

Stephen B Bevans and Roger P Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. American Society of Missiology, 30 (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

Mission is handicapped without a sound biblical theology of mission and an understanding of the history of mission leading up to our current context. *Constants in Context* offers both of these elements. It is mission theology in historical perspective and/or a history of mission that is grounded theologically. The authors describe it as a systematic theology with mission at its core, and a church history shaped by the constant but always contextual Christian traditions. Furthermore it is a constructive contribution to how mission theology needs to be practical and lived out through today's church and in our world.

Written collaboratively by Roman Catholic writers Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, both Missionaries of the Divine Word (SVDs). It is a particularly insightful in regard to the history and the various streams of Catholic mission but it also addresses and learns from the other traditions of the church. In fact, one of the book's strengths is its attention to neglected aspects and hidden stories of church and mission history. As a result it is gratifying to be inspired by non-European mission, women in mission and various forgotten or often ignored branches of the church.

The book is in three sections: first, there is a framework for cultural contexts and theological constants; second, an in-depth exploration of historical stages and different models for mission; and third, a presentation of theological frameworks for mission. The third section concludes with a case for "mission as prophetic dialogue" being the most appropriate model for 21st century mission.

Theological frameworks

The first section introduces what the book means by constants in context. Through a reading of Acts, it examines the changing *context* where the church sees itself as "missionary by its very nature". It was mission and breaking outward boundaries that helped the church emerge. This is shown, for example, in the groundbreaking stories of Philip preaching to both the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch (a God-fearer close to Judaism), the conversion of Cornelius (and associated conversion of Peter as he realises God was broadening boundaries), Gentiles receiving the Spirit at Antioch, Paul's growing mission to the Gentiles, and the anticipated ongoing fulfilment of Acts 1:8 through the rest of history.

The second chapter, complementing the idea of changing contexts, outlines the nature of the *constants* in the church's mission. The church of all ages receives the same mandate, "You are witnesses of these things". The six constants of the church are actually questions that all missionary initiatives address:

- Christology – who is Jesus Christ and what is his meaning? Do we focus on the divine or human, how does he redeem the world, and is he inclusive, pluralist or exclusive?
- Ecclesiology – how do we see the church and its rituals and role(s)?
- Eschatology – when and how will God’s reign be inaugurated? How optimistically does the church regard its future?
- Salvation – what does it mean and how broad is salvation – individual and personal or more holistic and cosmic?
- Anthropology – is humanity fallen and wholly corrupt as sinners and/or fundamentally good as made in the image of God?
- Culture – to what extent can God reveal himself through culture? How good or wicked is culture?

Using a framework set out by Justo Gonzalez and Dorothee Solle they suggest that these constants can be dealt with using one of three main theological approaches:

- Type A: mission as saving souls and extending the church (orthodox-conservative position, characterised by Tertullian)
- Type B: mission as discovery of the truth (liberal position, characterised by Origen)
- Type C: mission as commitment to transformation (liberation perspective, characterised by Irenaeus)

The type of theology used by different models and leaders of mission in different periods and the way they address the six constants is a feature of the remainder of the book.

Historical Perspectives

The second section, exploring “constants in context” from historical perspectives, divides the history of the Christian movement into six stages. Each chapter examines the political, social, religious and institutional context, notable missionaries and mission models and the application of the six constants during that period. Each chapter concludes with discussion of the implications for mission theology today.

In the early church (100-301 AD), mission was expressed by individual Christians in a variety of situations. Mission was not only undertaken by evangelists set apart for the work but by believers who were living out their baptismal call to mission. The catechumenate prepared people for a baptism which meant a life of service and mission. This mission was the very essence of the church and so, despite persecution, the church experienced phenomenal growth. Christianity spread East as far as India, Northern Africa, and throughout the Roman empire. By the time of Constantine 10% of the people of the Roman Empire were Christians.

The dominant mission model of the next period (319-907 AD) was that of the Monastic movement. After the epochal event of Constantine’s conversion in 307, mass conversions increased, the catechumenate declined, and the link between baptism, church and mission weakened. Monks and nuns became the primary agents of mission rather than individual, everyday Christians. Christianity had its first encounters with Islam and while the East Syrian church flourished it also experienced marginalisation and persecution from Islamic powers greater than any experienced by the Western church under the Roman Empire. Further east, Christianity spread in India and China. Theologically, Augustine and Pelagius grappled over human nature. Augustine won in the West with his emphasis on depraved and sinful humanity in need of the cross and atonement (Type A theology). The Greek East, in contrast, held a more optimistic view of human nature and stressed Easter and resurrection, an emphasis reflected also in Celtic monasticism (Type B).

The chapter on the Mendicant movement (1000-1453 AD) was my personal favourite in this historical section. It features the crusades, missionary preachers, nuns and Mongolian Christianity. This was a dark time of church history in many respects. Doctrinal disputes split Western and Eastern Christianity, the atrocities of the religiously motivated Crusades reflected poorly on the gospel (Western Christian Crusaders even sacked eastern Christian Constantinople in 1204) and religious propaganda was used to justify deeds which were totally incongruous with the gospel. Yet in the same period, mendicant orders, in particular the Franciscans and Dominicans, modelled alternative approaches to life and mission. Unfortunately, the church did not always rise to these mission opportunities. In 1266 a request came from Kublai Khan, through the uncles of Marco Polo, for 100 Christian scholars. The Pope responded in 1290 with two monks, who died en route! At the end of the 13th century China chose to follow Islam and in 1369 the last missionaries were expelled.

The age of discovery (1492-1773) involved tensions in America and Asia between conquistadors, prophets and gurus. In America some tried to uphold the human dignity of indigenous peoples, opposing the conquistador's imperial model of mission. This created a tension throughout colonial history which continues in our postcolonial period. The Jesuits, though sometimes paternalistic, were more incarnational and sensitive to indigenous people than most Christian missionaries. In Asia they modelled the missionary approaches of being guru, scholar and dialogue partner. However, Pope Clement IX later saw things differently and as a result of the rites controversy over ancestral veneration and the Pope's refusal to allow later missionaries to be culturally accommodating, as the Emperor requested, all missionaries were expelled. It was another lost opportunity for China. Amazingly, the Jesuits were dissolved in 1773 and the guru, scholar and dialogue partner models disappeared. If the previous period was marred by the Crusades, the darkest side of this period was the obscene reality of the slave trade. It is estimated that 10-12 million Africans were transported over 400 years of which 1-2 million died en route. Perhaps 12 million more died on the march to the coasts before even reaching the ships.

In the age of progress (1792-1914), Christianity continued to struggle with an over-identification with colonial imperialism. Western missionaries tended to feel culturally superior and often combined Christianising with commercial and civilising objectives (the 3 Cs of colonialism). There was certainly fresh missionary fervour. William Carey and others pioneered a new missionary model in volunteer missionary societies. In fact there was a host of new responses to the global missionary challenge. Youth and student movements, Faith missions, the Social Gospel, the Great Awakening, Methodism's focus on foreign and domestic mission, growing women's involvement in mission, and the 1910 Edinburgh conference were all significant features of this period. However, any misplaced overconfident optimism in human nature and Western superiority was dispelled with World War I, marking the beginning of the next period of post-colonial world Christianity.

The period of the twentieth century, described as 1919-1991, marked the emergence of world Christianity. Roman Catholicism went from certainty, to the ferment of Vatican II and through the crisis of working through changes, and came to a rebirth of missionary interest. Vatican II's transforming themes included a Trinitarian locus for the origin of mission, an expanded view of church as the pilgrim people of God, seeing the Reign of God as primary, and a fresh look at the nature of other religions. Vatican II called Catholics to not just learn about, but learn from, other religions. Protestant church councils also re-thought mission theology, mainly through the World Council of Churches (WCC), the International Missionary Council (IMC) which joined the WCC, and the Lausanne movement which started in 1974 as an evangelically assertive response. Lausanne affirmed the authority of the Bible, the uniqueness and universality of Christ, and the importance of holistic mission, but with a priority to proclamation. There was also Orthodox and growing African, indigenous and Pentecostal involvement in missions, and greater lay involvement. All

these different voices made for volatile debate over the uniqueness of Christ, the salvation possibilities in other religions, and the value of culture. The twentieth century marks huge changes in the shape of Christianity. Christianity is in decline in the West, so we are in the midst of a post-Christian Western world which is shifting its balance to the global South and a producing a predominantly non-Western form of Christianity.

This section thus presents a history of Christians struggling, sometimes successfully and sometimes poorly, to be faithful to God's Spirit. I loved reading about a range of fascinating mission leaders, including old favourites and new heroes, including:

- everyday Christians and merchants who spread the gospel in the early church;
- Saints Patrick and Columba in Irish monasticism are inspiring for their power encounters, pilgrimages and local enculturation;
- Francis of Assisi who joined a crusade but sought dialogue and mutual learning with the Sultan, who preached the gospel in deeds as well as words, who showed a profound reverence for God's love in all creation, and who went to the people rather than waiting to attract them to monasteries;
- Clare of Assisi and other women in mission who broke out of gender expectations and gave leadership to innovative and practical mission
- Ramon Lull the scholar and apologist who used reason and intellect to connect with Muslims and establish a missionary school, but who was eventually martyred;
- Francis Xavier who insisted on prayers in local languages while serving in Japan and China;
- Matteo Ricci who engaged with the languages and the cultural elite of China and thus grappled with the cultural and theological place of ancestor veneration;
- Hudson Taylor and others who pioneered faith missions and their radical volunteerism;
- Henry Venn and the Three Self movement that respected and empowered local leaders;
- E. Stanley Jones and his Christian ashram movement in India;
- D. T. Niles who saw evangelism as "one beggar telling another beggar where to get food";
- Donald McGavran who pioneered the Church Growth movement and emphasised the importance of proclamation;
- Lesslie Newbigin who stressed the West as a mission field and the importance of grappling with issues of gospel and culture; and
- John Stott and his summons to evangelical confidence in the gospel.

Theology of mission

The third section outlines three perspectives on mission theology that form a helpful synthesis for mission today: mission as participating in God's mission; mission as serving the Reign of God; and mission as proclaiming the uniqueness of Christ. Combined they make for mission as 'prophetic dialogue', a model which, the writers argue, incorporates the most appropriate ingredients for mission today.

The first perspective is 'mission as participation in the mission of the Triune God (*missio Dei*)'. The authors explore this with reference to Vatican II's *Ad Gentes* and certain Orthodox perspectives. *Missio Dei* suggests that the church has mission as its very essence - as a reflection of a missionary God. Mission is thus intrinsic and not just a department of the church. This is explored positively in books such as Darrell Guder's edited *Missional Church* which explores missional ecclesiology (building a doctrine of church starting with the primacy of mission) and less helpfully in forms of secularised churchless theology and emphases on the Holy Spirit that

downplay the centrality of Christ and trivialise the church. The WCC at Upsala, for example, tended to ridicule the church and look to the world to set the agenda for mission. At its best, though, the idea of mission as a participation in the mission of the Triune God reminds us of, variously, the role of the Spirit as the one who goes ahead; the nature of ecclesiology as communion-in-mission; eschatology as, at least partly, already fulfilled; salvation as expressed now and not just in eternity; anthropology as communal and not just individualistic; and culture as a positive vehicle for theological reflection.

The second perspective is 'mission as liberating service of the Reign of God'. This is developed by *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) and Conciliar Protestantism. It is the main focus of WCC. It reminds us that Jesus came to bring the Reign of God rather than primarily bring the church. The Reign of God is what the church hopes for, witnesses to and proclaims. This perspective promotes a Christology from below that looks at the historical Jesus and which cultivates a missional ecclesiology that focuses on God's purposes in the Reign of God. It fosters a dynamic and future-oriented eschatology. Salvation is relational and holistic. In this approach anthropology is more communal, since the Reign of God is working in history and all of creation. Sin is understood as structural as well as personal and God's reign includes culture, which is generally good but which can be co-opted by oppressive and dehumanising structures and needs prophetic challenge. Seeing mission as the Reign of God requires discernment too, since it is important not to forget the place of the church and the uniqueness of Christ and to not see mission as merely humanisation and development.

The third complementary perspective is 'mission as the proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal saviour'. This is presented by *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) and Evangelical and Pentecostal Christians. In RM the Catholic Church reaffirms the uniqueness of Christ and the primacy, or at least the importance of proclamation. It seeks to have the evangelistic passion of Evangelicals and Pentecostals. Schroder and Bevan argue that renewed commitment to proclamation is important in the face of resurgence of religious identity in non-Christian religions and the tendency towards pluralism in the church and the resulting waning of missionary interest.

'Mission as prophetic dialogue' offers a synthesis of all three perspectives and seeks to maximise the strengths of each. Mission must be dialogical in reflecting God's Trinitarian nature, appreciating the goodness of humanity and learning from culture. But it also must be prophetic in speaking for justice and peace, and in proclaiming the Lordship of Christ even if other religions have some "rays of divine truth". Mission must be prophetic as well as dialogical, since dialogue is impossible without clearly articulating truth: "Only by preaching, serving and witnessing to the reign of God in bold and humble prophetic dialogue will the missionary church be constant in today's context." Mission as prophetic dialogue participates in God's mission, serves the Reign of God and proclaims the uniqueness of Christ. Schroder and Bevan examine some of the diverse manifestations of mission:

- Witness and proclamation, which must go together, are central to mission. Paul VI said people today listen more willingly to witnesses than teachers, and if they listen to teachers it is because they are witnesses.
- Liturgy, prayer and contemplation, which express and empower for mission, are keys to participation in God's mission. The discussion of the way a cloistered life is not necessarily a rejection of world but an engagement of it at a different level is to be appreciated.
- Justice, peace and the integrity of creation, huge issues for the world today, must all be included within mission. Justice advocates need church support and co-operation since the gospel cannot be disembodied.

- Mission must include interreligious dialogue, not only proclamation but also listening and openness to learning. Dialogue may be sharing life, combined action, theological exchange and/or learning from the religious experience and spirituality of others. 'Mission in reverse' is a helpful phrase to suggest we can learn from and through those we encounter.
- Mission must engage in enculturation - which requires working through the tension of being at home in a culture and confronting its downsides. This is especially important in our globalised world where honouring local cultures and contexts is especially important.
- Reconciliation, at personal, cultural and political levels must be part of mission.

The church has one mission, or is missionary at its very essence, but this is expressed to the world and the church in word, action and being. The book's treatment of these different means of mission is a highlight, and makes this chapter a fitting conclusion.

We live in a multicultural, multireligious, postcolonial, globalised, ecologically fragile and religiously polarised world. The centre of gravity for Christianity has shifted to the global South. Observers of global trends say Christianity is becoming more conservative, Pentecostal, supernaturalist and assertive. And there are huge needs and great poverty. In such a context it is helpful to recognise as the church that we share God's mission, serve the reign of God and confess the uniqueness of Christ in prophetic boldness with dialogical humility. Bevans and Schroeder conclude and summarise as follows: "Mission ... is the church's witness in faith to certain *constants* – the person and work of Jesus Christ, ecclesial existence in eschatological hope of a salvation that embraces the whole of humanity and of human culture – always within particular and ever-changing *contexts*." (349).

Themes to affirm and further explore

Throughout *Constants in Context* I appreciated the following:

The affirmation of a critical and discerning enculturation, which is particularly important today in our globalised and multicultural world.

- Its advocacy for holistic mission and the priority of proclamation and witness, something imperative in the increasingly secular Western world.
- The affirmation of the proclamation of the uniqueness of Christ, essential for our pluralistic world.
- The place allowed for a missionary spirituality and forms of spirituality and community that sustain mission (e.g. Ignatian exercises).
- The celebration of innovation in mission throughout church history, even during "Christendom".
- Its warnings about the dangers of the uncritical adoption of culture.
- The recognition of missed opportunities in history, especially in China.;
- The influence and growing role of non-Western Christianity and "mission on six continents"
- The recognition of shocking discrepancies in witness of Christians such as the sacking of Constantinople, crusades, inquisition, imperialism and slavery.
- Its appreciation of the possibility of "mission in reverse" and learning from those to whom we go.
- An emphasis on the importance of lay people and women, not just ordained white professional holy men as missionaries.

The recognition of the need to continually reinvent the church for new contexts, which has been happening throughout church history. New expressions of church today are not the first to suggest the need for lay ministry, enculturation, new structures for a post-Christendom world and the importance of deed as well as word, to name just a few of the themes of the book.

Questions

At the end of reading this volume, I have a number of questions:

- Do Bevens and Schroeder believe in holistic mission (and that evangelism, justice and mercy are all equally important), or do they lean towards believing that proclamation is primary because of its eternal consequences? And does an eschatological hope in the Kingdom of God as being fulfilled and revealed now add weight to a holistic approach?
- What would a more intense treatment of Rene Padilla and others in the radical discipleship stream of Lausanne contribute to Bevens and Schroeder's concept of mission?
- Does a recognition of the possibility of light and truth in other religions lead many people to give up on evangelistic mission, at least subconsciously or implicitly?
- Is the concept of Judaism abrogated and fulfilled in Christianity the newer perspective on Judaism that Bevens and Schroeder advocate? Is it appropriate for mission to Jewish people to be only in the form of dialogue and not proclamation?
- Does the book deal fairly with Type A theology (conservative-orthodox) when it describes it as having a negative anthropology and pessimistic view of the value of culture in theology?
- How would Bevens and Schroeder respond to criticisms by Pentecostal missiologists that *Constants in Context* lacks reference to spiritual warfare and power encounters in mission? (A. Scott Moreau and Gary B. McGee, 'Constants in Context (book reviews)', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 29:2 (April 2005), 98-100).

Constants in Context is accessible and relatively easy reading for what is a significantly sized and theologically rich textbook. It has helpful tables, a comprehensive index and full endnotes, although, disappointingly, no bibliography. The approach of dealing with the way different eras and theologies of mission address the six constants and the different types of theology they typify is generally helpful, although, it can, at times make it quite complex. But overall it is a classic text that follows in the tradition of David Bosch's *Theology of Mission*

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