, the multiethnic group of students and practitioners who have taken these ideas to bear upon their field contexts, and have critiqued and

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and knowledge, and on the other outer winning and convincing. It corresponds to the congregation's process of growth" (V:142). Therefore, no servant of God should feel ashamed of his/her calling as a manager or administrator, much less see his/her vocation misused as a bad word aimed at stereotyping a distorted view of missiology.

2. Reductionist Use of Management.

For the critics, apparently, all management is intrinsically negative, unscrupulous and geared only toward immediate material objectives. On the contrary, management is an honorable field of human endeavor, one in which a host of Christians specialize themselves with the aim of channeling their service to God and humanity. Christian management (yes, there is such a thing) aims precisely at altruistic works that produce genuine personal fulfillment as the manager/administrator seeks to use his/her vocation for the service of others as a way of serving God.

3. Ignorance of Discussions on Spirituality and Management.

Unbeknownst to some critics, extensive discussions have been going on regarding the relationship between Christianity and management. Just to cite one example, a recent article by Denise Daniels, Randal Franz and Kenman Wong does precisely that. "A Classroom with a Worldview: Making Spiritual Assumptions Explicit in Management Education"⁹ is an excellent discussion of the relationship between worldview and management theory and practice. Daniels, Franz, and

Wong, who are professors of management at Seattle Pacific University, discuss "the impact that spirituality has on the fields of management research, practice, and pedagogy" (540). They propose a "Christian approach to man-

agement" by way of a "descriptive case about how our Christian beliefs inform our understanding and teaching of management" (552 ff.). The authors discuss such issues as the Christian perspective on the human nature and condition in relation to McGregor's Theory X/Theory Y model¹⁰ with practical application to their pedagogical calling. They go on to touch on the Christian perspective on community by stating that, in the Bible, "nowhere are people positively portrayed as atomistic individuals who are free to pursue completely self-chosen ends." Actually, "community serves as a central organizing principle for human purpose, activity, and conduct. For example, work ceases to exist as a path to material enrichment or self-fulfillment. Rather, it is a means by which one honors God and serves other people" (556). Job satisfaction, leadership, and resource usage are items that they analyze as far as the relation between community and management theory is concerned. For them, job satisfaction "can only happen when one views work as a vocation (literally, 'calling')" (557).

Statements to the effect that "people are to be responsible to be stewards of their resources, whether they are intellectual or physical" sound quite biblical to me. In their viewpoint, "customers' interests should drive the design and delivery of products and services, not merely to increase market share but to more effectively serve them" (558). The article is worth quoting at length, but I have space constraints here. As a final quotation, Daniels, Franz, and Wong offer a

criticized them in papers and dissertations for more than two decades.

6. Ignorance of and Confusion over Worldview Issues.

It seems to me that that Escobar, Engel and Dyrness, *et al*, have not really grasped the worldview differences between western and non-western missiologists. Contrasting assumptions, values, and commitments are not immediately perceived, even among scholars (especially if they come from different cultural backgrounds).

Such cultural assumptions¹¹ as “a real and rational world,” “analytical approach,” “a mechanistic worldview,” and an “emphasis on sight” combine to make up a basic worldview that more often than not is typical of western missionaries working in the non-western world. Understandably, then, conflicts soon spring up between implicit assumptions and explicit behavior as far as the transmitters and receptors of the Christian message are concerned.¹² We would do well to examine these worldview issues more attentively before jumping to conclusions about what is explicit or implicit in this or that missiology. I myself have come to appreciate a lot more the contribution of my colleagues in the western world once I began to grasp these very basic worldview differences.

7. Monologue Criticism.

Following a failure to understand the differences between western and non-western worldviews, a kind of “monologue criticism” soon springs up, and contributes to disrupt the process of mutual understanding between the parties concerned. More often than not, a person who is thinking A is saying B to another person who thinks C and responds D. Small wonder that our conversation is fast becoming a “monologue criticism” with little room for patiently seeking to understand the implicit meanings of the other.

8. Indirect Criticism of Christian Business People.

Another implication resident in the epithet is a veiled criticism of Christian business people, who might well ask themselves, “What do we have to do with missions since our expertise and resources are seen under a negative

light by those whom we propose to partner with for the advancement of the Kingdom?” We run the risk of impeding the unity that we should model in mission thinking and practice. If anything that smells business is inherently evil—a natural conclusion from the negativism implicit in the epithet—why should we partner together in the work of the Lord, be it evangelization or cross-cultural mission?

9. Ignorance of the Biblical Bases of Stewardship.

In the kind of criticism we are considering here, the biblical basis of stewardship has been bypassed with a simple waving of the wrong flag. The Bible repeatedly instructs believers about the proper way of conducting business—or management, for that matter—while condemning any interference of sinful thought and behavior, which can permeate any kind of human activity. We have honorable biblical characters who stand out as models of management, whose lives continue to inspire millions throughout the world by way of their faithfulness to the Lord in the midst of adversity. To dismiss or ignore such models is a grave mistake, both theologically and missiologically.

10. “Inimical Missiology” as Opposed to Missiological Dialogue.

For a long time, western theology was attached to the politico-ideological thinking that pervaded the East-West confrontational era, known as “cold war.” The 1960s, especially, were one such period in Latin America. The evangelical church, to a considerable extent, retrenched into its own existence and largely refused to dialogue with leftist ideologies, limiting itself to a safe criticism from a distance. The enemy then came from the East, with its Marxist ideology that threatened to quake the foundations so carefully carved out by the conservative Protestant groups in Latin America.

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the dismantling of the cold war, a new enemy had to be found to justify and re-deploy the energy devoted to this kind of thinking. The “enemy from the North”—i.e., managerial missiology—has appeared as a suitable substitute.

Conclusion

All in all, we must be grateful for the criticism leveled against “managerial missiology.” We have been forced to rethink our assumptions, values, and commitments—in short, our worldviews. I would suggest the following as principles or directives for debate and definition:

1. Evangelization and church growth, as well as cross-cultural mission, must come to terms with management considerations in the light of both biblical theology of mission and management theories.
2. We are responsible before God for the resources (human, material, conceptual, and spiritual) that He has entrusted to us; therefore, conscious and responsible stewardship/management is a must.
3. Since God has entrusted different resources to different agencies and human beings/groups, it follows that we must work in cooperation, not competition or enmity with one another.
4. Theoretical missiology cannot exist apart from or above practical missiology; they are mutually dependent.
5. We are responsible before God to be effective and faithful in our calling, and bear much fruit for His glory, not merely to theologize or missiologize about it.
6. There is no such thing as a missiological elite; we run a serious risk by institutionalizing missiology.
7. We must be accountable to one another if we are to be faithful to Scripture and work in unity as witnesses to the nations.
8. Before proposing new approaches/models in mission and church growth, we need to become familiarized with what others have done and are doing through mature dialogue.
9. Negative labeling and hasty dismissals of missiological approaches are detrimental to an informed and relevant missiology.
10. Criticism per se leads nowhere; we must propose consistent alternatives if we are to engage in mature and constructive missiological dialogue and partnership in mission.

I would urge all of us who are concerned with true missiology—one that involves mature dialogue centered around the Word of God and is carried out in light

As a final suggestion, I would propose that we convene a consultation to discuss the relationship between missiology and management.

of the contextual kaleidoscope in which it is to be expressed—not to hastily dismiss what has been proposed by serious missiologists, albeit with clear theoretical and practical weaknesses. The true test of missiological formulations or models takes place on the mission field context, not in the air-conditioned rooms of academia. In the final analysis, it is the missionary working on his/her assignment as a faithful manager of God's gifts that will be able to say whether our neatly packaged missiologies or criticisms thereof are worth their salt. This is a far cry from stating that pragmatism rules unchallenged. Our theology of mission (or missiology, if you will) has little value if it cannot be put into practice where it is needed the most—on the mission field. As in the pages of Scripture, God blesses the work of those who labor for Him among the nations and who are faithful stewards (or managers) of His calling and gifting.

As a final suggestion, I would propose that we convene a consultation to discuss the relationship between missiology and management. It is high time we made a sober analysis of the interplay between the methodologies we have proposed in the light of the biblical principles of stewardship in church and mission. Theologians, missiologists, mission practitioners, mission agencies' CEOs, and management experts (such as those I quote from in this paper) should be invited to participate in the debate. The ideal place to do that would be the U.S. Center, in my opinion. Since we have been particularly (often indirectly) criticized, we should be at the forefront of the debate.

We all—those with the gift of management included—have a part to play in God's mission. This is a time for dialogue and embrace, not for exclusion.

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Endnotes

¹I believe it is important to state my biases up front. First of all, I was born in Brazil, Latin America. Second, I have

been a missionary for over twenty years among the Terêna tribe located in the southwestern part of Brazil. My wife is herself a member of that group. Third, I have earned a Ph.D. (anthropology/missiology) degree from Fuller Seminary under the mentorship of Charles H. Kraft. Fourth, I am presently working in the Latin American Mobilization Division at the U. S. Center for World Mission as well as Academic Vice President of the William Carey International University, both of which are based in Pasadena, CA. Needless to say, I have been influenced by these (and other) contexts in many ways, which are reflected in the present discussion.

²*Christianity Today* 43(14): 28, December 1999.

³See David J. Hesselgrave's review of "Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have we Gone Wrong?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43(3): 567 (September 2000). Among other things, Hesselgrave points out that although Engel and Dyrness "acknowledge a debt to Roland Allen . . . they give only token attention to Paul's missionary ministry and the fact that it was that ministry that Allen considered to be the Biblical model for our mission." Perhaps the strongest criticism is Hesselgrave's assertion that Engel and Dyrness "claim that evangelical missions of the twentieth century went wrong because they adopted the thinking, values, and methods characteristic of modernity. But," he says, "baby boomer Christians . . . are postmodern and they now control the destiny of North American churches and missions." And again, "Engel and Dyrness embrace the [typical postmodern figure of] the rock 'n roll musician altogether too enthusiastically. It seems to me that their recommended personal revolution goes way beyond needed reform. To the extent that this so, the authors make the same mistake they accuse twentieth-century missions and missionaries of making, except that in the one case, the accommodation was to modernism, while in the other it represents an accommodation to postmodernism." Ralph D. Winter reasons along the same

lines. For him, Engel and Dyrness' book is too amateurish. "The very title assumes, 'We have gone wrong.' That is a slap in the face, right there, because their 'we' is not talking about themselves going wrong, but the people in the mission movement: pastors, missionaries, and mission executives. Indeed, almost every paragraph in the book seems designed to undermine the reader's confidence in the leaders and agencies that make up the current mission movement." Paradoxically, "the book is partly a book on management as a cure for all ills, and yet it roundly criticizes agencies for making plans and setting goals." In fact, "The book could almost be considered a thinly disguised commercial for management services to mission agencies." Those that encourage measurable goals are "fully aware that much more is required than measurements of certain kinds of goals," though Engel and Dyrness do not seem to perceive that (*Mission Frontiers* December 2000, Editorial).

⁴See the commentary to the Iguassu Affirmation in William Taylor, ed., *Global Missiology for the 21st Century: The Iguassu Dialogue* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2000), chapter 40. Rudy Girón, one of the commentators, lucidly exposes the one-sidedness of the Iguassu consultation: "It was unfortunate that almost none of the major missiologists that represent the so called 'managerial missiology' were at Iguassu That left us again [referring to the theoretical discussion on spiritual warfare] in Iguassu with only an unbalanced side of the coin. If some of the missiologists who have produced a vast field of data regarding the unreached people groups of the world had been present at Iguassu, they would have enriched the consultation." Besides, "many of these critics possess limited practical experience of the realities of this world." In a diplomatic tone, not divested of a point of criticism, Girón says: "missiologists have the tendency to present the Great Commission in such sophisticated theological jargon that the common Christian (who wants to understand how to contribute to the Great Commission) is simply lost. . . . We need to see through reliable statistics to the realities of this world." Girón states unequivocally: "Those of us who have been involved in what is called 'managerial missiology' have found these emphases to be a great blessing as we spread the missionary vision throughout our Latin American continent." Recognizing the

need to be cautious about the value and relevance of statistical information, Girón is emphatic: "we voice our concern that in applying the epithet 'managerial missiology' to all statistical strategizing, we may mislead the global missionary movement and deprive the church of very valuable tools that have blessed many of our churches worldwide." And, again: "We must be careful not to conclude that those who produce, use, and spread statistical information are seen only as ones who reduce mission to mere numerical elements."

⁵William D. Taylor, ed., chapter 40.

⁶See <http://www.om.org/relay/stories/3-97briggsIssues.html>

⁷Kittel offers a series of biblical texts in support of the profound theological import of the Christian's stewardship of God-given gifts and resources, both for the inner blessing of the faith community as well as for a witness to the world. In reference to *oikodomé*, Kittel states: "Whatever takes place in the community should contribute to [its] edifying. Apostolic authority should serve it" (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Gerhard Friederich, ed., and Geoffrey W. Bromiley, trans. and ed., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967:V: 145). His discussion on *oikonomos* and *oikodespotes* (two Greek terms for steward) is illuminating. "[*Oikonomos*] can be used for a kind of 'house-keeper,' 'estate manager,' or 'accountant.'" He goes on to state, rather emphatically, using the text of Numbers 12, that "God is a householder, for the whole world is His, v. Ps. 24.1; and Moses is His steward, v. Nu. 12.7; 'he is trustworthy in all my house' (cf. Hb. 3.1-6)" (V: 149).

⁸"A dispensation [*oikonomia*] is... a mode of dealing, an arrangement or administration of affairs" (Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, 1: 321).

⁹*Journal of Management Education* 24(5): 540-561, October 2000.

¹⁰According to McGregor, there are two basic perspectives on management. A manager may see people as typically resistant to change, preferring to be led rather than lead—which he dubbed X Theory. People are thought to lack any major motivation to work beyond their comfortable zones. Y theory, on the other hand, sees people as quite willing to work and to take responsibility on themselves. They take initiative when necessary and feel responsible for what they do. Instead

of using the traditional approach to management whereby the supervisor is more of a controller than a facilitator (X Theory), McGregor proposes that managers work with their subordinates as full-fledged human beings that need more than material goals to enjoy job satisfaction and attempt innovation, thus stretching their own innate abilities and acquired skills (Y theory).

The whole discussion ranges around the issue of motivation. In the first case, the major brunt of responsibility falls on the shoulders of the managers, who have to take a hard approach in order to coerce and control people. (A "soft" kind of management of X people would be to satisfy their demands and thus "abdicate" management to a large extent.) On the other hand, since Y people have potential, management is seen as providing the ideal conditions for their development in a relationship of mutual accountability and responsibility. In other words, theory Y advocates management by self-control and participation toward job and personal/social enrichment. McGregor's principles

were present in management training courses for more than a decade. They influenced the design and implementation of personnel policies and practices. His legacy permeates the postulates of participative management and TQM (total quality management), which are reflected in the practice of staff evaluation even to this day. See Douglas McGregor, *The Human Side of Enterprise* (McGraw Hill, 1960), and *The Professional Manager* (McGraw Hill, 1967).

¹¹As discussed, for example, by Paul Hiebert in *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1985), 111-137.

¹²See my dissertation, "The Shaman and the Missionary: Worldview Construction among the Terêna" (Fuller Theological Seminary: School of World Mission, 1999).

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