

# Missiology—and the Two Billion

By Ernst H. Wendland

[This essay was presented to the Missionaries' Conference, assembled at Salima, Malawi, Africa, on October 25, 1973.]

## Our Title

“Missiology” is a word that has come into use in relatively recent times. Our 1936 edition of Webster's Unabridged Dictionary doesn't even list it. The word itself means the study of Christian mission. A recent theological journal makes use of the word as its title. This journal, which is sponsored by the recently organized American Society of Missiology, proposes to study “the missionary dimension of the Christian Church.”

World mission work today, as we know, is no longer a matter of sending out a few intrepid explorers and clergymen to some unknown area and hoping and praying for the best. It involves a thorough study of linguistics, anthropology, and strategies of how best to deal with people of another culture about whom we know something, at least. Behind all of this, of course, still lies a theology of missions, which defines for us such basic terms as “salvation” and “conversion” and what it means to “preach the gospel” in all the world and to every creature. Our own missiology, we might say, reflects our whole approach to mission work.

The number “Two Billion” is used by some missiologists to designate those who are still outside the nominal membership of the Christian churches. This number, however, may already have become outdated. In 1962, when the references were made concerning “the two billion unsaved,” the world's population was supposed to have reached the three billion mark. But in 1969 the world's population was presumably three and one-half billion, and by the year 2000 A.D. it is expected to be “between six and seven billion.” Our use of the number is therefore symbolic of a great multitude of people who have not accepted Jesus Christ and His saving gospel.

Our title is actually, perhaps, a sort of catchy springboard to get at the subject of what is going on in the thinking of those who are concerned with the subject of world missions today. Missiology may or may not have something to do with the Two Billion. It all depends on where your interests and your sympathies lie these days. Dr. Donald McGavran, Dean Emeritus and Senior Professor of Mission at the Institute of Church Growth, Pasadena, California, are very much concerned about the Two Billion. Dr. McGavran severely censures the leaders of the World Council of Churches as having “betrayed the Two Billion.” This happened, according to Dr. McGavran, at Uppsala, Sweden, in 1968, at the occasion of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council. McGavran is joined in his protest by Protestants who refer to themselves as the “Evangelicals.” Generally these are best known, perhaps, through their expressions in the publication *Christianity Today*, whose writers take a conservative position toward the Bible as the inspired Word of God.

Naturally, leaders of the World Council rush to the defense of their missiological statement adopted at Uppsala. It is entitled “Renewal in Mission.” McGavran refers to the resultant debate as *The Eye of the Storm*, a book in which he points up the sharp cleavage in theological thinking today on the subject of world missions.

## “Renewal in Mission”

A study of the document adopted at Uppsala under the title “Renewal in Mission” shows best, perhaps, why the Evangelicals are somewhat aroused. Those who played leading roles in the formulation of this document state quite openly that its wording was the result of a conscious effort to get away from the old clichés and thought patterns which have dominated so much of mission thinking in the past. It was a “striving for renewal” both in terminology as well as in thinking.

The document states at its beginning: “We belong to a humanity that cries passionately and articulately for a fully human life.” This sentence sets the tone for what follows. Man's “humanity,” it is said, is threatened.

Man's "dignity, freedom, and love" struggle for meaning in today's society. His physical and social needs therefore cannot be a "secondary responsibility" for the Christian Church. The "mission of God" is a new creation that is a radical renewal of the old and the invitation to men to grow up into their full humanity in the new man, Jesus Christ

The above words, which consist mostly of quotations from the WCC mission document, give a taste of its language and thought. The document goes on to deplore not sin, but "man's exploitation of man." In Jesus Christ "we see what man is meant to be." We as Christians are here to bring about "men's response to Jesus Christ," which is a "new life." "The new life frees men for community enabling them to break through racial, national, religious and other barriers that divide the unity of mankind."

Methods for attaining these goals for a better society are through "dialogue," which does not dwell on differences, but which tries its best to find the "Christian presence" common to all religions. Significant is the sentence which later on has caused the most controversy among its own constituency: "Where the maintenance of order is an obstacle to a *just* order, some will decide for revolutionary action against that injustice, struggling for a just society without which the new humanity cannot fully come." This can be interpreted to endorse as a church the support of Freedom Fighter activities in Africa, and looks sympathetically on activities in certain areas that recommend the violent overthrow of the existing government by means of guerilla tactics and revolutionary movements.

A sentence which pretty well sums up the document's entire humanistic philosophy reads as follows: "We must see achievements of greater justice, freedom and dignity as a part of the restoration of true manhood in Christ."

### **A True Expression of WCC Leadership**

At first one can hardly believe that this "new look" is a real expression of what most of Protestantism believes about the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ. Yet it is the true expression of the WCC's most prominent spokesmen. It adequately states what men like J.C. Hoekendijk, W.J. Hollenweger, J.G. Davies, Max Warren, Hans J. Margull, and Philip Potter have been saying all along.

In their words the Church of Jesus Christ is not to be thought of primarily—if at all—as a fellowship of believers who look for a new heaven and a new earth at the Lord's Second Coming. It is rather "a society of loving men devoted to social justice here and now." Conversion is not a turning from sin and idolatry to Jesus Christ, the world's only Savior. It is a "turning around in order to participate in the new reality of this creation." Christ's presence, whatever that means, is to be found in the religions of pagans as well as Christians. The Holy Spirit of God is at work in all "good movements" upon the earth. To "evangelize," means, "to renew and revitalize the fabric of human society." "Salvation" is the establishment of *shalom*, which is defined as "a peace in which society can live without oppression and exploitation."

### **Mission is Everything and Nothing**

This emphasis upon building a better human society here and now casts a rather suspicious eye upon any kind of "propaganda" which is directed towards "winning souls for Christ." It does not look very kindly upon "planting new churches in non-Christian areas." Such actions would be almost tantamount to overt acts of aggression. The Church of Jesus Christ, it is assumed, rather works quietly and unobtrusively among people of other religions, exerting its "Christian presence" without becoming blatant or being supercilious about church activity. After all, it is claimed, "the Church IS Mission." It is there. It acts in many ways. It makes use of "dialogue" which readily grants co-existence to those of other religious persuasions. If the efforts of others to humanize society are successful, they may be for all practical purposes closer to the truth than many who call themselves Christians!

It is, therefore, a kind of missiology which cannot possibly recognize two billion people as being "on the outside," since many of these two billion could very well be closer to the truth than many who presume to be in

the fold. It is the missiology of existentialism. Someone succinctly commented on this whole trend of thought in the following words: “Where everything is mission, pretty soon nothing is mission!”

### **“Salvation Today” at Bangkok**

After Uppsala came Bangkok, where the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC met in January of 1973. The theme chosen for the Bangkok meeting, which was “Salvation Today,” seemed to raise the hopes of the Evangelicals to some extent, at least. Perhaps their testimony at Uppsala had had some impact after all! If nothing else, Bangkok offered the prospect of a continued debate on the main issue of world missions.

Such was not the case. Serious theology was excluded from discussion. When Peter Beyerhaus wanted the Frankfurt Declaration discussed (a theological appraisal of Uppsala by conservative German theologians), he was informed that this was a German matter, not a world matter. McGavran’s question about the Two Billion was not considered to be a “debatable issue.”

According to Evangelical observers the method for discussion at Bangkok was an exercise in “group dynamics” or “sensitivity training,” whereby groups met without advance preparation to express themselves freely and without inhibitions on various topics. Beyerhaus refers to this experiment as an exercise in “brain washing,” since each group managed to have a liberal leader briefed sufficiently beforehand to run the show.

In the words of C. Peter Wagner, Professor of Missions at the Fuller School of World Missions, Jesus at Bangkok was “the prototype of an ideal social attitude,” the “man for others” whose resurrection and lordship meant no more than that others should be inspired by His example. Bangkok’s “salvation” was “any liberating experience,” from peace in Vietnam to release from the captivity of power in the North Atlantic Community.

### **Effect on African Leaders**

This mess of theological pottage is certainly not without its effect on political and national church leaders in Africa. Political and ecclesiastical goals are thrown together. The churches are expected to participate in community development projects as well as political liberation movements. In fact, this kind of activity is considered to be the essence of the church’s mission. Dr. Kenneth Kaunda, Zambia’s political leader, can hardly be blamed when he repeatedly identifies Christianity with his own humanistic philosophy of government. He happened to have been an honored guest at Uppsala!

One would like to look for other things, perhaps, from those who presume to be African theologians in the Lutheran Church. The last issue of the *African Theological Journal* (December, 1972), published at the Lutheran Theological College, Makumira, Tanzania, contains several articles that give us pause for concern. American James H. Cone’s *Black Theology* is not only reviewed sympathetically, it is presented as a possible strong influence in the new “African Theology.”

### **Black Theology**

Black Theology according to James H. Cone wants to make the preaching of Jesus Christ relevant to our day. This means especially “preaching good news to the poor and liberating the oppressed.” This sees its highest validity today in its relevance to the black predicament. The message of the Bible is from beginning to end “a shout of liberation.” The Church of Jesus Christ is therefore there “to identify itself unequivocally with the cause of black freedom and to set man free from the tyranny of white power.”

The concept of heaven is irrelevant to Black Theology. The Christian cannot “waste his time” contemplating the next world, if there is such a thing as a “next world” at all! He will not be deceived by messages of pearly gates and golden streets. Too many earthly streets “are still covered with black blood.” God’s Word of reconciliation means that we can be justified only by identifying ourselves “totally” with the cause of the black masses.

## **African Theology**

From Black Theology, which arose out of the black power movements in America, it is just a step to what has now become known as African Theology. Eliwaha E. Mshana, the Lutheran Editor of the *African Theological Journal*, has this to say: “The main emphasis of African Theology is Africanization and contextualization. Africanization must involve liberation from centuries of poverty, humiliation, and exploitation. A truly African Theology cannot escape the requirement of helping the indigenous churches to become relevant to the spiritual, social and political ills of Africa.”

One can understand a cry for liberation from Western forms and culture as expressions of African faith. There are already too many churches in Africa with Gothic spires. There are also too many hymns in African hymnals with melodies out of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe. There are also possibly quite a few missionaries remaining who haven't overcome their colonialistic mentality. On the other hand, however, there is a justifiable apprehension that World Council theology has already exerted some influence upon parts of African Lutheranism. It isn't any more just a matter of Africanization. It has become a cry for humanization, whereby salvation becomes primarily a matter of social liberation. Someone might argue, perhaps, that it's all a matter of emphasis. That could very well be true. Unfortunately we have seen how in Africa a wrong emphasis can very easily be misunderstood, bringing on extremes which lead to theological chaos. But perhaps the same is pretty well true the world over.

Some significance may lie in the fact that the *African Theological Journal* comes to an end in the issue that speaks out so strongly for Black and African Theology. Commenting on this demise Editor Mshana cites the usual reasons such as lack of money, editorial staff, contributors, and the like. But he also goes on to say: “we have been feeding our Christians with husks which should have found their way into the waste-basket ... We need a theological renewal which will meet the conditions prevalent in Africa.” We shall let the editor's words speak for themselves as to the need for a new voice in theological journalism in Africa.

## ***Quo Vadis Africa?***

When we see the extent to which much of nominal Christianity has veered off from the clear path set before it in the Holy Scriptures, and the great influence which these strange and revolutionary theological movements are having upon both civil and church leaders in Africa today, we wonder what does lie in store for the large portion of the Two Billion who live in Africa. We are not so sure that we agree with Dr. David Barrett, who predicts that by the year 2000 there will be 357 million Christians in Africa.

We are thankful to God, on the other hand, that His message of salvation is not confined to that which comes out of the constituency of the World Council of Churches. In fact, as so often happens with these ecumenically minded agencies, their zeal for acting as a sending organization diminishes. They prefer to justify their lack of missionary outreach by stating that they are now working through national organizations that are already in existence everywhere. Dr. David M. Stowe reports that 74 per cent of American missionaries are not with boards related to the World Council. We heard recently at Wheaton College that nearly 17,000 missionaries are presently associated with the Evangelicals. And the Evangelicals are very much active and alive also in Africa. Although we may not agree with them on all doctrinal points, particularly in their millennialistic teachings and especially with their Calvinistic position with regard to the Sacraments, yet we certainly can say with Paul: “Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice” (Php 1:18).

## **An “Evangelical” Theology of Missions**

Recently we had opportunity to read a book written by Dr. George W. Peters, Professor of World Missions at Dallas Theological Seminary, who is also a leading spokesman for the Evangelicals. His book is entitled *A Biblical Theology of Missions*. It was a real pleasure to see how the author used the Bible to show

how it is from beginning to end “a record of theology in mission—God in action in behalf of the salvation of mankind.” As we read this book we couldn’t escape a rather strange sensation of *deja vu*. Somewhere we had seen this all before. We had heard it all before. And many times!

Yes, this is our theology, too! We had it in our own Seminary—in our dogmatics courses, in our exegetical studies, in our whole approach to both the Old and the New Testaments of Scripture. In fact, the truth of the unconditioned gospel as God’s eternal plan for the salvation of all people has been most clearly enunciated by our orthodox Lutheran theologians for centuries! There has never been any doubt as to the fact that ours is a theology of mission and for missions in every possible way. Our message of “Salvation Today” is clear. Our concern for the Two Billion is surely as deep as can be.

### ***Quo Vadis, Lutheranism?***

But doesn’t this at the same time give us an uneasy conscience? Why are we as a Lutheran church so far behind in doing mission work on a worldwide basis? We’ve read some excellent presentations on the subject of the Lutheran church as a mission church. One hesitates to wish to detract one bit from what has been presented. But when we get out in the world where the action is, and when we see how comparatively little Lutheranism has done in comparison with church bodies which are smaller by far in Europe and America, we are not so sure that our Lutheran church in general has been very mission-oriented.

Dr. George Peters makes the interesting observation in his book: “While we respect the Reformers as truly great men of God and want to grant them as much credit as possible, this much remains a fact: the churches which resulted from their labor were not missionary churches in the modern sense of the word, and the theologians who followed them and claimed to be their true successors and interpreters did not advance the missionary idea and motivation. A negative theology did dominate the official Protestant church following the Reformation for some two centuries. While noble individuals spoke and acted in protest, the ‘missionary status quo’ in continental theology was only effectively broken through German Pietism and the resultant revivalism which succeeded in permeating part of the church and arousing the missionary impetus at least in the ‘church within the church.’” Dr. Peters goes on to show how the task of world missions became primarily the task of great personalities and of missionary societies. Even trading companies entered into the picture, while the larger state-church organizations remained for the most part passive and uninvolved. Church history as we remember it seems to be very much on the side of these comments.

### **What about Us?**

Our own situation in the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod is similar as far as past history is concerned. We can recall during the thirties and forties of this century how it was especially pastors from Michigan who had to “sell” the Synod on becoming more active in the field of world missions. Thank God that His Spirit worked through these men, and that we, too, began to think more seriously about the world’s unconverted millions! We got started rather late in the day in comparison with other church bodies, but fortunately the day is still not ended, even though it is already far spent.

As we look to the future of Missiology in our own circles, we do so in a sober yet positive way. McGavran’s Two Billion should rest very much on our conscience, too. God has equipped us in a most wonderful way for the task of bringing them the message of salvation. A few conclusions presented more or less at random will sum up, perhaps, what we ought to consider worth thinking about on the subject of “Missiology—and the Two Billion.”

### **Our Conclusions**

Much of world Protestantism today, especially that which is a part of the World Council of Churches, has become so dominated by the voice of humanistic philosophy that it could not do very much about McGavran's Two Billion even if it wanted to—which it doesn't.

Many churches have already become so involved in projects of social and political reform that they are nothing more than the tools of a society which dreams of a better world. Jesus Christ has been made a comrade of Karl Marx, and for that matter, also of Che Guevara.

Especially the underdeveloped (or developing) countries of the Third World will exert increasing pressure upon the Christian churches to cooperate in development schemes and social betterment programs. These governments can hardly be blamed for this, since so much of the church has given a false picture of its mission.

It is therefore in areas where the true Church of Jesus Christ has its greatest mission that it is also in greatest danger of losing its true identity.

Churches which refuse to "cooperate" with governments in humanizing programs, or which fail to identify themselves with the political policies of many Third World countries could be in for a hard time of it as far as relationships with these governments are concerned. We need to prepare for this eventuality in every possible way.

The best way of preparing for such an eventuality of expatriate missionaries being *personae non gratae*, the first way of governmental self-assertion, would be to get the nationals to stand on their own feet as soon as at all possible.

The task of maintaining a sound theological position in today's pluralistic society is becoming more difficult all the time—yet never has the need for this been so great as it is today!

All this points to the fact that we must train thoroughly and build solidly upon the foundation of the Holy Scriptures in ALL that we do!

Africa is as yet not in a position to pull itself out of the mire of today's theological confusion by its own bootstraps. It is still very much in need of help—and by this we mean the right kind of help.

There is no doubt a legitimate cry on the part of Africa for liberation from Westernization. It has still not found its own idiom of expression in church affairs, so that many of its forms and methods of doing things have a foreign flavor. Although much of this may be due to its own lack of initiative, the church must ever be aware of the fact that Western culture is not essential for true worship, and neither is Western "efficiency" essential for the management of practical affairs.

Africanization in matters that do not conflict with Biblical theology should be encouraged wherever possible. We must constantly be on our guard, lest our own ethnocentricity become in any way a barrier to the progress of our work.

A thorough familiarity with the culture and the language of the countries in which we are working is becoming increasingly important. With Paul we need to become all things to all men.

Our own church, the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod together with the Lutheran Church of Central Africa, has the right theology for the kind of gospel work that is most needed and possibly least wanted from a human standpoint by the unconverted millions. One has to be struck by the universality of our message, the unconditioned nature of our Gospel, and the urgent need for what we have to bring. We have it all—by the grace of God alone!

Nowhere has the Lord promised that the task of bringing His gospel into all the world would be an easy one. The message of Paul was foolishness and a stumbling block to man's natural way of thinking. Ever since that time we see from the history of missions how men of God are surrounded by many dangers and confronted with many obstacles. The fact that we face things that are peculiar to our times should nowhere strengthen the false argument that the day of missionary activity is over, and that the missionary ought to "stay home where he belongs."

The Lord of the Church, who has all power in heaven and in earth, is the one who has given us our orders. Those orders still stand. His promise is also the same: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

Do we still have the perseverance; the stamina, the spirit of sacrifice, and above all the faithfulness to keep on pushing forward even in the face of growing opposition?

Perhaps it were better to put the question to ourselves in this way: “Do we believe that Jesus Christ is the world’s only Savior from sin, and that those who do not believe on Him will be damned?”

Upon the answer to that final question, really, is determined our whole outlook on “Missiology—and the Two Billion.”