

## **Response to “Missional Theology” by Paul Hiebert & Tite TiInou**

*Juan Martinez*

Paul Hiebert and Tite TiInou raise the crucial issue of theological reflection in a missional context. Traditional Western theological categories have made it possible for systematics to be done by people with no commitment to the mission of the Church and mission by people who assume that one can ignore theological reflection on the front line of mission.<sup>23</sup>

The last three sentences of the paper define the crucial issues that need to be addressed.

*We need missional theology to communicate the transforming Gospel into the particular contexts in which humans find themselves.*

*We need to make theological reflection central to mission.*

*We... need to view mission as integral to theology.*

Their analyses of systematic, biblical and tropological theologies focus on the limitations these systems impose when one has to deal with the “fuzziness and ambiguities of concrete human life.” These systems answer a series of important questions, but not necessarily the ones being asked by those who are trying to understand and live out the Christian faith.

God's truth needs to speak to specific human situations. But much of Western theology is unable to do this because it is set up to answer questions that are being asked by a decreasing number of people. Yet those who are proclaiming the Good News of the Gospel need tools to connect the Biblical message to specific human experience. Without a theological framework which provides the tools for translating biblical truth to concrete situations, God's word remains disconnected from the people who need it.

Hiebert and TiInou challenge us to develop a new model for theological reflection, one that addresses the specific questions faced by the missionary [and many pastors]. Missional theology is an effort to bring together what has been

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learned in systematic, biblical and iconic theologies and find ways to use them to respond to the concrete situations and difficulties faced in mission.

In working toward that goal the authors propose a model that mirrors English common law to describe how systematics and biblical theology might work together in addressing specific issues. The idea is to use the various theological types in the quest to answer new questions in a missiological setting.

This model provides interesting possibilities, because it describes how the various theological types would work together, in practice, to address specific theological and missiological issues. Hiebert and TiInou demonstrate that theological reflection and mission can work hand in hand.

If there is a concern to be raised, it is related to its real life application. Maybe it is not a coincidence that the authors draw on the English common law system, one that has many benefits but also many limitations. The English system has been used to legally justify British or American oppression of colonized peoples and ethnic minorities in the United States. It also limits the discussion to the “precedents” the system itself has established, not allowing outside ideas to fundamentally question what is already “accepted” truth.

When the common law model is applied to the missiological task it raises a similar type of concern. Systematics and Biblical theologies developed in specific contexts to respond to specific issues. They are not neutral systems that can serve as “absolute” benchmarks that can be applied directly to mission situations. Their advantages and limitations are a reflection of European/North American theological perspectives.

This has a direct application to what would be the “precedents” of the system. European and North American theologies have responded to a certain series of experiences and issues that are very different from those being faced by the Church in Africa, Asia or Latin America. For example, what precedent would apply to the issue of polygamy, being a Christian in a non-Christian setting, spiritual manifestations, etc. Using a common law model, it would be very easy for the well intentioned missionary, trained in a traditional seminary, to “impose”

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<sup>23</sup>Those who would call us to “preach the simple gospel.”

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European/North American “precedents” [as has happened] and call them biblical.

Theologies arising out of the Two Thirds world offer models that help break out of the limitations placed on mission by traditional theological categories. Yet they would not necessarily be taken into account by a missionary trained in the average European or American seminary [or Third World seminaries that use European and/or American curricula].

Two crucial concepts for missional theology are those coming out of Latin American and African theological reflections. Latin American insistence that one cannot separate orthopraxy from orthodoxy can provide a new route for missional theology. If truth is lived out truth, then we have the basis for addressing the issues of the messiness of human existence. By avoiding the dichotomizing methodology of traditional Western theological thought we can begin to avoid the categorization that left mission [and ethics] out of the theological picture in the first place.

The African insistence on asking relational questions in theology provides another crucial grid. Theological reflection which attempts to describe God apart from our relationship with Him is doomed to depersonalize our Creator and to disconnect Him from human existence.<sup>24</sup>

Hiebert and TiInou speak of complementarity in their description of a missional theology. I concur. But in practice it is not enough to include more Western theological models. What is needed is to include global theological reflections so that each helps fill in some of the weaknesses of the others, particularly those that exist in some of the “older” theologies. Critical reflection will occur when new models (“cases”) are brought into the process. A complementarity that is mediated through Western models, no matter how many, will not be able to respond to its own weaknesses. Nor will the traditional theological categories be able to address the “messiness” of postmodern, postcolonial and materialistic (McWorld) existence.

Hiebert and TiInou remind us that theological reflection begins when one asks “missional” questions in a specific context. One of the problems with much of systematic theology is that the original Greek context has been forgotten and that categories it developed are now assumed to be applicable to all circumstances. But that context has long since disappeared and systematic’s answers have become static.

Missional theology needs to revisit that original context to understand the

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<sup>24</sup>This is the problem with traditional systematic categories for describing God. They define God in lofty terms, but disconnect him from relationships and human existence.

questions and answers offered by systematics. But we also need to remember that those answers are context specific. They may not answer our specific missional questions today. Yesterday's questions can provide a framework for theological reflection, but they will not necessarily provide today's answers. That is why each generation must reread Scripture and reenter the "hermeneutical spiral of translation and transformation." Our generation has the opportunity of including a broader base of theological reflection that can help us respond to new missiological issues.

Missional theology provides the opportunity to address the issues raised by Hiebert and TiInou. It can also address other crucial concerns:

The need to break out of the dichotomies created by Western systematic theology.

The need to use new theological frameworks to answer questions in the growing "southern" church.

The means for bringing together traditional [northern] and newer southern theologies.

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Thank you, Paul and Tite, for raising the issues and pointing us clearly toward the answers.

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