



“Managerial MISSIOLOGY”

Levi T. DeCarvalho

A new label has recently been proposed in the field of mission studies. I am referring to the epithet “managerial missiology,” which—to my knowledge—was coined as a way of criticizing the kind of missiology that has been produced by the “Pasadena think-tank.” The epithet is unfortunate for several reasons, some of which I discuss below

Christianity Today recently reported on a missiological consultation held in Iguassu, Brazil, in October 1999, where the term “managerial missiology” dominated the intense debates, under the guidance of William Taylor, WEF’s Missions Commission head. David Neff reported:

Peruvian missiologist Samuel Escobar was unable to attend the consultation ... But in a paper discussed at the meeting, he criticized the ‘managerial missiology’ practiced by certain North American groups. ‘The distinctive note’ of this approach to missions ‘is to reduce Christian mission to a manageable enterprise,’ Escobar wrote. Practitioners of this approach focus on the quantifiable, measurable tasks of missions and ask pragmatic questions about how to achieve goals. Escobar called this statistical approach ‘anti-theological’ and said it ‘has no theological or pastoral resources to cope with the suffering and persecution involved because it is geared to provide guaranteed success.’¹

The other two names most readily associated with the use of the term (and who admit to having borrowed it from Escobar) are James Engel (Escobar’s colleague at Eastern Seminary) and William Dyrness (a professor and former dean of Fuller Seminary’s

own School of Theology). Neff states, somewhat paradoxically:

This managerial approach is ‘a major leap onto the secular stage of strategic planning,’ according to a monograph from retired Eastern College professor James Engel. In the event’s opening address, consultation director William Taylor quoted extensively from Engel, who was among the first to foster evangelical adoption of marketing principles.²

The critics associate the proponents of “managerial missiology” with the plans fostered by selected agencies to evangelize the world by 2000 AD. Following Escobar’s lead, Engel and Dyrness have published the controversial *Changing the Mind of Missions: Where Have We Gone Wrong?* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter Varsity, 2000, 192 pp.), which has elicited some strong criticism from David Hesselgrave and Ralph Winter, among others

Pejorative Use of the Word “Managerial”

It appears to me that the word “managerial” is being used in a pejorative way. This is most unfortunate since a whole group of Christians who try and develop their God-given managerial gifts for the advancement of God’s Kingdom find their vocation placed under such negative light. Management is one of many gifts of the Spirit. Time and again Scripture instructs the believers about the use of their managerial skills....

Reductionist Understanding of Missiology

Labeling the kind of reflection that has come out of Pasadena as “managerial missiology” is reductionist in terms of an intentionally negative categorization of missiological studies. The so-called “Pasadena group” or “Pasadena think-tank” represents a wide variety of field experiences. The theories or models that have been proposed by

both Fuller Seminary’s School of World Mission and the U.S. Center have been tested by that most demanding group of Christian witnesses, namely, the multiethnic group of students and practitioners who have taken these ideas to bear upon their field contexts, and have critiqued and criticized them in papers and dissertations for more than two decades now

All in all, we must be grateful for the criticism leveled against “managerial missiology.” We have been forced to rethink our assumptions, values, and commitments – in short, our world-views

I would propose that we convene a consultation to discuss the relationship between missiology and management. It is high time we made a sober analysis of the interplay between the methodologies we have proposed in the light of the biblical principles of stewardship in church and mission. Theologians, missiologists, mission practitioners, mission agencies’ CEOs, and management experts (such as those I quote from in this paper) should be invited to participate in the debate. The ideal place to do that would be the U.S. Center, in my opinion. Since we have been particularly (often indirectly) criticized, we should be at the forefront of the debate

^{1,2} *Christianity Today* 43(14): 28, December 1999.

This article was excerpted from a longer article, by the same name, that appears in issue 18:3 (fall 2001) of the International Journal of Frontier Missions (IJFM). To read the full article, or to subscribe to the IJFM, see the IJFM Web site at www.ijfm.org or the IJFM advertisement on the back cover of this issue of Mission Frontiers.

Levi T. DeCarvalho, Ph.D., is a member of the Training Department, Latin American Division, U.S. Center for World Mission. He may be reached by E-mail at levi@uscwm.org.