ISFM 2019 and the “Reimagining of Frontier Mission”

Mission is being sifted these days. Not only are global conditions requiring an institutional make-over, but the weight of history is calling “mission” to new account. The apparent complicity of our missionary enterprise with the power and abuses of Western civilization is casting a dark shadow over all its advances. The very totality of this narrative makes it suspect, and we’re wary of a cultural agenda that too easily indicts anything evangelical. But in a day of such global transformations, the mission enterprise must not balk at sifting and rethinking its own premises. It’s the necessary first step in reimagining God’s mission today.

ISFM 2019 opened its sessions with this “sifting of mission,” and three articles and two responses under the theme, “Reimagining Frontier Mission,” are included in this issue (others are forthcoming). We invited Mike Stroope to present the thesis of his recent book, Transcending Mission: The Eclipse of a Modern Tradition (p. 163). When I first read Mike’s book in preparation, I could feel my inner brake lights go on. I was reluctant to accept his verdict on the modern mission paradigm. The historiography was selective, his narrative seemed too grand. I resisted. But gradually I stopped picking at his historical hermeneutic and began to see how it goaded me to reexamine my own mission narrative. You can also read Martin Accad’s response from his context in the Middle East (p. 169). It’s quite apparent that Mike has struck a nerve and allowed a global critique to be heard. Both Stroope and Accad call for a brutal pruning of modern mission. Their radical assessment reminds me of the roadside trees I used to see on the route between Casablanca and Marrakech in Morocco. Occasionally the branches of these trees would be cut back to their trunks. Total decapitation. It was brutal, ugly, a row of posts sticking into the sky, seemingly unnecessary. One wondered if they could ever recover. A few months later when I would make the same trip, I’d be surprised to see those same trees with their leaves and branches flourishing. One thinks of the Divine Vinedresser whose pruning can cut us back in similar ways, a “cleaning” (John 15:3) that can bring fruit ever so quickly. A re-interpretation of mission history can threaten to do the same brutal pruning. One feels a tension. We’re aware of another positive narrative, one that assures us that mission witness and mission institutions have had astounding impact for good in the modern age. Yet, our imaginations must hold these different assessments simultaneously, for in a rapidly shrinking world we often live and work next to new account. The views expressed in IJFM are those of the various authors and not necessarily those of the journal’s editors, the International Society for Frontier Missiology, or the society’s executive committee.
to those who believe an anti-Christian narrative. We must reimagine witness with that perspective in mind.

So, ISFM 2019 indicated some early directions in our reimagining frontier mission.

Language and terminology must be examined. Both Stroope and Accad agree that any “transcending” of an outdated mission paradigm should taper us back to biblical metaphor—to pictures, not propositions. As I indicated in my ISFM presentation, our language can lock us into models that desperately need review. Accad suggests that a return to biblical images might help us reimagine an approach more appropriate to the interreligious sensibilities of the Middle East (p. 173). Paul Pennington’s ISFM 2019 presentation on our indiscriminate East (p. 173). Paul Pennington’s ISFM 2019 presentation on our indiscriminate use of New Testament language will be published in a future issue.

New missiological theory will be introduced. The review of Henning Wrogemann’s comprehensive theory of interreligious relations is a foretaste of new perspectives (p. 202). Too often our mission strategies have been derived from intuitive pragmatism rather than from a thoughtful biblical theology. In his ISFM plenary, Martin Accad condensed insights from his new book, Sacred Misinterpretation: Reaching Across the Christian-Muslim Divide, and called for the development of a biblical theology of Islam (p. 173). Darren Duerksen also presented a short case study from South Asia, one he lifted from chapter 4 of his recent book, Seeking Church: Emerging Witnesses to the Kingdom co-authored with William Dymess, reviewed on (p. 206). By exploring the tool of “emergence theory,” these two authors offer greater discernment on how the church arises in frontier contexts.

Expect a reformation of the mission agency. Boone Aldridge helped our ISFM imagine the organizational tensions in the strategic transformation of mission agencies. He offered insights from his recent history of Cameron Townsend and the radical reframing of the faith mission paradigm for Bible translation in unreached tribes (p. 181). Innovation will become more collaborative. In my opening address I encouraged a reimaging that would spotlight the terms and metaphors selected by those who initially respond to the gospel. At the tail end of our sessions, Kevin Higgins and Steven Spicer began to address how innovation in mission will require a process of listening to indigenous voices (articles forthcoming). One of our ISFM colleagues, Bradford Greer, addressed this same incarnational sensitivity to innovation in his presentation to a prominent evangelical seminary this past fall (p. 189).

Reimagining frontier mission begins with sifting, and brutal pruning is sometimes necessary for fruitfulness.

In Him,

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Endnotes

