Mission Research as an Exercise in Humility

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To be a researcher requires humility. Because researchers usually work behind the scenes, people who crave the spotlight have difficulty being good researchers. The same is true for mission researchers. Their role is absolutely essential in fostering and maturing a missionary movement, but the researcher needs to deny the human desire for immediate recognition and encouragement from others—or for immediate implementation of research-based recommendations.

This article deals with five significant facets of mission research as experienced within a Majority World mission movement: (1) the role of a mission researcher in the development of the Korean missionary movement, (2) empirical research as incarnational, (3) the significance of humility in integrating various disciplines, (4) the need to update the methodology of mission research, and (5) future prospects for mission research. In addressing these issues, I draw on my experience as a mission researcher over the past twenty-five years.

A Mission Researcher of Korean Missions

When I began my work as a mission researcher in 1990, I realized that it would be a ministry behind the scenes. People around me knew that I was about to become a missionary, but they did not understand much about the role of a missionary engaged in full-time research. It was not easy for NamSeoul Presbyterian Church (my home church) and several other churches to decide to support my ministry. Their commitment, however, led to the founding of the Korea Research Institute for Mission (KRIM), of which I am director. KRIM was formed under the umbrella of the Global Missionary Fellowship.

My colleagues and I have now been conducting research on Korean mission fields, mission strategies, and mission forces for twenty-five years. Our bulletin publishes information on what is taking place in unreached parts of the world. Our journal introduces and discusses new strategies and theories of mission. Our handbook regularly reports on the progress of the Korean missionary movement, with specific information on Korean missionaries, mission agencies, and mission fields, dealing with emerging issues and concerns. Our forum facilitates missiological reflection and discussion on a regular basis.

Once while on a study leave and pursuing a Ph.D. at a seminary in the United States, I was invited to present a research paper at the Overseas Ministries Study Center in New Haven, Connecticut. At the time I had just finished my coursework, and I had heard that Jonathan Bonk had been designated as the next executive director of OMSC. Then in my mid-thirties and still a novice, I found OMSC to be an important model for the conduct of mission research. The INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH inspires me as I continue to edit our journal in Korean, and OMSC’s mission research colloquia and seminars help me as I plan similar programs in Korea.

At a critical point when I was experiencing some burnout, Jon Bonk provided encouragement that lifted my spirits. After learning of my research on the Korean missionary movement, he encouraged me to submit an article to the IBMR. I did so, and it became my first report in English on the Korean missionary movement, appearing in the January 2003 issue of the IBMR. Several more articles for the IBMR followed, and in 2012 I was invited to become a contributing editor, reporting on the Korean mission movement on a regular basis. This step was an encouragement not only to me personally but also to many other people in the Korean missions community. The Korean Global Mission Leadership Forum, initiated in 2011, was another platform of partnership that came into being under Jon’s leadership. OMSC as a community has shown warm hospitality to me as a mission researcher working behind the scenes for an emerging missionary movement.

Empirical Research as Incarnational

As missiologists, we should not be satisfied to merely rehash speculative theology. Missiology needs to be fully down-to-earth in its approach, addressing human realities incarnationally, while maintaining its essential theological nature.

Within the academy, empirical research provides an example of a down-to-earth approach. Empirical research can be either quantitative or qualitative. Recent research approaches often combine these two research modes, something that is true of the design of my research projects as well. In our missiological research it is critical that we deal significantly with human realities and the phenomena of different societies.

Introducing an empirical approach into research conducted within the Korean mission community was not easy. It called for frequent travel to mission fields, as well as the hard work of preparing appropriate questionnaires. Empirical research required more time and energy than simply writing an article after reading some books. Being dependent on the cooperation of mission leaders and missionaries for carrying out research projects demanded humility. For me it also brought home the recognition that books are often outdated and do not reflect the way human realities change over time—hence the need to interact face-to-face with people.

In studies of a particular religion, it is helpful to distinguish between formal aspects and folk aspects. The former can be studied through analysis of the religion’s doctrinal texts, but folk aspects of a religion are best explored through empirical field studies. To learn how a religion affects daily life, it is necessary to meet and talk with people who practice the religion. Missionaries need to diligently study both these aspects, but too often they neglect serious study of the folk aspects of a religion. To study the formal aspects of a religion, researchers read books written by scholarly authors. But to study the folk aspects of the religion, researchers need to pay attention to what ordinary people say about their religious practice. Even a child or persons on the margin of society can be good informants for the researcher.

In conducting a phenomenological study of a religion, an empirical approach requires two-way communication. The

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researcher seeks to interpret the data from an emic, or insider’s, viewpoint. Understanding what insiders really believe and practice should precede making any critique of a religion, lest we make premature judgments. Empirical research facilitates mutual understanding and fair interpretation across cultures and religious traditions.

Empirical research does have limitations, since human experience and perception are limited in their scope. In carrying out empirical research, researchers must avoid a dogmatic attitude. Empirical approaches are best seen as instruments or means to be used for in-depth study of phenomena important to world missions. In due course, the findings of empirical research can lead to value judgments formed in light of biblical principles, which is critical for missiological understanding.

Both the data and the conclusions drawn from empirical research are often expressed in numbers, which can clarify what is vague in the world. Theorists of quantitative research tend to emphasize the power of numerical data in terms of measurability. Numbers, however, also have limitations, for many things cannot be quantified or measured with numbers. In studies of the Korean missionary movement, can numbers adequately express the sweat and sacrifice of Korean missionaries? Taking a humble perspective and maintaining a balanced understanding of numerical data and the limits of measurability will help researchers to avoid arrogance.

Just as the incarnate Christ had physical limitations while he lived for a certain period of time in one corner of the world, so empirical research in an incarnational mode must work within the boundaries of space and time. Within these boundaries, we must constantly check the validity and reliability of empirical research. This requirement certainly requires a spirit of Christian humility.

Integration as an Expression of Humility

The field of missiology is interdisciplinary, embracing theology, anthropology, education, psychology, history, management, and other disciplines. A single discipline is not sufficient to the task of addressing adequately the complex realities of human life and the dynamics of mission. How to integrate the theories and findings of various disciplines thus becomes an important issue in contemporary missiological studies.

Recognizing both the comprehensiveness of the nature of missiological studies and the limitations of any single discipline, mission researchers need to avoid becoming complacent with having achieved a level of competence in one or more fields. Missiologists need to pursue integration of theories from many different disciplines in their research. Findings from empirical research must be checked against biblical and theological principles. Cultural characteristics can initially be studied either historically or anthropologically, but the bodies of knowledge developed through those disciplines should eventually be integrated theologically. compartmentalized knowledge is not beneficial.

In the initial stages of an interdisciplinary study, it is necessary to be faithful to the methodology of each discipline. When psychology and anthropology need to be integrated in a scientific study of human phenomena, the whole process needs to carefully follow the methodological framework of both disciplines. Integrating different bodies of theory requires more than double the effort needed in a study pursued solely within one discipline. Fortunately, disciplines share more knowledge of a single topic than is usually imagined. For example, in their efforts to explain the phenomena and mechanisms of human cognition, whether at an individual or a community level, the fields of cognitive psychology and cognitive anthropology have considerable overlap.

It is not possible for a single researcher to become an expert in all the related disciplines of an interdisciplinary study. Smaller or larger teams of experts in the various fields need to work together to complement each other. Cultivation of synergistic teamwork is clearly a need in missiological studies. One of KRIM’s projects researched the type and amount of member care provided for Korean missionaries. In this case, a missiologist, a clinical psychologist, a missionary counselor, a medical doctor, and a medical researcher worked together as a team in conducting the research, including administration of a questionnaire survey and conducting field-based interviews. Overall, the process required more time for research design and data gathering because of the different perspectives members of the team had, but the integrated perspectives were helpful in providing a more holistic understanding of missionaries’ needs.

Integration of different bodies of theory and diverse research findings must revolve around biblical exegesis, especially when the research problem involves theological issues. In this task of integration, biblical exegesis and application are crucial, but the process also needs assistance from linguistics and other human and social sciences. Ultimately, a biblical worldview is the foundation on which we must build our efforts at integration. Checking the integrity of theoretical research findings against a biblical worldview is more important than focusing merely on developing their pragmatic usefulness and applicability.

The task of integration must address the synchronic issue of epistemological variation, as well as the diachronic issue of epistemological shift. Plausibility structures differ from culture to culture; they also vary to some degree depending on the research tradition used. Many research findings based on the instrumentalist perspective found in postmodern epistemology need to be checked and double-checked for their compatibility with a critical realist standpoint.

A significant issue that my experience in multidisciplinary teamwork has brought to light is research ethics. Depending on the subject matter and their home institutions, various researchers—say, an ethnographer and a clinical psychologist—may express or assume quite different views and guidelines. In establishing common ground, researchers need to harmonize, or at least acknowledge, their differences.

Integration in doing missiological research often calls for patience and humility. An attitude of willingness to learn from others with different academic backgrounds is necessary. With today’s rapidly increasing complexity of social groups and human experience, team research with collaboration among researchers is increasingly essential. Theologians and missiologists need to show sensitivity to other academicians working in so-called secular fields.
Updating Research Methodology

Given the strongly interdisciplinary nature of missiology, it is not surprising that its research methodology lags far behind that of other disciplines. Missiology needs to develop a cohesive research methodology that incorporates elements from the research methods of (among others) textual linguistics, statistical and qualitative approaches to empirical research, historiography, and even integration methodology.

The exegesis and application of biblical materials are pertinent to missiological issues, which means that we need to be looking for a missional or missiological reading of biblical texts. Many theologians are inadequately attuned to mission matters and therefore tend to miss much missional content present in the biblical passages they are reading. When one recognizes that mission is the whole point of the biblical revelation, it becomes clear that we must keep world mission in mind when reading any part of Scripture. Sharing this perspective with biblical theologians is a contribution that missiologists can make in dialogue with them.

Quantitatively, missiology needs to increase the methodological rigor of its statistical analyses. A first step toward that end is to use more professionally designed questionnaires. Second, our research designs must be built on samples that are large enough and representative enough to capture the realities found in the research population. Finally, to raise the questionnaire response rate, mission researchers need to cultivate a research-friendly organizational culture among mission agencies and related groups as well as among missionaries in the field.

Qualitative empirical research needs to take into account models of research that have been developed systematically over the years. Instruments used in data gathering must be designed so that they focus specifically on the research questions or hypotheses. When qualitative research approaches are used in combination with quantitative approaches, the question of priority becomes important. Interviews can be scheduled either before or after questionnaire surveys, depending on the intention and purpose of each process.

For suitable mission history to be written, the emerging missionary movements in the Majority World need to maintain their own records and establish archives, along with developing a relevant historiography. As Andrew Walls explains, the transition from a Christendom perspective to a World Christianity perspective is necessary if we are to understand or explain the establishment of missionary movements in the Majority World. Despite the critical importance of historical data in conducting mission research, the preservation of mission records and archives, at least in Korea, is one of the most neglected areas.

Methodologies for the integration of interdisciplinary studies need to be made more rigorous. Results gained by teams of researchers from different fields working together—and accounts of their experience working together as a team—need to be shared more widely. Issues that arise in the process of integrating multiple disciplines need to be identified and discussed at consultations and roundtables. The integration of emic and etic viewpoints needs to be discussed using real cases, because it is much more complex than simply identifying the conceptual distinction between them. We need to recognize that multiple views are possible, in both etic and emic perspectives. Also, the development of Q methodologies and R methodologies holds promise, but the irreducibility of multiple viewpoints calls for humility on the part of the researcher.

Another important challenge facing mission researchers is to develop a research method that is optimal and relevant but that is also simple enough to be adopted by mission agencies and followed by missionaries in the field. It is truly a daunting task to keep abreast of all the cutting edge research methodologies developed in the various fields. Even in a single field—say, cultural anthropology—the research methodologies developed through the years reflect different paradigms, each suggesting its own rigorous procedures and instruments. Unfortunately, many missionaries and mission researchers find such complexities hard to follow. An additional factor is the reality that many intercultural ministry settings do not allow for the application of detailed or systematic research designs developed for use in monocultural or domestic settings.

For mission researchers to remain up-to-date in research methodology requires diligence and humility. Regular monitoring of new publications in the field of research methodology and a long-term perspective are needed if the research methodology of missiology is to advance. About twenty years ago, when I began my doctoral program, I made a commitment to study research methods for the sake of mission research. My purpose was to prepare myself for supervising doctoral dissertations in missiology. Now, having seen some fruit from this effort, I find that I must continue to set aside a portion of my time for that purpose alone. It is a supporting role, but by gaining expertise in research methodology, a mission researcher can enable others, both missionaries themselves and students of missions, to do solid research and can become a sound adviser to them.

Envisioning the Future

In the twenty-first century Christian missions needs more mission research, and thus more mission researchers, to help enlarge our understanding of mission policies, practices, and results. If this significant need is to be met, more encouragement to beginning researchers will be required. Especially we need capable persons in the Majority World who will acquire the training and expertise necessary to conduct research, all the while being willing to work outside of the limelight.

Even in Western countries, the number of researchers and research institutes needs to be increased, but the need in Majority World countries is much greater. Emerging non-Western missionary movements need to be supported with solid missiological research. How to close the gap between the need and the supply is a big question that mission leaders and missiologists must address.

Researchers do not spring up like wildflowers. They need training. Each missionary-sending country and each missionary-receiving country has its own set of specific conditions and issues. The types of research needed will differ; one size does not fit all. Though the local people normally know the ministerial situation better than do outsiders, they need training in research methods. The global mission community needs to join hands with them in working together to meet this significant need.
For the global church, creating networks to connect mission researchers should become a significant agenda item. Researchers need to share their experiences with, listen to, and encourage one another as they cross cultural and organizational boundaries. As they do so, missiological reflection will be deepened and enriched. When a researcher who represents a missionary-receiving country and another researcher who represents a missionary-sending country come together, significant discussions can be expected about the way Christian mission is being carried out.

Multicultural research teams can address issues common to various ministerial contexts. To build up best-practice guidelines for the future, the global mission community needs to accumulate knowledge and expertise in doing missions. An example from psychology of the benefit that can follow if the global community works together to pool expertise would be the rise of attachment theory. First introduced by John Bowlby in the United Kingdom in the late 1950s, attachment theory was developed further through being explored and tested in various societal contexts. Likewise, we need to develop missiological theories and test them in different contexts across cultures and generations.

To envision the future requires faith and hope. To prepare for the future also requires much determined sacrifice. But our decisions to commit ourselves to this immense task do not lead to regret, because God is faithful, and we are confident that he fulfills his will in our lives. To be faithful before God is more important than to be successful in personal achievement. I cannot say that I have achieved much, but I have tried to follow consistently the narrow path laid out for me. Jonathan Bonk has been very clear in showing a spirit of hospitality, encouraging people who, like me, stand in need of such support.

In many countries of the Majority World, the path of mission research will impose greater burdens or obstacles than the path I have walked. In some countries the level of awareness of the need for mission research may be lower than in Korea, so researchers definitely will need a greater investment of assistance, cooperation, and support from others. Though they work behind the scenes most of the time, they need the spotlight of encouragement once in a while. Even as our world continues to become more and more globalized, the researcher’s role is essential if missions are to be done well.

Conclusion

Preachers and lay readers of the Bible rarely focus on Tychicus. He traveled with and for the apostle Paul (Acts 20:4). Though he occasionally ministered to a congregation temporarily on behalf of Timothy and possibly of Titus (2 Tim. 4:12; Titus 3:12), he is not known for pastoring a church as those two are. Paul sent him to the churches at Ephesus and Colosse. Tychicus’s mission was to bring the churches up to date with information on how Paul was doing, and also to encourage church members. Paul introduced him as “a dear brother and a faithful minister in the Lord” (Eph. 6:21) and as “a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord” (Col. 4:7). Even though his name is not widely remembered, he is remembered by Paul—and certainly by God.

Mission research calls for people who are willing to deny themselves and to work behind the scenes.

Research does not receive the spotlight of popular attention or the acclaim that the “front” person pastoring a large congregation or spearheading a massive evangelistic rally or even a field missionary may receive. Like the unseen footer or foundation that enables a skyscraper to stand, research can provide information for making wise decisions and informed judgments in recruitment and deployment of mission personnel, in shaping mission policies, and in guiding mission practice.

Mission research calls for people who, though they may also have gifts that would equip them for more public roles, are willing to deny themselves and to work behind the scenes. To work faithfully before God, a coram Deo spirituality is essential. Praise the Lord for the hope, hospitality, and humility for mission research that he has channeled to so many through Jonathan and Jean Bonk!

Notes

1. KRIM’s monthly news bulletin is titled Pabalma (Post haste). Its missiological journal, Hyundai Sankyo (Current mission trends), appears biannually. Beginning in 1990 KRIM assumed responsibility for publishing handbooks, directories, and reports about the Korean missionary movement at regular intervals. Some of these have been print publications, some online only; some are in Korean, others in English. KRIM also hosts a biannual missiological forum, Hankuk Sankyo Forum (Korean missiological forum).


4. Paul Hiebert maintained that integration of knowledge from different disciplines is necessary in order to overcome stratified approaches to understanding human beings. See his Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 41–45, 68.

5. At the time of writing, this research project was in the final stage of data analysis, and completion of the final report was planned for June 2015.


8. Q methodology deals with quantitative means for examining subjective aspects of human experience, whereas R methodology focuses on objective aspects. Questions can be raised about the objective element of the Q methodology, the subjective element in the R methodology, and their integration. See Bruce McKeown and Dan B. Thomas, Q Methodology (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2013), ix–15.