

Introducing David Bosch, His Context, Assumptions, and Agenda

His context

As a Dutch Reformed Afrikaaner whose ministry career spanned roughly apartheid era of South African history (1948-94), David Bosch lived, thought and wrote in a crucible. Permanently out of step with his church and his j eminent, he was watched closely and attacked by both but never success! manipulated or controlled by either. In this he embodied the style of disciple Jesus advocated: sent out as a sheep among the wolves, he was as shrew a snake and as innocent as a dove (Matt. 10:16). He did not seek to overthrow unjust authorities but to undermine them by pursuing his real mission in spite of them. Therefore, in the completely polarized society of South Africa at the t the radicals accused him of being too mild and the conservatives of being radical.

Several times he considered leaving his church, and at least once he considered leaving his country (for an attractive teaching post overseas). But he always decided that God wanted him to remain an insider, an uncompromising Chris in a highly compromised situation. He lived what he advocated so often in his writing — "creative tension" between apparently irreconcilable opposites.

For the last two decades of his life, his working context was the missiology department in the faculty of theology of the University of South Africa (Unisa) in Pretoria. This was a unique situation in several respects. Though apartheid laws prohibited black and white students from sharing a university dormitory or cafeteria, Unisa was multiracial because it had no resident students. It was a correspondence school established a century earlier to make training available those who were out of reach of any campus, and it had developed probably highest academic standards of any correspondence institution in the world,: bachelor's through doctoral level.

The university was phenomenally well funded and subsidized in the apartheid era. For example, with moderate grant assistance, Bosch was able to edit and produce the premier journal *Missionalia*, providing the world's best set of abstracts of mission-related articles. Tuition fees at the university were unbelievably low (about \$200 per year in 1979, when I began my doctoral program there), and that included Bosch as personal supervisor, two other faculty supervisors, and an amazing array of library services by mail. Black students could afford to study there, and they did.

Partly for this reason, theologians with anti-apartheid leanings tended to gravitate to this institution where they would not experience the hostility that was common in the theology departments at white campuses and church-controlled seminaries. Naturally the government was unhappy about this growing nest of vipers, yet it did not want to cut the funding for the university since the massive faculty building and library atop a ridge in Pretoria were an exhibit of how well the government provided educational opportunities for "our black people." The government resorted to other means, going as far as trying to

assassinate Bosch's right-hand man, Willem Saayman, in his bed, but the rifle bullet hit the headboard on his wife's side of the bed, and she had not come to bed yet.¹

In such an atmosphere, the common attempts by conservative South African Christians to separate religion from politics could not be reconciled with the Bible as Bosch read it. His own hermeneutic always was grounded in the way the biblical writers saw themselves, and that excluded any interpretation or application of particular Bible verses that went against the core identity and mission of the writers. For example, no one should suggest that the church turn a blind eye to injustice as if that were none of its business.

One side effect of his time and place was that because of his South African passport, Bosch though a world traveler had virtually no experience of Africa outside of southern Africa. He did manage to get a special visa to participate in the Pan African Christian Leadership Assembly in Nairobi in 1976, but that was a rare exception. He was quite involved in global meetings, both ecumenical and evangelical, and was fluent in English, Dutch, German, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, a major South African language he used during his years of teaching at a seminary for black ministers in the Transkei region.

Bosch considered South Africa an excellent vantage point from which to address both Europe and North America, drawing on both but keeping enough distance to think independently. Another advantage of a South African perspective was that mission was not an "overseas" matter. It was easier for the South African church than for the European and American churches to recognize the congruence between the local, regional, and global aspects of mission. A third advantage was that the racial mix in South Africa (about 15 percent white and 85 percent other) was similar to the ratio of Westerners to non-Westerners globally. The racial inequality issues that South Africa has been dealing with are likely to become worldwide issues as globalization increases and the non-Western poor assert themselves against their current abuse by the rich in the West.

His assumptions

Transforming Mission must be read in light of Bosch's basic assumptions some of which are not explicitly stated in his book:

1. We are at a major transition point in world history, which means that Christian mission must also undergo a major transition in form, though it will never be swallowed up in pluralism (introduction and chap. 11).
2. The "crisis" in mission is essentially a crisis in the Western countries that have been the bases for Christian mission in the past four centuries. (introduction).
3. The "mission" we seek to (re)model and carry on is the mission that star with Jesus' announcement of the arriving reign of God; the Old Testament is built on a different

¹ The shooter confessed years later to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

model of relationship with God that is not so intrinsically missionary in nature (chap. 1).²

4. Paradigm theory provides the best framework for studying transitions mission from one era to the next (chap. 5). The Enlightenment, the paradigm that has dominated our age, is losing its grip on the world, but is still paradigm we most need to recognize, understand, and move beyond as shape our new view of mission (chaps. 9-10).
5. Our best chance of recognizing the Enlightenment's influence on our mission thought and practice is to get a broad biblical and historical perspective on mission by looking at several other models or paradigms (chaps. 1-9)
6. The new paradigm is not a complete rejection of the old; there will be so continuity as well as some major changes (chap. 11).
7. The three main theological streams we most need to take into account as we struggle toward a new paradigm of mission are Roman Catholic, ecumenical Protestant, and evangelical Protestant; Orthodox and charismatic, streams do not figure prominently (chap. 12).
8. The biggest single challenge in forming a new paradigm for mission is to take ideas long considered to be incompatible opposites and hold them together in "creative tension" (chap. 12).
9. The best we can do at this point in history is identify a number of the pie we are fairly sure will have a place in the puzzle of our new paradigm of mission; we cannot fit them all neatly together, and we may not even have all the pieces yet (chaps. 12-13).

His agenda

Bosch's deepest concern is with the way Western Protestants have seen them-selves and their mission. He believes that in the modern era they have become unnecessarily polarized into evangelical and ecumenical camps and psychologically distanced from the Two-Thirds World because of the influence of the Enlightenment. Each. camp has a part of the truth but has developed its theology and programs in a lopsided manner. If they can now reintegrate their complementary parts of the truth around the original kingdom-centered message of Jesus and the New Testament writers; they can reformulate their mission in an appropriate way for the new postmodern era of history.

When Western Christians do this, they will discover that they are not the saviors of the world but participants with Christians of all nations in the mission of God. It is certainly

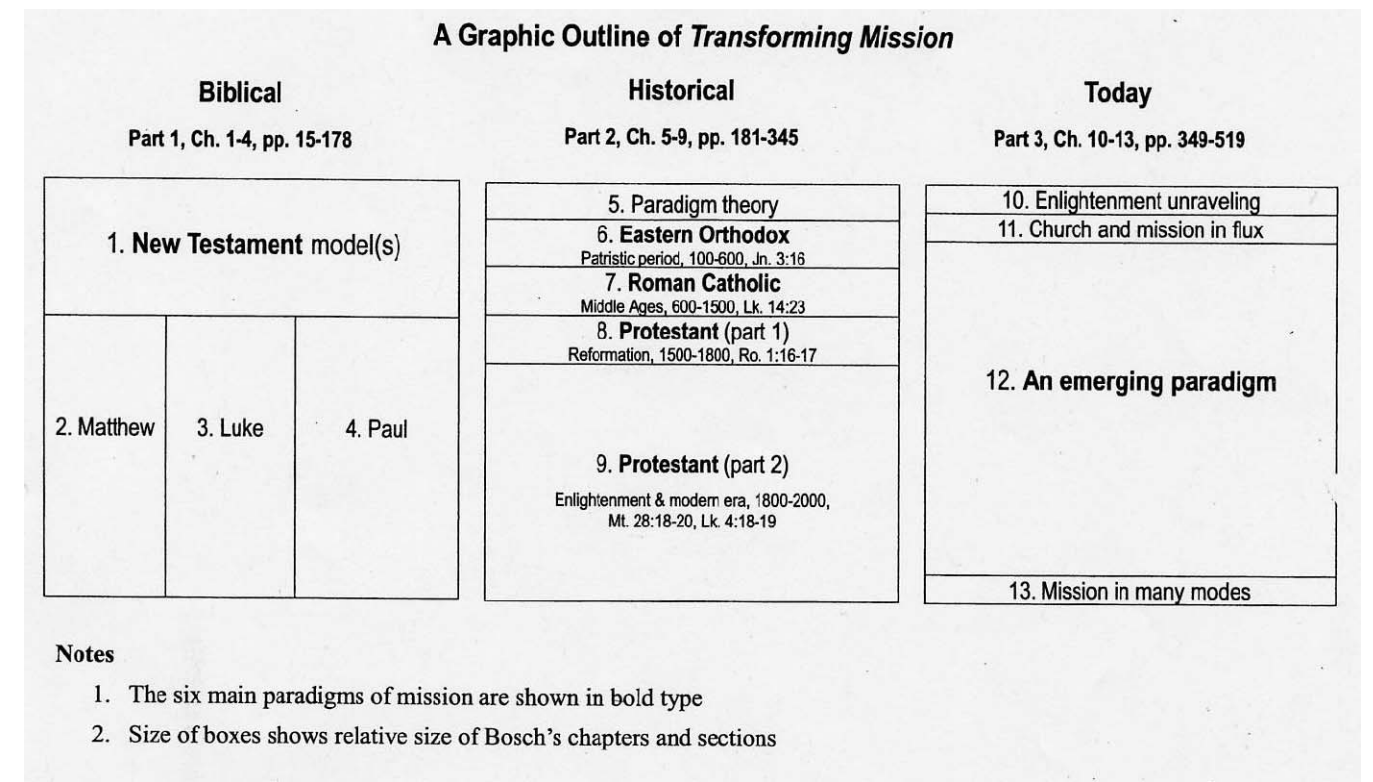
² Bosch's view was that Israel's mission was centripetal, that is, attracting other nations to by modeling life as a society under God's rule. The church's mission is centrifugal, commanding Christians to go out among the nations and spread God's good news and grace everywhere.

bigger than the Western church and even in some sense bigger than the whole global church. Bosch wants to stretch them toward a view of mission that is not Western-centered.

He thus provides a view of mission that is of immense interest to the global church today, especially the less Westernized parts of it. His suggestions feed into the global formulation of a missiology not dominated by the Enlightenment paradigm. He has not finished the job, and he knows it, but that was not his intention. He wanted to help create the biblical and historical foundations and bring some of the building materials to the site. The actual construction of the new paradigm will require a whole work crew. His death

In April 1992, two years before the end of apartheid, Bosch tragically bled to death after a head-on traffic accident in a rural area of South Africa. Passersby called for an ambulance to bring the "jaws of life" and cut his feet free so the bleeding could be stopped. When they called a second time to ask what was taking so long, the emergency dispatcher reportedly replied, "You didn't say he was a white man." A later investigation of whether this actually occurred was inconclusive, largely because the tapes of the two phone conversations had disappeared.

How ironic that one who lived as an enemy of racism should die as an un-official victim of it. But racism was not the victor in this story. Bosch's death exposed racism for what it really is — an ideology that kills even when it does not intend to, an ideology that cannot silence those it wishes to silence. How could it, when mere death is its ultimate weapon?



Bosch's Introduction to Transforming Mission

Is Christian Mission a Thing of the Past?

(Bosch, TM.pp. 1-11)

"The Christian mission is in the firing line today," and the attack on it is coming: from inside the church as well as outside (2.3).³ Consider the ways the world has changed since the mid-twentieth century when mission still was accepted as normal part of life by the church and the wider world (3.3):

- Science and technology have made huge advances, which many have interpreted to mean that humans can manage everything very well without God
- The "Christian" West has seen massive declines in church membership.
- People of other faiths have moved into "Christian" countries in large numbers.
- Western Christians have come to feel increasingly guilty as they realise how un-Christian their nations were in the colonial period.
- The gap between rich and poor has widened, leaving the rich Christians uncertain whether they have any credibility with the angry poor.
- Western theology is being challenged by a number of theologies based the experience of other parts of the world.

This combination of things has exposed some serious weaknesses in widely held beliefs about the foundation, aim, and nature of mission (4.8). Chief among these was the assumption that Western culture, because it was superior to others, would be the bucket that would carry the life-giving water of the gospel over the world. Other religions would fade away as people realized the superiority of Christianity, and we would end up with a Christian world by the end of the twentieth century (6.5).

The global changes and the exposed mistakes in mission aims and practice have led to two opposite reactions among Christians. One is "a terrible failure of nerve about the missionary enterprise," leading to "an almost complete paralysis and total withdrawal" from anything that smacks of mission at all (6.9). The other is to ignore the new trends, deny the crisis, and carry on using the old colonialist model of mission as if nothing has changed (7.2).

"The thesis of this book [is] that the events we have been experiencing at least since World War II and the consequent crisis in Christian mission are not to be understood as merely incidental and reversible. Rather, what has unfolded in theological and missionary circles

³ Page number format: a number such as "2.3" means that the quotation is from page 2 of Bo, and can be found 3/10 of the way down the page. There are approximately five lines per tenth c page.

during the last decades is the result of a fundamental paradigm shift, not only in mission or theology, but in the experience and thinking of the whole world" (4.4).

If that thesis is correct, we should neither withdraw from mission nor keep using the old methods. "Rather, we require a new vision to break out of the present stalemate toward a different kind of missionary involvement" (7.8). "The harsh realities of today compel us to re-conceive and reformulate the church's mission, to do this boldly and imaginatively, yet also in continuity with the best of what mission has been in the past decades and centuries" (8.3).

To achieve this we need to consider both the variety of the models of mission in the New Testament itself and other models that have emerged as the church has faced four previous experiences of paradigm shift in the world around it. As shown in Table 1, the New Testament and church history will each take about one-third of the book. In the final third, we will look at the current situation and the way to make the paradigm shift of our own era.

Before launching our investigation, we must state some assumptions and convictions that will be explained in greater detail as we go along (8.7):

- The Christian faith is "intrinsically missionary" (8.9). Christian mission starts with God on a mission, especially in Jesus Christ (9.5). If Christian mission is a thing of the past, so is the Christian faith, for it is faith in the reign of God through Jesus Christ over all humanity and all creation (9.8).
- Missiology studies mission not in theoretical objectivity but from the perspective of commitment to the Christian, missionary faith. This commitment does not blind us to the faults of mission but intensifies our desire to find and correct those faults (9.3).
- We will never arrive at a perfect definition of mission (9.4). The Bible will give us guidance but no magic formulas for mission (9.7). The church in its mission is a sign of the kingdom but never a perfect embodiment of it (11.6).
- If a church defines mission only in terms of this-worldly activities like promoting justice or only in terms of saving souls for the world to come, it is not being true to the true God. His mission has both worlds clearly in view (10.6, 10.7, 10.9,11.1).
- The difference between home and foreign missions is artificial (9.9). The difference between mission and "missions" is crucial. "Mission" refers to God's own mission in which the church participates and to which it points. "Missions" refers to particular forms of mission the church develops in specific circumstances (10.4).

YOUR VIEWS AND YOUR CONTEXT

1. Suppose you attended a lecture in which Bosch stated his assumptions as they are listed above. Choose one assumption you would you want to hear him clarify or defend. What would you ask him about it?
2. Bosch drafted this material in about 1990. Which if any of his assumptions (above or in the list on p. 5) need to be revised in light of what has happened since then? How should they be revised?
3. Bosch wrote as a South African with a global audience in mind. How well do his assumptions fit your particular country or region? How might you edit them in order to provide a better starting point for a theology of mission where you are?