

TITLE:

What is the role of the Church in mission? Illustrate your answer with reference the work of David Bosch and to the different Christian traditions.

A..... The historical influence of ecclesiology on mission

B..... Nineteenth and twentieth century developments

C..... Bosch's contribution to the ecclesiology of mission.

D. Critique

A. The historical influence of ecclesiology on mission

Over the Church's history, prevailing views of its fundamental nature have had a central role in attitudes to mission. Any attempt to develop an approach to mission for the new millennium which is valid throughout the world (and this is increasingly necessary because of the church's global nature) must take into account the strengths and weaknesses of these ecclesiologies.

- For example, the early *Greek church* inherited from apostolic times both a strongly missionary approach to the surrounding culture, and a high view of the unity of the Church. In the Byzantine era, the church came to be understood primarily in terms of its liturgy and worship, participation in which became both the means and goal of mission:

The conviction gradually grew that the church was the kingdom of God on earth and that to be in the church was the same as being in the kingdom.¹

A graphic example of such mission comes in *The Chronicle of Nestor* as it describes Russia's King Vladimir sending delegations to the various religious powers of the time. In the worship at Constantinople they:

...did not know whether [they] were in heaven or on the earth. It would be impossible to find on earth any greater glory than this, and it is vain that we should attempt to describe it.²

This meant that the whole church, in a real sense, *was* mission, and as a necessary corollary missionaries could go out only under the church's direction.

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This predominantly passive view of mission, combined with the close links with the civil power that followed Constantine, meant that when Islam conquered much of the church's domains, the church survived as a conservative, and introspective, minority. But given the limited field for expansion granted to a church sandwiched between Rome and Mecca (principally the Russian hinterland), Orthodoxy's mission proved very effective.

The Eastern church's approach to mission has remained largely unaltered, though it is receiving critical attention from its theologians now in the light of ecumenical involvement.

- The *Roman Catholic church's* ecclesiology developed in quite a different direction. The collapse of Western imperial power placed much responsibility for civil government on the Bishops of Rome. After this the church came increasingly to be viewed as God's temporal and spiritual kingdom in an *organisational* sense, rather than as a worshipping community. Authority became correspondingly invested in the Pope, and delegated *via* the hierarchy. The state was seen (in theory) as the secular arm of the Church.

At the same time, developments in sacramental theology came to make baptism the one mark of church membership, regardless of any real faith:

Since the act of baptism conferred a *character indelibilis* on the person baptized, nobody could ever undo his or her baptism; even where somebody had *resisted baptism*, he or she became a *fidelis* (believer).³

The last point was an unfortunate projection from Augustine's espousal of forced re-conversion from Donatism:

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He who is compelled goes whither he is compelled against his will, but when once he has entered in he takes his food with pleasure.⁴

These things led the way directly to mission as part of the colonialist expansion of western Catholic powers, conquered peoples being, sometimes forcibly, baptized (for the good of their souls) as they were subjugated for the glory of the Church.

Nevertheless, in parallel with this was the growth of the monastic movement. Vigorous pioneer mission was characteristic of the Celtic monks, with little reference to the church as such. The communities they founded, and even more so the later monasteries, were intended as retreats from the world. Yet at their best they were unintentionally centres of incarnational theology, providing an alternative Christian society which eventually permeated the whole of western Europe. They were, in effect, a major example of *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, and as such were an effective tool of mission to their culture.

- The *Protestant church*, by its rediscovery of justification by faith alone, tended towards an individualistic faith, very congenial to the humanism of the time. Arising as it did in Christianised Europe, its ecclesiology was bound to the concept of the Christian society. The Church was defined in terms of the true preaching of the word of God and the right use of sacraments, rather than in terms relating to mission:

...a place where something is done, not a living organism doing something.⁵

Implicit in this, however, was the power of the preached word to bring sinners to Christ, so that Bosch can say that:

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...there can be little doubt that at least Luther and Calvin as well as some of their younger colleagues (such as Bucer) propounded an essentially missionary theology.⁶

Protestant ecclesiology also rediscovered the *priesthood of all believers*. In Luther's thought this centred on the equality in spiritual worth of secular callings to "religious" callings, even the ministry of the word⁷. But in later writers, particularly English Puritans like Richard Baxter, the doctrine urged the work of active witness on every believer⁸. It was this thinking that inspired the 17th century missions to the native Americans.

A less positive aspect of this doctrine was its tendency to promote the Protestant disease of schism, which from the Orthodox or Catholic point of view was counter-missionary. However, the combination of these two developments of the *priesthood of believers* was probably a major contributor to the concept of mission by para-church organisations apart from the church, which formed the basis of the later missionary explosion⁹.

- *Pietism* was the motive force in this explosion. Though rooted in *priesthood of believers* ecclesiology, it was deeply sceptical of the "apostate" church and intensely individual in its spirituality. It was a major influence on both the evangelical movement and evangelical mission for two hundred years.

Nevertheless those who accepted the gospel necessarily formed churches. And also necessarily Protestant mission became increasingly a church-supported venture during the nineteenth century. Still, mission itself according to the evangelical model remained (and often remains) "*the hobby of special interest groups*"¹⁰ rather than of the Church itself.

B. Nineteenth and twentieth century developments

Possibly the most significant trend in the Western churches during the past two centuries was the increasing division between those who welcomed the “Enlightenment Project” with open arms, and those who overtly resisted it (though largely succumbing to its presuppositions unconsciously).

Within the denominations, the “mainstream” became progressively more liberal in viewpoint, with the evangelical wing becoming marginalised. Sometimes this involved evangelical secession (for example, of the IVF from the SCM, and of many evangelical groups after the absorption of the IMC into the WCC).

Both movements, however, became enmeshed in the Enlightenment belief that Western, Christianised culture was the answer to all the world’s problems:

...this was a form of consensus so fundamental that it operated mainly on an unconscious, presuppositional level.¹¹

This led during the nineteenth century, the heyday of imperialism, to an increasing missionary paternalism, which denied young churches any real self-determination. It also fostered a new denominationalism, less marked in the early days of Protestant mission, which was imposed together with the missionaries’ national culture on the new believers. So the whole missionary effort, both evangelical and liberal, tended to become identified with colonialism.

But there were significant differences in their attitudes:

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Where they did, however, increasingly differ was about the overall *aim* of mission.¹²

Evangelical churches maintained the centrality of *evangelism*, which however became alienated from any social action apart from humanitarian work, in reaction to the stance of the liberals.

The latter, whilst being equally convinced of the need to reach the world, increasingly saw God's kingdom in terms of spreading civilized values to the heathen. There were several corollaries of this during this present century. These included a diminished interest in evangelism (partly in reaction to "fundamentalism", but mainly through the loss of a biblical understanding of the gospel¹³), and an increasing concern with social and political projects. In the climate of the times, liberal political concern was bound to lean towards the left, since Marxism provided the only real intellectual critique of structural injustice. Further to these trends, attitudes towards other faiths became softer. The extreme of this direction was reached in the "received view"¹⁴ of the WCC by the late sixties:

Is the Church not arrogant in thinking it can offer man salvation?¹⁵

Nevertheless the liberal wing had already set some significant markers. Firstly, the emphasis on ecumenism pointed to the importance of the Church, rather than of competing churches, as the agent of mission. Secondly at the IMC conferences of 1928 & 1938, the fundamental equality of old and new churches was acknowledged¹⁶. And third, the association and then integration

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of the IMC and WCC (1948 & 1961 respectively)¹⁷ created a worldwide conceptual link between the churches and mission.

Meanwhile, the Catholic church's radical reappraisal of its ecclesiology in Vatican II produced:

...a convergence in Catholic and Protestant views on the missionary nature of the church...¹⁸

The same trend can be seen in the evangelical movement that crystallised in the Lausanne conference of 1974, though its thinking centred on the *invisible* church, perhaps underplaying the role of the *visible* church in mission¹⁹. But with this *caveat*, John Stott's statement:

Mission describes...everything which the Church is sent into the world to do...²⁰

shows that Lausanne was thoroughly committed to mission through the Church.

In all the main church groupings, therefore, there is at least a degree of emerging consensus over the role of the Church in mission, and it is this consensus that Bosch seeks to clarify and develop in his work.

C. Bosch's contribution to the ecclesiology of mission.

The section heading, "*Mission as the Church-with-others*", gives some idea of David Bosch's priorities. From currently popular views he distils the following considerations as worthy of particular application.

- *The church is missionary by its very nature.* On the basis of *1 Peter 2.9* the church has been created that it:

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...may declare the praises of him who called [it] out of darkness and into his wonderful light.

The church is God's people, and since God reaches out to the world, a church without mission, or *vice versa*, is a contradiction in terms.

Missionary activity is not so much the work of the church as simply the Church at work.²¹

This involves the daily life of the church – worship (*cf* the Orthodox position), hospitality to outsiders, authority structures and members' equipping for their life in society (*cf* the Puritan view), structural flexibility, and equal care for all kinds of people. But the church must also be *intentionally* missionary in the fields of evangelism and social justice.

- *The Church should be in pilgrimage.* The “already but not yet” concept found, especially, in *Hebrews* means the Church should always find itself away from the centre of society.

It is *ek-klesia*, “called out” of the world and sent back into the world.²²

This makes eschatology a vital component: imperfectly demonstrating God's kingdom, the Church nevertheless looks forward to its consummation.

- *The Church should serve a priestly function.* A popular ecumenical concept is of the Church as “*sacrament, sign and instrument*”. This is a useful understanding of such verses as *Romans 12.1*, provided it is understood:

“...only by virtue of its relationship with Christ”, who is the *real* sign of unity.²³

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The sense is, therefore, that of the body of Christ – but a body that directs attention to its head.

- *The Church should be in solidarity with the world.* The distinction between the Church and the Kingdom is important: the Church is a provisional institution, inaugurating the reign of God over the whole cosmos (*Romans 8.20-21*). God, by his Holy Spirit, is not only at work in the Church, but in the world outside as well. So involvement in the world – and even co-operation with whatever is furthering God’s purposes – is mandatory:

We are called, therefore, to be “kingdom people”, not “church people”.²⁴

- *The Church must be primarily the local church.* Bosch sees this mainly in terms of the equality of the various churches, as opposed to the paternalism (or autocracy) of former years.

...there is still room for and need of individual missionaries, but only insofar as...missionaries appreciate that they are sent as ambassadors of one local church to another local church...²⁵

Bosch concludes by urging the maintenance of the tension between the Church as privileged bearer of the truth, and as a model of God’s involvement with the world, a balance that has often been lost. He pictures this as an ellipse with two foci: the first, the enjoyment of God as the source of its life, the second joyful engagement with the world it serves.

This analogy is unintentionally rather dichotomising: perhaps it means that mission is “one beggar telling another beggar where to find food”.

D. Critique

It is hard to argue with the basic soundness of Bosch's "new paradigm" in relation to the Church. Perhaps the weakest point is a lack of concrete application to *actual* churches. This may be explained by long his involvement in councils formed mainly of representatives of *groups* of churches.

His stated emphasis on the local church demands an explanation of what mission should mean to a church of a few tens of individuals. Archbishops can press for social justice, but small fellowships are much more circumscribed in their opportunities.

With this in mind, I would hope for a developing emphasis on Church as actual *meeting* (the New Testament meaning of *εκκλησια*); where the beloved individual children of God are built up in order to serve God's kingdom, not primarily in programmes and "*imposing schemes*"²⁶, but in the specific situations into which God calls them.

This seems, when taken with the general thrust of Bosch's vision, to be a genuine template for mission in the post-modern age.

(2,303 words)

Notes

¹ Bosch, 1991, p.207.

² Quoted in Neill, 1986, p.77.

³ Bosch, *op.cit.* p.219.

⁴ Augustine, *letter CLXXIII*, in Allies, 1890, p.275.

⁵ Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.249

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.245.

⁷ “To serve God is for everyone to remain in his vocation and calling, be it ever so mean and simple” (Luther, in Hazlitt, 1857, p.363).

⁸ Baxter, 1650, *pt.4 chXIII*.

⁹ The most radical manifestations of this combination in early Protestantism were among the fiercely evangelistic Anabaptists, “among the first to make the [great] commission mandatory for all believers” (Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.246).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.253.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.296.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.297.

¹³ Mark 1.15.

¹⁴ Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.383.

¹⁵ Bangkok CWME meeting, quoted in Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.384.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.369.

¹⁷ Visser ‘t Hooft, 1982, p.57.

¹⁸ Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.372.

¹⁹ However, the best evangelical thinking recognised that “‘...the church’ in the New Testament never appears as an invisible entity and therefore may never be defined in terms of invisibility” (John Murray, *Collected Writings*, (Edinburgh, Banner of Truth, 1976), p.234.

²⁰ Stott, 1975, p.30.

²¹ Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.372.

²² *Ibid.*, p.374.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.376.

²⁴ Snyder, quoted in Bosch, *op.cit.*, p.378.

²⁵ Bosch, *op.cit.* p.380.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.387.

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