

Missionary Primer on Contemporary Evangelical Theological Methodology

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Introductory Comments

Missionaries can find themselves reading evangelical theology which espouses positions we suspect are different than our own. For example, it may be that we notice an evangelical author does not hold to the inerrancy of Scriptures as evangelicals have traditionally understood that doctrine. We sense that the author might be trying to reconstruct that doctrine for his or her own purposes. Or it might be that a millennial view expressed in a published article differs from our position. These kind of differences are theological in nature. Other types of differences are also possible. For example, it could be that an author in the country we have adopted as missionaries describes the situation of the church in our home country in such a way that we do not recognize our homeland church in the author's description. We sense that perhaps misrepresentation is happening. These kind of differences may be due to cultural or historical factors.

How should we personally evaluate and, if called upon, respond to these discrepant understandings of theology and history? This question is particularly relevant in light of the recently published theological pamphlet of the Japan Evangelical Association entitled, "Fundamentalism."¹ Several of the articles in the pamphlet seem to espouse or imply theological and historical/cultural understandings that probably lie outside the comfort zone of most evangelical missionaries in Japan.

One answer would be to do nothing by way of personal evaluation or public response. This is an easy solution for those who accept the postmodern idea that these kind of theological and historical differences simply reflect culturally determined understandings and local truths. Those who hold to this solution could reason that particular authors hold certain theological or historical viewpoints because of their cultural settings. Their understandings are determined by their personal context. Trying to argue for the soundness of a viewpoint not normally considered natural to that context is considered suspicious because such a move is seen as an imposition of a foreign, and therefore inappropriate, way of thinking. So the easy way out would be to choose not to engage in such argumentation. In our postmodern world this passive response to published theological and historical differences can be a comfortable response.

But for those of us who resist the relativism at the heart of postmodern thinking, our response is not so easy. Responding wisely to differing theological understandings is a complicated task. One necessary element of the task is to debate the actual content of the differences. For example, what is inerrancy? What kinds of positions can one hold on inerrancy and still be considered evangelical? How many nuanced levels of inerrancy are there? These kind of questions thrust us directly into discussion about specific theological content.

However, as if discussing theological content is not enough of a challenge, there is also the equally important task of trying to identify the theological methodology used in any given theological discussion. Before "doing theology" participants would benefit from reflecting on how to do it. Theological methodology is a topic at the forefront of contemporary evangelical

¹原理主義：JEA 神学委員会パンフレットNo. 6. (*Fundamentalism: JEA Theological Commission Pamphlet No. 6.*) Tokyo: Japan Evangelical Association, May 2006. As they become available, English translations of the Japanese articles within this pamphlet can be found at <http://www.jtheo.net>.

theology. Entire books are written on “prolegomena,” literally, the “word before.” For example, before diving into a discussion about inerrancy, it is helpful first to clarify the theological methodology used in the discussion. If both sides can agree on some basic methodological guidelines the actual ensuing theological discussion stands a good chance of shedding light, not just heat, on the subject at hand.

The purpose of this article is to identify some aspects of an evangelical theological methodology which might inject a degree of health into theological discussions we as missionaries encounter. To try to accomplish this task in the short space of this article, ten methodological points are touched upon, and those only in an introductory manner. This, then, is but a primer on the important subject of methodology in contemporary theology.

Healthy Methodological Framework for Reading Evangelical Theology

A healthy but critical methodological approach to reading theology helps us keep our theological balance in the possibly confusing world of contemporary theology. Assuming that most missionaries find themselves in the position of responding at the personal level to published theological positions rather than in the position of actually writing theology, the methodological factors below are placed in the interrogative form in order to help us read theology in a somewhat critical manner.

Note that the following methodological list is not exhaustive. Much more could be written. Also bear in mind that the following discussion of methodology is not only applicable to the theological discipline of systematic theology. The methodological stance outlined below is also applicable to reading theological studies of the Old Testament, the New Testament, and church history.

1. Has the Theology Been Published Hastily?

Contemporary theology, including the evangelical variety, is being written and published at a fast rate. For the one who wants to keep up to date with contemporary theology this speed of production means there is always another publication to read or another theological website to check. The task of reading theology can be endless. For the one who writes contemporary theology, this speed of production means that most theological works published with the word “contemporary” in the title will likely be irrelevant within a few short years. Only the outstanding contributions will have a long life span. This judgment applies to this article as well!

Sometimes this fast publication speed allows the authors to write their good ideas at a faster pace. However, in our hurried society the thoughtfulness, thoroughness, and care of a theological work can easily be undermined by hasty publication. If there is evidence that the theological work in question was hastily assembled, there is good reason to think that its quality has been negatively affected.

2. Does the Publication Display a Working Knowledge of the Diversity of Opinion on the Subject?

The speed with which theology is now published might also reflect the diversity of viewpoints within Christian evangelical theology. Due to technological advances all these viewpoints can quite easily be published, not only on paper but also on the internet. For instance, Alister McGrath’s introductory textbook on Christian theology includes a list of theological

websites.² The result is a veritable smorgasbord of published theological works. Some of the current hotspots of evangelical theology display this diversity of opinion: God (theology proper, Christology, pneumatology, Trinitarian theology, open theism, etc.), salvation (soteriology, theology of religions, etc.), and theological anthropology (gender roles in Christian homes and churches, evangelism and social action, etc.). Reputable evangelical scholars do not necessarily take the same positions on these kinds of theological subjects.

Diversity is also evident in theological methodology. One such example is the foundational issue of theological sources and their relative degrees of authority. That is, how are the Bible, Christian tradition, the church, and culture weighted in their authoritative importance for “doing theology”? Historically, one major difference between Protestant and Roman Catholic theology was that Protestants insisted on the priority of the authority of the Bible (rightly interpreted in its original autographs) whereas Roman Catholics understood the church to be the authoritative interpreter of both Christian tradition and the Bible itself. However, many contemporary Protestant, even evangelical, theologians seem to argue that more authority should be attributed to the church as a source for doing theology. These writers see the church as the community for which theology is written and therefore seem to imply that theology should primarily be accountable to the church. The community known as the church thus becomes authoritative over theology itself. It is no accident that the title of the late Stanley Grenz’ introductory theological textbook is *Theology for the Community of God*.³ Some contemporary evangelical theologians seem happy to attribute more theological authority to the church than evangelicals of yesteryear would have done. Diversity in theological methodology seems as prevalent as diversity in theological content.

So contemporary theological material is readily available. Christians who do not have an awareness of the breadth of options available, and who themselves have not read much theology, will quite easily be impressed with the first theological viewpoint they happen to read. If what they read happens to be well balanced, showing awareness of diversity on the subject, their faith will be enriched. But if what they read argues for a debatable point of view, with no awareness of diversity, readers likely will be unable to evaluate the position taken by the author. Even if missionaries cannot keep up with the publication speed of contemporary theology, it is helpful for them to know the basics of theology, including at least an introductory awareness of some of the issues in contemporary theology, in order to keep their theological balance.

3. Is the Opposing Viewpoint Treated with Care and Respect?

We who live in a postmodern era seem to like things that are new. Contemporary theology displays the same positive attitude toward new ideas. However, there may be a high price tag attached to this inclination. That is, contemporary theology’s search for new ideas leads it to take a critical stance toward historically held viewpoints and ideas. It could be that this lack of respect for historical theology generates the tendency within contemporary theology to describe the past using caricature. That is, contemporary theology tends to oversimplify the past in order to make a case for some new idea. Such shallow historical research can lead to revisionist historical theology. It seems that contemporary theology has a tendency to manipulate history in order to generate new and purportedly more attractive theological constructs. So

²Alister McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 589-92. This book is available in Japanese.

³Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).

contemporary theology seems to have a fascination with the new and a simultaneous suspicion or disrespect of the old. To be a contemporary theologian and yet champion the old viewpoints can bring a flood of criticism.

Some evangelical theologians are pointing the way back to a deeper respect for the theological positions of yesteryear. Thomas Oden is one of these.⁴ Another one is Alister McGrath who believes history is important to theology. About thirty percent of his introductory theological textbook focuses on history.⁵ So in our postmodern context there is a certain degree of evangelical awareness that theology is done within a particular historical and cultural context.

Nevertheless, both theological and historical caricature remain evident in published evangelical theology. Caricature serves no positive theological purpose because it is manipulative. What is needed to make theology credible and therefore helpful is careful description and nuancing of the opposing side's position(s). Millard Erickson's *Christian Theology*, which has become a standard introductory systematic theology text used in evangelical seminaries in the English speaking world, is a good example of theology carefully done without caricature.⁶ Erickson is consistent in describing the landscape of any given theological topic. Following this, he points out what he sees to be the pluses and minuses of the possible theological options, and then gives his position. This kind of methodology is helpful for readers of theology because it displays a working knowledge of the relevant theological positions. It allows the reader to see the lay of the land so an informed decision can be made as to what theological position to hold. It treats the reader with respect rather than in a controlling manner.

When this kind of working knowledge about the diversity of opinion on any given theological subject is not forthcoming in contemporary evangelical theology, it is best to read the theology with a healthy hermeneutic of suspicion. Why has the theological context not been spelled out clearly? Is there some reason the author does not want the reader to know about alternative evangelical positions? These are healthy questions for readers of evangelical theology to bear in mind.

4. *Have Both Friendly and Unfriendly Sources Been Accessed?*

In the development of a theological position which uses caricature it is usually necessary for the author to rely on only friendly sources. This is because accessing unfriendly sources—sources which might count against the stated theological position—would lead the author away from a theology dependent on caricature. This in turn would make it difficult for the author to retain the theological position espoused.

Theology which does not access unfriendly sources leaves readers with the suspicion that they have not heard the rest of the story. Furthermore, readers of two differing theological views which both use caricature—which do not access unfriendly sources—are left with the question of which caricature to accept. These residual doubts in the mind of the reader

⁴Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 2003). Oden is the co-editor of the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, a series focusing on mining the biblical and theological resources of the ancient church.

⁵McGrath, *Christian Theology*.

⁶Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998). This book is now available in Japanese, comprising four volumes.

would be dispelled if both friendly and unfriendly sources were accessed. Selection of only friendly sources serves no positive theological purpose.

5. Are the Key Theological Points Made Using Assertions?

Assertions which are peripheral to a theological argument cannot be avoided because any given theological publication cannot always cover all the bases. Theology builds upon what others have done. If their arguments are sound, then it is sufficient to reference those arguments rather than repeating them. However, the key points in a theological discussion lose credibility if they are asserted rather than argued for. A string of assertions related to the main argument does not make good theology. Assertions are only convincing for those who do not know the lay of the land, who believe that those in authority making the assertions are never mistaken, who have not learned how to think about theology in a healthy and critical manner, or who do not want to be convinced otherwise because they already believe the assertions.

6. What is the Theological Agenda?

The evangelical camp now includes theologians who hold theological viewpoints outside the parameters of what might be called the traditionally accepted evangelical norm. According to Millard Erickson, evangelical theologians can now be divided between the left and the right.⁷ The term “evangelical” is no longer understood in the same way by all theologians who claim it. There seems to be an identity crisis in some contemporary evangelical theology. As a result, evangelical theological writings can have an agenda which pushes a particular version of evangelical theology. It is possible the agenda might be hidden. However, hidden agendas are not conducive to healthy theological discussions. They work against the clarity being sought in the theological discussion. For the sake of clarity it is usually helpful for a theologian to clearly state a position and then argue for it. If such clear statement of intent is not readily available, the reader might want to read with care.

7. Are the Key Terms in the Discussion Clearly Defined?

Appropriate explanation and definition of the key terms used in the discussion makes for helpful theology. If the author does not do so, readers might supply their own definitions which might not match the thinking of the author. The result of such a mismatch is equivocation (same word, different meaning). Readers would be advised to discern the meaning of key words from what the author writes rather than reading their own meanings into the words. If those definitions are not available in the publication, the clarity of the theology is reduced.

This issue is particularly important for theological topics which are inherently controversial. For example, the reader of any theological position related to the issue of fundamentalism should ask whether the author has clarified the meaning of the word. If fundamentalism is confused with evangelicalism or if Christian fundamentalism is placed in the same category as radical Muslim fundamentalism, all without any clear definition of the terms used, the theological discussion bogs down in confusion before it has hardly begun. Heat may be shed on the issues at hand, but little light.

⁷Millard Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Postconservative Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

8. Is a Significant Amount of the Discussion Carried by Emotive Language?

In the English language emotions are often expressed in adjectives and adverbs. This is especially pronounced in the case of negative emotions. Extensive use of emotive language in theology tends to obscure the actual theological points under discussion, leaving the reader to sense the author's feelings but not necessarily understand the author's theological argument. Reliance on emotive language serves no positive theological purpose.

Culture influences the writing style used in theological publications. For example, theology written in Japanese makes frequent use of what we would call adjectives and adverbs in English. This tends to give theology written in Japanese an emotional tone. This tendency is also evident in oral discussions of theology. I have been present at theological discussions with Japanese colleagues who at the outset of the discussion decided to carry on the dialogue in English rather than Japanese so that the Japanese participants would be better able to understand one another. So it seems that in the Japanese context care needs to be taken to reduce the emotive elements of theological expression. Translating Japanese theology into English helps to reveal the emotive language so that decisions can be made as to whether to keep or modify those emotional elements.

9. Is the Published Work Available in English?

The language of contemporary theology is English. In general, there is no important contemporary theological work which has not been written in English or translated into English. Whether a theologian is Japanese, Chinese, Indian, African, French, or German—if his or her work is considered important it will be translated into English or it will be written in English. If the work is not in English, it will not be studied by theological students around the world. This fact generates debate among academics who determine the graduation requirements for students of systematic theology at the academic doctoral level (Ph.D., Th.D.). A strong case can be made that it is no longer necessary to learn a modern language other than English in order to become proficient in contemporary theology.

The significance of this for readers of contemporary evangelical theology is that if the theology is not published in English, its significance is restricted to the local level. This is satisfactory only for those who are content to carry out an internal dialogue insulated from outside critique. For most theologians this is inadequate. Most desire to have their theology read on a broader scale so that their theological formulations can be sharpened. If the work is not published in English there is a possibility it has not benefited from culturally external critique.

10. What is the Cultural Context for the Theology in Question?

Some cultural values work against healthy, critical theological methodology. In a culture or sub-culture which is top down and which believes that authority is not to be questioned, those who write theology often hold positions of authority. Their theological publications can therefore be expected to exemplify such characteristics as caricature, assertions, and emotive language. Such is the ethos of authority in a hierarchical culture. In these kind of cultures the theological methodology suggested in this article is by definition counter-cultural. Japan may be one such culture.

Understanding this cultural stance can help the reader search for theological truth beneath the assertions, caricatures, and emotions. When reading theology it is therefore wise to

inquire about the cultural context of the author so as to help in its interpretation. Understanding the cultural context of the author provides clues for interpreting the theology.

Concluding Comments

It is not unusual for missionaries to encounter a piece of published theology that is bothersome to them. If at that time they are able to apply only a few of the methodological suggestions above, then the purpose of this article will have been achieved. Of course, it is entirely possible that this very article employs at points a methodology which runs counter to what the article itself espouses! If such is the case, the author will need to work further on aligning his own theological methodology with what he expressed here!