

# Foundations of Missiology

Zane Pratt

**Abstract:** While outside missions strategies can be helpful, missions must be biblically based. A robust evangelical theology of Scripture, combined with a commitment to historical/grammatical hermeneutics, is the essential foundation of evangelical missionary thought and practice.

Missiology is a popular subject. Countless books, articles, and podcasts are produced every year on some aspect of Christian mission. Most of them focus on strategies and tactics for the various components of the missionary task. However, before we can address these sorts of practical issues, we need to step behind the particulars of missionary practice and ask more fundamental questions. What are the foundations of our missiological method? Where do we go for answers to the central questions of missional thinking? How do we determine the nature of our mission, the acceptability of various methods, and the desired outcomes of that mission? Before we can answer these questions, however, we must also ask the questions that lie behind them. How do we even determine the right questions to ask? How do we go about finding the answers to these questions? What sources do we mine for missiological insight, and how do we use them rightly? The answers we give to this set of questions behind the questions lay the necessary foundation for any further missiological inquiry.

This foundational set of questions points us to even deeper questions about issues most people simply assume and therefore seldom examine. How do we know what we know about anything? Because missiology is a theological subject, we are particularly interested in theological epistemology. How do we know what we

should believe and what we should do about those things broadly connected with theology and worldview? What is the connection between what we believe and what we do? How closely aligned are the things we formally profess to believe and our actual worldview assumptions and values? What sources other than our formal theological convictions influence our beliefs and actions? The answers to these questions will shape everything else about our missiology.<sup>1</sup>

As evangelical Christians, our starting point for any line of inquiry is the Bible. In fact, our entire theology of Scripture gives shape and substance to our missiology. This includes the nature and attributes of Scripture. It also includes our convictions about biblical interpretation and our approach to hermeneutics. Evangelical missiology must be applied biblical hermeneutics if it is to be evangelical in any meaningful sense of the word.

This means more than simply saying that we base our approach to missions on the Bible. Everyone who calls themselves Christian in any sense claims *that*, whether correctly or not. This approach to missiology requires understanding and application of each of the attributes of Scripture, as classically formulated in the evangelical tradition. The Bible is not only inspired and inerrant; it is also authoritative, clear, necessary, and sufficient.<sup>2</sup> It also requires a hermeneutically responsible approach to its contents. The Bible must be interpreted in its grammatical, historical, and textual contexts. It must be interpreted within its own framework as a Grand Narrative of Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration. It must be viewed within its own covenantal structure. Hence, the Bible should be read and understood diachronically, in the categories typically designated as Biblical Theology. The Bible must also be interpreted synchronically according to its great themes—the whole counsel of God on all the central issues of biblical revelation. In other words, evangelical missiology flows from the major heads of biblical doctrine as well as the proper interpretation of individual passages. Evangelical missiology must be rigorously biblical in every sense of the word. Therefore, the foundation

---

<sup>1</sup> A classical example of this sort of theological prolegomena is Auguste Lecerf, *An Introduction to Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949.) An excellent recent example of this type of inquiry is David K. Clark, *To Know and Love God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 47–140.

for evangelical missiology is a robust doctrine of Scripture, interpreted according to the grammatical/historical method of biblical hermeneutics, considered both diachronically (Biblical Theology) and synchronically (Systematic Theology).

## **Our Doctrine of Scripture**

The Bible is the word of God. Whatever the Bible says, God says. The Bible was written by dozens of people over a span of many centuries. The books of the Bible reflect the personalities and styles of those people. However, the Holy Spirit worked in the minds of those human authors in such a way that every word they wrote was the word he wanted. This is what we mean when we say that the Bible was inspired by God. Inspiration does not mean that God gave some inspiring thoughts and impressions to the human authors and then left them to flesh it out according to their best wisdom and insight. It also does not mean that God used the human authors as typewriters, dictating his message with no engagement of their context or personality at all. Rather, inspiration means that God breathed out his word (2 Timothy 3:16) and carried the human authors along by his Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:20-21) in such a way that what they wrote in their way was also perfectly what God wanted said, down to the very words they used.

There are several inevitable implications to this understanding of the inspiration of Scripture. The first implication is that the Bible is true. God cannot lie, and he is never mistaken. He knows all things comprehensively, and he knows the future as certainly as he knows the present and the past. If God says something, we can count on it being correct. Therefore, since the Bible is his word, everything it tells us is true. There is no error in the Bible. This complete truthfulness does not apply just to matters of theology or spirituality. It also applies to everything else the Bible teaches about every subject it addresses. Obviously, it is necessary to apply normal rules of reading to the biblical text. Approximations and figurative language are used in the Bible, and these are not errors. Everything must be interpreted in its context and according to its genre. However, when the teaching of the Bible contradicts the constantly changing standards of contemporary knowledge, conventional wisdom, or current social standards, the Bible is right and everything that disagrees with it is

wrong. We can trust everything the Bible teaches us, whether the world agrees or not.<sup>3</sup>

The next implication of this understanding of the inspiration of Scripture is that the Bible is authoritative. It is, in fact, our highest authority, and every other claimant to authority must be evaluated and judged by it. God is the supreme authority in the universe. He is King of kings and Lord of lords. Therefore, whatever he says outranks whatever anyone else says. Since the Bible is God's Word, it is therefore a higher authority than any ecclesiastical leader, any church council, any tradition, or any other book. It is a higher authority than any scientific theory, philosophical system, methodological approach or sociological model. It is also a higher authority than any vision, dream, or spiritual impression. It outranks our preferences and desires. God is King, and he has the last word on everything. That word is the Bible, and we do not get to judge it by any other standard or pick and choose what parts we like and what parts we do not. The Bible rules our beliefs, our lives, and our ministries.

The next implication of this understanding of the inspiration of Scripture is that the Bible is clear in everything we need to know. God is not a failure at communication. He is infinitely greater and smarter than we are, and it is true that he says some things that our small minds have a hard time grasping. However, God knows what we need to know, and he has made those things clear in His word. We may not be able to comprehend everything about him, but we are able to apprehend everything necessary for life and godliness. We should never say, "The Bible is hard to understand," and then make that an excuse for believing or doing what we want. There is more than enough that is crystal clear in the Bible for us to be saved from our sins, to grow in conformity to the image of Christ, and to serve Him faithfully in the mission He has given us.

The Bible is necessary. We cannot know God unless God reveals himself to us. He is infinite, and we are small. His understanding has no limits, while our understanding, as finite creatures, is profoundly constricted (Job 38:1–42:6, Isaiah 40:12–29, Romans 11:33–36, 1 Corinthians 2:6–13). Furthermore, the minds of fallen

---

<sup>3</sup> For discussions of inerrancy, it is hard to match two classics on the subject: Benjamin Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Philipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2020), and J. I. Packer, *Fundamentalism and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958).

men and women are darkened by sin and Satan in such a way as to render the things of God opaque and unintelligible to them (Romans 1:18–25, 3:11; 1 Corinthians 2:14–16; 2 Corinthians 4:3–4). We would not know who God is or what he requires of us had he not taken the initiative to reveal himself and his ways to us. As Kevin DeYoung so succinctly states it, “The only Being knowledgeable enough, wise enough, and skillful enough to reveal God to you is God himself.”<sup>4</sup> He has done so through his word. If we did not have the Bible, we would have the witness of natural revelation to show us the eternal power and divine nature of God (Romans 1:20), but we would know nothing more. We would know nothing about the Incarnate Word apart from the witness of the written word, and without it we would also know nothing about the mission God has given us. The Bible is necessary for us to be saved, to know God, to know how we are to live as his sons and daughters, and to know both the goal and the means of his mission.

Finally, the Bible is sufficient for us. We do not need any other source of instruction to know God, to be reconciled to him through faith in Jesus Christ, to live the life he wants us to live, or to fulfill the ministries he wants us to pursue. We do not need any other book, any ecclesiastical structure, or any person to give us the “real” meaning of the text of Scripture. We do not need to depend on secular social sciences to know how to live as God’s people or to fulfill the Great Commission. While we are free to learn useful things from other sources, we don’t have to have them, and we must always evaluate them under the authority of the word of God.<sup>5</sup>

## **Our Interpretation of Scripture**

Because the Bible is the very words of the living God, we must handle it carefully. We must be careful to read out of it what it actually says (*exegesis*), and not read into it what we want it to say (*eisegesis*). In this matter of biblical interpretation, context is king. Words mean what they mean in the context of sentences. Sentences mean what they mean in the context of paragraphs, paragraphs in the context of chapters, chapters in the context of books, and books in the context of the entire narrative and

---

<sup>4</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Taking God At His Word* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2014), 88.

<sup>5</sup> For a concise summary of the nature and attributes of Scripture, see Kevin DeYoung’s excellent work, *Taking God At His Word*.

teaching of the Bible. A given passage of Scripture means what it says, according to the meaning of the words and the structure of the grammar, in both its immediate literary and historical context and in the context of the big picture of the Bible. No word, verse, or passage of Scripture can possibly mean anything that it could not mean in context. Furthermore, although different cultures may notice things in Scripture that others do not, and although application may vary from one setting to another, the meaning of the biblical text does not change. A historical/grammatical approach to the meaning of Scripture is valid and binding in every cultural setting.

This means, then, that we are arguing here for the universal applicability of historical/grammatical exegesis. The text means what it says according to the words, the grammar, and the contexts that the human authors, carried along by the Holy Spirit, chose to write. This is true in every age and in every cultural setting, including among oral learners. To say that each culture has its own way of understanding texts, and that no one approach may be privileged above another, is ultimately to deny that the text has any definable meaning at all. It is to engage in hermeneutical nihilism. It may be based on a laudable desire to avoid ethnocentrism, and it may grow out of the correct observation (noted above) that different cultures may notice things in the text that others do not. It perhaps flows from the failure to distinguish between interpretation and application. Nevertheless, even those who argue such a position write in such a way as to negate their own argument, for they wish to be understood according to the normal rules of historical/grammatical exegesis, even by readers from different cultures.<sup>6</sup>

## **The Missiological Implications of Clarity and Sufficiency**

Some who affirm the inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture (and, at least formally, the necessity of Scripture) still question the clarity and/or the sufficiency of the Bible, and on that basis would seek other sources for missiological instruction. One well-known missiologist commented to this author (in a private conversation) that anyone could make the Bible say anything they wanted it to say, making the Bible

---

<sup>6</sup> For a concise discussion of this issue, see Will Brooks, "Grammatical-Historical Exegesis and World Mission," in Scott Callahan and Will Brooks, eds, *World Mission* (Lexham Press, 2019), 240–247.

unuseful as a source for missionary method. His preferred approach was to look at practices which had yielded the largest numerical growth in reported converts, and then to reproduce those practices.<sup>7</sup> This fits well with the pragmatism of American culture, and this sort of approach is appealing to many. In many ways, the Church Growth school of missionary practice is a reflection of this mindset, with its use of sociological factors to determine conditions under which churches typically grow, commending these as appropriate missionary methods.

The doctrines of clarity and sufficiency speak directly to this approach. As stated above, God is not a failure at communication. The Bible is clear in its description of the mission God has given His church and in its instructions on how that mission should be accomplished. While it is true that anyone can eisegete whatever they want into Scripture, it is not true to say that they can exegete whatever they want out of the text. The text of the Bible has meaning, and everything that God thinks we need to know is clear to the regenerate reader who is willing to put in the work of reading carefully. Furthermore, God has shown us more than simply the results he wants us to achieve. He has also revealed a great deal in His word about how we are to go about the work he has sent us to accomplish.<sup>8</sup> The Bible is enough. It defines both the end and the means to that end. The proper approach to missiology is to study the Bible as a whole, allowing it to define the issues, set the questions, and create the strategic framework for the mission God has given His people. A missiologist should approach the Bible with the assumption that it will communicate clearly the things necessary to carry out God's mission. He or she will look in Scripture for the answers to the questions that engagement with Scripture has raised. Scripture does not exist as a grab bag of prooftexts which can be used to bolster whatever philosophy, strategy, or method an author wishes to propose. Scripture as a whole, on its own terms, shapes the discussion, answers the questions, describes the methods, and defines the end.

---

<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that the word "convert" was left undefined, with an American revivalist understanding lying in the background, thus highlighting the importance of theological analysis in missiology.

<sup>8</sup> A prominent Southern Baptist pastor once said in a meeting of gospel workers overseas, "Once you know the what, the how doesn't matter." This statement accurately mirrors American evangelical pragmatism, but the editors and writers of this journal courteously but firmly disagree.

This does not mean that evangelical missiologists cannot learn from other sources of information. All truth is God's truth, and any believer is free to make judicious use of what others have observed. In particular, missionaries find themselves making constant reference to history, geography, economics, politics, medicine, and a host of other practical disciplines. They utilize the insights of cultural anthropology in order to communicate the gospel as effectively as possible in a given context. They may even make use of sociology as they evaluate their methods. However, our doctrine of Scripture sets clear limits on the use of such sources of information. Extrabiblical sources are never the starting point in missiological conversation. Scripture is. Scripture judges all other sources; they do not judge it. Not only must the surface elements of extrabiblical sources be evaluated by Scripture, but the underlying worldview must be evaluated as well. Scripture has the first word and the last word, and it has the controlling word in between.

## Conclusion

This article has barely scratched the surface of the foundations of missiology. There is still much to be discussed, particularly in the shaping dimension of systematic theology on missionary theory and practice. However, the first thing that must be said is this: the formal principle of Protestant theology, *Sola Scriptura*, is also the formal principle of evangelical missiology. A robust evangelical theology of Scripture, combined with a commitment to historical/grammatical hermeneutics, is the essential foundation of evangelical missionary thought and practice.

---

*Zane Pratt has served as Vice President for Assessment, Deployment, and Training with the IMB since 2015. Prior to that, he and his family served overseas, primarily in Central Asia, for 23 years. He is also Associate Professor of Christian Mission at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He has a BA in Religion and History from Duke University, an MDiv from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and is a PhD candidate at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.*