

Missional Theology for a Missionary Church

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The term “paradigm shift” is rapidly becoming a cliché. But it aptly describes the profound changes that the Christian church has experienced in the course of the twentieth century. In 1942, William Temple, on the occasion of his enthronement as Archbishop of Canterbury, described the emergence of worldwide Christianity as “the great new fact of our time.”¹ He was referring to the results of the modern missionary movement, which over three centuries had transformed Christianity from a faith movement rooted in North Atlantic cultures into a global family of churches planted in every major cultural grouping on the earth. This movement was being exhaustively documented at that time in Kenneth Scott Latourette’s magisterial seven-volume *History of the Expansion of Christianity*.² The first three volumes told the story of Christian mission from the New Testament period to 1800. Four more volumes were required to tell the story of modern missions from 1800 to the (then) present day. In 1937, the year his first volume appeared, Latourette surveyed the characteristics of Christian evangelism and mission in two articles in the *International Review of Mission*. He comments that “few of those engaged in the Protestant missionary enterprise of to-day realize how peculiar to this age are the methods employed and the characteristics which are outstanding. . . . They differ markedly from those of any other era in the spread of Christianity. . . .”³ As we near the end of this century, we are beginning to see how very marked and distinctive this paradigm shift truly is.

The statistical review prepared annually by David Barrett for the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* illustrates the paradigm shift graphically. In 1900, Christians in Europe and Northern America comprised 77 percent of the world Christian population. In mid-1998, that same constituency makes up 38 percent of the world Christian population, and by 2025, it will sink to 27 percent.⁴ The ancient center of so-called Christian civilization now represents the minority of world Christianity. Not only are the churches in non-Atlantic regions growing, but most of the established Christian traditions in the west are losing numbers, especially in the last decades of the century. Together with sinking numbers, the western churches now are coming to terms with the awareness that Christendom, the hegemony of the Christian religion and its institutional churches in the west, is finally over. Douglas John Hall has documented this passage exhaustively in his trilogy *Thinking the Faith, Professing the Faith, and Confessing the Faith*.⁵

For many members and leaders of the churches in North America it is difficult to comprehend, even harder to accept these changes. This is especially true of “mainline churches,” which may be defined as those North American ecclesiastical traditions that once claimed and enjoyed the benefits of establishment and protection under the umbrella of Christendom. For such churches, the current paradigm shift is traumatic. They are having to learn how to do theology in unaccustomed ways. They are having to discover how to relate to their context, the previously Christian and now secularized western cultures, as marginalized outsiders. They are having to learn new forms of communication in order to be understood. They are learning to ask hard questions

about their purpose and the way to go about it.

What is ultimately at stake is, of course, what takes place in the pulpit every Sunday. What the preacher says, why he or she says it, and how the communication event of the sermon must take place — these fundamental dimensions of preaching are shaped by the church's basic sense of its mission. If preaching today is to address the real situation of the church, that is, if it is to be truly contextual, then it must grapple with the missional paradigm shift, which is now definitive of the North American church. As Vatican II put it, "The pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature."⁶ Ecclesiology and missiology have merged. The term may not yet be common parlance, but the challenge is at its core "missiological."

Although the discipline of missiology is a little over one hundred years old, it has not been a major theological theme within the churches of the west. This discipline emerged in Britain and Germany as a response to what was happening around the world as the result of modern missions.⁷ The initial approach to the study was typical of Christendom's self-image: it addressed the expansion of western Christianity to the rest of the world. The planting of churches based largely on western models was the concrete task of the missionary endeavor. So, the "Christian" west sent missionaries to the "pagan" rest of the world. The vast and complex experiences of the missionary movement generated data that called for analysis, interpretation, and criticism. It became progressively clear that specialized studies were needed to prepare people to carry out western missions overseas. The result was the development of the field of missiology. Rarely was the work of missiologists ever turned around and focused on the situation of the "sending churches." Its primary interest was the situation "overseas," in the "receiving churches."

Parallel to the modern missionary movement, secularization began to make its mark in the west. The churches' response to that challenge came to be called "evangelism," a new word in the western Christian vocabulary. By the beginning of the twentieth century, most western churches had structures and programs for "missions" overseas and "evangelism" at home. While "missions" focused upon the evangelization of people who were previously not Christians and the planting of churches with the converts, "evangelism" sought to win back those who had previously been Christians to the churches that still largely defined their cultures.

Much of the work done in the field of missiology related to cultural, ethnological, and linguistic matters and to the methodologies of outreach. There was very little interaction between missiology and the other disciplines of theology. Since "mission" was a church-centered branch of its diverse ministries, missiology was regarded as one of the many sub-divisions of practical theology. As such, it had its impact upon preaching: the "mission sermon" placed the vision of the unevangelized pagans overseas before the congregation which was to respond with its prayers, its gifts, and the commitments of those who were called into "fulltime service." At the same time, "evangelistic preaching" evolved as a complex and much debated form of proclamation whose intention was to "reach the unsaved" within our own secularized setting. "Salvation" was, to be sure, largely identified with an individual conversion experience and integration into the church as the community of the saved.⁸

That somewhat restricted understanding of missiology has changed significantly in this century. Beginning in the thirties, the worldwide theological conversation about the mission of the church shifted from a primary focus upon the church and its

expansion to a focus upon God as a missionary God. This emphasis, which came to be called the theology of the *missio Dei*, was influenced by Karl Barth in the west, whose theological program converged with growing skepticism among western and non-western missiologists about the Christendom legacy in modern mission. Significantly, it was at a conference of the International Missionary Council (Villingen, 1952) that *missio Dei* theology was firmly established as a theological consensus (Bosch, 389f).

Mission was understood as being derived from the very nature of God. It was thus put in the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit was expanded to include yet another “movement”: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world. [Bosch, 390]

This meant that the purpose of mission and evangelism was not merely the formation of the church. It was rather the expression of God’s faithfulness to his saving intention for the entire world. As Karl Barth put it,

As His community [the church] points beyond itself. At bottom it can never consider its own security, let alone its appearance. As His community it is always free from itself. ... Its mission is not additional to its being. It is, as it is sent and active in its mission. It builds up itself for the sake of its mission and in relation to it. ... If it is the apostolic Church determined by Scripture and therefore by the direction of the apostles, it cannot fail to exist in this freedom and therefore in a strict realism more especially in relation to itself.⁹

The church does not *do* mission, it *is* mission. By its very calling and nature, it exists as God’s ‘sent’ people (*missio* = sending). Its worship, its proclamation, its life as a distinctive community, and its concrete demonstration of God’s love in acts of prophetic and sacrificial service are all witness to the good news whose sign and foretaste it is to be. Such is the consensus of *missio Dei* theology — but it is hard to translate into the deeply rooted and long since defined classical patterns of western theology. It is equally difficult to translate into the structures of churches which are still shaped by the mindset of Christendom and which have not come to terms with the paradigm shift that surrounds them.

No area of theological work or churchly practice is untouched by the theological agenda of the *Missio Dei*. This is demonstrated by the ways in which the study of missiology has evolved in this century. From a rather narrow focus upon the expansion of western Christianity and its implications, the discipline today intrudes into every area of theological discourse. It is still possible to find seminary courses on “the theology of mission.” But the global paradigm shift requires now that we do “missionary theology” (Bosch, 492ff). This is the missional challenge that confronts the biblical scholar, the church historian, the systematic theologian, and the practical theologian.

The contemporary literature in missiology reveals the vibrant and integrative

fashion in which the discussion has advanced. Although it only appeared in 1991, David Bosch's *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* has become the classic textbook in the field. It belongs in every pastor's library. Its structure demonstrates the integrative and intrusive character of the missiological challenge. The first third of the book deals with the biblical foundations of mission (Bosch, 15-178). The second third of the book reviews the "Historical Paradigms of Mission" (Bosch, 181-367), in effect transforming church history into mission history. In the final third of his book, Bosch reviews the great diversity of missional approaches which characterize the "emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm" (Bosch, 349-519), as we struggle for a "relevant missiology" for today. Much of the theological debate of this century is surveyed in this discussion, as it is re-focused around the basic question of the church's missionary vocation.

What we see in Bosch's treatment of the biblical foundations of mission are the emerging contours of a missiological hermeneutic. As a New Testament scholar, he marshals impressive evidence of a growing consensus among scholars about the centrality of the church's missionary vocation in both the formation and the interpretation of the canonic scriptures.¹⁰ Such an interpretive approach works from the basic assumption that the New Testament writings are directed to communities which are primarily and essentially defined by their missionary vocation. They are apostolic communities, that is, churches founded by the apostolic proclamation with the purpose of continuing that witness in their particular contexts. The New Testament documents focus on these churches' missional vocation from a range of perspectives: affirmation, correction, encouragement, and always continuing evangelization and edification. We, therefore, need to read and respond to Scriptures in the same way. We need to understand ourselves as missionary communities, sent where we are for God's mission. The Scriptures function for us as they did for the first Christian communities: they evangelize, edify, correct, shape, and send us as the continuation of the apostolic mission in our particular contexts today. The missiological challenge which confronts us today in our biblical scholarship and our preaching is precisely at this point: How do we read and respond to the biblical word as missional calling and equipping, then and now?

We ask similar questions of the church's historical development. The missiological challenge here is to move from the old and accustomed patterns of church history to the study of the mission of the church throughout its history. The process has begun with Latourette's massive study, cited above. More and more, church history is being written from the perspective of missional faithfulness (or unfaithfulness).¹¹ We learn to ask questions like these: How did the gospel and the specific culture in which its witness generated a church interact? How was the gospel "contextualized," i.e. translated, planted and rooted, shaped within and by a specific culture? In the process, were there compromises made to make the gospel "fit" more compatibly? How was the culture influenced, even transformed by the gospel witness? What was the impact of Bible translation into a new language upon its culture?¹² How has that culture shaped both the proclamation and theological reflection of the gospel over time?

Such questions and their exploration illumine our own situation in our post-Christendom and even postmodern context. They begin to refine our sensitivity to the cultural compromises that are such a profound aspect of our western legacy. These studies teach us to read our culture through the eyes of non-western partner churches.

They help us to recognize our own need for repentance and conversion. We have been used to seeing ourselves as the Christian societies who are entitled to send out models as missionaries for other societies to emulate. As we read our history missionally, we realize that we need to be evangelized by our Christian brothers and sisters from other, non-western cultures, whose vision of God's gospel is not shaped by our cultural captivity.

As long ago as 1908, the systematic theologian Martin Kähler recognized that "mission is the mother of theology."¹³ The theological reflection of the early church accompanied its mission and grappled with its challenges as a missionary church. The purpose of that theological labor was to equip and support the church in its missionary vocation. One can read the continuing history of Christian theology in that light. The theological controversies of the second to sixth centuries were an expression of the church's struggle with the contextualization of the gospel in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds into which the gospel was being translated. But, with the establishment of Constantinian Christianity, the missional sense of the church's calling and nature faded from consciousness. Theological scholarship has always, in some sense, been the enterprise of "faith seeking understanding" (Anselm). Christendom was handicapped, however, by the dangerous assumption that it not only possessed the truth of the gospel, but it had thoroughly parsed and examined it.

The passing of Christendom and the emergence of global Christianity have revealed how reductionistic and culturally diluted our western gospel has become. One evidence of that reductionism is the stress upon individual and personal salvation as the sole purpose of the gospel. This is not just a characteristic of contemporary revivalism and "evangelistic" preaching. It goes back very far in our history and parallels the Constantinian "establishment" of the church. Long lost from our evangelistic proclamation is Jesus' own message of the inbreaking reign of God, which defines the fullness of God's saving purposes for all the world. If 'Christian society' equals the kingdom of God, which the western tradition has asserted until very recently (and some of the right wing still asserts), then that theme is irrelevant for the salvation of individual souls. Evangelism, in this form of reductionism, is the church's effort on behalf of unsaved persons, but it is not the church's own encounter with the gospel which calls it to continuing conversion so that it can be the sign, foretaste, and instrument of God's inbreaking rule.

Another evidence of that reductionism is the modern counter-movement to the entrenched salvation individualism just mentioned. Much of the mainline church has rediscovered the theme of the Kingdom of God, but has equated it with our efforts to plan, strategize, and bring about our versions of the Kingdom of God. Thus, we reduce God's reign to our particular political, social, and economic agenda. In this form of gospel reductionism, evangelism is the "prophetic sermon" which calls people to engage in the "building of the kingdom of God in our time." Thus, the church is not just the sign and foretaste of what God is doing and most certainly will do, but is rather its embodiment -- a view of the church, ironically, which the Reformation went to great pains to correct.

The missional rethinking of Christian doctrine must challenge these and many other reductionisms of the gospel that are pervasive in our churches today. If the very nature of the church is God's mission, then the doctrinal disciplines of the church have much work to do, beginning with many of the assumptions which shape their thinking.

We do not end up with mission, as the precipitate of all our theologizing; we start with God's mission and work our way through the theological agenda of the faith.

For the North Atlantic churches, the missional and theological challenge at the end of this century has been formulated most concisely and pointedly by Lesslie Newbigin.¹⁴ With his writings in the last twenty years of his life he inaugurated a missiology of the west which has become a rich and diverse theological enterprise. Because of our Constantinian and Christendom legacy, our challenge is located in the tension between the gospel, the church, and culture. We have tended to melt them into one, assuming that the church and the gospel were synonymous, just as the church and the culture were a seamless fabric of institutional partnerships and legally regulated Christian morality. With his probing analysis, Newbigin forces us to look at the compromises we have made . . . and continue to make.¹⁵ Those compromises, which are rooted deeply in our history, found their most powerful intellectual expression in the Enlightenment. Ironically, this threshold period of western thought has shaped both the rejection of Christianity in the west as well as the major theological traditions since 1800. It defines the cultural water in which we swim. As the Enlightenment legacy is now subject to critical review, its impact upon the church's understanding and proclamation of the gospel calls for thorough critique.

The Gospel and Culture discussion of the last ten years is developing constructive ways to move beyond critique to re-emboldened public witness.¹⁶ The goal is not to return to Christendom. It is to become again a church whose witness is public, whose voice challenges the context through its faithful communication of the gospel, and whose practice reveals that all the other idols have been displaced by Jesus Christ, who is Lord and Sovereign.

With the renewed power of Scriptures read with a missiological hermeneutic, the churches must discover how to translate the gospel understandably into a society confused by the passage from confident modernity to decentering post-modernity. The sensitivity gained by reviewing our history missionally empowers the Christian church to confess its faults over centuries, and to live out of the forgiveness which is its most powerful testimony. At the same time, the missionally shaped theological disciplines can guide us to reclaim from our past much that is of great importance for a missionary witness today.

Although much is already happening, as the bibliography cited in this article indicates, the work has just begun. The missional re-orientation of theology must serve the missional renewal of the churches. This will require broad investigation of virtually all our assumptions, beginning with the very content of the gospel itself, and embracing the ordering and ordination of church leadership, the concept and practice of church membership, the meaning of connectionalism, the theology and practice of worship, the shape and purpose of pastoral care, and the character of the Christian unity for which we are to strive.

The preacher's task is shaped by every dimension of this process. If we are to come to terms with the cultural compromises of our legacy, and especially with our gospel reductionism, then we must begin by asking, What is the gospel? What is the central message God has entrusted to the church as her calling and the content of her witness? The ancient wisdom of the church, which placed a gospel text at the center of every Sunday's public worship, is missionally crucial. It testifies to the necessity of the church's own ongoing evangelization and conversion. The preacher's task is to hear

and respond to that gospel so that the people of God will hear it as good news that transforms and sends. That is why the “evangelist” is placed at the center of the ministers of the word in Eph. 4:11 who “equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ.” For the missional church to be equipped to be Christ’s witnesses (Acts 1:8), the word must be proclaimed apostolically, prophetically, evangelistically, pastorally, and instructively. Only a congregation that is continually being evangelized will itself be evangelistic in its witness. Gospel proclamation, linked with the evangelizing experience of the sacraments, is the constant formation, in and through the Word of God, of God’s missionary church.

Gospel preaching in this missional sense is more than the evangelistic sermon that seeks to bring the unbeliever to a decision of faith — although that must always be a dimension of it. Gospel preaching has to do with the “whole counsel of God,” with the comprehensive nature of God’s mission for the world. Such preaching employs a missional hermeneutic to expound scripture as the continual equipping of the church for its witness. Such preaching examines the conformities of the church in its particular contexts, so that it may be “transformed by the renewing of its mind” (Rom. 12:2). Such preaching moves from the indicatives of the gospel to the obeyable imperatives, the apostolic instruction that shapes God’s people for faithful witness. The ministry of the Word disciples God’s people so that they can move out into the apostolate for which God’s Spirit calls and empowers them. Gospel preaching is, therefore, always ultimately ethical in its orientation, because it addresses the shape and behavior of Christian witness in the particular place in which each community is God’s sent people. Gospel preaching is the public testimony of the Lordship of Jesus Christ over against all the contending idols and powers which lure the church away from faithful and obedient witness.

The paradigm shift we are going through requires the missional re-orientation of the church, especially in the North American context. More bluntly, it calls for the conversion of the church to its missionary vocation. All of our theological resources must be marshaled for the formation of the church, in each particular community, for empowered proclamation of the gospel in its midst and faithful witness in the world. All the ecclesial traditions have important contributions to make to this conversion process. There is a new missional ecumenism emerging, in which Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran, Reformed, Wesleyan, Anabaptist, and non-western indigenous Christian traditions are learning from each other, correcting each other, and ultimately, evangelizing each other. We are learning that our common ground is our common calling to be God’s missionary people, to be Christ’s witnesses, and thus to “lead a life worthy of the calling with which we have been called” (Eph. 4:1).

The missionary church lives out her vocation in the dynamic tension between what God has begun and will certainly complete “in the day of Jesus Christ.” Crucial to the church’s missional renewal is the rediscovery of biblical eschatology. Christendom reduced the future hope of the gospel to the question of one’s individual lot in eternity, that is, to the hope of heaven and the fear of hell. The good news of God’s inbreaking rule in Jesus Christ means, as we are now learning, that God intends that his creation should be healed and made whole, beginning now and completed as God consummates his rule. We are witnesses to a living hope, for which the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ are the guarantee and certainty. So we proclaim confidently that God, who has begun a good work in us, will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ

(Phil. 1:6). The character of Christian mission and its witness is anticipatory, expectant, confident because God is faithful. It is at the same time modest and profoundly aware that we are still “on the way,” still forgiven sinners, still in need of our own continuing conversion. Our evangelistic task is to invite others to join us in a pilgrimage of faith and healing, rooted in the salvation events of Jesus Christ, and moving toward the outcome of our faith, which is the salvation of our souls (1 Pet. 1:9).

To end as David Bosch ended his great book, “...mission is, quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus..., wagering on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God’s love, incarnated in the witness of a community, for the sake of the world” (Bosch, 519).

Notes

¹ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Mission* 2nd ed (London Penguin Books, 1986) 14-15

² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vols I-VII (New York Harper & Row, 1937-1945, reissued Grand Rapids Zondervan, 1970)

³ Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Distinctive Features of the Protestant Missionary Methods of the Nineteen and Twentieth Centuries,” *International Review of Mission*, XXVI, 104 (October 1937) 441, see also his “Pre-Nineteenth Century Evangelism Its Outstanding Characteristics,” *International Review of Mission*, XXVI, 103 (April 1937) 309-321

⁴ David B Barrett and Todd M Johnson, “Annual Statistical Table on Global Mission 1998,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, XXII, 1 (January 1998) 26-27

⁵ Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis Fortress Press, 1991), *Professing the Faith*, 1993, *Confessing the Faith*, 1996

⁶ “Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity” [Ad Gentes Divinitus], *Vatican Council II*, 2

⁷ See David Bosch, *Transforming Mission Paradigm Shift in Mission Theology* (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Books, 1991), 489-498 Hereafter, I will cite this classic missiological text as Bosch with page numbers in parenthesis See also O G Myklebust, *The Study of Missions in Theological Education*, 2 vols (Oslo Egede Instituttet, 1955-57)

⁸ For a critique of this reductionism see Darrell L Guder, *Be My Witnesses The Church’s Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans, 1983), *The Continuing Conversion of the Church Evangelization as the Heart of Ministry* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans, forthcoming)

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh T & T Clark, 1956), IV/1, 725

¹⁰ See James Brownson, “Speaking the Truth in Love Elements of a Missional Hermeneutic,” in G R Hunsberger & C van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture The Emerging Mission in North America* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans, 1996), 228-259, George R Hunsberger, “Is There Biblical Warrant for Evangelism?,” *Interpretation*, XLVIII, 2 (April 1994) 131-144

¹¹ A good example is Justo L González, *The Story of Christianity*, 2 vols (San Francisco. Harper, 1984-85), we look forward to the appearance of his *History of Christian Mission* in English Regional histories of mission are now appearing which are exploring new territory in terms of missiological interpretation, see e g Samuel H Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol I (San Francisco Harper, 1992), vol II is awaited

¹² See especially Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY Orbis Books, 1989)

¹³ Martin Kahler, *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission* (Munich Chr Kaiser Verlag, 1908, 1971), 190 Quoted in Bosch, p 16

¹⁴ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, rev ed (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans, 1995 [1978]), *The Other Side of 1984 Questions for the Churches* (Geneva World Council of Churches, 1984), *Foolishness to the Greeks The Gospel and Western Culture* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans, 1986), *Truth and Authority in Modernity*, [Christian Mission and Modern Culture] (Valley Forge Trinity Press International, 1996) See also George R Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit Lesslie Newbigin’s Theology of Cultural Plurality* (Grand Rapids Wm B Eerdmans, 1998)

¹⁵ See George R Hunsberger, “The Newbigin Gauntlet Developing a Domestic Missiology for North America,” in Hunsberger & van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, 3-25

¹⁶ See Hunsberger & van Gelder, *The Church Between Gospel and Culture*, Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), G. R. Hunsberger, *Bearing the Witness of the Spirit*. For the British discussion, see Hugh Montefiore, *Credible Christianity: The Gospel in Contemporary Society* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993).