



Does missiology have three legs to stand on? The upsurge of interdisciplinarity

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Abstract

A common heuristic device for depicting the interdisciplinary nature of missiology is the metaphor of a stool that stands on three legs (or academic disciplines). However, missiologists have disagreed on exactly which disciplines comprise those legs. That theology is central is hardly contested; but there is less agreement about the role of the social sciences, history, education, mission strategy, and so forth. Here, I argue that we should move beyond the three-legged stool metaphor, as it fails to describe the true interdisciplinary nature of missiology: The academic influences on missiology are more numerous than the stool metaphor allows for; the borders between these disciplines are fuzzy and changing; and the influence of academic theories on mission strategy is not merely one-way. In quest of a more satisfactory metaphor, I begin by suggesting a definition of missiology as the utilization of multiple academic disciplines to develop strategies for making disciples across cultures. Drawing on that definition, I develop the image of missiology as a river with countless tributaries (theoretical disciplines) that converge for this common goal. Since scholars of Christian mission cannot be experts in many fields, we must be intentional with the sort of interdisciplinarity that is most useful for designing effective mission strategies.

Keywords

interdisciplinarity, missiology, heuristic device, *missio Dei*, crosscultural discipleship

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Introduction: how many legs does the discipline of missiology stand on?

Just as a definition of “Christian mission” has been elusive and hotly contested over the years, scholars have had difficulty pinning down exactly what missiology is. As the science of Christian mission advances, it incorporates countless disciplines, ranging from biblical exegesis to cultural anthropology, to computational linguistics, to the use of psychology in member care and cultural adjustment, and so on. The advantage of this broad influence is that mission scholars can draw on their diverse academic backgrounds and interests as they apply their understanding of the *missio Dei* to their contexts. However, the ever-expanding net that missiologists cast may lead to the same problem that Stephen Neill (1959: 81) warned about when it comes to defining mission: If everything is missiology, then nothing is missiology. To avoid this crippling ambiguity, we must answer, *What is the nature of interdisciplinarity within missiology? What common denominator brings these disciplines together? How can an academician specialize, and yet be interdisciplinary at the same time? What is the relationship between academic theories of mission and the actual practice of Christian mission?* And at the very foundation of all these questions, we must settle on a definition of the discipline: *What is missiology?* These questions are the focus of this article.

I begin by briefly working out a definition of missiology; then I explore five limitations of the commonly promulgated “three-legged stool” metaphor, which errs in suggesting that the academic disciplines within missiology are static and finite in number, containing firm boundaries between each of them. It also erroneously implies that these disciplines exert a unidirectional influence on missiology. And while a stool has legs of equal length, scholars are not likely to ascribe equal prominence to each of the fields that influence missiology.

To better understand the role of interdisciplinarity within the science of Christian mission, I will develop the image of missiology as a river. This dynamic and expanding metaphor remedies the limitations of an inert stool, and allows for a meta-theoretical framework for describing the fluid and expanding nature of the discipline. To develop this metaphor, I will discuss emerging theories of interdisciplinarity, which have received little notice from missiologists; and I will uncover some of the dangers of casting such a broad interdisciplinary net. I argue that it is not the use of theology, social sciences, and history that lends missiological significance to a study; instead, it is the use of an interdisciplinary approach for the sake of making disciples across cultures that describes how missiology is done (see below for a more expanded discussion on the definition of missiology). In critiquing metaphors of the discipline of missiology, I desire to help emerging scholars of Christian mission find where they best fit within the discipline. They should cast their net ever more broadly, while standing firmly in their own area of expertise.

Defining missiology

To define missiology, we may start with the definition offered by a scholar who has done more than any other to shape the discipline. Alan Tippett defined missiology as

“the academic discipline or science which researches, records and applies data relating to the biblical origin, the history . . . the anthropological principles and techniques, and the theological base of the Christian mission” (1974: 26). We can see here an early instance of the trifecta of theology, anthropology, and history, with theology made prominent. Mission strategies (techniques) are also mentioned. We can also detect in Tippet’s definition an earlier, more basic definition of missiology as simply “the science of Christian mission.”

While Tippet’s definition is seminal, I suggest that it is unhelpful to leave the word “missionary” or “mission” undefined in a definition of missiology. Instead, we should aim to actually flesh out—concisely—the mission of the church. While many definitions of Christian mission have been offered, for the sake of parsimony, I may as well settle on Scherer’s (1987b) pithy definition as the church’s endeavor to cross boundaries (1987b: 37). So missiology is the use of these sciences that Tippet mentioned (anthropology, theology, history, etc.) to bring the church across cultural boundaries.

This brings us to one other limitation in Tippet’s definition: Missiology has moved far beyond the confining three-fold taxonomy of theology, history, and the social sciences. So I would broaden our definition of missiology a bit for the purposes of this article: the utilization of multiple academic disciplines to develop strategies for making disciples across cultures.

Depicting missiology

Once we have a basic definition of missiology, we can begin searching for a metaphor that depicts how the science of Christian mission is actually done. Missiologists have typically organized the discipline around three intersecting academic fields: theology, history, and anthropology (or more broadly, the social sciences) (Conn, 1984; Tippet, 1974; Winter and Hawthorne, 2013: 27). Some have likened missiology’s dependence on three major disciplines to a stool that stands on three legs (Steffen, 2011). While the stool metaphor is helpful in naming the “big three” disciplines, it has numerous limitations.

To begin with, scholars of mission who have expertise in other areas like education (Langmead, 2014) or mission strategy (Luzbetak, 1988) argue that the stool actually stands on a fourth leg. However, it is debatable what exactly that fourth leg should be, since scholars are tempted to emphasize the importance of those disciplines in which they have extensive professional experience. And if we added more legs to the stool, Olson and Fanning’s (2011) model of missiology would stand on five legs (which they call dimensions): history, theology, anthropology, demographics, and strategy. How many more legs can be added to the stool before it becomes something else altogether? While we know that missiology is by nature interdisciplinary, we have had difficulty delineating the disciplines that are especially “in” or “out.”

It is also difficult to find a metaphor that depicts how theory relates to practice in missiology. Justice Anderson’s (1998: 8) tripartite equation was reminiscent of the three-legged stool, but incorporated a space for strategy: The theology of mission plus the history of mission comprise a philosophy of mission (approaches) which will, in

turn, lead to cross-cultural strategies. Baker (2014) turned the three-legged stool metaphor on its figurative head by suggesting that the stool is inverted like a top: Theology, history, and anthropology are situated above the much more prominent part, the seat of the stool. The seat, where these legs meet up, is mission strategy. The more we tweak the metaphor to make it describe missiology, the more suspicious we become of its usefulness as a heuristic device.

Below, I will explore five limitations of the stool metaphor. The point is not so much to decry the stool metaphor, but to see how exposing these limitations can bring to light the true richness of the interdisciplinary nature of missiology.

Limitation 1: stool legs are distinct, static, and separate

A significant limitation of a stool metaphor is that furniture is solid, stationary, and unchanging. The legs of a stool are distinct, and do not touch each other. Reducing missiology to a short list of static disciplines creates artificial boundaries, and excludes other fields that are also influential. For example, the line between history and anthropology is often blurred in ethnographic studies: A society's past tends to shape its cultural makeup. Or to take another example of these fuzzy boundaries between disciplines: No theology can be developed without a theory of humankind—that is, without combining theology and anthropology. Baker pointed out the fuzzy boundaries between disciplines in the science of Christian mission when he argued that history, theology, and anthropology are metonyms for the “continually expanding array of disciplines and sub-disciplines” such as ethnohistory, ethnotheology, and ethnodoxology (2014: 18).

Missiology is not static; it has been shaped over the years by needs, trends, shifts, and paradigms. Rather than limit the academic disciplines that feed into the science of Christian mission, we need to emphasize the dynamic and expanding nature of missiology.

Limitation 2: stool legs are of equal length (or prominence)

Now that the distinct lines between the stool's legs have been blurred, the length of each leg is also called into question. A stool fails if one of its legs is longer than the others. But missiologists recognize that the equal weight should not be given to each academic sub-field. What they do not agree on is *which* leg is prominent.

Most missiologists would agree that theology has a leg up on the other fields. Mission anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1996: 203) argued that missiology must be built on theology—but not just any theology, rather, a theology that has mission at its core. While theology is weighted in importance, theology classes make up only a small percentage of the curriculum in schools of mission or intercultural studies. Bible and theology courses make up on average 21% of the required curriculum for doctoral degrees in missiology at seven well-known Christian universities in the USA, with a minimum of 13% and maximum of 38%.¹ To keep theology prominent, Pentecost's (1982: 16) image of missiology places theology at the hub of a wheel, and our various other academic pursuits are the spokes in that stem out of the hub.

Just as theologians would argue for a prominent role in the science of Christian mission, anthropologists are trying to secure their sphere of influence. Anthropology is in crisis in academia, and the role of anthropology in seminaries is increasingly contested, for fear that secular ideas about humanity from the social sciences will have a corrupting influence. And more broadly, “the social sciences, in the minds of many theologians, should not be allowed a dialogue partner role” (Priest, 2015: 30).

Twenty years ago, Hesslegrave (1996: 2) concluded that evangelical missiologists have a “fascination” with the social sciences as he compared the use of social sciences, theology, and history in the conciliar *International Review of Missions* to those in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*. Four percent of articles in *IRM* were historical, 15% were theological, and 1% were based on social sciences. In contrast, 1% of articles in *EMQ* used historical inquiry, 7% were theological in nature, and 6% relied on the social sciences.

The role historians have to play in missiology is also ambiguous. Is the study of history an end in itself, or is it only useful insofar as it provides insights about failures, successes, and paradigm shifts in Christian mission? While evangelicals have not neglected theology, they have a short memory (neglecting history) and have had what Corwin called a “love affair with research and analysis” (1996: 20). With such an emphasis on research in the social sciences, some feared that missiology was actually becoming de-theologized (McQuilkin, 1996: 176).

Interestingly, the origin of the “three-legged stool” analogy is related not only to interdisciplinarity but to questions about giving prominence to a specific discipline. Throughout the 20th century, the metaphor of a three-legged stool was typically ascribed to Reformation leader Richard Hooker in 1597. Hooker developed an Anglican hermeneutic that leaned on Scripture, reason, and authority (or tradition):

Be it in matter of the one kind or of the other, what Scripture doth plainly deliver, to that the first place both of credit and obedience is due, the next whereunto is whatsoever any man can necessarily conclude by force of reason; after this the Church succeedeth that which the church by her ecclesiastical authority shall probably think and define to be true or good, must in congruity of reason overrule all other inferior judgments whatsoever. (Book V, 8:2)

Historical theologians challenge the notion that Hooker developed such a three-legged hermeneutic that would give Scripture, reason, and authority equal weight. Instead, Hooker and most other reformers envisioned a hierarchy or chain of command, with Scripture at the top. Reason and tradition are also essential for guiding our lives, but are subservient to Scripture.

Missiologists employ a similar chain of command for developing the science of Christian mission; but there is disagreement about what is at the top of the chain. The stool metaphor does not adequately capture the way in which disciplines are weighted or given prominence.

Limitation 3: stool legs do not represent a recursive process

Our understanding of missiology must also reflect the interplay between theory and practice. If we think of theory as legs on which to stand, or as ideas that funnel down

to strategy, we fail to recognize the recursive interaction between theory and strategy. In reality, our theories are shaped by real experience; so there is, as Baker (2014: 18) put it, a feedback loop. The field experiences of missionaries are continually applied to missiology to refine theory and strategies. Missiologists pine for a scenario where the science of Christian mission not only stems from systematic theology, but also informs the work of theologians. And, in fact, some theologians have certainly been influenced by missiologists. New Testament scholars D. A. Carson and Andreas Köstenberger, and pastoral theologian John Piper are some examples. Timothy Tennent (2007), after Andrew Walls (1999), has built a strong argument for the necessity of cross-cultural influence on every area of systematic theology. This feedback is especially helpful as missiologists can further theology by distinguishing between cultural forms and underlying meanings (Allison, 1996: 38).

Missiology and anthropology are in a continual process of cross-pollination (to switch metaphors for a minute). At the end of the 19th century, Christian mission played a major part in forming the discipline of anthropology. Whiteman (2003) has traced the contribution made to anthropological theory by missionaries like Robert Codrington, John Batchelor, Maurice Leenhardt, Henri Alexandre Junod, and William and Charlotte Wisser. Missionaries provided data from all over the world on so-called primitive cultures, and they modeled high standards for ethnographic field methods.

The feedback loop can also be seen in the way missionaries provided data on the world's minority languages at a time when linguistics was becoming recognized as a science in its own right. Kenneth Pike, founder of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), was a formative linguist. Eugene Nida, from the United Bible Society, helped bring anthropology, linguistics, and Christian mission together.

Since this time, theories from anthropology, linguistics, pedagogy, and so on, have in turn influenced missiology. To take several examples, missiology has incorporated the notion of functional substitutes from Malinowski's (1944) biological functionalism; the orality movement gained steam from Walter Ong's (1982) seminal work on the subject; Edward Hall's (1959, 1976, 1990) research from the Foreign Service Institute has shaped missionary cross-cultural training for decades. Missiologists Lingenfelter and Mayers's (1986) models of cross-cultural communication drew on Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's (1961) comparative study of cultural values; and their grid-group model relied on work from anthropologist Mary Douglas (1978). And more recently, Livermore's (2009) application of cultural intelligence (CQ) to short-term missions was borrowed from the business world (Ng, Van Dyne, and Ang, 2012).

In any interdisciplinary context, borrowing and modifying is a two-way process. It is as if theology, history, the social sciences, linguistics, and so forth, move forward alongside missiology; the more diffusion of ideas there is between the disciplines, the more they have in common. The stool metaphor, though, does not allow for the influence that one leg has on the other.

Limitation 4: missiology is not done that way

Additionally, while the "three leg" metaphor has become nearly canonical, it does not describe how missiology is actually done. Over 20 years ago, missiologists recognized that

mission education for the 21st century would certainly involve theology and the social sciences, but would also include studies from other areas like economics, poverty, urbanization, migration, globalization, and the breakdown of the family (Steffen, 1993). Pocock's list of sciences that are part of missiology included "anthropology, sociology, psychology, communications, linguistics, demography, geography and statistics" (1996: 10).

In fact, missiology has been branching beyond the "three big disciplines" for decades. For example, Anderson (1973) recognized the role that agriculture, education, medicine, and public health play in shaping the science of Christian mission. Kraft's missiology leaned heavily on theology, history and anthropology, but also drew from communication theory. Cross-cultural training relies on the psychology of cultural adjustment experienced by sojourners and immigrants. Research methods inevitably get into philosophy; evangelism relies on studies of world religions, pluralism, and epistemology. Business as mission (BAM) relies on economics and social justice (Rundle and Steffen, 2013). To mitigate the fault of the "three and only three disciplines" in the stool analogy, Tippett's (1988) organization of the science of Christian mission involved a Venn diagram with two dozen or so overlapping sub-disciplines (demographics, sociology, etc.).

The ever-widening pool of theory from which missiology draws can be seen in specific research projects. For example, Ott's (2014) recent article on biblical metaphors drew on (among others) biblical studies of atonement and ecclesiology, as well as the use of metaphor in higher education, the role of ontology in architecture, the use of symbol and ritual in culture, and the role of language and translation. Two recent studies published in *The Great Commission Research Journal* (Casey, 2012; Huizing, 2012) relied on ecclesiology and theology as well as concepts from the field of qualitative research methodology. Jenkins's (2008) essay on "missiology in environmental context" cites numerous sources on environmental stewardship but also employs liberation theology, ecology, and development theories. And Rynkiewich's (2013) article on diaspora missiology cites sources on globalization, multiculturalism, hermeneutics, as well as specific ethnographic studies.

In fact, missiological research can be done without direct historical studies, or without delving into anthropological theory. For example, Barram's (2014) theoretical essay on biblical values of economic justice, while rooted in the *oikonomia* of Genesis 1–3, does not look at the economics within specific cultural or historical contexts. Or theology may be slim in some missiological research; but the piece may still make a contribution to Christian mission. LaBreche's (2014) research on the evaluation of missionary performance relies very little on anthropology, history, or theology, but provides important guidelines for missionary educators and administrators. As I looked over my own missiological research, I noticed that my study of Christianity and animism in Melanesia (Nehrbass, 2012) stood on anthropology, history, and to a lesser extent, theology. However, my study of formal theological education in Vanuatu (Nehrbass, 2011) did not particularly involve historical or theological inquiry—it asked a question from the social sciences: For what reasons do Melanesians avail themselves of theological training?

What, then, makes the study missiological, if it does not stand simultaneously on theology, social sciences, and history? The use of an interdisciplinary approach for

making disciples of the *ethne* (Matt 28:16–20; Luke 24:44–48; John 20:21; Acts 1:8) is the common denominator of missiological studies. That is, it is not the presence of certain academic fields that makes missiology; instead, what makes missiology is a commitment to understanding how best to make Jesus-followers as we cross cultures.

Extreme prioritists may argue that missiology is only useful insofar as more churches are planted. But the command to make disciples of all nations is more richly understood when it is taken in a number of directions. We make disciples of the *ethne* as we educate cross-culturally, as we run businesses in an ethical way cross-culturally, as we care for the sick and provide for other material needs. In other words, we may be engaged in missiology even when we are not sitting squarely on the three-legged stool of theology, history, and social sciences.

Limitation 5: stool legs do not describe a meta-theory

This leads us to a fifth limitation of the three-legged stool. True, just as the legs serve to prop up the stool, each of the disciplines (whether three, four, five, or whatever number) serves the single purpose of cross-cultural discipleship. However, the stool metaphor comes up short in explaining how these legs are fundamentally related to each other, or how they synergistically create a new entity. Is there some sort of “unifying field of knowledge” that explains what in the world anthropology has to do with theology, or what education has to do with history? Even a Venn diagram with the blurred boundaries between theology, history, social sciences, and so forth, fails to represent a unifying field that brings these disciplines together in the first place.

It is God’s mission, the *missio Dei*, that really serves as a unifying field around which all our other academic studies are organized. That is, God has been working throughout history and human societies, since the beginning of time, for the central purpose of revealing Himself. In that sense, there is no anthropology for its own sake, or even theology for its own sake. In light of the *missio Dei*, all studies are based on the underlying purpose of understanding who God is and who we are in relation to God.

Additionally, the “one-size-fits-all” characteristic of the stool metaphor fails to depict how missiology is done on a global scale. The questions of missiology are shaped significantly by our own ecclesiastical traditions; so missiology looks different for different “camps.” Glasser (1978) recognized that there are distinct conciliar, independent, and Catholic missiologies; and these traditions serve as “balancing distinctives” for the discipline.

Summary of the three-legged stool metaphor: does missiology have a leg to stand on?

Missiology is not a hodgepodge of firmly bounded academic disciplines; nor is it the sum total of knowledge from these various disciplines. The science of Christian mission is something *sui generis*—it is the use of biblical theology, social sciences,

education, and so forth in order to understand how to make disciples in other cultural contexts. As our knowledge of the world expands and changes, as more voices are added to the choir, missiology changes as well.

Below, I will develop a metaphor of missiology which attempts to rectify the deficiencies of stools, Venn diagrams, and spokes on a wheel. I envision the science of Christian mission more as a river with countless tributaries (theoretical disciplines) that converge at the common goal of making disciples in cross-cultural contexts. As the river moves downstream, it serves multiple communities in endless ways (mission strategies).

But before I develop the metaphor of missiology as a river, we need to consider the nature of interdisciplinarity itself, since it is the cross-pollination of ideas that really encapsulates how missiology is done.

The nature of interdisciplinarity

Of course, missiology does not have a monopoly on interdisciplinarity. Collaboration is becoming increasingly popular all over academia, as we recognize that all learning is simply the process of making new connections between several previously unconnected ideas. For instance, social scientists and physicians are working together to solve health problems in the Global South. Mining and oil companies consult anthropologists to understand the communities where they do business. As interdisciplinarity becomes more common, academicians run the risk of collaborating simply for collaboration's sake, or simply because it is trendy. Interdisciplinarity scholar Frodeman asks, Interdisciplinary is useful "to what end? Pragmatically put, toward the ends of greater insight and greater success at problem solving" (2010: xxxii). In the case of missiology, the cross-pollination is for the ultimate sake of making disciples of all peoples.

Earlier, I mentioned that one fault of the three-legged metaphor is the tendency to portray the disciplines of missiology as distinct and static. Interdisciplinarity scholars Calhoun and Rhoten explain that this tendency is common within any interdisciplinary field: "The distinctions among the social science disciplines are historically forged and largely arbitrary" (2010: 104). The recognition of a blurry overlap between fields marks a paradigm shift in interdisciplinarity. Scholars have moved from collaboration or interaction to integration of their disciplines (Landau, Proshansky, and Ittelson, 1962).

What makes interdisciplinarity different from collaboration is that true interdisciplinary studies often give birth a new academic discipline. Missiology was the result of what Krohn (2010: 31) has called "interdisciplinary fusion"—rather than leaving the boundaries between disciplines firm, a new discipline was born to solve new sorts of research problems. So interdisciplinarity is not a salad bowl—it requires integrating multiple disciplines to create a new field with distinct research methods, theoretical models, and purposes. And missiologists have argued that their field is not merely a mixture of "legitimate disciplines" like the social sciences, theology, and so forth; in the past three decades it has come to be recognized as a field in its own right (Scherer, 1987a; Tippett, 1974).

The dangers and difficulties of an interdisciplinary approach

While interdisciplinarity is part of being “cutting edge” in academia, it is not a panacea. In fact, it comes at a cost. One danger of such interdisciplinarity is it can give the impression that scholars must be experts in numerous fields in order to make a significant contribution. Staffing schools of mission with diverse specialists can give the impression that to be a mission scholar, one must become an expert on fields ranging from pastoral theology to Islamic studies to international development. Scherer called this tendency “interdisciplinary overload” (1987a: 517). We must be careful not to send the message that missiologists must be simultaneously economists, theologians, anthropologists, historians, educationists, and demographers. Instead, we must allow scholars to locate themselves within the broad discipline, and to ask what new connections they can make between theory and practice.

Also, interdisciplinarity can lead to “disciplinary defaulting” where theorists from certain backgrounds (economics, anthropology, etc.) continue to use terms and theories that are specific to their field, but that do not translate well across disciplines (Miller, 1982: 1). This leads us to a related danger: rather than fostering cross-pollination, emphasizing separate disciplines can cause further compartmentalization (Adeney, 2000: 384). The offices in our schools of world mission are occupied by theologians, historians, anthropologists, linguists, development consultants, and educationists, yet the demanding schedules of academia impede the interdisciplinary process.

New Testament missiology as a base for a new metaphor

It is common to talk about the “missionary methods” of the apostle Paul, the founder of Christian mission; but did he actually develop a missiology? Hesslegrave (2012) contends that Paul’s methods, theology, and strategies were inextricably linked. While Paul did not have modern anthropology and was not a historian, he used knowledge from many areas of life to discover how God makes Himself known among the *ethne*. Paul certainly combined the study of salvation history, culture, biblical exegesis, and so forth, to form a philosophy of mission and mission strategies. Paul’s missiology was defined by a desire to preach Christ to all *ethne*, and that approach required him to vary his message, style, polity, and methods depending on his target audience (Schnabel, 2012).

We see the same sort of flexibility in proclamation, methods, and geographic targeting throughout the New Testament. As Dean Flemming showed, Luke’s program for the book of Acts seemed to be the development of a missiology that contextualized the message, the law, and leadership styles for the target audience. For example, Paul adapted his communication style as well as his message for the Jewish agrarians, the Greek philosophers, and the Romans in rural areas (2005: 70, 74, 85, 130). The good news for Corinth was embodied differently than it was in Rome, Thessalonica, or Philippi (2005: 87–88). In fact, Flemming has shown a flexibility in the missiology of

Jesus and Peter, as well as Paul (2005: 53). So while it may be anachronistic to refer to a New Testament missiology, the apostles developed cross-cultural ministry with some of the tools that missiologists use.

For example, Paul's philosophy of mission was dynamic; it expanded and was flexible. The law applied differently to Jews living in Jerusalem than for pagans in the Roman Empire (Acts 15:1–35). As Gentiles came to faith, he realized that he could have communion with them (Gal 2:11–3:29) and the expansion of the church in his day caused him to work out a theology of the law. Consider how he worked out an approach toward food that had been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 8:1–13; 10:14–26). It was a theological question, but also an issue of culture, politics, history, and even demographics. Dyrness (after Chester Wood) argued that as Paul understood the geopolitical circumstances of his day, his missiological strategy involved moving the missionary outreach center from Jerusalem to Rome (1990: 189). Andrew Walls takes note of Paul's interdisciplinarity in solving missiological questions: "Paul ranges over such issues as the ontological status of pagan divinities, the nature of Christian liberty, the Christian duty of loving consideration for other Christians, and the different degrees of Christian maturity" (2010: 24).

And Paul's missiology also was directional, as the Spirit moved him along. He came to understand that his missionary purpose was to be a light to the Gentiles (Acts 13:46–48). The dynamic aspect of Paul's missiology meant that his strategies were unbounded; he could move as the Spirit led; in fact virtually every decision Paul made was based on prayer and the Spirit's guidance (Gallagher, 2013). He incorporated a number of influences.

By this point, we have examined the nature of interdisciplinarity, the weaknesses of the old stool metaphor for capturing the essence of missiology, and have tried to gain a sense of a New Testament missiology. Now, we are ready for a new metaphor that may more fully encompass the interdisciplinary nature of the science of Christian mission.

Missiology like a river

We understand that the disciplines that inform missiology are expanding, the boundaries between the disciplines are fuzzy, these disciplines converge for a central purpose, and that the diffusion of ideas between missiology and the other disciplines is two-way. A river seems to be a metaphor that captures this dynamic and expanding process that is compelled by an unseen force to move onward. While a stool is unchanging, rivers are constantly reinvented. As Heraclitus said, no man ever steps in the same river twice.

A river has endless tributaries; some are large and some have a much smaller influence. At times, some of the disciplines (like communication theory) that influence missiology surge for a time; others (like theology) exert a continual force, while others have a much smaller impact. Theology, though, occupies a unique place in the river. It is both tributary (as a separate discipline) and yet is the *sine qua non* of missiology. That is, if the theological tributary were cut off, the river would cease to be defined as missiology.

Indeed all of these tributaries expand and change as the cultural currents shift. That is, trends and issues arise which affect the mission of the church. When the current events included famines, cargo cults, or Marxism, missiology responded. Today, the world's surging currents involve human trafficking, global partnerships, and oral learners; and missiologists are in touch with those global needs and trends. Some streams within missiology rise and then wane; some disappear at the bottom of the river, others have a long "tail life" (Nehrbass, 2013). There are many hidden treasures in a riverbed, and eddies bring up those sediments. Additionally, the river metaphor suggests that ideas that had been latent upstream appear again later on.

How can we find the recursive process in a river? Mission scholars are often ambassadors of multiple disciplines (earlier I suggested the names of Codrington, Mayers, Lingenfelter, Livermore, Kraft, and others, as such cross-disciplinary ambassadors). They ferry their new missiological knowledge back upstream as they return to anthropology, psychology, theology, and so forth to diffuse their ideas throughout those tributaries.

The convergence of major tributaries often is the space that defines the river. While the Nile runs thousands of miles and is fed by endless smaller streams, the convergence in Egypt is symbolic of the river itself. In missiology, the space where these multiple disciplines converge is the purpose of fulfilling the Great Commission. Without that specific convergence, there would be social sciences, history, ethnotheology, and so forth, but there would be no missiology. Missiology exists when the study of God and God's *kosmos* is employed for the purpose of making disciples across cultures.

And rivers flow directionally. This mixture of theories moves downstream in the form of mission strategies. However, rivers are fluid, and the elements that are mixed up inside of them continue to wield an influence on the river and on future theoretical and strategic contributions. This is the recursive interplay between theory and strategy. What's fascinating is that even the downstream strategies of mission are highly interdisciplinary—with fluid or "fuzzy" boundaries between the theories. Madinger (2010), for instance, has demonstrated that the strategy of orality (evangelism through the spoken, rather than the written word) involves at least seven disciplines: anthropology, linguistics, literacy, social networks, cognition and memory, the arts, and media. And some might say that orality has become a discipline in its own right, with its own technical terms, canonical list of scholars, and formative books.

A stool serves best when it does *not* move; but a river moves with purpose. Rivers have a *telos*—a completion. Rivers, like Paul's missiology, are directional—moving toward the goal of making disciples of all peoples. The missionary task is not directed by missiology itself, but by God's work throughout history. Some scholars refer to this theoretical position as trinitarian missiology (Zscheile, 2013: 1, 3). All our efforts in language, culture, and theological studies are carried along by the *missio Dei*; we are participating with God as the Spirit moves (Bosch, 1991: 389–93). The image of currents carrying along a river reminds us that it is the Spirit of God that provides the forward direction.

But the directionality of a river does not imply narrowness in purpose. A stool's purpose is too narrowly defined for missiology: it is only for sitting. It is the very

nature of missiology as an interdisciplinary effort that allows this river to be quite broad, as we make disciples through our various efforts.

Conclusion

My overall aim here is not simply to substitute one metaphor for another; instead, I am contrasting various metaphors that have been used to describe missiology so that I can paint a vivid picture of what missiology is, and what it isn't—of how missiological research *is* and *isn't* done.

While we may concede that missiology is informed by countless disciplines “upstream,” schools of mission have limited resources, so the curriculum cannot include an endless stream of courses from philosophers, business professors, sociologists, and so forth. This is why we end up with a more or less canonical set of courses and faculty from anthropology, history, theology, and education. And even if we concede that the boundaries of missiology are dynamic, expanding, and “fuzzy,” schools of mission must design a standardized curriculum. In general, Christian mission faculty have doctoral degrees in history, theology, or the social sciences, and their courses reflect this. But missiologists use their narrow specializations in broad, interdisciplinary ways. Missiologically minded theologians do theological studies in an interdisciplinary way, looking at current economic and social challenges to our theology. Missiological historians do historical studies in an interdisciplinary way, delving into topics like geo-politics and globalization. And our studies in the social sciences span across the disciplines, from education to the psychology of intercultural adjustment, to economics and community development.

Casting our net widely means that no questions or data are off-limits when it comes to researching missiological questions. For example, research questions about theological education are also political and economic questions; studies of contextualization are also linguistic and historical studies; an understanding of best practices in community development also requires understanding of postcolonial modernities and globalization.

But casting our nets widely doesn't mean we must be experts on all of these fields. Instead, we must ask, What academic disciplines must I look at for solving the research question I'm interested in? And what level of collaboration with other scholars is necessary? In every case, we are increasingly aware that interdisciplinarity is fundamental to a holistic missiology.

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Note

1. I compared the ratio of credits for courses that are overtly theological or biblical in nature to the total credits required for the DMiss (alternatively called the Doctor of Intercultural Studies) at the following six academic institutions: Biola (6 out of 40 credits), Grace

Seminary (18 out of 48 credits), Western Seminary (9 out of 36 credits), Assemblies of God Theological Seminary (9 out of 38 credits), Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (6 out of 48 credits), and for the PhD in Missiology at Concordia Theological Seminary (15 out of 72 credits).

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