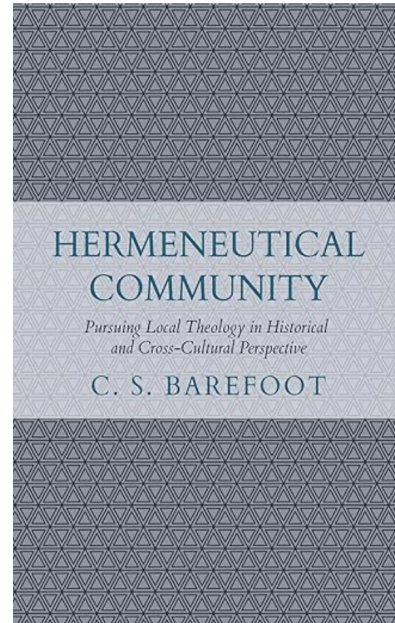


Barefoot, C.S. *Hermeneutical Community: Pursuing Local Theology in Historical and Cross-Cultural Perspective*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2024

Reviewed by Jonathan Martyn, IMB personnel, Asia Pacific Rim

When missionaries plant a new church, how should these new believers do theology in ways that speak to their cultural context but are also faithful to Scripture? In this book, Barefoot explains that historically, two main challenges related to accomplishing this goal of local theology have been theological imposition and theological abandonment. In other words, on one extreme, missionaries directly imported their theology and dictated the theology of this new church, or on the other extreme, they left the new church alone to do theology on its own. In response to these two extremes, Barefoot recommends what he calls a “hermeneutical community for local theological development” and then provides insight on the role of outsiders (missionaries) in that community.



In addressing the role of the outsider in the hermeneutical community, he explains that one key issue is the need for the outsider to model sound hermeneutics. He writes, “Without acquiring a model for how to properly interpret the Bible, local believers remain susceptible to practicing a kind of eisegesis in which their contextual preunderstandings remain the operative, determinative factor in theological development rather than biblical exegesis” (257). Walking alongside local believers from this newly planted

church, an outsider modeling sound hermeneutics equips these believers to read Scripture and apply it to the key issues of their contexts.

Barefoot's work is a thorough, detailed examination of this critical topic. For each extreme, he devotes an entire chapter where he evaluates historical discussions and key examples that display the challenges of that extreme. Of course, the greatest strength of this work is that it proposes a balanced approach that avoids the extremes of imposition and abandonment, while also providing a helpful explanation of the role of the missionary in this process. One weakness, though, is that because this was Barefoot's dissertation, it is academic and may be difficult for some missionaries who are not accustomed to conceptual and theoretical discussions.

Despite this weakness, Barefoot's work holds significant value for missionaries. In recent years, a common debate among missionaries is that of church health versus church multiplication. If missionaries lean in one direction, they may be in danger of falling into the two extremes Barefoot examines, that of theological imposition or theological abandonment. This work provides valuable and much-needed insight into this debate by pointing missionaries forward.

In fact, the final chapter is a veritable goldmine of insights for missionaries involved in church planting and especially leadership development. For example, Barefoot shows that "parachute theological education," where educators only "drop in" to teach for a short period of time, is often ineffective in developing local theology since those educators are not aware of the issues the local church is facing. Additionally, he shows that an approach to leadership development or theological education that only focuses on content transfer is equally ineffective, since what ends up happening is the transfer of theological content that is not contextual.

In conclusion, Barefoot's book is a valuable contribution to missiological discussions related to contextualization, local theology, and hermeneutics. One challenge missionaries often face is how to come alongside local believers to address specific cultural norms and practices of that context. This

book helpfully addresses that topic in a way that equips missionaries to think clearly about how to navigate those challenges. Barefoot's work also provides critical insight into the church health versus church multiplication debate through its balanced proposal that guides missionaries in how they can aid local believers in developing theology that is both biblically sound and contextually relevant.