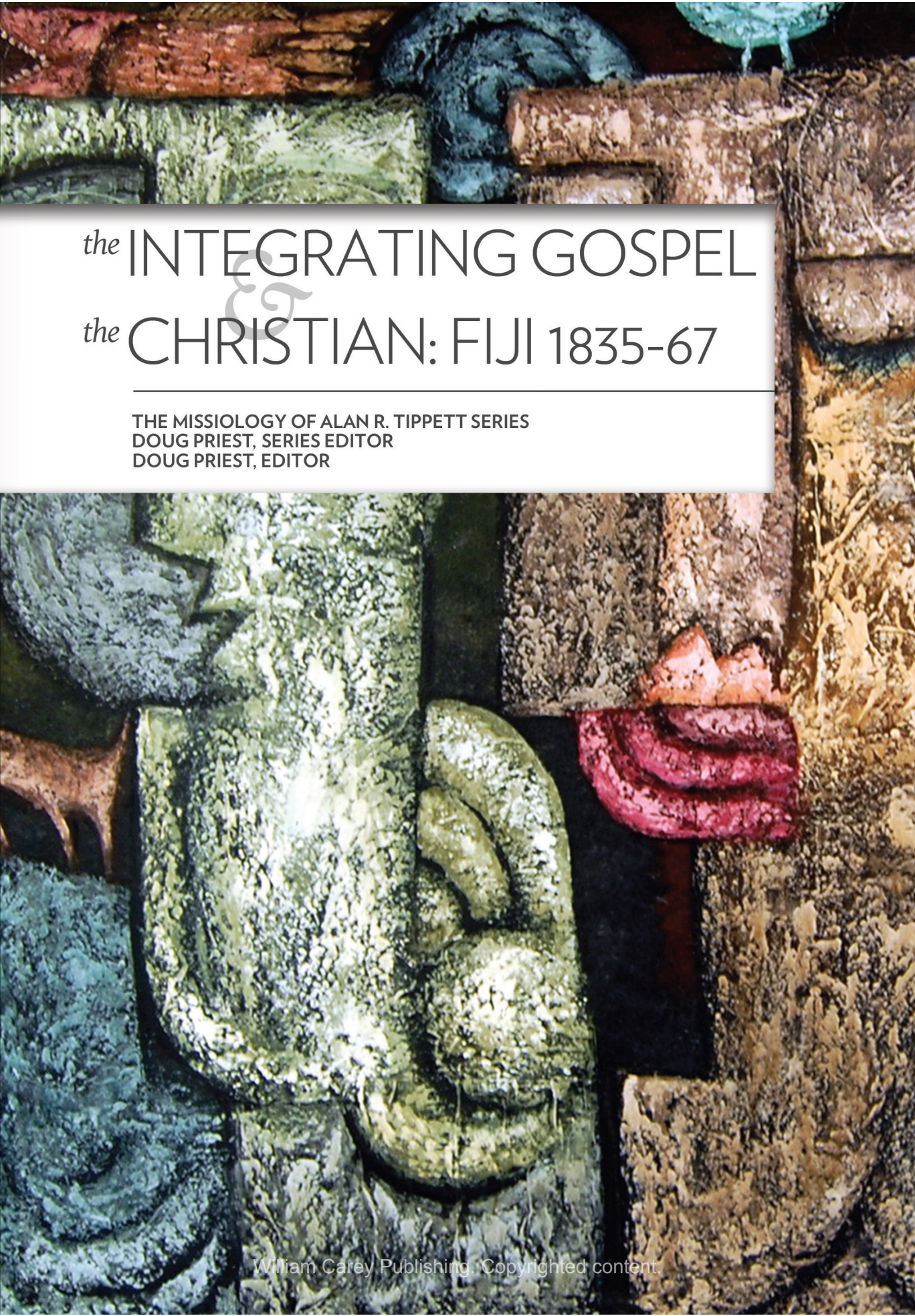


the INTEGRATING GOSPEL *&* *the* CHRISTIAN: FIJI 1835-67

THE MISSIOLOGY OF ALAN R. TIPPETT SERIES
DOUG PRIEST, SERIES EDITOR
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INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

Words are pictures that reflect scenes and episodes. They are more than this, for they represent ethnolinguistic fusion (i.e., in words we may pinpoint cultural elements, reflections of ways of living, relationships, attitudes, philosophy, historical changes, and even the development of theological concepts). Thus we may take a word with a long and interesting history, and study its use at any given point of time, and find therein a reflection of cultural elements of that precise period in the history of its users. Therefore words are important evidence in the science of historical reconstruction.

This operates both ways, so that sometimes a word will reveal new light on a cultural idea or custom, and at other times cultural studies will throw light on the use of a word; this in turn illuminating the context in which it is used. Again by means of the comparative method, a word used in different contexts of the same date may bring to light much important information. Ultimately this may be used for dating other texts, or for the investigation of questionable texts, as to whether they are genuine or spurious. There is no end to the study of ethnolinguistics, and no knowing where it may lead one. Its value in biblical exegesis has been tremendous, and especially in the reconstruction and verification of biblical history, and in the tracing of the development of religious concepts.

Some Scripture Examples

Let us take an example. Following Robert I. Kahn, we consider the attributes of God and wonder, perhaps, how to reconcile the paradoxical ideas of justice (*mishpat*) and mercy (*chesed*). The question arises as to how these ideas stand in the Talmud, and how the sages viewed them. Immediately our current theological problem has become an ethnolinguistic one. They were not concerned with the documentary theory of J and E, where J showed, perhaps, the Merciful One and E the Just One, and JE the two attributes in one Being. The dualism did not trouble them, so much so that they even visualised two thrones in the heavenly throne room, and God sat on one in justice and moved to the other in mercy,

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thereby delaying or suspending the judgement of the former (Kahn 1956, 581),[1] and we begin to appreciate a bold anthropomorphism as part of the cultural ethos, which is not so easy for philosophic moderns. Thus ethnolinguistics enables us to pinpoint concepts in time, place, and cultural setting.

As an example of the use of this science in historical reconstruction, let us take the word *ecclesia.* Here we have the lawful assembly of a Greek city-state, comprised of those with full citizenship rights, but excluding foreigners and slaves. They met to deal with the business of the state. We find the word used secularly thus three times in Acts 19, where we are concerned with the faith making its impact or encounter within the Greek world. This is the assembly fixed by law as opposed to the illegal concourse (*sustrophe*), and in those days, it met three or four times monthly in Greek cities (Webster and Wilkinson 1855, 1:664). The word was taken over by the translators of the Septuagint for the Greek-speaking Hebrews of the Dispersion, for the rendering of the Hebrew *quahal*, as for example in 2 Chronicles 30:23.[2] The emphasis is on the assembly having been *summoned* to meet with God, and the word is chosen to differentiate from another (*synagogue*), which is assembled like a congregation,[3] of its own volition, so the background of the word is Greek in form but Hebrew in meaning.

The word becomes of immediate interest to us when we discover that it is common in the Acts of the Apostles and in the Epistles but appears only twice in the Gospels, and both those times on the lips of our Lord (Matt 16:18; 18:17 twice). Thus in anticipation He describes His church and falls in line with other utterances wherein He stresses the *call* (John 15:16). Our Lord is the one who calls. It is *His* church.

How then was the word used later on, after He had departed from their midst? If we take the first letter to Corinth as an example, we will find already differentiations of use. The greeting is addressed to the local church at Corinth (1:2); further on the word has a wider sense as of the church universal (10:32); and in the closing verses greetings are sent from one of the household churches (16:19), which were springing up throughout the Graeco-Roman world, especially in places of pioneering and heavy persecution.

The word *ecclesia* is used throughout, but we have a sequence of reflections of a changing pattern, which can be pinpointed in time and place as an operator stops a filmstrip.

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1 The writer holds no particular brief for Kahn's views but uses his facts merely as an illustration to show how a modern biblical theological problem may find its explanation in an ethnolinguistic pinpoint. For the reader desiring to study further the words *mishpat* and *chesed*, the writer recommends Snaith (1944), where the origins of these two words are discussed in a most scholarly manner, though strangely without mention of the dual thrones.

2 It has been suggested that there are etymological affinities between *quahal* and the Greek, *kalein*; the Latin, *calare*; and the English "to call" (Trench 1865, 3).

3 The Alexandrian translators were not entirely consistent in this, and Trench (1865, 1:2–4) points out the inconsistencies while admitting this seems to have been their general plan. Another authority claims the former summons men from the whole world to become its members, the latter brought together members of an existing society; and that this differentiation reveals the ultimate distinction between the Christian church and the Jewish synagogue (Bullinger 1924, 72–73). See also the chapter on "The Church of God" in Barclay (1955).

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The words of the Bible capture the changes of formative days for the church of God. Today we have a basic doctrine of the church, and our theological colleges provide a course of lectures about it; but in the Scriptures we may study its development—we have a filmstrip which reflects the cultural ethos at different points of time. The word and the culture pattern are mutually confirmatory, and therefore either one is valid evidence for suggesting the other where light on one is not clear. The whole must integrate. Therefore whenever a text reveals a peculiar use of a well-known word, we are justified in asking why, and likewise whenever a word suddenly changes its meaning.

There must be a reason, which calls for investigation. Take, for instance, the use of the term *Lord* for Jesus in the gospel narrative. You may, according to Durell, find it used in three ways, and these uses are found to fall into historic periods (1910, 33–34). Something happened at a specific point of time, and from then a known word had a new meaning and indicates a new attitude on the part of the disciples towards Jesus. The pattern must integrate as a whole, and we are compelled to pinpoint the Caesarea Philippi incident and the Resurrection as being vital experiences leading to the changes concerned.

One of the many examples which might be taken from Paul is the word *tapeinophrosune*, "with a lowly mind." *Tapeinos*, to heathen writers, had a bad meaning—groveling, abject—but the full word is a Jewish seed brought to maturity in the Christian church. It was used in the Septuagint (e.g., Prov 29:23) but is not found in classical Greek before the Christian era. A common word in the New Testament, it reveals how Christ's teaching and life raised the idea of humility to a new level (Phil 2:3) (Lightfoot 1913, 109).

Some Examples from Church History

Many volumes have been written on key words of the Bible, but that is not the theme of this study. The purpose of this preamble has been to use well-known data to illustrate a point of view or an attitude towards the relationship of words and culture pattern, of words and events, of words and changing society, of words and the development of theological and ethical concepts. What has been said of the days of the early church—that they were formative days—applies also of the church throughout history. Its days are never anything but formative, and semantic change when it has bearing on the church (either its organisation or its thought) is valid evidence for historical investigation. We are interested in the experience of the saints. This is our tradition, as Bishop Moore said—the cumulative heritage of actual experience, the faith of past generations, through which God has helped to create ours, as ours in time will help create that of the next (Edwards 1951, 41).

Thus, throughout the history of the church, the experiences of men especially in times of crisis, have led to the reading of some new meaning into old words, and this very change is evidence of both the event and the experience of the saints. Just as the meaning of the words *bread* and *wine* received a new significance because of a certain act, in a certain room,

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at the time of the Last Supper, so all through history where events and personalities have come together, words have been left as evidence. Was there not a time when men spoke of "the Eternal City" and thought of Rome? Then came the fall of Rome, and this event reacted on Augustine, leading him to write his *City of God*; and did not this change forever the meaning of the proud term—"the Eternal City"? And are there not words which belong to church history, which, though we claim them ours, we can never completely separate from certain names and events and a particular religious background? Would any of us preach on *justification by faith* without thanking God in our hearts for Martin Luther? It was in the Bible, of course, and we might have found it without Luther, but it would not have been quite the same meaning. *Justification by faith*, consciously or unconsciously, for every one of us, involves something conceived against a background of sixteenth-century Roman Catholicism. Nor will it ever be easy for an expositor to speak of *predestination* without reference to Calvin. There are other words like *perfect love*, which have similar significance for Methodists. This is a "cumulative heritage of actual experience." We cannot ponder these theological terms without reference to the past, and even in concepts which we reject, we still feel the drag of those focal points where the concept was changed or charged with new meaning, or a long-forgotten meaning rediscovered with power.

Now, the cardinal fact of this study is that what has applied for the people of God in biblical times, and down through history, is also applying today for the young churches. I want to take you now from the known to the unknown, and show you how the church is a causative factor in semantic change, and how these very changes in word meanings are evidence of new and vital Christian experiences, of developing organisation, and a growing theology—indigenous growth reflecting a struggle with racism, Western money economy, and social forces of disintegration that have invaded from without. My examples come from the Fiji Islands, the field where I labour.

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