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Keith R. Sellers
WorldVenture Mission, keithnbeverly@gmail.com

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Book Review

Advanced Missiology: How to Study Missions in Credible and Useful Ways

By Kenneth R. Nehrbass
Eugene, OR, Cascade Books, 2021
337 pages
USD \$30.40, Paperback

Reviewed by Keith R. Sellers. Keith has served with WorldVenture Mission in Hungary for over 21 years. He has a B.A. in Christian Missions, an M.A. in Bible, and an M.Div. from Bob Jones University as well as a D.Min. in Growing and Multiplying Churches from Biola University. His ministry experiences include evangelism, church planting and revitalization, and TCK education.

The text is explicitly a critical exploration of foundational missiology as its main title suggests. On the other hand, the subtitle expresses the instrumental nature of the text, “How to Study Missions in Credible and Useful Ways.” The very title presents a frustrating tension in this often-misunderstood field of knowledge: It is practical and very complex at the same time. Nehrbass suggests a couple of introductory texts for the uninitiated and those who may have studied it in a previous decade (7). Using the phrase “cross-cultural discipleship” as a definition for missions, he guides the reader down the grand river of missiology highlighting its numerous tributaries as well as its key intellectual and spiritual dangers. This study should attract scholars and thoughtful practitioners alike since both may sometimes encounter dead ends in the confusing labyrinth of missiological opinions. Because an advanced exploration of the river of missiology requires the use of many disciplines, Nehrbass wisely collaborated with other scholars. Rebeca de la Torre Burnett, Leanne

Dzubinski, and Julie Martinez made valuable contributions to the book (chapters 6, 7, and the missiologist profiles). The short profiles of the field's most prominent thinkers provide both personal inspiration and historical perspective.

In the first chapter, Nehrbass strives for a consistent definition of missiology without falling into the extremes of excessively limiting it, nor making it too broad to include everything. He highlights the extremely multidisciplinary nature of crossing cultures and making disciples. Recognizing the limits of the old "three-legged stool" metaphor, he proposes the image of a dynamic river to help us better understand missiology (7, 16, 27-30). The author provides the following definition of missiology: "The use of academic disciplines to bring the church across cultural boundaries for the sake of making disciples" (18). This thoughtful and practical definition guides the book's discussion of how specific disciplines relate to the task of making disciples in other cultures.

In chapter two, "Connecting Theology to Cross-Cultural Discipleship," Nehrbass explores a viable path toward comprehending the relationships between theology and mission. Although missiology began as a subfield under schools of theology in which theologians would develop a "theology of missions" (38), missionary efforts at making disciples have historically driven the discussion of theology so that theologians and practitioners can better explain Christianity to other ethno-linguistic groups. Nehrbass offers what he calls a "systematic missiological theology" as an alternative to the "mission of God" and "missions is everywhere" views (43-44). He makes a distinction between a "missional hermeneutic" and what he calls a "missiological hermeneutic." Nehrbass claims that his "missiological hermeneutic" specifically focuses on the idea of cross-cultural discipleship and includes the *missio Dei* theology's broad view of God's missional plan to redeem humanity. Some readers may see this critique and added terminology as unnecessary since they already wed *missio Dei* theology with the Great Commission.

Chapter three shows how missiologists use history to conduct better research for best practices in the present. The author provides six lenses for understanding the history of missions or the expansion of Christianity (76). The fifth and sixth approaches, "emphasizing specific strategies of missions" and "building missiological theory," are perhaps the most beneficial lenses for practitioners. For scholars of missiological history, he provides practical examples of topics to research (78).

Chapter four addresses the controversial field of anthropology and the complicated love-hate relationship missiologists have with it. While Christian scholars disdain the extreme cultural relativism and anti-

religious rationalism of secular anthropology, the text makes a strong case for engaging with it. Because Christians desire to bring every aspect of culture under the lordship of Christ, they must understand the cultural spheres of His dominion. Anthropology helps us better understand those cultural spheres. The chapter refutes past criticisms that anthropologists made against missionaries, and it notes how postmodernism pushed anthropology to a more inclusive stance. The author describes the dynamic tension between empowering culture and changing it to the point of committing what critics call ethnocide (110). Theologically minded readers might observe that the tension exists because we as bearers of God's image create culture, and at the same time we are fallen creatures whose cultural norms need transformation.

Closely related to anthropology, chapter five addresses the nebulous concept of intercultural studies, which Nehrbass defines as "the academic field that examines the experiences of people who cross cultural boundaries" (140). This chapter helps cross-cultural workers uncover ethnocentric attitudes and simplistic stereotypes. The three main branches of this discipline include intercultural communication, intercultural adjustment, and intercultural leadership. The chapter addresses the specific dynamics which may lead to very thorny situations when Westerners engage other cultures. These dynamics are playing out in North American churches as the older generation embraces individualism and status quo while the emerging generations tend to prefer collectivism and innovation. Churches in multicultural communities with many new immigrants should pay attention to the descriptions of how newcomers may acculturate (149). The description of what constitutes a healthy cultural intelligence is quite liberating for the expat practitioner (151).

In chapter six Martinez and Nehrbass connect development theories to cross-cultural discipleship. Their logical and theological argument for development ministry flows from the cultural mandate (Gen 1:28) to Christ's great commands about loving God and others. They claim that development is about restoring broken relationships with God, government, society, land, and people (156). Mending these relationships helps people to become better disciples. The chapter traces the holism-prioritism debate up to the Lausanne Committee's influential resolution that social action follows, precedes, and accompanies evangelism (161). The reader will learn about the most significant theories of community development and suggested venues of empirical research.

Connecting education to cross-cultural discipleship in chapter seven, Burnett and Dzubinski address formal (schools) and non-formal (in

churches) educational approaches concerning their effectiveness, contextualization, outcomes, and preparation. Other missiology texts usually ignore cross-cultural education, but it has been a valuable tool among missionaries for the past two hundred years. Of special note for missionary educators, formal educational approaches must be holistic, locally contextualized, experiential, and inclusive to be effective (182-83, 189). Unfortunately, evangelical churches have become too preoccupied with financing overseas church planting initiatives to the neglect of this extremely valuable tool of making disciples and anchoring new generations with a Christian worldview. Churches and agencies might consider developing missionary teams that integrate both education and church planting. Very recent surges of immigration and diaspora due to the wars in Syria and Ukraine have produced dire educational needs among immigrant children, whose parents may readily welcome bilingual Christian schools. Perhaps bilingual Christian schools, or programs that address the needs of third culture kids, may address needs for immigrants coming across US borders. Churches attempting to reach immigrant adults who are “low-literate” should consider using more oral communication methods which contribute to both their learning of the Bible and English (193).

Defining cross-cultural discipleship, chapter eight begins the second section of the book, “The Distributaries of Missiology.” Nehrbass asserts that the Great Commission is the “*sine qua non* of missiology,” and he shows how theory connects with practice (199). Because the concept of cross-cultural discipleship is an integral part of the book, some readers may prefer a definition in the beginning, but its presentation here unveils an interesting climax to the overall flow. This chapter deals with two particularly fuzzy, yet crucial words: disciple and missionary. The ancient word disciple proves difficult to nail down since it originates outside of the Western educational context. The author describes a missionary as “someone who is sent by a Christian community primarily for the purpose of making disciples across cultures” (206). He leaves it up to the reader to decide whether specific fuzzy examples of workers belong to the category of “missionary” (206-08).

Chapters nine and ten describe seminal theories and models in missiology. Chapter nine reviews key theories that shaped missiology and encourages readers to explore new ways of understanding the gospel’s effective dissemination. He lists strengths and weaknesses of well-known theories. The text leans in favor of the Homogenous Unit theory, which provides a valuable starting point to reach a specific people (219), who eventually should become more heterogeneous (Gal 2:28). Chapter ten

surveys the most popular models that have influenced missiological theory and practice. To both the uninitiated and well-read, missiology's historic usage of the term "model" remains a source of frustration since it does not denote a complex methodological scheme, but it merely provides a launching point into the grand river of missiology. Nehrbass speaks highly of the Three Selves Model, which strives for indigeneity and independence, but then he questions its goal of self-determination and proposes that churches should instead become interdependent (238).

Chapter eleven provides a view to the latest trends and possible directions in the future of missiology. Nehrbass justifiably warns about the need to rethink closure theology, and he provides an action list to make missiology a more useful discipline (301). Missiology will continue to become more influenced by women scholars and researchers from non-Western contexts.

Nehrbass has studied hundreds of missiological texts from multiple disciplines to produce this valuable work. The book's panoramic view of the broad river of missiology helps the practitioner visualize where he or she has already traversed. Because the book contains numerous analyses of the pros and cons of various theories and models, practitioners and theorists may find themselves both offended and affirmed. The text indirectly comprises a veritable list of dialectical tensions that exist in carrying out the Great Commission. Those looking for easy answers and an easy read will be unfulfilled. The book serves as a catalyst for missiological research and hands-on experimentation in doing mission. It should compel readers to re-examine their views on critical issues related to missiology.

Perhaps the multiple dilemmas in the text arise from the fact that most missiologists have originated in the West where there exists a robust propensity to atomize, categorize, and form propositions that apply in every context. A few dialectical tensions mentioned throughout the text include empowering culture vs. ethnocide (110), Andrew Wall's poles of indigenizing vs. a supra-cultural pilgrim principle (210), McGavran's homogeneous unit vs. a heterogenous church (219), Winter's modality/sodality model (224), Pike's emic and etic distinctions of cultural analysis (226), ethno-theology vs. a supra-cultural kernel (244), indiscriminate sowing vs. one-time strategic sowing of the gospel (251), and heart language vs. language of wider communication (268).

Missiology's dilemmas may be largely rooted in contemporary epistemological dilemmas relating to the confluence of modernity with post modernity. The text reveals that some scholars tended to follow a faulty either-or thinking or the logical fallacy of a false dilemma. Scholars

and practitioners must seek a coherency and harmony rising not only from empirical research, but also from Scriptural examples of contextualization (242), practical wisdom, and cross-cultural collaboration among Spirit-led leaders (245).

As globalization continues and Christianity declines in the West, church planters, pastors, evangelists, educators, and missionaries must become better versed in missiology. Christian leaders must improve their integration of missiology and theology. Churches, mission agencies, and theological schools cannot remain disconnected from each other, but they must synthesize their resources, energies, and knowledge in order to fulfill the Great Commission. *Advanced Missiology* will help these institutions to engage and challenge the world to obey all that Christ commanded.