

## South African Context – Universal Missiology: David Bosch and the Importance of Ecclesiology for Mission

By Timothy Yates

Perhaps I may begin this paper with a personal reminiscence. My first experience of IAMS was a memorable meeting in Harare in 1985, a time when Zimbabwe had thrown off the colonial yoke for an integrated society, while South Africa was still experiencing official apartheid. David Bosch and others had driven up from Pretoria to participate in the conference. I offered a paper on Anglican Evangelical missiology, which concentrated on the writings of Max Warren and Stephen Neill. Professor Bosch showed great interest and some theological anxiety at some of Max Warren's ideas on the cosmic Christ but it was a good session with much participation. I discovered later that David Bosch was suffering from severe toothache. Despite this, he arranged to meet me later to talk missiology, a conversation which seemed to last for some two hours of highly stimulating discussion, even while he held his hand to his jaw in much pain. The story is an illustration of the man, his commitment to truth through dialogue, wholehearted engagement irrespective of personal considerations of extreme discomfort.

Like all of us, David Bosch was a child of his own time and place. He was born into an Afrikaner farming family, baptised into membership of the Dutch Reformed Church (1). Church going was a serious matter for the family involving long distances on Saturdays and considerable efforts on Sundays. It is important to remember that he remained a member of the DRC for the whole of his life, despite latterly being effectively deprived of any preaching ministry within it. The DRC was the main (but not the only) repository of Afrikaans culture and tradition, forged in the nineteenth century into an identity over against the British and by such historical turning points as the Battle of Blood River of 1838, when 400 Boers formed a laager against 10,000 Zulus and by the Great Trek whereby many Boers left the Cape to form the Transvaal across the Orange River and escape British dominance. The DRC was Calvinist in theology, anti-British in outlook and viewed black Africans as inferior. During the nineteenth century, when Dutch Reformed clergy from Holland were scarce, the DRC in the Cape reinforced their numbers with Reformed clergy from Scotland, among them Andrew Murray junior. He was representative of a pietist, evangelical strand of Scottish church life, an injection of a rather different spirituality to the DRC which brought a greater missionary awareness to the church. Much of the missionary life and vitality of the DRC is held to be traceable to this source and in time David Bosch would share this influence (2).

The war between the Boers and the British of 1899-1902, where the British employed scorched earth tactics against the Boer farmers and interned their families in concentration camps, in which over 25,000 women and children died, hardened Afrikaner attitudes inevitably.

and gave added determination in the twentieth century to resist attempts to Anglicise their volk. In David Bosch's early days the DRC could be described as the Nationalist Party at prayer. This party, led by D.F. Malan and later by <sup>Hendrik</sup> Verwoerd, achieved political power in South Africa in the 1940's and in 1948 put in place three pieces of legislation which enshrined apartheid as a political system: the Race Classification Act, the Group Areas Act and the Mixed Marriages Act. The so-called 'homelands' were set up ~~eleven~~ years later in 1959 under the Bantu Self-Government Act.

As early as 1829, the DRC had refused to discriminate against black Africans in services of Holy Communion: but gradually approaches to differing ethnic groups, which were essentially practically based, were accorded theological justification. One unfortunate constituent in this was the German Lutheran teaching of Gustav Warneck of what might be called 'ethnic missiology' (3). What might be a fruitful approach to tribal mission in the hands of people like Bruno Gutmann and Christian Keysser could be employed to reinforce a fatal ethnic separation, where Africans could be treated as a separate ethnic volk rather than integrated into a racially diverse church fellowship. This does much to explain David Bosch's later criticisms of both Warneck and Donald McGavran for his 'homogeneous unit principle', aspects of his developed ecclesiology to be discussed later in this paper.

David Bosch's personal career during these years of increasing dominance by the National Party was to include doctoral study under Oscar Cullmann in Basel in the 1950's. He described to Kevin Livingstone in an interview how, despite sharing in the general Afrikaner rejoicing at the triumph of the National Party in 1948 ('a dream come true') his attitude to Africans had begun to change as he organised services for farm workers as an intending DRC minister: 'previously I only thought of them as pagans and at best semi-savages... from then on I accepted Blacks fully as human beings' (4). It was a major discovery to find black Anglicans, Methodists and African Independent Christians in the black community. While studying in Basel, with the help of fellow Afrikaner also in Europe for study, he <sup>round himself</sup> ~~breaks~~ with the whole ideology of apartheid (5). In 1957 he returned to South Africa to work as a missionary among the Xhosa people (1957-67), during which his mastery of the language became legendary, in the way that Lesslie Newbigin's was of Tamil in India. His period as a missionary in the Transkei caused him to knit together missiology with praxis: Frans Verstraelen, a penetrating critic of Bosch's theology, has written of this period, in a phrase relevant to the theme of this conference, that it showed 'convincingly... his integrity as a human being... a Christian and as a missiologist' (6). In this period also he gained experience of ecumenical life in the Transkei Council of Churches, where DRC, Methodists, Roman Catholics and others showed him the value of unity in action.

3

The period in the Transkei confirmed his shift in attitudes to both Africans and the white paternalism prevalent. One illustration of this was his experience with an African mechanic: while Bosch stood over him the man was incapable of mending his car but left to himself proved perfectly competent (7). David Bosch had not, like Beyers Naude, been a member of the Afrikaner Broederbond and confronted by events like the Sharpeville shootings of civilians by the police in 1960 he did not experience the same depth of rejection as Beyers Naude in his repudiation of the Broederbond and DRC attitudes, set out in a famous sermon of 1962. Nevertheless, after a short period in a small seminary in the Transkei (1967-72) he accepted a chair at UNISA in Pretoria with much trepidation, knowing that to do so was to distance himself further from DRC theologians who looked on the faculty with suspicion: because of its large number of external students, it had retained a mixed race constituent in its work still.

As the 1970's advanced, David Bosch's critical stance towards apartheid became stronger. In 1979 he chaired an important conference, SACLA (South African Christian Leadership Assembly), attended by 5,000 Christians over ten days with black Africans present, for which permission by the government was uncertain up to the start of proceedings. He stood out against violence as a method of achieving political change, believing that this had been the way of Jesus and that for the Church to adopt violence was to adopt the ways of the world and ultimately make her redundant as a witness (8). In the 1980's he was a leading figure in the Open Brief (Open Letter) of 1982 seeking a change of heart among the leaders of the DRC, signed by a large number of sympathetic ministers, and in 1983 he contributed to a book of essays edited by John de Gruchy and Charles Villa Vicencio in a piece entitled 'Nothing but a Heresy', the book's overall title being Apartheid is a heresy. For him, the issue was that identity in terms of race was being preferred to the common identity given to all people in the church. To do this was to act heretically.

This background of personal struggle, from a position of shared Afrikaner attitudes on racial issues in his early years to costly opposition after his return from Europe in 1957, especially in the UNISA years after 1972, is important as Bosch's theology is assessed. In John Mackay's distinction between the 'balcony' and the 'road', between the detached observer with his love of universals and ideas and the participant, David Bosch is undoubtedly as Livingston has called him, 'a missiologist of the road', one of whose early writings on the relevance of St Paul to missionary theory and practice in the second letter to the Corinthians was A Spirituality of the Road (1979). He preferred to remain in 'prophetic solidarity' with the DRC, even when effectively banned from its pulpits, rather than repudiating his fellow Afrikaner Christians; but, equally, given the opportunity to leave South Africa altogether, for <sup>example, for</sup> a chair at Princeton Theological Seminary, he

he refused to retreat to what could have been an academic balcony from him.

Before narrowing this treatment to the theme of ecclesiology, some of the criticisms of Bosch's corpus should be faced. Frans Verstraelen wrote a very penetrating critique in Mission in Bold Humility (9) It has to be conceded that Bosch's theology is fairly characterised as standing in the classical western tradition of ideas 'from above' and sharply contrasting with the concentration on praxis and concrete contextualisation of the liberation theologians. Bosch himself concedes this and is unapologetic about it (10); but he recognised that praxis has its place with theoria, and in the interests of a human and theological holism he adds a third aspect, poiesis, the need to provide beauty and worship for a satisfying theological and missiological approach. The same criticism is made in essence (and with special pointedness) when John de Gruchy and <sup>M.L.</sup> ~~Wes~~ Daneel regret the absence of Bosch's own missionary experience in the book "Witness to the World" (1989) (11), in which Orlando Costas regretted the absence of third world theology (12). Pentecostalism is indeed generally absent as Willem Saayman detects (13) and there is little reference to the contribution of women to mission as discerned by Dana Robert (14). Kirsteen Kim suggests that Bosch's approach to the Holy Spirit is more modern than post-modern: Bosch showed himself aware that the Orthodox view of the procession of the Spirit enabled them to view other religious traditions more positively but it remains uncertain whether he would have followed this approach and more likely that he would have seen the Spirit tied more closely to the person of Christ in the western tradition (15). Nearer to our central theme, W. Nicol accused Bosch of a cocetic ecclesiology: his exposure to the kind of Heilsgeschichte views of a theologian like Oscar Cullmann, where salvation is within the church and sacred history is detached from the general historical continuum, allied to his espousal of the church as an 'alternative community' which owed much to J.H. Yoder and Mennonite/Anabaptist views of the church, could on this view lead to a church withdrawn from the world. Even his use, which is frequent, of the term 'the Church' could be seen as a retreat into universals from the more messy business of dealing with actual ecclesial entities like the DRC. Against this has to be set Bosch's actual record of 'prophetic solidarity' as outlined above (16).

What then of Bosch's approach to ecclesiology and mission? First and foremost he held that the church was essential to Christian mission (17). He leaned on well-known authorities in Karl Barth, the documents of Vatican II, Hoedemaker and Brunner (18) to distinguish his position sharply from, for example, J.C. Hoekendijk (19). The section in his guide to mission theology is headed 'The Indispensability of the Church' (20). In fairness to Hoekendijk, after the legitimate ecclesiocentric stresses of Tambaram 1938, theology had felt the influence of the Heilsgeschichte school, where critics felt that God's work had been confined to salvation through the church. Against such a ghetto-ising

5

Tendency, Hoekedijk represented a violent reaction. The church became marginalised (21), while the true mission dei took place in the world. The position was expressed in the phrase 'the world sets the agenda' and the tendency was marked at Uppsala 1968. David Bosch, rightly in the view of this writer, while never identifying the church with the kingdom of God, saw it as the divinely given agent of mission, with the kind of interdependency between agency and mission which Emil Brunner had described: 'the church lives by mission as a fire lives by burning'.

As he set his face against any marginalisation of the church in mission so he opposed ethnic approaches (volkskerke) as advocated by Warneck and worked out by Gutmann and Keysser. Bosch's context, the Sitz in Leben, is important here. What might be legitimate attempts to incorporate ethnic and cultural aspects of a people like the Chagga (Gutmann) or the Katsi (Keysser) in the manner sketched out by Warneck, <sup>when</sup> used by Afrikaner theologians to bolster a separate ethnic approach to black Africans, which denied the catholicity of a mixed race congregation, ~~it~~ became for Bosch 'totally incompatible' with the new community of Jesus. The Reformed Heidelberg Catechism at Answer 54 asserted that the Church is at all time and in all places the one people of God gathered from the whole human race by Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit and the Word. Ethnicity, discerned by Gustav Warneck in the panta ta ethne of Mt. 28:18-20 was a cultural and ethnic, but not a theological, category (22).

For Bosch, the same fatal tendency was present in Donald McGavran's writings. In Bosch's view, McGavran's obsession with numbers of converts obscured the greater need for catholicity (23). One must enter a caution on McGavran's behalf. I have argued elsewhere that the so-called 'homogeneous unit principle' was aimed at initial evangelisation, where McGavran held that people of a specific race or social class were reached best in their own contexts and among their own: this has surely been proved again and again in the church's history (23). This in no way justifies post-conversion segregation, when the principle of catholicity may be expected to assert itself in the convert, a factor which McGavran did not dispute. For Bosch, however, ever since that pragmatic decision of the 1820s to treat Africans separately by the DRC, justifications grounded in homogeneity were to be resisted and in the interests of catholicity the principle of diversity upheld.

If Hoekedijk was to be confronted with the indispensability of the church in mission; Warneck with the need for catholicity in overcoming ethnicity; and McGavran by catholicity overcoming homogeneity, what were the marks of the Church for the future which Bosch wished to emphasise? Once more, the context of the South African struggle can be discerned in what follows. First, justice must be an essential preoccupation. In the posthumously published monograph Believing in the Future, justice is 'what Christians are for', in a world in which one fifth of the entire world population live in absolute poverty (24). Christians must not divorce earthly justice from spiritual righteousness. They are closely

6

related if not identical (25). Secondly, unity has to preoccupy the church. His experience of practical ecumenism in the Transkei Council of Churches had shown the importance of unity in witness and action but this was a deeply held theological conviction also. Disunity is not just a vexation but a sin. Unity is not an optional extra...we should never tire of striving towards that day when Christians in every place may gather to share the One Bread and the One Cup' (26). He had sought unity in the different branches of the Reformed family in the Open Brief of 1982 and in addresses of that year and in 1986 (27). Associated with unity, thirdly, the church must be a reconciling community. Although there is little in Transforming Mission on reconciliation, the stress on the church as bringing both judgement and reconciliation was important to him (28) and we may believe that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa and Archbishop Tutu's Herculean efforts would have been approved by him. Fourthly, he wished to emphasise that the church was essentially missionary. Barth's view of the church gathered, built up and sent out, as also his view of the interaction of church and mission as mutually life-giving, were endorsed. He produced a catena of quotations in Transcending Mission from Ad Gentes, Hoedemaker, Glazik, Barth and others to make the point with Schumacher that 'the inverse of the thesis "the church is essentially missionary" is "mission is essentially ecclesial" (29). Next, he wanted to stress the fully representative nature of the local: 'the church-in-mission is primarily the local church everywhere in the world' (30). There is no conflict here, he held, with the church universal, which finds its truest expression in local churches. With J.R. Oldham, he knew that the local is real; and he endorsed Leslie Newbigin's dictum that the only hermeneutic of the gospel is a congregation of men and women who believe it and live by it. For witness to be credible, it has to flow from a local worshipping community and in the future church it will be the laity and their witness which will carry greater credibility than the 'guild of pastors' (31).

Finally, the church must have worship at the centre of its life and it must be an eschatological community. He found that Protestant ecumenical theology with its stress on ~~the~~ involvement in the world had been reflected even in the theology of Vatican II 'so that it sometimes seems as if the Church as a worshipping community has faded away' (32). Mission is 'moored in the Church's worship, to its gathering around the Word and <sup>the</sup> sacraments' (33). The Church can only give what it has received from God (34). People do not only need truth and justice (theory, praxis) 'they also need beauty, the rich resources of symbol, piety, worship, love, awe and mystery, what he calls the dimension of poiesis (35) and he gives also an important place to the church's intercession. The eschatological element will mean that the Church is not simply tied to human programmes but in a world devoid of hope will provide that vital constituent (36).

In his final essay on missiology, he recognised that new forms of church expression were emerging. It would be in ecclesial fora like the German

7.  
Kirchentag, where he noted 140,000 young people had gathered in Munich in 1984, that some of the pressing issues for the world church were more likely to be considered than in the average Sunday morning congregation (37). Ecclesiology provided the essential antidote to the world of post-Enlightenment individualism which had also spawned the voluntarist missionary societies as its missionary expression. Interdependence and the corporate were the counter to what he called 'the monomaniac rejection of the empirical church' by Hoekendijk and similar thinkers: 'without the church there can be no evangelism or mission' (38) remained his view.

David Bosch assumed the traditional marks of the church as one, holy, catholic and apostolic. We have to ask: how far had his own version of these characteristics, as outlined above, provided for the future? The twenty-first century will challenge the church at certain discernible points: globalisation would seem to imply that a world body will need to shape its responses to such global issues as consumerism, exploitation of natural resources and threats to the planet itself with more than local and fragmented efforts. While wholeheartedly endorsing his heavy emphasis on the local church, his lesser stress on the necessity for catholicity to be also expressed in larger units and networks will become of great importance. In terms of local congregations, I have written elsewhere that 'indigenous forms of Christianity, which bear comparison to (pentecostal groups) with their emphasis on healing, prophecy and exuberant worship with speaking in tongues, have sprung up as independent, non-denominational expressions of local Christianity' (39), referring in particular to Latin American and African Initiated local churches. It would seem that in the twenty-first century a major challenge to a body like the WCC will be to connect with these local expressions of Christianity and somehow offer them input and influence as the great issues are debated conciliarly, the alternative being that their highly fragmented witness risks being dissipated. It is an issue that the Roman Catholic church has had to address over the CE3's (Base Ecclesial Communities) in Latin America.

Issues of ecology, alluded to above, were noticed as absent in the Bosch corpus by Kirsteen Kim but they made a late appearance in Believing in the Future. The twenty-first century church, as part of Bosch's stress on justice, will need to hold world governments and their leadership to fairness in relation to the planet and the world economy. The contribution of Ulrich Duchrow to the IAMS conference at Buenos Aires in 1996 brought home the missiological ~~challenges~~ nature of economic challenges for the future (40). The stewardship of the planet, which the WCC has taught us to refer to as the 'integrity of creation', means that nations of the size of the USA and China with their potential impact on climate change and the environment will need the constant witness of the church on behalf of the well-being of the human race, only likely to be effective if in some sense united.

8  
 united. Despite the twenty-first century's dislike of the large, the institutional and the over-arching in narrative, to this writer the church is committed to all three and cannot in responsibility deny them. A further inescapable issue of justice remains the place accorded in human societies to women after a century (the twentieth) which could be called their century in terms of progress towards achieving equality in many realms of endeavour. Once more, the twenty first century church has a role to play, while also wrestling internally with its own questions on the issues.

A recent report from the Church of England to which I belong entitled Mission Shaped Church (41) has suggested that in the older mission fields of Europe, once thought of as Christendom, the old, traditional and territorial approach of geographical parishes and dioceses may be breaking down. Once again, the danger would seem to be fragmentation and the loss of such strengths provided by national church and international associations, in the Anglican communion characterised by unity around the bishop, itself now qualified by sectional arrangements to provide for diverse outlooks and varied supervision to accommodate these. The danger is once more of the loss of effective and united witness, though this report attempts to contain this result within a twin-tracked approach to mission, territorial and non-territorial, both owned by the bishop and related to him as a focus of unity.

This conference has as its title 'the integrity of mission in the light of the gospel: bearing the witness of the Spirit'. For me, David Bosch was precisely a missiologist of deep integrity, one who managed to integrate in himself (as Professor Andrew Walls has written) 'the three different public domains' of academia, the Church and wider society 'dimensions of the same reality (involving) the integration of <sup>intellectual</sup> academic rigour, participation in the life of the Church and practical demonstration in the life of the world' (42). As Walls wrote, the attempt brought him 'great discomfort' but this was disregarded. I have deliberately omitted from this treatment his long struggle with different understandings of the gospel as expressed by 'ecumenicals' and 'evangelicals', which he stated was the context for his widely read book Witness to the World of 1980. Here, as so often, he had an overriding concern for the truth of the gospel, expressed as much in social action for the neighbour as in proclamation of the divine grace in Jesus Christ, with no priority to either. It was this same integrity which caused him to feel an evangelical at the Melbourne CWME conference and an ecumenical at the Pattaya/Lausanne conference both in 1980: concern for the full truth of the universal gospel would not permit him to let go of essential, alternative insights. A missiologist who was also a missionary; an ecumenical who was also evangelist; a life-long member of the DRC in critical solidarity with his Afrikaans roots, who never repudiated his fellow Afrikaaner Christians - he may be judged on these and many other counts to have been a faithful witness to many of us <sup>from</sup> many nations other than South African, deeply indebted as we are to this 'missiologist of the road'.

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## NOTES

- (1) J. Kevin Livingston, International Bulletin of Missionary Research, vol. 23, no. 1 (Jan. 1999) p. 26f. I am also greatly indebted to Dr. Livingston's doctoral thesis for the University of Aberdeen of 1989 'A missiology of the road: the theology of mission and evangelism in the writings of David Bosch' later to be published by the University Press of America (art. cit. p. 31 note 12), though I have not seen it in this form. See also his essay in Mission in Creative Tension edited by J. N. Kritzing and W. A. Saayman (pp. 3-16)
- (2) Livingston, dissertation cit., I, p. 10f.
- (3) For G. Warneck, C. Keysser and B. Gutmann see T. Yates, Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century, pp. 34-56
- (4) Livingston, IRMR, art. cit., p. 26
- (5) Livingston, diss. cit., I, p. 58
- (6) F. Verstraelen, essay in Mission in Bold Humility ed. W. Saayman & K. Kritzing, p. 10
- (7) Livingston, diss. cit., p. 59 note 25
- (8) Mission in Creative Tension pp. 14-15 quoting Bosch, Theologia Evangelica vol. 9, July-Sept., pp. 2-3. Bosch distanced himself from the Kairos document of 1986 on the same grounds.
- (9) F. J. Verstraelen in Mission in Bold Humility, pp. 8-39
- (10) D. Bosch, Transforming Mission, pp. 425, 431
- (11) Livingston, diss. cit. p. 167 note, p. 195
- (12) O. Costas, IRM, vol. 70, no. 278, pp. 82-6, especially at p. 83
- (13) W. Saayman in Mission in Bold Humility, p. 51
- (14) L. Robert, op. cit., p. 94
- (15) K. Kim in IRM vol. 89, no. 353, pp. 172-9 and <sup>in</sup> T. Yates (ed.) Mission - an Invitation to God's Future, pp. 99-108.
- (16) W. Nicol in Mission in Creative Tension, pp. 93-8; on 'Church' F. Verstraelen in Mission in Bold Humility, pp. 26-7
- (17) Transforming Mission, pp. 416 of p. 386
- (18) Bosch, Believing in the Future, p. 31f.
- (19) Bosch, Witness to the World, pp. 176-7; for Hoekendijk his Church Inside Out (1967) and Yates, op. cit., pp. 53-6
- (20) Bosch, Guide 1, MSR 201 'Theology of Mission' (UNISA, 1975), p. 155
- (21) Witness to the World, pp. 176-7: 'ecclesiology (for Hoekendijk) (is) not more than a <sup>single</sup> paragraph in Christology'
- (22) Bosch in Missionalia, vol. 5, no. 2 (1977), p. 34; cf P. J. Robinson in Mission in Creative Tension, pp. 164-5
- (23) Witness to the World, pp. 208-9; Yates, op. cit., pp. 216-8
- (24) Believing in the Future pp. 34, 37
- (25) Bosch, 'The Scope of Mission' CMS Annual Sermon of 1982, pp. 11-12
- (26) Transforming Mission, p. 467
- (27) Mission in Creative Tension, pp. 15-16

- (28) Livingston, diss. cit., I, p. 71
- (29) Transforming Mission, p. 372; K. Barth, Church Dogmatics, IV, pp. 725f.; Ad Gentes, 9.
- (30) Transforming Mission, p. 378
- (31) Believing in the Future, p. 59
- (32) Witness to the World, p. 185
- (33) Transforming Mission, p. 385
- (34) Guide 1 MSR 201 pp. 155-6
- (35) Transforming Mission, p. 431; for intercession, Guide 1 MSR 201, p. 157
- (36) Transforming Mission, pp. 387, 499; Missionalia vol. 3 (November 1975) p. 177
- (37) believing in the Future p. 45, p. 64 note 10
- (38) Transforming Mission, pp. 416-7
- (39) T. Yates, The Expansion of Christianity, p. 181
- (40) U. Duchrow in Mission Studies vol. 13, nos. 25 & 26 (1996), pp. 32-67
- (41) Report, Mission Shaped Church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context (Church House Publishing, 2004)
- (42) A. F. Walls in Occasional Newsletter (of the British and Irish Association for Mission Studies), March 1994, no. 2 (New Series) p. 2; pp. 1-5 for whole. This has since appeared in Walls, The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History and is a very valuable assessment. The IRM printed a short obituary IRM, vol. 81, no. 323 July 1992, p. 362 after Bosch's death on April 15, 1992. See also the appreciation by his colleagues at UNISA, Willem Saayman and Klippies Kritinger ('David Bosch the South African' in Mission in Bold Humility pp. 1-7.