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THE BOOK REPORT (1):

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MISSIOLOGICAL ISSUES. (PAGES 1-103)

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SUMMARY

Introduction

Paul G. Hiebert starts the introduction of his book with a question, “What can anthropology contribute to mission?” His answer is this, “In missions we must study the Scriptures and also the sociocultural context of the people we serve, so that we can communicate the gospel to them in ways they understand.” His second question is this, “How can we use anthropological insights, yet avoid captivity to the social sciences and a secular humanistic perspective?” It is the worldview that shapes and integrates theology, anthropology, and missions. The Christian worldview is important; however, our worldview is also shaped by a particular culture. So we constantly must reexamine our own or someone else’s in the light of Scripture. For this, the triad dialogue between systematic, biblical, and anthropological theology can help study the Scripture and the people more accurately. Hiebert ends his instruction with this confession, “In fact, the triad dialogue has made me aware of how deeply my Western worldview has colored not only my anthropological views but also my theological and missiological ones. It has forced me to study the Scriptures in new ways.”

Epistemological Foundations for Science and Theology

Christians seek to root their theologies in the revelation by God of himself in history, but theologies are deeply influenced by the cultures in which they live. The
theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were influenced by modern science. Many came to see theology as a kind of science. In the past few decades a radical change has been taking place in the epistemological foundations of science. This shift holds profound implications for those seeking to integrate science and theology and, indeed, for theology itself.

In epistemological foundations for theology, naïve realist/idealist Christians claim that his or her own theology is full and certain truth: those who disagree must be wrong. In the end a determinist or instrumentalist theology leads to theological and religious relativism. However, critical realists Christians assume that all theologies are partial and culturally biased. They check against theological error by the Scripture, Holy Spirit, and international community of churches.

**The Missiological Implications of an Epistemological Shift**

When we talk of relationships among systems of knowledge, there are different three levels. The lowest level of abstraction is theories, and theories are imbedded in higher-level systems of knowledge that it is called, paradigms, research traditions, or belief system. At the top level, a number of research traditions and a great deal of common-sense knowledge are loosely integrated into an overarching worldview.

Science and theology have emerged as separate belief systems in Western worldview. Integration between a naïve realist theology and science was difficult to achieve. Integration is unnecessary in an instrumentalist mode. Bothe science and theology are seen as pragmatic solutions to immediate problems; the only test is results. However, in critical realist mode it is possible to look for complementarity between
theology and science, as long as they share the same worldview. Both are based on an examination of real events in history, but focus on different dimensions or levels of reality. When joined, the interplay of diachronic and synchronic belief systems in science and in theology provides a better understanding of reality.

In epistemological foundations for missions, the most part of the early missionaries were naïve realists and idealists. They considered most local customs to be evil and sought to root them out, sought to transmit their theologies unchanged to the national church leaders, and pursued to destroy and replace old customs, belief, and rituals by new Christian ones. On the other hand, instrumentalists see all religions as useful, yet culture-bound, servants of their respective societies. Not conversion, but helping people to solve their life problems, is central. They recognize the subjective dimension of human knowledge and make no claims to truth. Consequently, they accept religious differences uncritically. However, critical realists fall between the extremes of strict absolutes and relativism. Missionaries must study other religions and dialogue with their leaders, not to create a new synthesis between Christianity and other religions but to build bridges of understanding so that the people may hear the call of the gospel in ways they comprehend, without compromising the truth of the gospel. They hold to objective truth, but recognize that it is understood by humans in their contexts. Paul, Hiebert was convinced that critical realism is a biblical approach to knowledge.

Beyond Anticolonialism to Globalism

In the colonial era, missionaries equated Christianity with Western culture, and the West’s superiority proved the superiority of Christianity over pagan religions.
Anthropologists believed that their theories were unaffected by their own historical, cultural, and personal contexts, and behind their search lay the assumption that the white race was superior to other races. Like scientists, theologians focused their attention on universals. The epistemology that emerged during this era was positivism, or naïve realism, the belief that science was a new and unique type of knowledge.

Anticolonialism appeared as a reaction in the West against colonialism and its arrogance and cultural oppression. The indigenous church that were self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating led to the development of autonomous churches around the world. The contextualization of theology is a more explosive issue than the earlier question of indigenization. The emphasis was on dialogue, not proclamation. The epistemological foundation was instrumentalism. The consequences of instrumentalism are a pragmatism, relativism, and deconstructionism.

However, in global era, a global perspective requires reevaluation of mission history, critical contextualization, double translation (semiotics), incarnational witness, and recognition of both felt and real needs. In anthropology, the answer about relativism is a semiotic view of symbols and a critical realist view of knowledge. In Peircean semiotic, symbols have both objective and subjective dimensions. In a critical realist epistemology we recognize the complementary nature of human knowledge, between emic (inside) and etic (outside) analyses, between the nature of reality and theological insight, and between the different culture and regarding humanity. Today anthropologists emphasize the underlying oneness of human beings, while recognizing diversity. They are forced to develop a metacultural framework above these cultures that enables us to see both cultures from without, and to compare them. In global perspective theology turn
attention again to the biblical texts, but seek to understand them in the contexts in which they occur. One important area of complementarity in theology is that between systematic and narrative theologies. For this, theologizing must recognize the fact that different persons and different cultures understand the Scriptures differently, begin with Scripture, be led by the Holy Spirit, and be done in the community.

**Critical contextualization**

In the era of noncontextualization, to become Christian one had to accept not only Christianity but also Western cultural ways. Colonialism convinced the people of the West of their own cultural superiority. The consequences of noncontextualization are that Christianity was perceived as a foreign religion identified with Western culture, and that old beliefs and customs did not die out. In the case for contextualization, anthropologists no longer spoke of “culture” but of “cultures.” This contextualization has some problems that the denial of absolutes and of truth itself runs counter to the core Christian claims of the truth of the gospel and the uniqueness of Christ. Second, the separation between form and meaning blinds us to the general nature of tribal and peasant societies. Third, contextualization places on the accurate communication of meaning, often to the point of ignoring the emotive and volitional dimensions of the gospel. Fourth, contemporary cultural context are taken seriously, but the historical context of the universal church is largely ignored. Fifth, uncritical contextualization provides no basis for unity among churches in different cultures. Sixth, it has a weak view of sin. Finally, it could open the door to syncretism.
However, the first step in critical contextualization is to study the local culture phenomenologically (exegesis of the culture). In the second step, the pastor or missionary leads the church in a study the Scriptures related to the question at hand (exegesis of Scripture and the hermeneutical bridge). The third step is for the people corporately to critically evaluate their own past customs in the light of their own biblical understanding and to make decisions regarding their response to their new-found truths (critical response). The pastor and missionary must help them to arrange the practices they have chosen into a new ritual that express the Christian meaning of the event (new contextualized practices). Finally, critical contextualization takes the Bible seriously as the rule of faith and life, and it recognizes the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of all believes open to God’s leading. In critical contextualization the church acts as a hermeneutical community. (checks against Syncretism)

**Metatheology: The Step beyond Contextualization**

In the early church, the test was made by the church and its leaders acting as a hermeneutical community (Gal. 2:2). A second paradigm of theological unity emerged after Constantine and the merger of church and state. However, the medieval church was largely unaware of the profound cultural differences to be found around the world. In principle the Protestant churches affirmed theological diversity by advocating the priesthood of all believers. Today, as young churches develop their own theological formulations, these churches face a theological crisis. The three selves-self-government, self-support, and self-propagation-were widely affirmed and implemented. The fourth self-self-theologizing-howevers, was rarely discussed.
The Anabaptists were afraid theology might replace the Bible as the ultimate source of truth. Theological truth was derived from biblical truth, but it was partial and colored by personal biases. To them the authority of Scripture meant that they constantly had to go to the Scriptures to test their beliefs and behavior. This recognition of the objective and subjective nature of human knowledge had two consequences. First is related theology directly to human life. Second, it led the Anabaptists to define faith as discipleship more than as mental affirmation. The answer of the original Anabaptists to theological unity and diversity, then, was not to formulate an unchanging systematic theology but to develop a Metatheology.

There are several levels at which contextualization takes place. First, the Bible needs to be translated into new languages. Second, old customs must be dealt with. Third, the church is to be a new sociocultural order. Finally, the church must develop its own theology by applying biblical truth to the day-to-day issues it faces. Consequently, churches in specific cultural settings need the check of the international community of churches to test where theologies are too strongly influenced by cultural assumption. It may bring us closer to the formulation of the truly supracultural theology.

CRITIQUE

Paul, Hiebert show us some extreme aspects through the historical development: naïve realism/idealism and instrumentalism, absolutism and relativism, colonialism and Anticolonialism, indigenization and contextualization, objective and subjective dimensions, synchronic and diachronic belief system. And then he suggests the synthesis ones: critical realism/idealism, critical contextualization, metatheological approach,
metaculturalism, and globalism. They mean the ones of a middle way between two extremes, the synthesis ones between thesis and antithesis, or the complementary ones between the opposite things. In scientific approach, these are obviously great achievements.

However, if we do not acknowledge the existence of biblical absolute truth, there could be antithesis against the synthesis by Hegel, middle way will be relativism, and complementarity could be syncretism. Hiebert repeatedly suggests three checking methods to avoid these risks: the Bible as the rule of faith and life, the work of Holy Spirit, and the church acts as a hermeneutical community. He remains complementary approach to these methods. For the right understanding the text (the Bible), we should study the context (the people we serve) together. For the right working of Holy Spirit to us, we should admit that Holy Spirit works to the people we serve together. For the right exegesis of community, we should be checked by the international community of churches.

Can we arrive at the absolute truth or standards through these methods? Could it be other naïve idealism or relativism? In my opinion, Hiebert should have more used the Bible to support and prove his assertion. It would be better that he deduce these theories from the Bible with scientific approach.

MINISTRY APPLICATION

I had served church as a ministry for about eighteen years. However, I did not study about unbelievers outside the church. I did not know what they have worldviews, belief system, custom, ritual. Even I did not study about church member inside the church.
I did not know how difficult their daily life is to live as a believer in the earth. By Hiebert, I was a naïve idealist and colonial ministry. I more have to study the people I serve by anthropological reflections.

I ignored to give biblical answers about non-Christian culture. Even though Korean Christianity has being grown, it could not change from a non-Christian culture to Christian’s. Korean Christians hold their culture in underground. By Hiebert, it is a result of colonial mission. I have to theologizing the culture of the people I serve. For this, missionary and church leaders go hand in hand. During this theologizing, church members’ participation is required.

I have to recognize that I am colored by my own culture and worldview. My exegesis, sermon, and teaching can be colored. By Hiebert, I always have to check by three checking method.