The Legacy of François Elbertus Daubanton

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François Elbertus Daubanton was born in Amsterdam on February 5, 1853, the son of a Walloonian minister in the Netherlands who sympathized with the revival movement of that time. François received a Dutch-French education marked by the piety of the 1850s evangelical revival. He began theological studies at Leiden University, where he developed a friendship with Herman Bavinck. He completed his studies at the Free Theological Faculty in Canton de Vaud, Switzerland, and was ordained in the Netherlands Reformed Church in 1878.

Daubanton married Catharina Maria Dros, who was about five years younger than he. They began married life in Zwolle in 1878, where he served for eight years as pastor of a Walloonian (French-speaking) congregation. This service was followed by pastoral ministry in Dutch-speaking congregations in Heemstede and Amsterdam (1886–1903). Six children were born to François and Catharina: three sons and three daughters. Two children served in Indonesia. One of the daughters married Arent J. Wensinck (1882–1939), professor of Arabic in the University of Leiden.

In 1903 Daubanton was appointed by the synod of the Netherlands Reformed Church to be the ecclesiastical professor of biblical theology, practical theology, and the history of mission in the theological faculty of Utrecht University. Succeeding the first Utrecht University professors of missions, Egbert H. Lasonder (1831–86) and Everhardus H. van Leeuwen (1833–1913), Daubanton taught at the university until his death in Utrecht on December 6, 1920. His wife outlived him by nearly eighteen years.

For thirty-four years, from 1883 to 1917, Daubanton was the general editor of the journal Theologische studiën, popularly known as the Daubanton journal. Although Daubanton never undertook postgraduate studies or the writing of a dissertation, in 1886, on the occasion of the 250th anniversary of Utrecht University, the university conferred on him an honorary doctorate in virtue of his ecclesiastical activities, theological writings, and editorial work.

An Encyclopedic Scholar and Teacher

Daubanton was appointed to teach a wide range of theological disciplines. Gifted with an encyclopedic mind, he accepted without complaint an unusually demanding teaching load. He published an introduction to theology in which he distinguished between *cognoscere* (to learn), *intelligere* (to reflect), and *facere* (to do). Accordingly, he divided theology into three fields—empirical theology, philosophical or systematic theology, and practical theology—and he indicated appropriate methods for each field. Old Testament studies, New Testament studies, and church history belong to the first category; dogmatics and ethics to the second category; and all other disciplines to the third category, focusing on the maintenance and extension of the church. The science of mission (German *Missionswissenschaft*, Dutch *Zendingswetenschap*) and polemics relate to the third field, that is, to the extension of the church. As the Great Commission concludes the canonical Gospels, so the science of mission is the concluding section of practical theology and of theology as a whole.

Daubanton paid considerable attention to biblical studies. He not only supervised the translation of George B. Stevens’s theology of the New Testament but also published his own theology of the New Testament. The science of mission depends upon the theology of the New Testament because the latter supplies the principles of evangelical (i.e., Protestant) mission. The overriding New Testament theme is the universal character of the kingdom of God, as preached by Jesus (p. 28). Daubanton also emphasized the progressive character of biblical revelation, beginning with the providential history of the people of Israel and culminating in the revelation in Jesus Christ. This revelation is rooted in God’s salvific will for humanity as a whole. Consequently the message and mission mandate of the Bible and Christianity are universal.

Although practical theology was included in Daubanton’s
teaching schedule, he gave high honors to Alexander Duff (1806–78), the first professor to teach missions full-time in a European university. He described Duff’s inaugural lecture as “so warm, so enthusiastic, so courageous, by a man who, not only spoke, but translated his words into actions” (p. 276). The Norwegian mission scholar Olav G. Myklebust, while noting Daubanton’s disproportionate attention to Continental mission history, gave the Prolegomena high praise: “Daubanton’s Prolegomena is by far the most complete introduction to the study of Missions, not only in the Netherlands, but anywhere.”

Daubanton was the first scholar to provide a history of mission studies and to describe and analyze the systematics of mission studies as a discipline in its own right. Harvey Newcomb (1803–63) may have published the first missionary encyclopedia, but Daubanton’s Prolegomena is the first missiological encyclopedia. Prolegomena focuses on the structure, the name, the history, the encyclopedic character, the auxiliary sciences, and the methodology of the science of mission (pp. 136–577).

Daubanton’s voluminous study demonstrates his close relation with Gustav Warneck (1834–1910) as the founder of missiology as an academic discipline. Myklebust appropriately regards Daubanton as “a true, yet independent, disciple of Gustav Warneck.” Daubanton as theologian indeed followed Warneck (who, like Daubanton, lacked missionary experience outside the Western world) and quoted him, especially his Evangelische Missionslehre (1892–1903), more than anyone else.

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But Daubanton devoted much more attention to the structure of missiology than did Warneck, and he dealt with missiology in just two sections rather than following Warneck’s tripartite model of mission history, mission theory, and missionary apologetics (pp. 218–23). According to Daubanton, the two sections of missiology are mission history and mission theory; missionary apologetics is considered a part of Christian apologetics in general rather than a part of mission studies. Given Daubanton’s threefold division of theology (empirical, philosophical, and practical theology), we might have expected a division of missiology into mission history (empirical studies), mission theory (philosophical studies), and mission practice (practical studies). This inconsistency may follow from Daubanton’s regarding the whole of missiology as practical theology. In his own words, the science of mission (missiology) is “the science of a praxis” (p. 130).

Daubanton emphasized the interaction of missiology with other theological disciplines (pp. 477–501) and with nontheological sciences such as ethnology, linguistics, and religious studies (pp. 502–62). His encyclopedic mind pushed him in this direction. Missiology, in Daubanton’s view, is not just a discipline or a department within the faculty of theology; it represents the direction in which theology as a whole is moving, for theology is essentially missionary theology. Furthermore, missiology not only requires the insights of ethnology, linguistics, and religious studies; it also contributes to the well-being of the latter sciences because missionaries, with their long experience in the non-Christian world, are better informed and more equipped to do research than anybody else.

**Daubanton’s Approach to Mission History**

The task of the mission historian, according to Daubanton, is to investigate (1) the activities of established Christianity to propagate the Gospel and to plant Christ’s church elsewhere, and (2) the development of new Christian communities on the mission fields. Therefore, the history of mission can be divided into the “subject” and the “object” of mission—on one hand, the history of the messengers of the Gospel and, on the other hand, the history of the receivers of the Gospel.

The history of the mission subject—the messengers and their
proclamation of the Gospel—cannot be separated from world history because the universal Gospel is connected with the goal of world history. It investigates the missionary movement in six continents. At a time when rationalism pervaded the established churches (both orthodox and heterodox) and denied the universal mandate of the Gospel, Protestant visionaries such as the Moravians and William Carey challenged the neglect of missions by the established churches and pioneered new models of missionary enterprise.

The history of the mission object is as important as the history of the mission subject. It deals with the struggles and results of all endeavors on the mission fields. Three stages need to be discerned: (1) the implantation of the Gospel, (2) the growth of the implanted seed, and (3) the abandonment of the superstition and magic of heathenism in favor of the construction of a Christianized culture and community.

Daubanton’s Conception of Mission Theory

Daubanton maintained that mission theory is derived from mission history “by philosophical reflections in the light of biblical theology” (p. 202; see also pp. 199–210 and 335–443). He divided mission theory into four sections: thetiek (its theses or propositions), organiek (its organs or instruments), agrieek (its fields), and methodiek (its methods and work). This structure of mission theory differs somewhat from that given by Warneck in Evangelische Missionslehre.

Daubanton regarded mission as a “thesis” grounded in the divine will to save humanity. Although the church is rooted in God’s salvific will and in God’s grace, it repeatedly neglects mission; but it does so to its own peril, for a church that neglects mission will—sooner or later—die out. All non-Christians are God’s creatures and therefore are “predestined,” that is, entitled, to receive the Gospel. The history of nineteen centuries of mission stands as a powerful call to do mission everywhere.

God himself is “the mission universalist” (p. 19), and Jesus Christ, God’s missionary, is the founder of both world mission and God’s universal kingdom (p. 30). The church, missionary societies, and individual Christians are the concrete organs, or instruments, of mission. The church as a missionary church is the Christ, God’s missionary, is the founder of both world mission and “predestined” to hear the Gospel. Any area of the world remains a mission field so long as it has not opened itself to receive the Gospel. All non-Christians, including Jews and Muslims, are the highest moral achievement in the evolutionary process, reasons Daubanton, is to open the door to accepting other “revelations” in a future stage of world history as even higher than that of Jesus Christ.

Thirty years after Buss, Troeltsch also embraced evolutionism in articles about mission in the modern world that appeared in the journal Die christliche Welt. Warneck responded vigorously in a dialogue with Troeltsch. Daubanton referred to this exchange of ideas in a speech he delivered at a mission festival in April 2005.

Revelation Versus Evolution

Daubanton followed Warneck in his criticism of the history-of-religions school (religionsgeschichtliche Schule), as advocated by Wilhelm Bousset, Hermann Gunkel, Ernst Troeltsch, and others. Daubanton and Warneck defended divine revelation against the claims of evolutionism. Daubanton makes clear that this criticism does not imply the denial of development. In essence, the Gospel does not arise from human sources but has its origin in God, the Father of Jesus Christ, who is the Lord of history. Evolutionists tend to explain the Old and the New Testaments, the history of Israel, and the history of the church anthropologically; they do not hesitate to view even the person and work of Jesus Christ as a natural phenomenon.

Daubanton criticizes three scholars especially: the Swiss Ernst Buss (1843–1928) and the Germans Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923) and Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930). In a book on Christian mission, Die christliche Mission (1876), Buss proposed giving to Christian mission no other task than education (Völkerpädagogie), which he believed would bring non-Christians to a higher level of spiritual life. Daubanton rejects this evolutionist model (pp. 352–77), emphasizing that Christians must choose between immanent evolutionism and a genuinely new development deriving from the impact of God’s salvific revelation in Jesus Christ. Daubanton criticizes Buss for taking into account neither God’s providence nor humanity’s sin. He regards Buss’s Pelagianism as a variant of the philosophy of Gotthold E. Lessing (1729–81), who equated education with revelation in his treatise Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts (1780). To consider Jesus Christ as the highest moral achievement in the evolutionary process, reasons Daubanton, is to open the door to accepting other “revelations” in a future stage of world history as even higher than that of Jesus Christ.

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ment, and so forth—but we cannot have “evolutionism without God” (p. 533). Christianity cannot accept any view that eliminates God and his salvific revelation in Jesus Christ and that consequently rejects world mission.

As for the third of these writers, Daubanton regarded von Harnack’s two-volume work on the expansion of Christianity in the first three centuries as a masterpiece (pp. 314–16).\textsuperscript{25} But Daubanton reminds us that von Harnack also published a controversial book which, under the influence of evolutionism, denied Jesus’ missionary work among non-Jews.\textsuperscript{26} Along with other evolutionists, von Harnack denied that Jesus’ outreach crossed ethnic borders. Daubanton challenges the notion that Jesus could be a particularist in the wake of Isaiah’s universalism, and he contests von Harnack’s thesis that Paul was Jesus’ improver (p. 316). Along with Warneck, Daubanton opposes the idea that crossing ethnic borders begins with the disciples after Easter; it begins with Jesus. Daubanton concludes that von Harnack had no space for the mystery of God’s salvific revelation at the beginning of the Christian era.

### Conclusion

Daubanton’s *Prolegomena* is to be honored as the first history of mission studies and the first formal study of missiology as an independent discipline. Several scholars in continental Europe who have written missiological encyclopedias have acknowledged Daubanton’s pioneering role, notably André V. Seumois (1951), Angel Santos Hernández, S.J. (1961), Alphonsus J. M. Mulders (1962), and Jan A. B. Jongeneel (1995–97).\textsuperscript{27} But a majority of scholars have failed to acknowledge the debt owed to Daubanton. As a result, Daubanton’s achievement remains relatively unknown, particularly in the English-speaking world.

Daubanton’s basic conviction regarding revelation versus evolution was defended by Hendrik Kraemer in his response to W. Ernest Hocking’s *Rethinking Missions* (1932)\textsuperscript{28} and more recently by J. E. Lesslie Newbigin and like-minded theologians, who have criticized Paul F. Knitter, John Hick, W. Cantwell Smith, and other pluralists.\textsuperscript{29} Contemporary missionaries and missiologists who prioritize the preaching of the Gospel, the planting of churches, and the Christianization of cultures over against the development of “civilization” and social work, including development programs, can refer to Daubanton as a predecessor.

Carol Poensen characterized Daubanton’s magnum opus as “the artistic porch of a beautiful cathedral.”\textsuperscript{30} The term *Prolegomena* indeed suggests that the book is no more than an introduction to the subject, and to some extent that is true. However, people who stand on the porch can see into the interior of the cathedral. The nature and content of Daubanton’s missionary theology come clearly into focus in his *Prolegomena*. The purpose of his missiology is to put every human being and all peoples in the light of the sun of God’s salvific will for humanity as a whole, which already has shined in the history of Israel (especially in the writings of the prophets) but thereafter abundantly radiates in the words and deeds of Jesus Christ, the founder of world mission and God’s universal kingdom.

### Notes


2. In 1917 the publishers of *Theologische studiën* decided to launch a new series under the title *Nieuwe Theologische studiën*. Daubanton stepped down as editor, titling his last editorial “Suprema verba.” However, from time to time he contributed articles to the new journal.


5. Page numbers in parentheses refer to Daubanton’s magnum opus, *Prolegomena van protestantse zendingswetenschap* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1911).

6. François E. Daubanton, “Dogmatiesche fragmenten,” a series of five articles appearing over a period of eight years, 1891 to 1898, in *Stemmen voor Waarheid en Vrede*.

7. Martin Kähler, *Dogmatische Zeitfragen* (Leipzig: Deichert, 1908). The second part of this study, pages 340 to 487, is devoted to mission.

8. Daubanton dedicated this work to Professor Carel Poensen, for many years the editor of the prominent missiological journal *Mededeelingen vanwege het Nederlandsche Zendelingenwees kap.*


14. Daubanton used the term “science of mission,” whereas today the preferred term is “missiology.” In the rest of this article, “missiology” will be used where Warneck, Daubanton, and others used the term “science of mission.”


18. See Heinrich Balz, “Überwindung der Religionen” und das Ziel der


**Selected Bibliography**

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**Works About François E. Daubanton**


