

**David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991)**

This year is the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* by David Bosch.

It is a book which has transformed our thinking about mission.

***Missio Dei* and the Reign of God**

Bosch led the way to a redefined concept of mission in last century. He took it from an understanding of 'missions' as the spreading of Christianity or programs for church expansion or conversion; to a focus on the mission of God with God as the sender. The book can be summarised by the last paragraph. "... mission is quite simply, the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus waging on a future that verifiable experience seems to belie. It is the good news of God's love, incarnated in the witness of community, for the sake of the world" (p. 519).

The church, particularly in the West, needs this expanded understanding of mission which places the purpose, practice and power of mission with God. God's mission has been, and continues to be, to bring in God's Kingdom. The book holds in creative tension two ideas. First, an understanding of mission rooted in the actions of God which are necessarily mystery and unknowable. Second, through an exploration of New Testament understandings of mission as the Reign of God and the various epochs of missionary engagement, he gives us a very clear mirror in which to see mission and our part in it. "God's reign is not understood as exclusively future but as both future and as already present. ... God's reign arrives wherever Jesus overcomes the power of evil" (p. 32).

**The Church is Missionary by Nature**

An understanding of the church as being missionary by its very nature emerges from this understanding of the *Missio Dei* (p. 372). The Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, put it this way: "It is not the church of God that has a mission. It's the God of mission that has a church."<sup>[1]</sup> Too often local churches are desperate to find the way to 'reach' people through the right programs. They view success as more people coming to church and they look for a visionary leader to show them the way through their 'bright' ideas. Bosch's understanding of mission helps them to refocus on the right things to do, rather than doing things right. It places the authority for mission with God. We do programs because they are a chance to show, tell and be good news (Gospel) in authentic relationships; in the hope that others may seek to be followers (Disciples); so that we can be part of God's mission to the world; which is to bring in the Kingdom of God. The programs are the vehicle for the goal not the end goal.

**'Mission is the Mother of Theology'**

The above quote of Martin Kähler, and use of this idea throughout the book is indeed radical to an Enlightenment- and modernist-influenced church. Bosch critiques the rise of reason in response to the Enlightenment as "thoroughly anthropocentric (in which) there was no room left for God" (p. 269). From the rationalism of knowing, reading and speculating; contextualisation is permitted and even encouraged by Bosch.

## Paradigms of Mission

At the heart of Bosch's thesis, is the idea that there are paradigm shifts in the theology of mission which run through a succession of six epochs in Christian mission history from Christ to the present. He uses Hans Kung's idea of Christian thought being dividable into six periods where there are particular understandings of the Christian faith and adds that there are also distinctive understandings of Christian mission (pp. 181-2). He rejects the idea of paradigm shift requiring a conservative back-lash or clean slate and instead sees that in each paradigm shift there remains a creative tension between old and new and the agenda is "reform and not replacement" (p. 367).

We should remember that Bosch was writing at the end of the postcolonial era of mission where the entwinement of colonialism and missionary methods was completed. He is writing not long after the United Nation's policy saw the withdrawal of colonising powers in Africa, India and the Pacific. The ramifications of this on the development and stability of these countries was and is devastating, as these countries attempted to live in a globalised, post-industrial world where their tribal societies had at best, been disrupted and at worst, destroyed and left with lethal mix of a vacuum of power and extensive poverty. The temptation to reject all previous missionary methods, particularly destructive soterian approaches is strong.

Bosch's paradigm understanding as it is applied to mission is helpful in encouraging a fresh expression of the church's mission and a rethinking of its theology and its methods. I believe it has created something of a freedom, in a movement which is both recalling the church to rediscover its part in continuing Christ's mission in the world and which says we can plan a future which is different from the past where we assumed that Christianised cultures and the values of our society would support the church and its practices.

## The Practice of Mission

Bosch extensively explores Matthew's gospel and concludes that the Great Commission and the making of disciples is a process which is costly and involves working for justice. His analysis of Luke-Acts highlights the need to respond to those who are socially poor. Bosch's gospel has both horizontal (care for the marginalised) and vertical (relationship of forgiveness with God) aspects. Without justice there is no salvation. The liberation of the rich is found in justice for the poor. Mission is more than evangelism. There is "no tension between saving from sin and saving from a physical ailment" (p. 33) in Bosch's reading of scripture. The Greek word *dikaiosyne* to correctly translated to mean both righteousness and justice in Bosch's opinion (pp. 70-71).

Bosch's thesis is deeply rooted in his own missionary and cross-cultural experiences. He was not simply a scholar but also a practitioner of church planting. In South Africa and amongst those who knew him, he is respected for his personal integrity, humility and intelligence. His approach to mission was one of mutuality in the tradition of DT Niles' statement, "Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread." Mission is best done without any sense of supremacy or superiority but with bold and deep humility and shared humanity.

His death was as a result of a car accident where emergency services delayed attending because they assumed the victim was black. It was symbolic of the way in which he lived his life, in identification with those to whom justice was denied. His legacy is the way he lived and died and the ideas he collected and offers in this magnificent and seminal work.

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[1] Rowan Williams, "Foreword" to *Mission-shaped Church: Church Planting and Fresh Expressions of Church in a Changing Context* (London: Church House Publishing, 2004)

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