Theological Metaphors of Teaching Mission in An Age of World Christianity in the North American Context

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to present not WHAT to teach, but HOW to teach mission in an age of World Christianity in the context of North American seminaries/theological institutions. In response to the encounter between North American teachers and Global South students, this paper would like to propose three theological metaphors of teaching mission as the excellent pedagogies in an age of World Christianity. First—a shepherding metaphor of guiding—teachers as the guides should know the needs of their sheep and the models of how to guide them. The second metaphor is a hospitable form of teaching that demands gift exchange between the hosts and the guests. Students have been for many years on the receiving side, but hospitable teachers should reveal their students’ gifts and affirm what they have to offer by using their gifts. The third metaphor is a dialogical method of subject-centered teaching where teachers and students are colearners to discern God’s voice anew in the process of interaction. Defining mission as a dialogical discipline, teaching must be both mutually informative and transformative.

Introduction

In his seminal book The Next Christendom,² Philip Jenkins rightly argues that the “center of gravity in the Christian world has shifted away from the global north, Europe and North America—to the global south—Latin America, Africa and Asia.”³ However, North America in particular remains a center for world theological education. Many students (including the author) from the global south come to the North America, especially the United States of America, for their theological education. At the dawn of World Christianity, we may contend that

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A theology of mission is what British scholar Christopher Wright rightly calls “A cross-cultural team game playing with the global players. And the Western academy is no longer a referee, but the Bible itself is.”

Yet, we still put western professors at the center of the classroom. What Asian, African and Latin American students are thinking and writing seem marginal to the western professors. If Christianity is a World Religion, the way we teach mission and the way we discuss theology must be attentive to global conversations. The point is not whether we like everything we hear in global conversations, but whether we are willing to listen to each other. Related to this, Kosuke Koyama said, “Christianity suffered from a teacher complex.” Western missionaries in particular, and theologians in general, are more interested in teaching than in learning. This is teaching mission as a one way traffic. As far as Koyama’s word is concerned, a one way traffic of teaching mission comes from a Christian crusading mind. What he proposed was a two way communication of a crucified mind that comes from the humble mind of a kenotic Christ (Phil. 2:5).

Koyama’s four-decades-old word remains true to our contemporary context of World Christianity. Some professors remain more interested in teaching than in learning, more interested in speaking than in listening. In this paper, I propose to re-define teaching mission as reflecting a dialogical God who speaks and listens to humans. This calls for teaching mission as a mutuality of active speaking and listening between teachers and students with both being centers of the classroom or a metaphor of ‘little mission field.’

In response to the encounter between North American teachers and global south students in an age of World Christianity, this paper proposes three theological metaphors as excellent pedagogies. First, I will discuss the metaphor of shepherd-sheep communication as the model for teacher-student relationship. Second, I will speak of the host-guest relationship as the metaphor for teacher-student relationship in a hospitable classroom. Third, perhaps most important, I will discuss the subject-centered classroom as the metaphor of the little mission field in which teachers and students treat each other as subjects of dialogical teaching and learning. They enter into the classroom to engage with each other to hear and experience anew God’s voice in the process of interaction.

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4  See Christopher J.H. Wright’s forward in Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing the Way We Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007).
5  Ibid., xviii.
7  Ibid., 51-54.
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Shepherding Metaphor of Teaching: Shepherd-Sheep Relationship

In proposing the shepherding metaphor as a pedagogic teaching in an age of World Christianity, I would like to draw on Johannine’s use of a shepherd–sheep relationship (Jn. 10:11–18). John’s Gospel is the Gospel of metaphors through which we see Jesus as a shepherd and teacher (Jn. 9:1–5; 11; 17, 22, 35–37).8 The metaphor of Jesus as a teacher is not limited to John’s Gospel, it can also be seen in Mark’s Gospel. Mark 4:35–41 provides an interpretive lens for Jesus as teacher in Mark’s Gospel.9 Both Gospels reveal that Jesus teaches by engaging and guiding His hearers. By studying a shepherding metaphor of Jesus’ teacher of the past, we get a glimpse of how we can do a better job of teaching mission, that is, embodying the life and work of Jesus in the present and future.10 What are the implications of Jesus’ shepherding metaphor for teachers?

First, Parker Palmer argues that “Good teaching comes primarily from knowing the self and others and secondarily from techniques.”11 For him, knowing one’s self (identity) as God’s appointed-shepherd (teacher) is crucial to knowing others (students). “Without knowing myself, I cannot know who my students are,”12 he asserted. He went on to say, “When I cannot see my students clearly, I cannot teach them well.”13 Palmer’s aim is to know ourselves by connecting to others.14 His idea of mutual knowing the self and others echoes Jesus’ use of mutual knowing between Himself and His sheep. Jesus said, “I know the need of my sheep and my sheep also listen to my voice” (Jn. 10:14–17).

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12 Ibid., 2-3.
13 Ibid., 3.
14 Ibid., 117.
Though Jesus does make it plain who the sheep are here, they are not limited to the disciples and hearers of His teaching. We may take sheep and hearers of Jesus as the paradigms of students for our purpose. After having asked Peter three times, “do you love me?” Jesus said, “tend my sheep,” (Jn. 21:16-17). Jesus’ use of tend my sheep, is applied exclusively to the pastoral metaphor. It should also be applied to the teaching metaphor. In both metaphors, guidance is crucial. As a shepherd, Jesus guides His hearers or sheep by knowing their needs (Jn. 10:14). Knowing the need of sheep shapes the ways of how He guides them well. Similarly, what teachers should do is to take heed to knowing one’s self and students (their identities and needs). In his book, Tell Us Our Names, Asian theologian C.S Song argues that God does not give us the name-giving power, but the name-knowing power: the power to identify the names of people with whom we interact, the power to pronounce them correctly, and the power to understand their contexts.

Second, knowing one’s self and knowing students is not enough, what the matter is to know the methods of seeking how to guide them on the right path. This requires the intellectual skills and methods of teachers. As a shepherd, Jesus is a skillful guide. Skillfulness is the primary characteristic of a shepherding metaphor of the teachers. As the proverb states; “it is not enough to give hungry people fish, but you have to teach them how to fish.” By the same token, the shepherding role of teachers is not simply to transfer knowledge to their students, but to provide them with informative skills.

In order to teach students from different contexts, it is imperative that teachers have multiple skills, such as “linguistic skills, interpersonal skills, and knowledge of global worldviews,” of which the latter two are necessary. Without having these skills, it would be hard for teachers to guide students forward a level of growth. In my own experience, it is difficult to study with teachers those who do not know or reject our contexts. The challenge happens especially when talking about contextualization. For example, spirit-worship is crucial to an Asian worldview, but this does not make sense to some western teachers those who do not accept or believe the spiritual existence.

17 David Kolb, Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1983). The other two types of students are convergent and accommodative learners.
19 For the Western rejection of the existence of the spirits, see Philip H. Wiebie, God and Other Spirits: Imitation of Transcendence in Christian Experience (Oxford University Press, 2004), 1-2.
When teachers do not understand the local contexts of their students, not that we serve methods, but that methods serve us as our tour guides. Received knowledge happens when teachers are knowledgeable and skillful. To argue that skillfulness is an important character of a shepherd, let me compare the shepherding metaphor of skillful teachers with the metaphor of skillful midwives. The role of midwives is not simply to tell the pregnant woman all she needs to know about the birth process, but to help the woman make the birth possible by using the intellectual skills. Similarly, good teaching is not simply telling the students what to do, but it is guiding them how to do things.

Third, generosity is another important character of a good shepherd. Jesus said, “I lay down my life for my sheep,” (Jn. 10:15). Jesus’ generosity is the model for the teachers’ love toward their students. True we are not Jesus and, we cannot lay our lives down exactly like Jesus does for His sheep, but in our limited way, we should strive for Jesus’ generosity by being generous to our students. By generosity, I do not necessarily mean being generous in giving undeservingly high grades to students, but rather by guiding them with patient love. It is natural that some students less talented in the subject matters than others, which require that the generous act of patience is crucial to a teacher’s shepherding ministry. Palmer rightly notes that “Good teaching is a gift and a generous act of commitment and it comes from the inner heart of a patient teacher.”

Finally, a shepherding metaphor of guidance is not from above, but from beside and before. By a shepherding metaphor of guidance from above, I mean the teachers’ guidance of students with power. The teacher’s role in reference to the shepherding ‘metaphors of before and beside is to lead students and to walk the same speed with them. As Koyama noted in his book Three Mile an Hour God, our God of patient love is in no hurry, but walks the same speed of three miles as finite creatures do. In the desert, God took 40 years to teach a lesson to Israel (Deut. 8:1-4). How slow and patient! If God the patient shepherd is the model for us, teachers should also walk beside with their students. Patient shepherds never leave the sheep behind, but also guide them forward.

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20 Mary F. Belenky et al., Women’s Way of Knowing: The Development of the Self, Voice and Mind, 10th anniversary (Basic Books, 1997), chapter 10.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 1-5.
23 Koyama, Three Mile an Hour God, 3-7.
Hospitable Metaphor of Teaching: Host-Guest Relationship

In our metaphor of host-guest relationship, we will regard North American teachers as hosts and global south students as guests. This is the reality. Students coming to North America see themselves or are seen by teachers as guests. They even feel themselves or are made felt by teachers as strangers or aliens (*xenos*). It is painful to be strangers in the land where local people do not welcome you as neighbors. Especially painful is the experience when people laugh at your English with different accent and when your hidden gifts are unnoticed. Equally painful is the reciprocal experience when hosts and guest built the wall of hostility instead of extending hospitality to each other (Rom. 12:3). What I want to propose is to see hosts and guests as ‘bread’ for each other.

In making my case that hosts and guests are to be seen as “bread for each other,” I would like to define the true meaning of hospitality as reciprocal. Hospitality has been defined in some contexts, especially in Asia, as a one way relation. By “one way relation,” I mean hosts are seen as bread for guests. Hosts are the givers, while guests are the passive revivers or consumers. From the perspective of Christian education, such is what one may call a ‘banking model’ thereby students or the metaphors of guests are often seen as the mere receivers of knowledge or the metaphor of bread from teachers. This is not the model of hospitality of which I speak. Instead, we need to re-define the meaning of hospitality. Who do we mean by hospitality in an age of World Christianity?

According to French philosopher Jacques Derrida, hospitality comes from a combination of two Latin words—*hostis* (stranger) and *hospes* (host and guest). The meaning of hospitality is to be defined as the exchange of hostility for hospitality and mutual acceptance between two groups. The New Testament word for hospitality is *philoxenia*, to make the stranger become the guest by way of making friendship. In this sense, we contend that host-guest relationship nothing more
or less making friendship. If this is so, the classroom should not be perceived as a stranger-centered environment. It must be a hospitable classroom. But who would create the latter type of classroom?

In all contexts the hosts are responsible for creating a hospitable environment. A good host is the one who not only receives his or her guests with goodwill, but also makes them feel comfortable at home. First of all, this asks for North American teachers as the metaphors of hosts not only to welcome their foreign students as guests with goodwill, but also to make them feel comfortable in the classroom dominated by the local white students. In describing classroom as a hospitable environment, I do not necessarily mean that teachers have to provide food, snacks and coffee. Instead what I propose is that the teacher should create a hospitable classroom. The hospitable classroom can be defined as a space where teachers and students enter with the generous attitude of exchanging blessing and bread of insights to be primary sources of mutual nourishment.

It follows from this hospitable space that the hospitable teachers have two additional tasks. They are what Henri Nouwen convincingly calls: “revelation and affirmation.” First, revealing involves teachers’ exposing the hidden gifts and insights of students. Reveling task of teachers is relevant to the context where students, especially foreign students keep silent in the class. In my own experience, many Asian students keep silent in the classroom, not because they know nothing or have nothing insights or talents to offer in the classroom, but mainly because they feel shy. Their shyness stems from two places. First, they feel shy about their spoken English. Second, they are afraid the questions they ask might be wrong. In this context, the task of teachers is not only to reveal and help students see their hidden talents, but also to empower and aid them.

Without revealing their hidden gifts and empowering them, the shy students would remain silent in the classroom. As a result, they would remain the metaphors of the passive guests who simply receive food from their hosts. Thus in this sense, we may say that a good guest or student is the one who not only honors the house of his or her host with a joyful sense of presence, but also honors the host with a generous sense of contribution. Likewise, a good host or teacher is the one who not only exposes the hidden talents of students as sources worth serious attention for their own sakes as well for their fellow students and teachers, but also empowers them with all the care they need.

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 84.
Second, the teachers have to affirm their students’ voices of questions or discussions. If the revealing task of teachers is to expose the invisible talents of students and to empower their ability, the affirming task of teachers is to confirm what students discuss or contribute. Metaphorically, a good host not only accepts all the food a guest brings, but also appreciates what the guest contributes. Regardless of being delicious or not, a good and polite host should accept it. By the same token, a hospitable teacher should politely affirm what students raise questions or discussions in the classroom.

The language of teachers’ affirmation of students includes: “yes, that is thoughtful and great question.” This is not to say that the students’ contributions replace the teachers’ criticism. Instead the teachers’ affirmation aims at welcoming the voices of students’ contribution in the class. If teachers impolitely reject the contributions made by students, that students would feel embarrassed. In order not to happen this, I argue that affirming the students’ contributions is a necessary attitude of good teaching. On the other hand, I argue that good teachers should hold a dialectical form of affirmation or praise and criticism where praise addresses students’ strengths and criticism their weaknesses. The aim of criticism not to belittle them, but to show them how and what they can improve. Of course, praise is a stimulus for the students, and they want to hear more affirmative. Thus, it is right to conclude that while teachers’ revealing task helps students see themselves as the contributors of insights for themselves and hosts, the affirmative language encourages them to keep saying something in the classroom. The hospitable teachers must hold this dialectical form of reveling and affirming tasks.

Dialogical Metaphor of Teaching: Subject-Centered Classroom

Most professors of any field, but especially professors of religion, emphasize the need for dialogical teaching. But, the way the teachers design the classroom remains either a teacher-centered space or a student-centered space. In a teacher-centered classroom, teachers tend toward giving lectures without listening and some even abuse their power. In a student-centered classroom, by contrast, the role of teachers is less and less about forming students, more and more about listening to them without providing them with intellectual skills. The result is not a dialogical teaching. A genuine dialogical classroom must be operated in both teaching and learning.

30 Ibid., 87-89.
32 Nouwen, Reaching Out to Our Fellow Humans, 88-89.
33 Palmer, The Courage to Teach, 119-123.
What we need in an age of World Christianity is to design a “subject-centered classroom,” to quote Palmer’s word. In the subject-centered classroom, both the teachers and students play their respective roles as “active participants and collaborative learners.” When I suggest that teachers and students gather in the subject-centered classroom as active participants and collaborative learners, I am not stating that teachers and students share an equal authority; instead, they share an equal opportunity. In the subject-centered classroom, the teachers remain authoritative instructors in terms of facilitating the class, giving and assessing assignments, but the main purpose of the subject-centered classroom is to see teachers not as authoritarian instructors.

Of course, we must stress the former type of teachers because they hold a dialogical form of teaching and learning without abandoning their authority. Three questions emerge. What makes a dialogical classroom possible? What are the respective roles of teachers and students? What would be the ultimate goal of dialogical teaching?

First, we propose the need for mutual respect. We contend that it is mutual respect that creates a genuine dialogical classroom. Jürgen Moltmann rightly stated;

> Mutual trust is a necessary habit of freedom; its living space. Where other people trust me, I can develop freely and go out of my self. Fish need water to swim, birds need air in which to fly, and we need trust in order to develop humanity.

But how do we attempt mutual respect or trust between North American teachers and global south students of different cultures? We may attempt it by breaking the boundary of different cultures and by building the common bridges of humanity. The assertions are two in number. In the latter sense, teachers need to treat students respectfully as ‘humans’ regardless of race and nationality. Students must do likewise by treating teachers respectfully as ‘humans’ regardless of position and status. In other words, one may argue that the subject-centered classroom is to be characterized by the democratic nature of a human-centered atmosphere.

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34 Ibid., 119.
35 Ibid.
36 Pazmino, God Our Teacher, 72-73.
In the context of belonging to the different cultures, teachers and students need to see their social differences not as contradictions or conflicts, but as gifts of God’s creation and as opportunities for complementary and mutual enrichment. This requires boundary breaking and bridge building. Without boundary breaking, we cannot follow Jesus who first breaks the boundary between heaven and earth. Jesus is a dialogical missionary and teacher. In his article Jesus as Teacher, Brian Blount argues that “Jesus teaches by engaging and crossing boundaries of His hearers.”39 Peter C. Phan made an even stronger statement which has connection to understanding mission as the act of intercultural studies in an age of World Christianity. He said:

Intercultural studies or multicultural hermeneutics see social boundaries or boarders as the privileged meeting place where people from both sides of the boundaries or boarders with different cultural backgrounds can come and listen to one another and to create a fuller meaning of theology (text).40

If we apply Phan’s statement, our task is not only to see the multicultural classroom as a privileged meeting place but also to cross boundaries respectfully. In a similar vein, Lalsangkima Pachuau asserts that “If two or three strangers of different cultures are to meet in the classroom, they have to move each other, crossing boundaries and exchanging their different views for mutual enrichment.”41

In short, it should be noted that breaking boundaries and building bridges are two essential attitudes of mutual respect for the teacher-student relationship. This mutuality of breaking boundaries and building bridges connects to Jürgen Habermas’ idea of communicative action. He argues that “communicative action is coordinated not through egocentric or imperial calculations, but through an act of reaching and understanding the other.”42 Habermas’ idea of communicative action supports interpersonal, intercultural, interfaith, and ecumenical teaching. Of course, there could also be mutual disagreements on the subject matter of theology, not on humanity. However, mutual respect must always take priority over all kinds of mutual disagreements and debates.

39 Blount, “Jesus as Teacher,” 189.


Second, dialogical teaching must be grounded in what noted Christian educator Stephen Brookfield called “Discussion-based participation classroom.”43 By “discussion-based participation,” Brookfield referred to a free and open conversation in which teachers and students enter to explore and reflect fearlessly on any kind of theological discipline.44 The role of teachers is not only to invite students into conversation, but also to lead or guide the conversation.45 This does not mean that students become the mere objects of learning, but rather they become the invited participants in mutual conversations. In this way, students would express their voices—their identity, their experiences and their understanding of the world and of theology.46

Of course, students’ expression of their voices in discussion does not necessarily mean “talking a lot or showing everyone else how much they know or have studied.”47 Again we must remember international students whose first language is not English. Mostly they remain on the dialogical periphery.48 In this context, what the native English-speaking students need to do is let international students speak and listen to their voices patiently. Indeed, dialogical classroom involves sharing students’ experiences (context), wrestling with theology (text) and anticipating some comments from teachers and fellow students. It also involves appreciation for all the contributions.49 By this they teach each other—students teach teachers and fellow students. But I contend that discussion in the classroom should not end with teachers assimilating their students into their own stance.

In my own experience, some teachers have a good attitude of listening to the voices of their students in discussion, but they have a bad attitude of assimilating them into their own stance. This happens especially when teachers and students have their different beliefs of truth. This I would call “truth against truth.” How should teachers and students make space for seeking a common truth? To answer this, we need to define what we mean by truth? According to Palmer, “truth is both in us (what we mutually believe is true)—teachers and students—and simultaneously beyond us (the mystery of God).”50 Truth can be discoverable in the sense that a

44 Ibid., 44-45.
45 Ibid., 32.
46 Palmer, The Courage to Teach, 120.
47 Brookfield, “How Do We Invite Students into Conversation?” 34.
48 Ibid., 47.
49 Ibid., 34-44.
50 Parker J. Palmer, To Know as We are Known: Education as Spiritual Journey (San Francisco, Calif, HarperCollins, 1993), 36.
mutual knowing of truth can fit into a synthetic harmony. On the other hand, it is beyond our comprehension.\textsuperscript{51} The former demands our compromises, while the latter demands acknowledging our limitations.

Thus, good teachers are not the ones who lead discussions in the classroom toward predetermined conclusions\textsuperscript{52} but guide them to a continued discovery of seeking a higher truth. The true meaning of education is not about drawing in but about drawing out. If so, the goal of teachers is not to draw students into their own destiny, but to draw them out with the intellectual skills into a journey of discourse and contemplation on the mystery of God. True dialogical teaching is a space free from assimilation and coercion in which students can discuss, defend, debate, wrestle with, evaluate and come to their own conclusions.\textsuperscript{53} In our ongoing journey of dialogical approach to the contemplation of the mystery of God and to the pursuit of truth, David Tracy said well:

\begin{quote}
Say only what you mean, say it accurately as you can, listen to and respect what the other says, however different or other; be willing to correct or defend your opinion if challenged by conversation partner; be willing to argue if necessary, to confront if demanded, to endure the necessary conflict, to change your mind if the evidence suggests it.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Third, and perhaps most important, the ultimate goal of dialogical teaching is mutual transformation. This kind of pedagogy has been developed by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire in his seminal book \textit{Pedagogy of the Oppressed}.\textsuperscript{55} Freire talked about the need for mutual transformation between teachers (elites) and students (oppressed). For Freire, mutual transformation has to start with the voices of students. Because of this, we have argued earlier that it is imperative for teachers to invite students into conversation. But how does that conversation lead teachers into transformation? The success of teachers’ transformation depends on their compassion in listening to the voices and stories of students and their conviction about the voices and stories they heard.

The nature of true dialogical teaching is built upon a mutual activity of speaking and listening. When teachers speak, students listen, when students speak, teachers listen. When we listen carefully, we always learn something new. The goal of this process is a mutual transformation of both teachers and students. This means that transforming education is not simply to be brought down to students but is directed by the voices of students with the cooperative participation of teachers. In this context, three kinds of transformation could happen on both sides of teachers and students. In order to show how three kinds of transformation could happen, I observe that most students come to seminary for three main reasons: preparation, discernment, and formation/equipment.

First, the task of teachers is to prepare students to be skillful interpreters of the text or theology by connecting with their experience or context. This focuses on how and what are to be interpreted. This is a cognitive transformation (head) involving a new theological understanding. In the process of preparing students, teachers and students are transformed in a new way of thinking about and discussing theology. Second, the task of teachers is to accompany students, praying with them in the process of their discernment. This is an affective transformation (heart), which focuses on God’s call, students’ spiritual awareness, and their compassionate feeling about ministry. Third, the task of teachers is to form/equip students not only to be skillful interpreters of theology but also to become theological practitioners outside the classroom. This is a behavioral transformation (hand). Three kinds of transformation depend on each other.

Conclusion

If mission is a dialogical discipline, teaching method should also be understood as a two way of communication. One way of communication, that is, teaching without learning, speaking without listening, transforming others without being transformed by others is no longer acceptable in an age of World Christianity. A good teacher of mission must not be the one who merely transfers information to

56 Ibid., 23-24, 29, 39.
58 I drew the idea made by Dr. Timothy C. Tennent, President and Professors of Mission at Asbury Theological Seminary, Wilmore, KY 40390. My own conviction goes along with him.
60 Ibid., 10. See also, Brookfield, “How Can We Teach Authentically?” 4.
students without listening to their voices, but the one who invites students to speak and listen to their voices with the hope of mutual learning and transformation in the process of interaction.

In light of this, I would argue that a good teacher should be characterized by the metaphors of a good shepherd who knows the needs of his or her sheep and knows a method of how to guide them and of a good host who accepts his or her guests with open arm and affirms what the guests contribute. The metaphor of host-guest relationship reminds us that the global south students are not merely impoverished and empty beggars for North American food (education) but the generous guests to whom hospitality and insights must be both extended and received. Teaching mission in an age of World Christianity constantly requires designing a hospitable and subject-centered classroom.

This way of teaching mission reflects the character of Jesus as a dialogical teacher whose teaching is never imposed on the hearers of His messages, but requires for asking the questions and encourages them to keep thinking. This way of teaching mission reflects the nature of Christianity as a world religion thereby western academy or teacher is no longer a referee, but the Bible itself is, and missiology is becoming an intercultural team game with global players in a dialogical and hospitable field.  

61 I drew the idea by Wright in his forward, Tennent, Theology in an Age of World Christianity.
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