

Review of Hiebert, Paul. *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1994.

Paul Hiebert's *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* is an attempt to formulate a "trialogical" model of missions. In short, he wants to integrate the contributions of missions, anthropology, and theology. These disciplines, he believes, should not be set against one another, as some have done in the past. Instead, each specialty gives a different perspective on the task of contextualization, church planting, and cultural analysis. His book divides into three parts. First, he examines the epistemological foundations for diverse views of theology and contextualization. Second, he uses anthropological insights to assist in the task of church planting. Finally, Hiebert reflects upon issues concerning "spiritual encounters", such as healing miracles and spiritual warfare. He is keenly aware of the danger of personal bias. Therefore, he uses anthropology to check our various cultural theologies and improve our communication of Scripture.

In part 1, Hiebert begins by showing how epistemology influences our view of the world, whether in our understanding of science or of theology. As a corollary, he argues that all worldviews and theologies are *culturally* informed. For example, the emphasis on science and an orderly, knowable universe led many theologians of the 1800s to call theology a "science"; such labels were apologetic attempts to defend the Bible's value in a context that sharply dichotomized objective and subjective knowledge. This spurs a review of various epistemological perspectives. He highlights realism, idealism, determinism (which is essentially reductionism), instrumentalism, and (his choice) critical realism. Each view holds a different way of relating subjective knowledge with objective reality. Realism basically claims that knowledge of the "outside" world is possible. Idealists say knowledge is an abstract construct in the mind, not necessarily corresponding to the facts outside our minds. Determinism says that perceived knowledge is really a factor of socio-political influences. Instrumentalism suggests that knowledge is simply that which is useful; this philosophy amounts to pragmatic relativism. Critical realism, he says, offers hope, avoiding the extremes of naïve realism and postmodern instrumentalism. It claims that real knowledge of the world is possible, but is imperfect. We must distinguish between the world as it is and the world as we see it. We need critical methods to assess these two "worlds".

In history, theologians, missionaries, and those from other religions have had severe disagreements. Hiebert's assertion is that many of these problems arise from discordant epistemologies. One's perception of the world and of knowledge will inevitably affect theological content and the way we relate to those of different religions and theologies. Historically, an uncritical view towards one's cultural assumptions has caused problems in missions. Missionaries absolutize their theology and practice to the point that the gospel is unattractive because of its *foreignness*. Nationals who first heard the gospel misunderstood it, associating it with western cultural rather than supracultural truth revealed by the God of the universe. In short, colonialism manifested itself not only in economics and politics; it was ever present in the church, theology, and missions. This gave birth to anti-colonial sentiments, both among sensitive missionaries and indigenous peoples. Hiebert cites the well-known formula,

“self-propagating, self-supportive, and self-governing”, but then adds the need for “the fourth *self: self-theologizing*” (46). He surmises that theology can be the mediator between Bible and culture. Theology is essentially the interpretation of the Bible by those in diverse cultures. Speaking from a “critical realist” position, he writes, “They see all theology as comprising human interpretation of the biblical revelation within specific contexts. Consequently, different theologies are bound to emerge because different cultures ask different questions and view reality in different ways” (47). Hiebert’s historical survey should motivate contemporary missiologists in the study of philosophy, world religions, and other social sciences.

Finally, he proposes an approach called “critical contextualization”. In summary, the missionary begins by uncritically examining the culture, trying to discern important customs, categories of thought, and values that best describe the prevailing worldview. Second, the missionary and the local leaders in the church together exegete the Scripture in view of its original context. Third, local Christians can find those areas in which the Bible challenges community norms. Since they know their own culture best, they can best critique what needs to change and what can remain the same; they can discern the complex intricacies of symbolism and meaning. He notes that this approach has a number of advantages, like taking the Bible seriously, allowing the community to participate in the hermeneutical process, and opening a door for the Holy Spirit to uniquely address an extra-Biblical context. Certainly, Heibert’s model helps dispel the “westernness” from the theologies taught by missionaries. Yet, there still remains a vestige of presumption or ignorance that does not befit a humble hermeneutic. As is evident by his diagram on Figure 2.4 (p. 47), he assumes that only culture needs correcting by Scripture. Although he rightly distinguishes between the Bible and theology, he does not recognize that culture may have many *Biblical* components, absent in our own theology. As David Clark points out in *To Know and Love God*, the culture may have much to offer theologians by way of correcting blind spots that skew conventional readings of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> Part of the problem in Heibert’s analysis is the lack of clarity in categories. For example, he puts forth a “trialogue” with missions, anthropology, and theology in conversation. This is a very unclear differentiation. Can missions be so sharply separated from the latter two? Missiology might better be seen as a composite of anthropology and theology, one’s view of man and God.

In part 2, Hiebert applies the findings of anthropology to the church. For example, missionaries must reflect on the meaning of the category “Christian”. He helpfully introduces set-theory as a means of understanding how groups and individuals identify themselves. How one defines becoming and being a Christian will radically affect one’s practices, theology, and mission. He distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic qualities. The former speaks of essential characteristics of the group’s members. The latter refers to its identity in relationship to other things/people. These groups (or sets) can be “well-formed” (with sharp boundaries) or “fuzzy” (having little or no distinct boundary). Having examined the various combinations of group-sets, he suggests we see those in the church, i.e. Christians, as “extrinsic well-formed (centered) sets” (122ff). This means that Christians are people defined by having a relationship with Christ, who is the center of the group. Membership is defined by this relationship. This criteria sharply bounds the group, denoting both who is in and out of the group. If we

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<sup>1</sup> See especially Chapter 3 in Clark’s *To Know and Love God*.

misunderstand things like group-identification, we may misapply or misunderstand things like sanctification, the need for evangelism or missions, and leadership in the church.

Hiebert illustrates how groups orient themselves and how this influences missions. Western cultures highly value order, thus strictly protect hierarchy, are time-oriented, and seek rational explanations for problems in the world. Other cultures emphasize relationship, thus are more flexible with schedules, know how to handle ambiguity, and are less focused on technique. The implications for missions vary. A westerner may well be prone to doing tasks more than maintaining harmony in relationships. Traditions and ritual may be disregarded for the sake of efficiency. Such missionaries might ignore respected authorities and communal norms in the quest for individual conversions. Churches are inherently communal, thus social assumptions, values, and practices will shape the way national Christians seek to organize themselves. Outsiders are challenged to consider the values that underlie such practices and which call our own views into questions. For example, Hiebert notes that the western zeal for “order” may hide a fear of losing control (144). Working with people is “chaotic”. Most messy among relationships are those between missionaries and national partners. Together, they form “bicultural” relationships, in which the rules of the relationship are not distinctly from one culture or the other; instead, they share values and habits from both parties’ culture. While this opens doors for new experiences and learning, it can also be alienating for both groups. In time, each generation of national Christians may absolutize this bi-cultural arrangement, forming ghettos. With time and size, institutionalism sets in. Institutionalization has its advantages and disadvantages. It is natural with growth, however, much effort must be given to constant renewal. Renewal and change are facilitated through “transformative rituals” and “rituals of restoration” (168–69). The former are brief and catalytic, leveling social hierarchy and norms; the latter tends towards reinforcing the status quo. Finally, Hiebert offers a few helpful words on leadership training and decision-making. Missionaries must be keenly intentional that they train leaders, not followers, lest the locals become dependent upon the foreigner. This requires humility, perseverance, and flexibility. Otherwise, ego, fear, and short-term gain may cause us to “use people to build programs, not programs to build people” (175). Since missions and churches are about relating to people, not methods or personal preferences, we must take into consideration the matter of decision-making and sacred space. Group-oriented cultures may not be as efficient as a westerner might like, yet the decisions may have lasting value. How one identifies him or herself will affect how decisions are made. Generally, groups and individuals have certain spaces that are considered “sacred”, or reserved for special use. Each culture has rules that govern the use of that space. Conversation and sacredness are communal categories; thus, when discussing issues like evangelism and church meetings, a person must bear in mind the appropriate place to worship, pray, and minister to different sorts of people. It may be that changes in time and venue will affect receptivity or communicate varying meanings.

Hiebert’s focus, in part 3, is quite narrow. He applies the broader concepts discussed in the previous sections to the particular topic of spiritual warfare, miracles, and supernaturalism. What is especially helpful are Hiebert’s reflections on how Christians often unknowingly resort more to cultural philosophies and mythology over Scripture. By listening to the questions of other cultures, we are challenged to reassess the validity of our own views. For example, Hiebert contrasts a biblical worldview of the world with Indo-European mythology, which emphasizes,

order, dualism between good and evil, and victory. We should recognize that God is the one true, good God, sovereign over his creation and that peace, not domination over enemies, is the goal of the world. These facts protect us from fixating on supposed conflicts between evil spirits and the “good forces” of the universe; instead, we can understand God’s love for enemies, the importance of the human heart, and the necessity of chaos in forming loving relationships. “Our Western need for order and control works against true community and fellowship, because it is the passage through chaos that forms the basis for real communication and community” (210). In addition, we will recognize that authentic good and truth is not found in physical healings, wealth, and public success; in fact, God displays his power of evil at the cross. This leads us to value compassion, serving in weakness, and humility in community. The stakes are so high. In essence, Christians proclaim a competing worldview that challenges that of the prevailing culture and the world (218). Even our vocabulary can be a Trojan horse for diverse theologies. For example, Hiebert notes how the language of “supernatural” and “natural” exposes a subtle Neoplatonic presupposition that the world is divided between spirit and matter. Instead, the fundamental division is between Creator and creation (219). God is at work in various means, including the “ordinary” means that people are accustomed to seeing. God uses people, medicine, and nature. We should not be enthralled by the “signs and wonders” of various teachers. Heibert reminds us that these can be false pointers that actually deceive people. The true signs of God’s grace appear in the Spirit’s bearing fruit in the life of believers. Such Christ-like lives free people from the western narrative that emphasizes individualism and visible success. Hiebert’s work encourages the reader to seriously compare culture with Scripture, making sure that our missiological theology and practice center upon Christ.