

The Theory of Practice: Reflections on Donald McGavran

by Charles H. Kraft

I was hired by Dr. McGavran in 1969 to be the fourth member of the School of World Mission faculty. I was at that time teaching at UCLA and took this position as a part-time faculty member to teach anthropology in relation to church growth. I had completed my career as a field missionary and had “paid my dues” as a scholar by writing theoretically.

I write this piece to highlight one aspect of McGavran’s legacy that I found to be helpful to our students and to the movement. McGavran had a keen mind and could have held his own with any group of academics. However, at retirement age, rather than choosing and giving his attention to a known academic discipline as he could have, he chose to develop an area in which *practice* rather than theory was the name of the game.

In academic circles, studies that focus on practice rather than theory are looked down upon. Whether it be philosophy or theology or sociology or, my fields, anthropology and, linguistics, theory is religion and the scholars are the gods. Articles and books are written to impress other scholars, not to help ordinary people who seldom can even figure out what is being written by the scholars.

McGavran, during a long career as a missionary, having seen a variety of mission activities, had come to focus on the fact that the most important thing for missionaries to understand is that God wants people to be won to Him and gathered in churches. Other involvements of missionaries should always be secondary to this single purpose.

Now, there were missiology programs that had been captured by the quest for academic respectability. McGavran reacted against these programs in favor of training that specialized on developing “hard, bold plans” for carrying out Christian mission. He was for *practice*, letting the concern for theory fall where it might. There is theory in McGavran’s approach, but it’s the theory of practice, not theory for its own sake.

I believe the greatest heresy in Christianity is academicization. And the handmaiden of academicization is the quest

for academic recognition rather than practical application. That quest, then, is often fed by the insecurity of scholars who are trying to outdo other scholars in creativity.

Perhaps at least partially because McGavran was older, with most of his career behind him, he had the personal security that enabled him to thumb his nose at the scholars and stand for something *practical* and applicational. So he chose one tune, a tune he could play on any fiddle, and with “fierce pragmatism” he fought the theoreticians as well as God’s enemy.

Personally, I found this approach very congenial. My own approach to missiology as to all of life is practical. I have very little patience for the theory-oriented scholars in my previous field, linguistics. They play games with ideas and help very few. I contend that I am not a scholar. Nor was McGavran. *Scholarship is something we do, not something we are.*

When McGavran came to Fuller, he gave up something very important. By virtue of the academic focus of Fuller, he was forced to exist in an atmosphere of theoretical academics. He and the mission faculty were able to fight this to some extent, but with aims so practical, we were never considered scholars.

So, whatever happens from here on in, I believe McGavran chose the right way, the way of practice and the theory of practice that created an approach that has brought many into God’s Kingdom. It is irrelevant that we were looked down on. It is crucial that this legacy continue, that our mission movement continue to be practice oriented rather than scholarly. This is where God’s heart is, and where ours should be also. **IJFM**

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