Biblical Studies and Frontier Missions: "What God Has Joined Together..."

Larry W. Caldwell

very professor is proud of the achievement of his or her students. But not many professors receive the opportunity to showcase their students' work in an international journal! Most of what follows in this issue of the *IJFM*—extending from Nancy Porras' analysis of corporate personality to Brenda Thompson's article on refugees—is an edited sampling of work that students have done in four sections of an Old Testament survey class I have taught during the past two years. I, and they, are indebted to Darrell Dorr, editor of the *IJFM*, for giving us this opportunity.

I am excited about these papers, not just because they have been written by my students, but also because of the model they represent. For too long there has been an unnatural dichotomy between the "academic" realm of Biblical and theological studies and the "practical" needs of students seriously considering or preparing for missions service. Of course, most fields of academia struggle to bridge the theoretical and the practical, and, yes, the theoretical dimension is necessary in any course of study worth its salt. But all too often the practical missiological implications are glossed over in classes in Biblical or theological studies.

My own educational experience—though academically excellent—is evidence of the lack of the practical dimension. One of my major fields in undergraduate education was Biblical and theological studies, and I later obtained a Master of Divinity degree with majors in Old Testament and New Testament. Therefore, I felt prepared when my wife and I went to the Philippines to teach for a year in a Bible college. I



Larry W. Caldwell is director of the U.S. Center for World Mission's "Year of Bible and Missions" certificate program. He also holds the rank of assistant professor at the William Carev International University.

soon learned, however, that my years of Bible training had not adequately prepared me for teaching the Bible in a crosscultural situation. Sure, the general course content was the same, but I was ill-prepared to shape my courses to the cultures of my students. I later resolved my problem by obtaining more education (!), but this time at Fuller Seminary's School of World Mission, which places a major

emphasis on the practical.

When I began teaching in the "Year of Bible and Missions" program at the U.S. Center for World Mission, I resolved to make class lectures and assignments as relevant as possible to the needs and aspirations of my students. (Granted, this is made immensely easier in our program, since most of our students have a commitment to serve in some capacity among unreached peoples, and many have already worked among particular groups.) I believe that I have been able to safeguard missiological relevance without compromising the foundational elements which need to be covered in class. What this has come down to is a question of priorities. For example, in an Old Testament survey class, is it more important for students to memorize the list of kings in the Northern and Southern Kingdoms (as I, alas, did several times over the course of my studies, after each cram session forgetting what I had memorized), or to spend their energies in grasping the main themes and content of each book of the Old Testament and then integrating these discoveries into their current or future ministries?

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This question of priorities is crucial. In light of the fact that some 17,000 unreached peoples are cut off from the Gospel, can we afford to divorce Biblical studies, even on the introductory level, from mission applications? I think not. With apologies to conscientious exegetes, and only half in jest, I would propose a new application of Jesus' words that "what God has joined together, let man not separate" (Matt. 19:6). The very backbone or story line of the Bible is the steady, purposeful initiative of the living God to use His people to bring blessings to all the nations of the earth. Whether or not we are actively preparing to work among unreached people groups, we are under obligation to keep

Biblical studies and frontier missions together. This is not a union of our own making.

The following article by Ralph Winter is a wonderful backdrop to the contributions of my students. Winter's plea for a missiological Christology, made before eminent evangelical scholars, is answered by the attempts of young men and women to apply their studies to the "unfinished work of Christ" among unreached peoples. These students are neither credentialed scholars nor experts on the unreached peoples their articles address. The Old Testament survey course which prompted their efforts is only introductory. But my purpose is to stress what can be done by ordinary students who are encouraged and enabled to harness their Biblical education to missiological application.

So, if you are a student, why not write your next paper (whether in a "Bible"-related course or not) on some aspect of reaching a particular unreached people group? If you are a professor of Biblical or theological studies (or missions!), why not try an assignment like this in one of your courses? If you are a missionary or mission executive, why not experiment in your own sphere of educational influence? In any event, I hope you enjoy what you read here, and I pray that Biblical studies around the world will become increasingly characterized by an emphasis on those peoples who presently have little or no opportunity to fellowship with the God of the Bible.

Author's address: 1539 E. Howard St., Pasadena, California 91104, USA.