

# THE MISSION *of the* CHURCH

FIVE VIEWS IN CONVERSATION



EDITED BY CRAIG OTT

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## PREFACE

Over the past fifty years a growing discussion has emerged in missiological circles over the nature of the mission of the church. This conversation has expanded to include church leaders and theologians who do not typically live in the world of missiology. Controversies are of both a theological and a practical nature with far-reaching consequences. Changes in the place of the church in Western cultural contexts along with developments in the Majority World church have heightened the relevance of the discussion for all who are concerned about the challenges and opportunities facing the church in the contemporary world. An overview of developments in this discussion is offered in the introductory chapter. Consensus among nearly all branches of Christianity has gradually emerged regarding the missionary nature of the church, which has its source in the very character and acts of the Triune God, in the *missio Dei* (mission of God). Yet at the same time differences remain regarding the practical implications of that conviction. This book is an attempt to explore those commonalities and differences.

Numerous “views” books have appeared over the years in which various positions on a theological topic are presented by leading thinkers, followed by contributor responses to one another. Typically the positions are in clear contradistinction to one another and often mutually exclusive, and the discussion takes the form of a debate. This collection of essays, though similar in structure, is somewhat different in spirit. Contributors were invited to enter a charitable dialogue with one another, engaging in direct conversation, exploring commonalities, and clarifying differences. There has been a stronger emphasis upon mutual listening and understanding, less on debate. Of course differences remain—many rooted in fundamental theological, confessional convictions beyond the scope of this volume—and those differences have not

been glossed over. However, a spirit of dialogue and mutual appreciation is more dominant, while questions in need of further clarification and honest debate are identified and addressed in a nuanced manner.

The selection of contributors to this conversation was not easy. The fact that four of the five authors are white, male North Americans is an admitted weakness. On the other hand, readers familiar with the conversation will recognize the names of these contributors as leading thinkers and writers on the various positions. Strictly speaking, these views are not representative of different confessions, though the authors themselves are at home in various traditions: Stephen B. Bevans is a Roman Catholic, Darrell L. Guder a main-line Protestant, Ruth Padilla DeBorst a Latina evangelical, Edward Rommen an Orthodox, and Ed Stetzer a North American evangelical.

Finally, it may come as a surprise to some readers that I, as an evangelical, have chosen to edit such a volume. Evangelicals are not known for their enthusiasm for ecumenical dialogue! The simple explanation is that I believe where we differ on important issues, we should seek to understand, appreciate, and learn from one another. This does not entail compromising our own convictions. We sometimes discover that we have more in common than we thought, and we often come to understand and articulate our own viewpoint more clearly by engaging those with whom we differ. Much will have been accomplished if readers not only clarify their own understanding as a result of reading these pages but also grow in their appreciation of others.

Craig Ott  
Deerfield, Illinois, 2016

# INTRODUCTION

CRAIG OTT

John's Gospel reports how the resurrected Christ encountered his perplexed and fearful disciples after the turbulent events of his arrest and the horrific witness of his crucifixion. Christ victoriously conquered death and the grave, but what did this all mean for them and the future of their movement? The world appeared hostile. The disciples met behind locked doors. The messianic hope they had set on Jesus seemed dashed. Yet to them he says these remarkable words: "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you" (John 20:21). These words ring in our ears today as no less humbling and daunting. What does this sending entail? How can we as simple followers of Christ, as a community of his disciples, rise to fulfill these words? At the most fundamental level, this is the question this volume seeks to explore: How are we to understand the mission of the church?

The Latin root of the word *mission* conveys the idea of sending.<sup>1</sup> Thus mission is not a static term but indicates intentionality, purpose, movement. In the words of John G. Flett, "the question of the church's relationship with the world is properly a missionary one" (2010, 3). Thus, when we speak of the mission of the church, we are speaking of the church's relationship to the world and the purposes for which God sends the church, his people, into the world. At a deeper level we must also explore the ways in which the very *nature* of the church is defined by its relationship to the Triune God, who is a missionary God. What precisely *is* the missionary nature of

1. The word *mission* derives from the Latin words *mitto*, "to send," and *missio*, "sending."

the church? What *are* those purposes for which God sends the church into the world, and *how* is the church to fulfill them? In what ways is the church to be an agent or sacrament of God's redemptive purposes for the world?

In this volume we will read five different perspectives on answering this question. They are presented by contributors who not only are at home in different traditions but in some cases have themselves significantly shaped the conversation. To set the stage for the concerns and debates surrounding these questions, an admittedly simplified historical overview of the development of the current discussion will be provided in this chapter. This will focus primarily on developments in the twentieth century.

### Early Developments and the Erosion of Consensus

At first glance the answer to the question "What is the mission of the church?" may not seem so complicated. However, as we begin to examine the various proposals for how the church should engage the world, how the mission of the church might interface with God's larger purposes in history, and for what specific tasks Jesus sends his disciples into the world, we discover that these questions have been answered in very different ways by different people in different periods of church history. They are not answered in a vacuum, but answers are intertwined with one's presuppositions about many other issues. The ways in which the church has historically defined its mission have evolved dramatically. Based upon Hans Küng's proposal describing six major theological paradigms that developed in the course of the history of Christianity, David J. Bosch's magisterial *Transforming Mission* (1991) mapped out major paradigm shifts in the understanding of Christian mission. In a no less ambitious project, Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder's *Constants in Context* (2004) described six historical models of mission. It is beyond the scope of this work to discuss the merits of these proposals, but they convincingly demonstrate that the church's understanding of Christian mission has evolved throughout history.

In the early centuries of the church, Christians were a marginalized, often persecuted minority. They lived as a counterculture in the hope of the soon return of Christ to establish his kingdom on earth. With the conversion of Constantine and the establishment of Christianity as an official religion in the Roman Empire, convictions shifted and the church came to be identified with a Christian empire.<sup>2</sup> The task of evangelization of non-Christian

2. In many non-Western settings Christianity remained a marginal minority and developed in directions quite different from in the West.

peoples was largely left to monastic orders. The responsibility of the church was the instruction and nurture of Christians in the context of the Christian state. Apart from smaller Anabaptist and free church movements, the Protestant Reformation did not fundamentally overturn this thinking. For example, Puritan mission was linked to the theocratic vision of establishing a Christian society. Thus the civilization (in the Western sense) of non-Christian peoples went hand in hand with evangelism and church planting. Only with the Enlightenment, secularization, and the separation of church and state did the concept of Christendom begin to erode. Nevertheless, in contrast to most other religious movements, as the Christian faith entered new cultural contexts, fresh cultural expressions of the faith emerged as an inevitable result (Sanneh 2009). Eventually the concepts of indigenization, inculturation, and contextualization became a more intentional task of mission (Shenk 2005).

Whereas Christians have long differed from one another in theology and polity, until the late nineteenth century virtually all confessions shared the common conviction that, apart from faith in Christ, non-Christian peoples were eternally lost. Cyprian's famous maxim from the third century, *extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the church), was assumed. During the Age of Discovery it became apparent that the original twelve apostles had not completed the Great Commission and that it was the obligation of the church to preach the gospel and plant the church among vast numbers of non-Christian peoples. Christian mission became identified with the geographic spread of the Christian faith. Especially for Protestants in the nineteenth century, the Matthean formulation of the Great Commission became the program for missions: "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19a). Specialized mission societies and agencies—structurally separate from the church—were formed and became the engine promoting and facilitating the cause (Walls 1996; 2002). The establishment of schools, hospitals, orphanages, publishing houses, and various works of compassion and social development soon followed. These were sometimes considered a necessary bridge to evangelism. Sometimes they were viewed more as a fruit of evangelism. In any case they were ancillary to the more central task of conversion and the establishment of the church. Enthusiasm, urgency, and optimism about world evangelization at the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh were perhaps the last evidence of this consensus.

Actually, by the late nineteenth century this consensus was already eroding in many Protestant circles, leading to perhaps the most dramatic shifts since Constantine in understanding the mission of the church. Several developments



challenged traditional convictions. Theological liberalism and biblical higher criticism undermined confidence in the authority of the Bible and its explicit teachings. In North America the modernist-fundamentalist debate and controversy over the social gospel led to polarization and numerous denominational splits. As a result fundamentalists tended to view social action with suspicion and emphasized the singular necessity of evangelism and conversion as the mission of the church. The kingdom of God was understood largely in otherworldly terms.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile liberals increasingly questioned the necessity of conversion and placed greater emphasis on alleviating human suffering and ignorance and promoting social reform.<sup>4</sup> This was fueled in part by a vision for the realization of the kingdom of God within history. Kevin J. Vanhoozer capsulizes the tension of these opposing views: “Is the point of the drama to get up to heaven or to bring heaven down to earth? And then, however one answers that, what is the role of the church?” (2014, 150). The eschatological framing of the church’s mission is of no little consequence—a point to be explored in the pages that follow.

Later, many theologians would find some resolution to this tension in Oscar Cullmann’s salvation-historical approach to eschatology (1950; 1961). This emphasized the already-but-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God: inaugurated in Christ’s first coming, anticipated in this age (particularly through the life and work of the church), and to be consummated at Christ’s second coming. The purpose of mission is a preparation for Christ’s return and a *Vorzeichen* (anticipatory sign) of the coming kingdom. This view is reflected, for example, in Lesslie Newbigin’s oft-cited description of the church as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom (e.g., 1978, 163; 1986, 124), and in the work of Bosch, who studied under Cullmann.<sup>5</sup> Agreement with this approach has since found considerable consensus among missiologists from all traditions. But, as we shall see, it would be a rocky road before any such consensus was reached.

3. Fundamentalists continued to operate schools, hospitals, orphanages, rescue missions, and ministries of compassion. But they rejected as alignment with the social gospel any church role in political action or economic reforms that addressed systemic sources of poverty and injustice.

4. It should be noted that Walter Rauschenbusch, a major advocate of the social gospel, believed in the necessity of evangelism and personal conversion but rejected what he saw as one-sided premillennial views that undermined work for social progress (Fishburn 2004, 235).

5. “Mission is in essence witness to the reign of God which *has come* in Christ to the one *yet coming*. The missionary proclamation of the church gives the time between the resurrection and parousia of Christ its salvation-historical meaning” (Bosch 1959, 197). Bosch later maintained that the salvation-historical approach remains the “soundest base for an understanding of the eschatological nature of mission from a postmodern perspective” (1991, 504).

## Mainline Protestants and the Ecumenical Movement

Following the Edinburgh conference of 1910, the International Missionary Council (IMC) was formed in 1921, which later merged with the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1961.<sup>6</sup> In this movement, led largely by mainline Protestants, various controversial proposals in the reframing of Christian mission were under discussion and hotly debated. This was particularly evident in the controversial publication *Re-thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry after One Hundred Years*, known as the Hocking Report (Hocking 1932). Among other things, this report relativized Christian uniqueness by advocating the pursuit of a common spirituality with non-Christian religions and rejecting the idea of individual religious conversion as a goal of missions. Historic Christian doctrines considered foundational to missions—such as the atonement, creeds, sacraments, and ecclesiology—were absent. Though the report launched a firestorm of controversy, many of its convictions would eventually be embraced in the ecumenical movement and beyond.

The mission of the church, which had been more or less assumed for centuries, was no longer so self-evident. Consensus crumbled, and polarization between evangelicals and the ecumenical movement followed that has yet to be fully reconciled. A theological center could not be found to guide the way forward in resolving these tensions. But following the Second World War, three significant developments in the ecumenical movement revolutionized virtually everyone's understanding of the church's mission: first, the grounding of the mission of the church in the mission of God—the *missio Dei*; second, the awareness of the global nature of the church and the shift from *missions* to *mission*; and third, a fresh vision for the missionary nature of the church in a missional ecclesiology.

### *The Grounding of Mission in the Missio Dei*

By the mid-twentieth century, following two world wars between Christian nations and the Holocaust in the land of the Reformation, Christian mission fell into a crisis of credibility and justification. Furthermore, the contingencies of human history—such as the collapse of the colonial system that was often linked with Christian mission, and the closure of China (the world's largest mission field) to foreign missionaries—raised questions about the future of Christian mission and divine prerogative in the missionary enterprise. Was mission a human undertaking that had met its end? Walter Freytag captured

6. For a discussion of developments regarding the mission of the church in the ecumenical movement from 1900 to 1990, see Yates (1994).

the crisis in his memorable statement, “Previously mission had a problem, today it has itself become a problem!” (1961, 111).<sup>7</sup>

What came to be called a Copernican revolution in understanding the mission of the church came at the IMC conference in Willingen, Germany, in 1952.<sup>8</sup> The concept of *missio Dei* was set forth as the source and foundation of Christian mission, moving the very concept of mission from a human prerogative and activity to a divine one. God himself, not the church or human undertakings, is the center of mission. Mission is not dependent upon the accidents of history or the frailty of human undertakings. Rather, it is rooted in the sending activity of the Triune God, indeed in God’s very character and being. The trinitarian nature of God manifests the missionary nature of God, a God who sends the Son and the Spirit into the world for his redemptive purposes. Karl Hartenstein’s conference report from Willingen summarized that “mission is not just conversion of individuals, not just obedience to the Word of the Lord, not just an obligation to gather the church, it is participation in the sending of the Son, the *missio Dei*, with the all-encompassing goal of establishing the lordship of Christ over the entire redeemed creation” (1952, 54). Therefore, “the *missio ecclesiae* comes alone from the *missio Dei*. Mission is thereby placed in the broadest imaginable framework of salvation history and God’s plan of salvation” (62).

However, linking the *missio ecclesiae* to the *missio Dei* failed to define the precise nature of the mission of the church in the world. The *missio Dei* justified the mission of the church insofar as the church participates in God’s mission. But what precisely does such participation entail? Unpacking the implications of *missio Dei* for the missional activity of the church proved controversial. As Flett has argued, “‘Mission’ soon expanded to encompass the entire horizon of divine and human history” (2010, 7). He continues, “*Missio Dei* is a trope. It satisfies an instinct that missionary witness properly belongs to the life of the church without offering any concrete determination of that act” (8). Declaring mission a divine attribute abstracted it and created uncertainty over the nature of human missionary action (9). *Missio Dei* became a shopping cart of sorts that could accommodate almost any pet theory or practice of mission (Günther 2003). In the words of one observer, “In the decade of the 1960s, *Missio Dei* was to become the plaything of armchair theologians with little more than an academic interest in the practical mission

7. All translations from German original sources are by Craig Ott.

8. This was not the first time that the sending of the church had been linked to the sending activity of the Triune God (see Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 289–90). However, “Willingen 1952 was the first time that mission was so comprehensively anchored in the doctrine of God” (Sundermeier 2003, 560).

of the church but with a considerable penchant for theological speculation and mischief making” (Scherer 1993, 85). Nevertheless, virtually all ecclesial traditions came to theologically embrace the grounding of the mission of the church in the *missio Dei*.

Linking the mission of the church to the *missio Dei* meant for many that the mission of the church must be defined in terms of the expansion of the kingdom of God in the broadest of terms. In this view, mission cannot be confined to evangelism, church expansion, or spiritual matters alone. But how should the relationship between church, kingdom, and world be eschatologically framed? Does the church live primarily as a witness in anticipation of a coming kingdom, or is the church to be an instrument for the realization of the kingdom within history? Dutch missiologist J. C. Hoekendijk (1952; 1966) took the latter line of reasoning and rejected altogether what he called ecclesiocentric mission. He thus placed the world at the center of God’s activity and effectively marginalized the role of the church in the *missio Dei*. In the 1960s Hoekendijk’s view led to what became a watchword in the WCC, “the world sets the agenda of the church,” because the church is called to serve the world. The spiritual, eternal, and transcendent dimension of mission was minimalized. This so-called secularization of mission found a Roman Catholic counterpart in the writings of Swiss missiologist Ludwig Rütli (1972).

By the early 1970s the WCC was defining mission and evangelism largely in terms of humanization and liberation.<sup>9</sup> Political and economic agendas took center stage. Liberation theologies, developed by both Protestants and Catholics, articulated the concern for participation of the church in social and economic reforms aimed at transforming systemic oppression. Although liberation theologies generated considerable controversy and opposition, the fundamental concern for social justice came to be widely embraced. Mission was framed more in terms of the kingdom of God and less in terms of the church. In the words of Orlando Costas, “The demands of the kingdom do not encompass only personal and ecclesial affairs, but also social and institutional issues. This new order is not limited to the community of faith. Instead it embraces all of history and the universe, and it is the task of the ecclesial community to witness to that all-encompassing reality” (1982, 93).

This larger framing of the church’s mission would come to include such concerns as creation care, gender equality, racial reconciliation, and inter-religious dialogue. Indeed almost any effort of the church to engage the world—reversing the effects of the fall and making it a better place—could be considered an expression of the kingdom of God and the *missio Dei*, and

9. See, e.g., Potter (1971), M. Thomas (2002), and *Salvation and Social Justice* (1973).

thus part of the missionary obligation of the church. In light of this, many evangelicals began to fear that the concept of mission had become so broad as to be nearly meaningless, echoing a memorable quote from Stephen Neill, “If everything is mission, nothing is mission. If everything the church does is to be classed as ‘mission,’ we shall need to find another term for the church’s particular responsibility for . . . those who have never yet heard the Name of Christ” (1964, 81). Newbigin attempted to resolve this dilemma by making a distinction between the missionary *intention* and the missionary *dimension* of the church’s activities (1958, 21). Not everything a church does has the explicit missionary intention of crossing the frontier between faith and unbelief. But everything should have a missionary dimension in that the whole life of the church is to be characterized by witness.

*Awareness of the Global Nature of the Church and the Shift  
from Missions to Mission*

The second major factor leading to rethinking the church’s mission in the twentieth century has been the growth of Christianity in lands once considered mission fields. This was accompanied by the decline of Christianity in the West. By the mid-twentieth century, not only had the colonial system collapsed, but the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America had come of age and were growing rapidly. They could no longer be considered “mission churches,” but rather needed to be viewed as equals and partners with the churches of the West. By the mid-1980s the demographic center of gravity of Christianity had shifted south, with the majority of Christians living in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Indeed these churches were becoming a missionary sending force in their own right.

The realization became painfully clear that the church in the West, especially in Europe, had been deeply impacted by secularism and was in dramatic decline. The privileged position of the church under Christendom that was crumbling in 1900 had by the end of the century fully dissolved. The 1960s found the church in the West not only in dramatic numerical decline but also increasingly on the defensive and marginalized in its attempts to influence the wider culture. Religious pluralism and postmodern philosophies further relativized the message and role of Christianity in the public sphere. One began to speak of post-Christian cultures of the West.

These inverse developments brought the realization that mission could no longer be conceived as “from the West to the rest.” Clearly the world could no longer be neatly divided into Christian and non-Christian nations. Rather, in a real sense wherever Christians find themselves, there is

the “mission field.” Already in 1938 at the IMC conference in Tambaram, India, the dichotomy between missionary-sending and missionary-receiving nations was challenged. However, it would take the aforementioned historical developments to seal the need for a fully new paradigm. The 1947 IMC meeting in Whitby, Canada, characterized the new relationship between “older” and “younger” churches with the slogan “partnership in obedience,” and declared the language of Christian and non-Christian lands obsolete. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in 1963 in Mexico City met under the theme “Mission in Six Continents,” underlining the fact that the church is called to mission everywhere. Massive waves of immigration from the Majority World to the West further broke down such categories. Geography and nationality could no longer define the locus of the church’s missionary activity. This led Stephen Neill (1964, 477) to declare that the age of *missions* (plural) had ceased and the age of *mission* (singular) had arrived.<sup>10</sup> For many this seismic shift demanded a fundamental redefinition of the mission of the church and a reexamination of the place of foreign missions. The association between foreign missions and European colonialism cast further doubt on the notion of missionary sending in the conventional sense. Calls for a moratorium on missions became loud (e.g., Gatú 1974). Many mainline denominations cut back missionary sending and restructured their mission-sending agencies into departments for ecumenical relations (Pierson 2003). Emphasis of mission in mainline denominations was increasingly focused on the local witness of the church or participation in broad ecumenical concerns.

While most evangelicals may have agreed that the mission of the church is more comprehensive than foreign missionary sending, they maintained that it is certainly not less than that. Indeed Donald McGavran, father of the Church Growth Movement, blasted the WCC’s 1968 Uppsala, Sweden, assembly for betraying the world’s two billion people who had not yet heard the gospel and for having abandoned the traditional understanding of Scripture (McGavran 1968). In a nearly diametrically opposite direction from the WCC, the Church Growth Movement took off, and later evangelical groups such as AD 2000 and the US Center for World Mission advocated a redoubling of efforts to identify and evangelize “unreached peoples” as central to the mission of the church (cf. Bush 2003).

10. Reflecting this sentiment, in 1969 the *International Review of Missions*, a publication of the WCC, changed its name to *International Review of Mission*. The term *mission* has since tended to be used to describe the totality of God’s missionary intentions for the church in the world flowing out of the *missio Dei*; the term *missions* has been used to refer to the more specific tasks the church undertakes in fulfilling its missionary calling.

More recent statements from the WCC and from evangelical groups evidence signs of less polarization, with the WCC affirming the importance of evangelism, and evangelicals affirming the importance of social action, justice, and creation care.<sup>11</sup>

### *The Missionary Nature of the Church*

Until the late twentieth century the missionary activity of the church was largely considered one task among many to which the church is called. At least in the Western church, because society was considered Christian, missions was considered largely a matter of expansion and extension of the Christian faith among non-Christian peoples outside Europe. The nature and task of Christian mission was framed largely in terms of the activity of foreign missionaries. This task was typically carried out by specially formed mission societies, agencies, or religious orders. At the 1928 Jerusalem conference of the IMC, the idea of two parallel structures, that is, church and mission agency, was challenged. But it would not be until the second half of the century that the implications of such proposals would be more fully explored.

In 1950 Newbigin emerged as a prominent voice advocating the integration of church and mission. “The truth is that the church is not the church in any New Testament sense unless it *is* a mission. . . . I very much like the phrase of Emil Brunner ‘the church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.’ . . . By detaching mission from the church we have grievously corrupted in practice the whole conception of what the Church is” (Newbigin 1950, 142). Newbigin would seek in numerous writings to correct that conception of the church. For example, in *The Household of God: Lectures on the Nature of the Church* (1954) he rejected the dichotomy between church and mission, arguing that mission is essential to the nature of the church. Eventually this little volume would influence the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* (LG) (Wainwright 2000, 98).

Johannes Blauw was commissioned by the WCC to produce a biblical theology of mission. The result became a brief but landmark volume that, surveying the Old and New Testaments, made a profound biblical case for the claim of its title: *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (1962). The people of God in both Testaments are a missionary people called and set apart by God as his agents of righteousness and redemption in the world and among all nations (e.g., Gen. 12:3; Exod. 19:5–6; 1 Pet. 2:9). Not long afterward, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the same: “The pilgrim Church is missionary

11. See, e.g., WCC (2012) and “Cape Town Commitment” (Lausanne 2011).

by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the Son and the mission of the Holy Spirit that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father” (*Ad Gentes* [AG] 1965, par. 2).<sup>12</sup> Here the missionary nature of the church is rooted in the economy of the Trinity. As noted in the theology of *missio Dei*, the church finds its very identity through participation in the sending activity of the Triune God.

Rather than mission being one of many undertakings of the church, this bold proposal places mission at the very center of the church’s purpose and nature. The church does not merely send missionaries; rather, the church itself is God’s missionary people. Mission becomes the defining character of the church as a reflection of the divine character of God as a missionary God. Darrell L. Guder summarized this shift:

The ecclesiocentric understanding of mission has been replaced during this century by a profoundly theocentric reconceptualization of Christian mission. We have come to see that mission is not merely an activity of the church. Rather, mission is the result of God’s initiative, rooted in God’s purposes to restore and heal creation. (1998, 4)

Ecclesiology had been defined largely in terms of creeds, confessions, institutional governance, and denominational distinctives. Missiology was generally considered a subset of practical theology; thus ecclesiology gave definition to missiology. But as the mission of the church, indeed the very existence of the church, came to be understood in terms of a trinitarian theology of the *missio Dei*, missiology would define ecclesiology. God’s mission was prior to the church. Works such as Charles Van Engen’s *God’s Missionary People* (1991) further explored the implications of these convictions. Andrew Kirk has stated the revolutionary implications of this logic in the strongest possible terms:

The Church is by nature missionary to the extent that, if it ceases to be missionary, it has not just failed in one of its tasks, it has ceased to be the Church. Thus, the Church’s self-understanding and sense of identity (its ecclesiology) is inherently bound up with its call to share and live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the ends of the earth and the end of time. (2000, 31)<sup>13</sup>

12. Bevans writes: “In his important commentary in the *Unam Sanctam* series Congar points to the Catholic roots of this theological foundation in the scholastics and the seventeenth century French School of Spirituality. He also acknowledges the influence of contemporary Protestant thinking on mission as participation in God’s mission, the *Missio Dei*” (2009, 2, with reference to Congar 1967, 186).

13. The WCC statement “Together towards Life: Mission and Evangelism in Changing Landscapes” states similarly, “It is not possible to separate church and mission in terms of their origin or purpose. . . . If it does not engage in mission, it ceases to be church” (WCC 2012, par. 57).



Concerns for mission to post-Christian (or postmodern) Western cultures were articulated in the later writings of Newbigin such as *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (1986). From this, along with the affirmation of the missionary nature of the church, came the foundational convictions that led in the 1980s to the formation of the Gospel and Our Culture Programme in the UK and in the 1990s to the Gospel and Our Culture Network in the United States. In 1998 came the publication of the landmark volume *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Guder. Missional church theology, with various nuances and implications, has since been embraced and popularized by a wide range of mainline Protestant, evangelical, and Catholic theologians.<sup>14</sup> Various proposals for a missional hermeneutic have also been set forth by Christopher Wright, Guder, and others that make the *missio Dei* the unifying theme and interpretive key to Scripture.<sup>15</sup> Although the missional church concept has since been used and abused in many divergent ways, it has not lost its power to convey the missionary nature of the church. Guder's chapter in this volume moves the conversation forward in this trajectory, casting a multicultural and translational vision for mission.

## Roman Catholics

We have already noted that several developments in Catholic understandings of the mission of the church ran parallel to streams of thought in the WCC. Catholic ecclesiology has historically given the church greater prominence in its understanding of Christian mission. Evangelism, conversion, church planting, and social transformation (often in the sense of “civilization”) have long been foundational to Catholic mission. But by the end of the nineteenth century Catholic theologians were discussing the possibility of salvation for persons outside the church through “implicit faith,” a view later affirmed by Vatican II (*LG* 1965, par. 16; *AG* 1965, par. 7). Into the twentieth century debates arose between the Münster and Louvain schools regarding the priorities of personal conversion and *plantatio ecclesiae* (church planting). Does the church have a greater role in the world than the salvation of souls? Vatican II sought to synthesize the Louvain and Münster positions with a broader conception of the church (Brechtler 1969). The language of *extra Ecclesiam nulle salus* was not used. But at the same time, *Ad Gentes* affirmed

14. For a summary of the various streams of missional church thinking, see Van Gelder and Zscheile (2011).

15. For an overview and comparison of four approaches, see Hunsberger (2011).

the necessity of evangelization and church planting among non-Christian peoples (AG 1965, pars. 1, 6).

The Second Vatican Council (1963–65) was a watershed event for the Roman Catholic Church in general and mission theology in particular. For the first time a Catholic council took up the topic of the mission of the church. Indeed, Bevans has argued that mission was at the very heart of the entire council: Vatican II was a “missionary council” (2013, 282). Deliberations were influenced by theologians such as Hans Küng, who argued that the church should be understood in the larger framework of the kingdom of God, and Karl Rahner, who saw God’s work beyond the bounds of the church, even in other faiths. As noted above, *Ad Gentes* affirmed the missionary nature of the church rooted in the *missio Dei*. All Christians are called to missionary activity. Mission occurs not merely in faraway places among non-Christian people, but wherever God’s people find themselves.

By the early 1970s, the liberation theologies of Roman Catholics such as Gustavo Gutiérrez and Leonardo Boff further challenged traditional thinking, calling the church to oppose unjust social structures and engage in political and economic reforms. Base communities were formed to initiate social transformation from the grassroots level up. Catholic missiologists such as Karl Müller proposed that the concept of salvation be expanded beyond mere salvation of souls to include salvation from hunger and oppression. These concerns are reflected in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) (1975), the apostolic exhortation of Pope Paul VI. It reaffirmed the missionary nature of the church as a continuation of the mission of Jesus, and expanded the understanding of evangelism to include issues of justice and liberation, while not losing view of the spiritual dimension. “As the kernel and center of His Good News, Christ proclaims salvation, this great gift of God which is liberation from everything that oppresses man but which is above all liberation from sin and the Evil One” (EN 1975, par. 9).<sup>16</sup>

*Redemptoris Missio* (RM) (1990) by Pope John Paul II presented a considerably more comprehensive explication of the mission of the church. Mission cannot be reduced to any single dimension but is complex and all-encompassing. In the face of growing religious pluralism, *Redemptoris*

16. *Evangelii Nuntiandi* denounces the use of violence (1975, par. 37). It is also cautious in its formulation and retains a distinction between human liberation and eternal salvation:

The Church links human liberation and salvation in Jesus Christ, but she never identifies them, because she knows through revelation, historical experience and the reflection of faith that not every notion of liberation is necessarily consistent and compatible with an evangelical vision of man, of things and of events; she knows too that in order that God’s kingdom should come it is not enough to establish liberation and to create well-being and development. (par. 35)

*Missio* strongly maintained the uniqueness and centrality of Christ. This document, continuing in the line of *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, asserted, “The liberation and salvation brought by the kingdom of God come to the human person both in his physical and spiritual dimensions” (par. 14). It rejected, however, secularized, anthropocentric understandings of the kingdom that reduce the kingdom to an inner-historical human undertaking (par. 17). Although the church is not an end in itself but rather the “seed, sign and instrument” of the kingdom, “the kingdom cannot be detached either from Christ or from the Church” (par. 18). Acknowledging the importance of mission in contexts where the church already formally exists but is spiritually weak, *Redemptoris Missio* described three situations of the church’s missionary activity: (a) contexts where Christ is not known, (b) where fervent churches are a local witness, and (c) “where entire groups of the baptized have lost a living sense of the faith, or even no longer consider themselves members of the Church, and live a life far removed from Christ and his Gospel. In this case what is needed is a ‘new evangelization’ or a ‘re-evangelization’” (par. 33). The Spirit is seen at work in other faiths, and interreligious dialogue is encouraged (par. 55). This topic is spelled out more clearly in later pontifical documents, *Dialogue and Mission (DM)* (1984) and *Dialogue and Proclamation (DP)* (1991).

Pope Francis’s exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium (EG)* (2013) expresses Christian mission in a spirit suggested by its first line, “the joy of the gospel.” Much is reaffirmed from the previous documents in this extensive work, but with a fresh emphasis upon Spirit-filled proclamation and social engagement. The church is called to “a new phase of evangelization, one marked by enthusiasm and vitality” (par. 17).

The discussion here has focused largely on the formal, balanced, and carefully crafted statements issued by the Catholic magisterium, the official teaching office of the church. Among individual Catholic missiologists there remains much diversity. Some continue to place social justice or interreligious dialogue at the top of the church’s missionary agenda. Others such as Francis Anekwe Oborji argue, “The aim of mission remains evangelization and church formation. . . . It is important that the classical meaning of mission be retained” (2006, 210). Bevans and Schroeder (2004; 2011) have explored the creative tension between dialogue and proclamation in mission, proposing therein a synthesis of the various themes under the term *prophetic dialogue*. This approach has its roots not only in the aforementioned documents but more particularly in perspectives expressed by Asian and Latin American members of the Society of the Divine Word. Bevans concisely summarizes this understanding of the mission of the church in chapter 1.

## Evangelicals

Evangelicals have generally sought to maintain a straightforward interpretation of the Great Commission that they hold to be the historic, biblical view of Christian mission, namely, proclamation of the gospel, the necessity of personal conversion, discipleship, and church planting—all integrally linked to gospel faithfulness and biblical authority. They have viewed works of compassion and social transformation as natural and necessary partners of evangelism but certainly not as substitutes for it. The urgency and centrality of evangelism cannot be lost in light of the eternal fate of sinful humanity on the one hand and the uniqueness of Christ and his redemptive work on the other. Often the positions articulated by evangelicals have been in reaction to developments in the conciliar movement that departed from these convictions and that became the anvil on which they hammered out their own views more clearly.

Starting in the 1960s and continuing through the 1980s, church growth became a major focus for many evangelicals. The Church Growth Movement, led by Donald A. McGavran and others at Fuller Theological Seminary, produced (using social science methodology as their handmaid) voluminous research on how and why churches grow around the world. For McGavran and others, evangelism and church growth comprised “*the central task*” of the mission of the church (1980, 455–56, emphasis original). It is a superficial misconception that church growth for them was an end in itself. Rather, they viewed church growth as offering the surest outward sign that faithful disciples of Jesus Christ are being made. In his classic *Understanding Church Growth*, McGavran defined mission as “*an enterprise devoted to proclaiming the Good News of Jesus Christ, and to persuading men to become His disciples and dependable members of His church*” (1980, 26, emphasis original). He further believed that social and economic betterment of a people would be best achieved by planting and growing the church because “the church is the most powerful instrument known for the alleviation of social ills” (Glasser and McGavran 1983, 28–29). The movement came under heavy criticism largely because of its pragmatic orientation, and by the 1990s was losing its influence. But many of its fundamental concepts left an indelible mark on evangelical missiology. For example, McGavran’s conception of the nature of social and cultural barriers to the gospel became the foundation for the “unreached peoples” and Frontier Missions movement launched by Ralph Winter (1975).

Evangelicals’ disillusionment with developments in the WCC reached a climax in 1974. In that year Billy Graham convened the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization with the goal of forging a definitive evangelical

consensus on the nature of Christian mission. Although evangelicals had previously sponsored their own conferences and consultations, none before or after Lausanne has reached such a level of consensus and influence among evangelicals. The resulting “Lausanne Covenant,” drafted largely by John Stott, articulated that consensus in a balanced and positive manner, while simultaneously distancing itself from controversial conciliar understandings of mission.<sup>17</sup> Paragraph 6 affirms what might be considered a classic evangelical position: “In the Church’s mission of sacrificial service evangelism is primary. World evangelization requires the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world. The Church is at the very centre of God’s cosmic purpose and is his appointed means of spreading the gospel” (Lausanne 1974, par. 6).<sup>18</sup> The Lausanne Movement, along with the World Evangelical Alliance, has since given voice to evangelical understandings of mission through numerous ensuing consultations and working groups.

However, Lausanne also marked a significant shift taking place among many evangelicals who came to include social justice as integral to a holistic understanding of the church’s mission, a view that decried any dichotomy or prioritization between meeting physical and spiritual needs. This was reflected cautiously in paragraph 5 of the “Lausanne Covenant”: “We affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty.” In particular, Latin American evangelicals such as René Padilla and Samuel Escobar who advanced this view at Lausanne pioneered the evangelical discussion. Organizations such as Evangelicals for Social Action were also formed at this time. In chapter 3, Ruth Padilla DeBorst describes the background of this development and presents her position with what has been called *integral mission*.<sup>19</sup>

The shift to placing equal importance on social action as on proclamation has not been shared by all evangelicals. All would affirm the ethical obligation of ministering to the needs of the whole person, consistent with the Great Commandment (Matt. 22:34–40) and the Golden Rule (Matt. 7:12). But some, such as David Hesselgrave, have maintained that evangelism and the spiritual dimension of Christian mission must remain the highest priority. He asserts:

17. This is particularly evident in paragraph 5, which reads in part, “Although reconciliation with other people is not reconciliation with God, nor is social action evangelism, nor is political liberation salvation, nevertheless we affirm that evangelism and socio-political involvement are both part of our Christian duty” (Lausanne 1974, par. 5).

18. Interestingly, defining evangelism as a commission to “the whole Church to take the whole gospel to the whole world” was put forward at the WCC Assembly in New Delhi in 1961 (see N. Thomas 2010, 111).

19. A term coined in the 1970s by the Latin American Theological Fellowship.

At its heart, Christian mission . . . has to do with making the true and good gospel of Jesus Christ known to those who are most separated geographically, ethnically, and religiously from centers of gospel knowledge and influence. It does not follow from this that missions is absolved of responsibility to respond to physically needy, economically deprived, and socially disadvantaged people. . . . It does follow, however, that the primary concern of our Lord has to do with meeting spiritual needs, not with meeting physical, material, or social needs. (Hesselgrave 2005, 136)

More popular works such as John Piper's widely read *Let the Nations Be Glad!* (1993) have articulated the necessity and priority of evangelism and church planting among the unreached.

Interestingly, by the late 1970s evangelicals in the United States began to reenter the public sphere, but in two camps with strikingly different agendas and justifications. The so-called Christian Right (which has received more press) sought to reestablish conservative values and morals through political action. Their justification usually was framed in terms of returning America to its supposed Christian roots, but rarely in the name of Christian mission. In contrast, evangelical progressives, such as Sojourners, advocated for social justice, arguing that it is integral to the mission of the church, quoting liberally from the Old Testament Prophets.<sup>20</sup>

As noted above, evangelicals have also contributed to the missional church discussion. Christopher J. H. Wright, who previously chaired the Lausanne Movement's Theology Working Group, serves as one prominent example. Wright authored not only the monumental biblical theology *The Mission of God* (2006) but also a more practical follow-up volume, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (2010). This second work expresses a broad vision of the church as God's missionary people sent into the world, with the mission of the church flowing from the *missio Dei*. Wright maps the mission of the church in the most comprehensive of terms, including not only witnessing in word and deed but also addressing concerns such as creation care, reconciliation, social justice, and cultural engagement. Michael Goheen's *A Light to the Nations: The Missional Church and the Biblical Story* (2011) offers, to date, perhaps the most comprehensive biblical theology of the missional church using a missional hermeneutic.

Ed Stetzer has also been an influential evangelical advocate of missional church theology and practice, having conducted extensive research, authoring numerous books, and speaking at popular conferences. His position in this volume describes what might be called a mainstream evangelical understanding.

20. See the discussion in Hunter (2010, 111–49).

## Eastern Orthodoxy

For a variety of reasons Orthodox theologians have only in recent years begun producing formal theologies of mission.<sup>21</sup> Orthodox understandings of mission stand in a certain tension with Western understandings, as Kondothra M. George explains it:

Some examples are the emphasis on the trinitarian rather than the ecclesiastical, on the pneumatological rather than the Christo-monistic, and on the qualitatively doxological rather than the quantitatively expansionist dimensions of the mission of the church. (2014, 311)

Orthodox theology in general and theology of mission in particular is trinitarian at its core. In fact, the renewal of trinitarian theology in the ecumenical movement has been attributed to the influence of Orthodox theologians (FitzGerald 2004, 157). “Trinitarian theology points to the fact that God is in God’s own self a life of communion and that God’s involvement in history aims at drawing humanity and creation in general into this communion with God’s very life” (Bria 1986, 3). The sending of the church is bound with the sending of the Son and the Spirit. In common with the traditions already discussed, Orthodoxy affirms not only the trinitarian source of mission but also the missionary nature of the church, the responsibility of every Christian to be a witness to God’s glory, and service in the world (Bria 1986, 3, 11, 47).

Orthodox understanding of mission also reflects the doxological character of Orthodox theology. Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos, citing numerous biblical passages, states, “A key to the Orthodox understanding of the process of history is, I think, ‘the glory of the most holy God,’ viewed in the perspective of His infinite love” (1965, 281). The work of the Holy Trinity in creation, incarnation, and redemption is a manifestation of God’s glory. Thus God’s mission on earth, and through the church, is ultimately doxological. George summarizes,

Any reflection on mission and missiology is essentially reflection on theology. Any reflection on theology goes to the experience of the triune God’s love and the divine economy of salvation in Jesus Christ. All missiology is theology in

21. Writing in 1965, Archbishop Anastasios Yannoulatos stated, “Orthodox theological thinking about mission has not been systematically developed” (1965, 281). The Turkish occupation of the Balkans and Greece for four hundred years, and the fact that 90 percent of Orthodox Christians during most of the twentieth century lived in totalitarian, atheistic states, may offer a partial explanation (Yannoulatos 2010, 25; Schmemmann 1979, 25–66). Associations of Catholic and Protestant missions with colonialism may be another factor (George 2014, 310).

the fundamental doxological and experiential dimension of the word *theologia* in the Orthodox tradition. (2014, 313)

*Theosis*—namely, deification, or partaking of the divine nature and union with God—is central to Orthodox understanding of salvation. This underscores the deeply spiritual dimension of the church’s mission. “Evangelistic witness is a call to salvation, which means restoration of the relationship of God and humanity, as understood in the Orthodox teaching of *theosis*” (Bria 1986, 30). The goal of evangelistic witness is thus conversion to a life characterized by the restored image of God. This is the “highest missionary obligation” of the church (Yannoulatos 2010, 143). Through incorporation in Christ, the Christian participates in the glory of God.

So mission is not a question of proclaiming some ethical truths or principles, but the beginning of the transfiguration inaugurated by the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor. 4:4; cf. 4:6), through which we are called “so that we may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 2:14). (Yannoulatos 1965, 288)

This light is intended for all people everywhere and must be spread by both clergy and laity (Yannoulatos 1997).

Perhaps the most prominent feature of Orthodox theology of mission is its understanding of the church as a eucharistic community. Whereas nearly all Christian traditions value the sacraments (or ordinances) for the spiritual nourishment of the believer, none elevates the importance of the Eucharist in Christian mission as does Orthodoxy. The church as the community of pardoned sinners is given the presence of the Holy Spirit and presents to the world the kingdom of God. That divine presence is particularly manifest in the Divine Liturgy, projecting the kingdom onto the gathered church. The church is thus an “icon of the eschaton.” By virtue of the church’s unity with God, it becomes an extension of God’s activity in the world. For this reason the church and church planting are essential to mission. “The goal and aim of proclamation of the gospel, and thus of mission, is the establishment of eucharistic communities in every locality, within its own culture and in its own language” (Bria 1986, 12).<sup>22</sup> Verbal proclamation is important, but proclamation also occurs in celebration of the Eucharist, where the divine

22. “The establishment of the local church which, through the mysteries and through her whole life, will participate in the praise and the life of the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church, whose head is Christ (Eph. 1:22, 4:15, 5:23, Col. 1:18), is surely the basic goal of mission, according to Orthodox tradition and theology” (Yannoulatos 1965, 289).



presence is manifest. Thus the liturgical expression of the church is necessary for outreach, with the Eucharist playing the central role:

The efficacy of the church's missionary witness depends on the authenticity of our communion. Our ability to present the light of the kingdom to the world is proportionate to the degree in which we receive it in the eucharistic mystery.

Although the eucharist is the most perfect access to the economy of salvation, it is the goal—and also the springboard—of mission, rather than the means of mission. (Bria 1986, 19)

The Eucharist forms the very source and center of Christian life and witness. Petros Vassiliadis comments,

Without any doubt the centre of the church's mission and spirituality, with few exceptions, has always remained the eucharist, the sole place where the church becomes what it actually is: the people of *God*, the body of *Christ*, the communion of the *Holy Spirit*—a glimpse and a foretaste of the coming kingdom of God. (1998, 56)

Though partaking of the Eucharist is reserved for members of the church, the Eucharist proclaims the death and resurrection of the Lord until he comes again—and this proclamation is intended for non-Christians as well as for nominal Christians (Bria 1986, 29).

In 1975 the phrase “liturgy after the liturgy” was coined by Yannoulatos (2010, 94) and has since become a common way of expressing the continued engagement of the church in the world (e.g., Bria 1996). Liturgy is not withdrawal from the world; rather it sends the believer into the world for service. With the words of dismissal after the Eucharist, “Go forth in peace,” the congregation is to live as witness to the coming kingdom in its communities. According to Vassiliadis, only by a “massive reaffirmation of the eucharistic identity of the church through a radical *liturgical renewal*” can the Orthodox Church bear witness and overcome evil in the world (1998, 61). Works of love also witness to the coming kingdom of God. This will involve the struggle against poverty and oppression, responding with healing and liberation. The doctrine of apostolic succession is not unique to the Orthodox Church. But given the central place of the Eucharist for Christian witness in Orthodox mission, the importance of a duly ordained priest to celebrate the Divine Liturgy is accentuated.

In all these dimensions, Orthodox understandings of the mission of the church are rooted in and flow from a profound mystical spirituality. This stands in stark contrast to the secularized understandings of mission in the

1960s and the more pragmatic missiology of the Church Growth Movement and its heirs. Although Orthodox churches are members of the WCC, their uncompromising commitment to truth, rejection of syncretism, and other concerns have created certain tensions in their relationship to the ecumenical movement.<sup>23</sup> In chapter 4, Edward Rommen draws deeply from the well of Orthodox theology and concludes with an example of its practical implications.

### The Structure of This Book

This brief overview of shifts, concerns, convictions, and debates regarding the mission of the church provides a backdrop for the essays that follow. Unlike many books presenting contrasting views on a particular theological question, the positions presented here are not all necessarily mutually exclusive. But, as the response chapters demonstrate, they are in many ways complementary. Thus the tenor of this book is less of a debate and more of mutual listening and learning—even where contributors disagree. Our hope is that these contrasting perspectives will stimulate readers forward to arrive at their own informed conclusions. The views are presented in alphabetical order by author.<sup>24</sup> This introduction concludes with a thumbnail sketch of the central thesis of each contributor.

Stephen B. Bevans, professor of mission and culture at Catholic Theological Union, presents a “prophetic dialogue” approach. Roman Catholic thinking on the mission of the church has in the last decade developed an understanding of mission as prophetic dialogue, though this approach is not limited to Roman Catholics. This approach emphasizes the fact that mission today should be done in an attitude of dialogue (openness, vulnerability, docility), but at the same time with a clear sense of prophecy (commitment to preaching and witnessing to the person of Jesus Christ; offering hope in a violent and complex world; and confronting any sort of injustice).

Darrell L. Guder, retired professor of missional and ecumenical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, contributes a “multicultural translation” approach. The determinative assumption is that the church’s purpose and actions are defined by its vocation to serve God’s mission as Christ’s witnessing people. That purpose is carried out as the witnessing community “disciples all the ethnicities,” demonstrating that the gospel is fundamentally translatable into every culture. God’s Spirit enables the gathering and equipping of

23. See, e.g., the discussion in Schmemann (1979, 123–25), the Orthodox response to events at the WCC General Assembly in Canberra in 1991, and other concerns (Bozikis 2015).

24. More complete author descriptions are found on page 171.

the witnessing community and then empowers it to be sent into the world as “ambassadors of reconciliation,” “Christ’s letter to the world,” “light, leaven, and salt.” This missional approach implies a reinterpretation of the church’s catholicity in terms of its apostolicity. Centered on the person and work of Christ, culturally diverse witnessing communities serve as signs, firstfruits, and instruments of God’s reign now breaking in.

Ruth Padilla DeBorst, general secretary of the Latin American Theological Fellowship in San Jose, Costa Rica, offers an “integral transformation” approach. She argues that followers of Jesus are sent into the world as he was: to embody and proclaim the good news of God’s reconciling presence and purpose for the entire creation. Reconciled relationships in the new-creation community are at the heart of transformation. And this transformation affects all dimensions of life, matters spiritual, social, political, economic, and ecological. This chapter explores the multilayered calling of any community that seeks to follow Jesus and live the *already* of God’s kingdom and God’s justice in the midst of the beauty and pain of our world today.

Edward Rommen, rector of Holy Transfiguration Church (Orthodox Church in America) in Morrisville, North Carolina, delineates a “sacramental vision” approach. According to Orthodox thought the gospel is not information about a person but rather the person of Christ himself, who *is* the good news. The task of mission, then, is to introduce Christ to those who do not know him. Rommen proposes that though the ascended Christ is generally present everywhere, he specifically manifests himself regularly in particular places such as the eucharistic assembly of the church. The faithful who celebrate the Divine Liturgy in the church experience the real presence of Christ and are then dismissed into the world to invite others to come and see him for themselves. This is the liturgy after the liturgy. The church and its sacraments are thus the beginning and end of its mission.

Finally, Ed Stetzer, author, researcher, and executive director of LifeWay Research, describes a “kingdom community” approach. For evangelicals, a missional concern will always integrate a strong emphasis on traditional evangelical values: evangelism, discipleship, church planting, and global missions. The church is not the center of God’s plan—Jesus is—but the church is central to God’s plan. Yet the missional concern reminds us that this church is not simply a dispenser of religious goods and services focused solely on church expansion. Instead, it is (as Newbigin explained) a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the kingdom, thus engaged in kingdom endeavors beyond itself, leading to kingdom impact and transformation around it.

These five chapters will be followed by a response from each contributor to the other positions. May the reader be stimulated and challenged by these

essays, not only to arrive at clearer convictions regarding God's missionary purposes for the church, but also personally to be more deeply motivated to participate in that mission today.

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 **PERSPECTIVE CHAPTERS**

# 1

## A Prophetic Dialogue Approach

STEPHEN B. BEVANS

In the last fifteen years, the understanding of Christian mission as a practice, attitude, and spirituality of *prophetic dialogue* has emerged among Catholic missiologists and missionaries as an important way to think about and to engage in the Triune God's mission of salvation in creation and history. The term has its origin in discussions among members of one of the Catholic Church's major missionary congregations, the Society of the Divine Word (SVD), the congregation to which I belong. Understanding mission as prophetic dialogue was a way to affirm that the church's mission is grounded in the attitude and practice of *dialogue* (something that the Asian members of my congregation in particular insisted on) and also committed to the clear proclamation of Jesus Christ on the one hand and opposition to all oppression and injustice on the other (this latter perspective insisted upon with equal force especially by my congregation's Latin American members). As the final document from this assembly expressed it: "We believe that the deepest and best understanding of this call [to mission] is expressed in the term 'Dialogue,' or more specifically, 'Prophetic Dialogue.' . . . Together with our dialogue partners we hope to hear the voice of the Spirit of God calling us forward, and in this way our dialogue can be called prophetic" (SVD 2000, paras. 53–54).

In *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Bevans and Schroeder 2004), Roger Schroeder and I chose the term *prophetic dialogue* to describe the synthesis (later characterized as the *creative tension*) of three ways of thinking about mission that had characterized mission theology in the last half of the twentieth century. The first perspective is that espoused by the Second Vatican Council's document on mission *Ad Gentes* (AG) (1965, par. 2) and documents of the Orthodox Church. This perspective speaks of mission as participation in the life and mission of the Triune God. The second perspective appears in Pope Paul VI's document *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (EN) (1975) and in documents of the World Council of Churches (WCC) since its Nairobi Assembly in 1975, a perspective that envisions mission as engaging in the liberating service of the reign of God. The third perspective appears principally in Pope John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* (RM) (1990) and Pentecostal and evangelical documents like those of the Lausanne Movement, in which mission is understood primarily as the proclamation of Jesus Christ as universal Savior. All of these perspectives, we emphasized, were correct; but to articulate a mission theology for today there was need of a term or an idea that would capture the truth of each. Inspired by David Bosch's powerful idea that mission today needed to be carried out in "bold humility" (Bosch 1991, 489), Roger and I adopted our congregation's term *prophetic dialogue*. As we expressed it:

Mission is about preaching, serving and witnessing to the work of God in our world; it is about living and working as partners with God in the patient yet unwearied work of inviting and persuading women and men to enter into relationship with their world, with one another, and with Godself. Mission is dialogue. It takes people where they are; it is open to their traditions and culture and experience; it recognizes the validity of their own religious existence and the integrity of their own religious ends. But it is *prophetic* dialogue because it calls people beyond; it calls people to conversion; it calls people to deeper and fuller truth that can only be found in communion with dialogue's trinitarian ground. (Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 285)

Readers will immediately recognize that our choice of prophetic dialogue to describe missionary thinking and practice is not meant to be exclusively Roman Catholic. We developed the term in a thoroughly ecumenical context, appealing to mainline Protestant groups, evangelicals, and Pentecostals. In the closing years of the twentieth century, although their emphases certainly differed, most Christian churches and communities acknowledged that mission originates in the saving presence and activity of the Triune God; must be about the whole person, especially liberation from any oppressive structures;

and has as its central core the announcement of salvation from sin and meaninglessness that comes through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. We proposed prophetic dialogue as a way to think about and practice mission in all Christian traditions. Indeed, among Protestants, evangelicals, and Pentecostals there has been a positive response to the notion, with critiques that have deepened the understanding significantly. Roger Schroeder and I developed the idea of prophetic dialogue more fully in *Prophetic Dialogue*, in which we acknowledge many debts to the insights and critiques from the spectrum of Christian church communities (Bevans and Schroeder 2011). In 2012, under the presidency of Roger Schroeder, the annual meeting of the American Society of Missiology focused on the theme of prophetic dialogue and featured speakers such as Klippies Kritzinger and Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi, both of the Reformed tradition (*Missiology* 2013). Cathy Ross and I have also edited a volume on mission as prophetic dialogue, with Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Pentecostal, and evangelical contributors (Ross and Bevans 2015).

Nonetheless, prophetic dialogue does have a particularly Roman Catholic shape to it. The Roman Catholic emphasis on sacramentality and the fundamental goodness of creation affirmed by the incarnation is evidenced by the insistence that mission today can only be done in dialogue. Dialogue is the foundation of mission. In addition, Catholicism's "both-and" character is reflected in the fact that *both* dialogue *and* prophecy are necessary components of missionary thinking and practice (see Bevans 1991). That being said, prophetic dialogue is not an official term that appears in official Catholic documents—although there are many resonances within them. To cite one example in Catholic magisterial documents, Pope Francis in his 2013 *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG) writes about interreligious dialogue in the following way, balancing both dialogical openness and prophetic truthfulness:

In this dialogue, ever friendly and sincere, attention must always be paid to the essential bond between dialogue and proclamation, which leads the Church to maintain and intensify her relationship with non-Christians. A facile syncretism would ultimately be a totalitarian gesture on the part of those who would ignore greater values of which they are not the masters. True openness involves remaining steadfast in one's deepest conviction, clear and joyful in one's own identity, while at the same time being "open to understanding those of the other party" and "knowing that dialogue can enrich each side." What is not helpful is a diplomatic openness which says "yes" to everything in order to avoid problems, for this would be a way of deceiving others and denying them the good which we have been given to share generously with others. (EG 2013, par. 251)

The Catholic (although perhaps catholic) genius, I believe, is captured well in the term *prophetic dialogue*.

### Prophetic Dialogue: A Closer Look

Employing a great Catholic principle—that theologians may *distinguish* without *separating*—a closer look at the dynamic of prophetic dialogue will focus first on mission as dialogue and then on mission as prophecy. This will help us see the dynamic in all its rich complexity as we bring these two ideas together in synthesis, or creative tension.

#### *Mission as Dialogue*

In a 2014 interview, Pope Francis spoke of ten tips for a joyful life, and the ninth was, “Don’t proselytize. . . . The worst thing of all is religious proselytism, which paralyzes: ‘I am talking with you in order to persuade you.’ No. Each person dialogues, starting with his or her own identity. The church grows by attraction, not proselytizing” (Glatz 2014). In 1984 the Vatican body that was then called the Secretariat for Non-Christians spoke of dialogue as “the norm and necessary manner of every form of Christian mission, as service or direct proclamation” (*Dialogue and Mission [DM]* 1984, par. 29). Dialogue in this sense is more than a practice, as in the practice of interreligious or ecumenical dialogue. It is a basic attitude, indeed a kind of spirituality that underlies every aspect of mission. A Presbyterian colleague of mine, Claude Marie Barbour, speaks of the necessity of engaging in mission “in reverse,” that is, doing mission in a way that is convinced first and foremost that the Spirit is present before the arrival of the missionary. Because of this, the missionary is first open to be evangelized by those she or he has come to evangelize. Mission is about allowing the women and men whom we work among to teach us first—about their questions, their hopes, their dreams, their cultural values, their own sense of God. Our basic stance is openness, an attitude of respect, listening, and docility (i.e., teachableness) (Barbour 1984). It is about a profound “letting go” before “speaking out” (Bevans and Schroeder 2011, 88–100). In one of the most striking interventions at the 2012 Synod of Bishops in Rome on the New Evangelization, Luis Antonio Tagle, now Cardinal Archbishop of Manila, called for the church to listen first before speaking. “The Church must discover the power of silence. Confronted with the sorrows, doubts and uncertainties of people, she cannot pretend to give easy solutions. In Jesus, silence becomes the way of attentive listening, compassion and prayer” (Tagle 2012).

Catholic missiologists in the last few years have begun to rename a major way of talking about mission in a phrase that shows the influence of the dialogical foundation of mission. Rather than using the venerable term “mission *ad gentes*” (mission *to* the nations)—clearly implied in Scripture (e.g., Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8) and the title of Vatican II’s pivotal document on mission—missiologists today are beginning to use the variation “mission *inter gentes*” (mission *among* the nations). William Burrows in 2001 was the first to formulate this updated term, pointing to the fact that Christians in traditionally mission countries are involved, through the inspiration of the Spirit, in translating the gospel message into the languages and cultures of their own situation (Tan 2014). They are doing this in many cases because they have come to realize that the religions among which they live are not demonic creations but vehicles of God’s saving power. And so they have come to realize that other religions are not Christianity’s rivals but potential allies in working for the values of the reign of God (see Tan 2014, 1–2). Tan is writing specifically about Asia, but the importance of the shift in terminology goes beyond the Asian context, and even beyond relations with other religions. It calls for dialogue with traditional religions in Africa and for dialogue with popular religious practices among indigenous communities in Latin America. It further calls for attention to the stirrings of the Spirit among the secular cultures of North America, Europe, and Australasia. Mission must be grounded in dialogue.

### *Mission as Prophecy*

But if such an attitude of dialogue is foundational to missionary thinking and practice today, without the cultivation of the spirit of prophecy it lacks any direction or purpose. Prophecy, like its specific form in verbal proclamation, must always employ a “dialogue method” (Zago 2000, 17). This means more than being nice, or learning from others, or even developing relationships and making friends—as essential as these may be. Mission is ultimately about sharing the good news of God’s reign with the peoples of the world. Christians believe that this reign has already been inaugurated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is present in the church as its sacrament and celebration of the Eucharist, and is present in secret ways (see AG 1965, par. 11) beyond the borders of the Christian community. The way that the church communicates this good news is through the practice of prophecy.

Prophecy is a highly nuanced activity. On the one hand, it is nonverbal, and so incarnated in the witness of an individual Christian, a Christian community, or Christian institutions. Think, for example, of Jeremiah walking through Jerusalem with a yoke on his shoulders (Jer. 27–28), Isaiah’s description of the

servant as a “light for the Gentiles” (Isa. 49:6), or Jesus’s healings and exorcisms narrated in the Gospels. On the other hand, prophecy employs words, in accord with its etymological meaning of “speaking forth,” proclaiming the Word of God. “You must go to everyone I send you to,” God tells Jeremiah, “and say whatever I command you. . . . I have put my words in your mouth” (Jer. 1:7, 9). Jesus preaches in parables and offers words of wisdom such as in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7).

In wordless gestures and witness, and in powerful spoken and written messages, prophets offer comfort and hope in times of persecution and near despair (e.g., Isa. 40:1–11); a vision of God as unsurpassable love, mercy, and compassion (e.g., Isa. 49:14–18); and a denunciation of every form of injustice and oppression (e.g., Amos 8:4–8). Christians in mission create communities of hope, where life together, the quality of liturgical celebrations, commitment to education, and openness to fellow Christians and other religions give witness to how the gospel message can give life to women and men in every situation, no matter how difficult or seemingly hopeless. Such church communities are signs of the already present reign of God and give testimony to the merciful, life-giving, and true God revealed by Jesus. They are also powerful communities of counterwitness in an unjust, individualistic, or life-denying society, bearing witness to the justice of God’s reign in the face of oppression and injustice.

Christians in these communities of “missionary disciples” (EG 2013, par. 24) also *speak forth* a message of encouragement and hope. They dedicate themselves to developing ways of communicating the gospel message that are clear and focused, relevant and powerful—ways that engage people’s lives and the cultures in which they live. They speak out in all sorts of ways against evil in society: through individuals in daily encounters, editorials, blogs, and tweets; through communities in statements of opposition against oppressive migration laws or cultural practices; and through the institutional church in statements that condemn political injustice, ecological destruction, economic exploitation, or religious intolerance.

Living out mission as prophecy can be as dramatic as Oscar Romero protesting the death squads in 1970s El Salvador, peace efforts of the Sant’Egidio community in civil wars in Africa, an Amish community in Pennsylvania declaring its forgiveness to the man who had killed several of its children during a shooting rampage, or the earth-keeping ministry undertaken by a number of African Initiated Churches in Zimbabwe. It can just as well be as simple and commonplace as a mother telling stories of Jesus to her young children, a community that consistently welcomes visitors and strangers at its liturgies, a priest or minister preaching a well-prepared homily, or a march for clean water in a sprawling African city.



### *Mission as Prophetic Dialogue*

Prophetic dialogue is the name of the dance that is mission, originating in the dance of the Trinity through history, and performed according to “the beautiful rhythm of dialogue and prophecy, boldness and humility, learning and teaching, letting go and speaking out. . . . [It is] beautiful because it is the rhythm of God’s love moving through history” and “complex because it changes with time, place, creation’s groaning and humanity’s response” (Bevans and Schroeder 2011, 156). In some situations, the rhythm of dialogue will be more necessary. In others, the rhythm of prophecy will be more pronounced. For several years now I have begun to think of mission as a contextual practice, much akin to doing theology contextually (see Bevans 2015). In some situations, the dance will take on the rhythm of salsa. In others it will be a dance to the rhythm of African drums. Still others will require a Filipino tinikling. The dance is the dance of mission, the mission of God; the rhythm is a combination of prophecy and dialogue; the *kind* of dance depends on the particular context in which mission is being done.

As in contextual theology, the first step is to discern the context and the particular model of theologizing that would be most appropriate in that situation (see Bevans 2002). Imagine a kind of continuum with dialogue on one side and prophecy on the other. Each context determines where the emphasis will be placed as the church engages in its missionary work: Will it be a stance of more listening and dialogue? Or will it be one of prophetic witness or confident proclamation?

In many if not most instances, dialogue and prophecy are interwoven in the church’s missionary work. Patient listening and appreciation of a culture, for example, are the *sine qua non* of any authentic witnessing to or preaching of the gospel. Any message of gospel hope will be rooted not only in Christian faith but also in an appeal to human and cultural resources. Any action for justice needs to have carefully gathered facts, be attentive to the real aspirations of those who have been oppressed, and be appreciative of the strength of the people whose power is being employed. In some environments, such as those hostile to Christianity, dialogue can be a truly prophetic stance. Like every dance, like any good theologizing, like any good discernment, practicing mission as prophetic dialogue is an art.

### **Practicing Prophetic Dialogue**

*Constants in Context* (Bevans and Schroeder 2004) develops our understanding of mission as prophetic dialogue by explaining that, while mission is a “single”

reality (it is the mission of God in which the church participates), it is nonetheless “complex” and “develops in various ways” (RM 1990, par. 41). Although there are other terms that describe these “various ways,” Roger and I outlined six elements or practices of mission, each of which has a dialogical component and a prophetic one. These elements or practices are (1) witness and proclamation; (2) liturgy, prayer, and contemplation; (3) justice, peace, and the integrity of creation; (4) interfaith, secular (and ecumenical) dialogue; (5) inculturation; and (6) reconciliation (see Bevans and Schroeder 2004, 348–95; 2011, 64–71).

### *Witness and Proclamation*

Witness and proclamation are practices that belong together. While on the one hand “the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life” (EN 1975, par. 41), Christians have to keep in mind that the direct proclamation of the gospel “is the foundation, summit, and center of evangelization” (*Dialogue and Proclamation* 1991, par. 10). Witness can be of an individual, a local Christian community, or an institution, or it can be the common witness of Christians of various traditions working together. Proclamation, while confident, must avoid at all costs undue pressure and unworthy proselytism. “*The Church proposes,*” Pope John Paul II wrote urgently; “*she imposes nothing*” (RM 1990, 44, emphasis original). The “name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom, and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God” (EN 1975, par. 22) must be proclaimed, but it must be proclaimed in dialogue, in connection with witness, as an invitation rather than an imposition, and in answer to women’s and men’s real questions in their particular contexts. The dynamic of dialogue and prophetic witness and proclamation is evident in this first Christian practice of mission.

### *Liturgy, Prayer, and Contemplation*

“The church,” writes Lutheran liturgist Robert Hawkins, “lives from the center with its eyes on the borders” (1999, 201). Hawkins was writing of liturgy, but the relevance of these words to prayer and contemplation is clear as well. In liturgy, God’s Word is proclaimed and the paschal mystery celebrated; the assembled community gives witness to one another’s faith and gives witness to visitors and inquirers. These are all prophetic acts. But if liturgy is not celebrated with attention to present context and the variety of cultures that makes up the worshiping community, if the homilist preaches without “an ear to the people” (EG 2013, par. 154), if a community is not welcoming to outsiders, if the celebration of equality and solidarity does not translate into

working for justice in the neighborhood and the world, then liturgy will not be able to fulfill its great potential as an evangelizing act (see Meyers 2015).

Prayer and contemplation are perhaps much more aligned with dialogue, since so much of prayer is an attentive listening to what God is saying to a particular individual or community, and so much of contemplation is developing the skill of truly seeing and listening for God's presence and voice in an individual's or community's world and experience. And yet prayers shared in community can be a great source of prophecy as one prays for various personal, community, or global needs or as a community praises God or laments an incident of evil. Contemplation, too, is the *sine qua non* of prophecy, for prophets need to listen attentively before they act or speak. The interplay of prophecy and dialogue appears with clarity in this second practice as well.

### *Justice, Peace, and the Integrity of Creation*

Like witness and proclamation, *justice, peace, and the integrity of creation* are intimately linked to one another, for without justice there can be no lasting peace, and without peace there can be no justice. Increasingly, missiologists are recognizing the importance of a strong ecological commitment to the establishment of both justice and regional and world peace. While the prophetic nature of working for justice, peace, and ecological integrity is evident, it is important to recognize that constant dialogue also needs to be practiced in these areas. People's real needs must be discerned and listened to so that justice can be authentically established. Peacemaking demands patient and creative dialogue so that both or all sides are heard and appreciated. As Elizabeth Johnson has eloquently expressed, referencing Job 12:7–10, human beings must “ask the beasts and they will teach you; the birds of the air and they will tell you; ask the plants of the earth and they will teach you” (2014, 1). Dialogue goes hand in hand with these strongly prophetic practices.

### *Interfaith, Secular (and Ecumenical) Dialogue*

In *Constants in Context* and subsequent writings, Roger Schroeder and I limited ourselves to *interfaith* and *secular* dialogue. In the wake of further reading and some important experiences in my own life, however, I believe this set of practices can be expanded to include *ecumenical* dialogue (see, e.g., Thomas 2010; WCC 2012). Each of these practices of dialogue has a prophetic component.

Pope Francis was cited earlier in this chapter noting the importance of being open to the truth and goodness in other religions, especially with regard to

joint action for justice. This does not mean, however, falling into a “facile syncretism” that blurs all differences and does not allow for the interplay of both dialogue and proclamation (see *EG* 2013, pars. 250–51).

The same would be true in a dialogue with those who have no faith, or whose faith is limited by a strictly secularist outlook. While we can find many points of agreement and even allow ourselves to be critiqued and inspired by unbelievers’ or agnostics’ honesty and commitment to justice, peacemaking, and ecology, as Christians we cannot dodge the responsibility of giving cogent reasons for our own belief or witnessing confidently to it.

While ecumenical dialogue involves Christians working together, praying together, and sharing their own faith perspectives and spiritualities, we cannot reduce our particular Catholic (or Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, and so on) perspective to an easy and naive agreement.

An authentic engagement in dialogue of any sort involves courage and the commitment to prophecy.

### *Inculturation*

Christians engage in doing contextual theologizing and inculturation in order to better proclaim and live out the gospel. Relevant, clear, and at times disturbing preaching must have inculturation as the condition of its possibility, and that means that all the skills of dialogue need to come into play. We see here once again the interplay of dialogue and prophecy. Every act of ministry and mission must first discern the context in which one works and among whom one works. This entails cultivating respect for the culture and the people in the context, paying attention to its values and discerning its disvalues, and learning how to communicate effectively in that context. Max Warren’s famous dictum needs always to be kept in mind: when Christians encounter women and men in mission, they must first “take off their shoes,” for the place in which and the people with whom they are working is holy (1963, 10). Dialogue with that holiness can open up new and exciting ways of thinking about Christian faith. But inculturation also involves the challenge and purification of many of the values and practices of a particular context, and so it also has a prophetic, sometimes even countercultural aspect to it.

### *Reconciliation*

Missiologists have recognized in the last decade or so that reconciliation is an essential part of God’s missionary action in the world, and thus a constitutive part of the church’s mission as well. Particularly in today’s world

of unimaginable violence—whether personal oppression such as spousal or sexual abuse; official state oppression as was the case of apartheid in South Africa or sweeping genocide in Rwanda; cultural and ethnic oppression as occurred among aboriginal peoples in Australia or Native Americans in the United States; or clericalism and antiwomen attitudes in the church—the fact that the church can proclaim the possibility of reconciliation is indeed amazing, good news (see Schreiter 2013).

The proclamation of the possibility of reconciliation between victims and oppressors is indeed a prophetic act, and the act of forgiveness on the part of victims—always prompted by God’s grace, always offered first by the victims—is a stunning witness to the God of the Christian gospel, the God of Jesus Christ.

The ability of a Christian minister to mediate in such situations demands a deep commitment to dialogue, both with the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven, and in terms of the contemplative openness, patience, and presence that are essential attitudes for reconciliation work. As reconciliation is effected among victims and oppressors, a deep dialogue is also necessary in order that each side recognize the humanity of the other despite our history. Once again we see the rhythm of dialogue and prophecy working in tandem as signs of God’s understanding love and challenging call to forgive, be forgiven, and move to new life.

### Trinitarian Foundations

As Christians engage in mission, prophetic dialogue is no arbitrary act, nor is it a mere strategy. Much more deeply, the practice of prophetic dialogue is the full participation in God’s trinitarian life and mission. Christian faith came to explicit trinitarian faith as Christians reflected on the saving action of God in the world and its history.

First, that action is perceived in the gentle presence of the Spirit as she patiently encouraged, persuaded, and cajoled the emergence of the various elements after the big bang into gases, elements, stars, and galaxies; as life slowly emerged on planet Earth and likely other planets in our vast universe (O’Meara 2012); as plant and animal life began to flourish; as creation became gradually conscious of itself in *Homo sapiens*; and as humanity tried to express the wonder of creation in various religious expressions. The Spirit’s work of creation was one of dialogue, and still is, as she whispers truth in women’s and men’s hearts and consciences and brings humanity together in a communion that is a sacrament of the new creation to come (see Edwards 2004,

33–49; Johnson 2014, 122–53). But especially in the history of one people, Israel, chosen to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3; see Wright 2006, 194–221), the Spirit raises up prophets to speak words of hope to an oppressed people, to call them back to fidelity to the covenant, and to speak powerful images about who this God is whom Israel worships and who chastises the rich among the people who oppress the poor.

Second, “when the set time had fully come” (Gal. 4:4), God’s pervasive, persuasive, and prophetic Spirit took on a human face in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was a man filled with God’s Spirit, the Spirit that fell upon him at his baptism in the Jordan and anointed him with the prophetic mission of bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, healing those who suffer, freeing those who are oppressed, and proclaiming God’s mercy—the mercy of a loving and forgiving Father—to those who had sinned (see Luke 4:18–19). His prophetic ministry was expressed in his beautiful, consoling, yet challenging parables and pithy sayings, in his healings and exorcisms, and in his practice of including everyone, especially in the context of table fellowship (see Edwards 2004, 66–86; Bevans and Schroeder 2011, 101–14).

At the same time, Jesus is remembered as a man of dialogue, open to the requests of others (Luke 7:1–10), gentle and humble of heart (Matt. 11:29), asking people about their needs and wants (Matt. 20:32; Mark 10:51), and ready to listen, even learning from others (Matt. 11:21–28). In his words and deeds he bore prophetic witness to the coming reign of God, revealing a God who rules the world in overflowing mercy, patience, vulnerability, and generosity (see Matt. 20:1–6; Luke 15). This dialogical nature of God was revealed especially in Jesus’s death and resurrection, where God’s love for the world was poured out fully and then shared abundantly with Jesus’s disciples as they are called to participate in God’s very mission through the pouring forth of God’s Spirit upon them (see the whole movement of Acts, and especially Acts 2). God’s saving and redemptive purposes in creation and history, accomplished in a creative prophetic dialogue, had been worked out in the history of Israel and in the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through the Spirit, the church became God’s agent, God’s partner even, in fulfilling God’s saving purpose.

As the church—challenged by serious misunderstandings of Jesus’s and the Spirit’s identity—reflected further, it gradually came to realize that God’s deepest identity had been fully revealed in God’s saving and redeeming purpose. As Kathleen Cahalan puts it, the church realized that “who God is and what God does is one divine life” (2010, 150). Edward Hahnenberg says, similarly, that the God who works in dialogue and for communion is, in Godself, dialogue and communion (see Hahnenberg 2003, 85). God not only *practices* prophetic

dialogue in God's saving presence and action in creation and history; God is in God's very self a communion of prophetic dialogue.

In baptism, Christians are plunged into this communion and are called to share God's life of dialogue and prophecy within the created world and in human history. The church is God's people, on pilgrimage to God's reign; it is the body of Christ, sharing and continuing Jesus's mission in the world; it is the creation and temple of the Holy Spirit, sacramenting God's sanctifying and redeeming presence in God's world. Quoting Cyprian of Carthage, the Second Vatican Council describes the church as "a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 1965, par. 4, quoting Cyprian, *Treatise IV*, par. 23). As such, the church is "like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (LG 1965, par. 1).

### Scriptural Foundations

Reflection on the trinitarian foundations of prophetic dialogue leads to an understanding of the rich scriptural foundation of this attitude and practice. While prophetic dialogue is not a scriptural term per se, we see that the Scriptures are full of both God's loving dialogue with humankind and God's prophetic communication of the divine identity, the nature of God's saving work, and God's opposition to all evil and injustice. The ministry of Jesus in particular, as sketched above, illustrates this dynamic and creative tension between dialogue and prophecy. More work on the biblical foundations of prophetic dialogue needs to be done. This section, however, focuses briefly on two passages in the Scriptures that to my mind provide a strong basis for a scriptural foundation to the term. The first passage is from Luke's Gospel; the second is from the writings of the apostle Paul.

#### *Luke 24:13–35*

Luke 24:13–35 is the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus. As the disciples discussed and commiserated with one another as they left Jerusalem three days after Jesus's death, Jesus joins them on the way, although they do not recognize him. He appears—as he had appeared to Mary Magdalene early in the day (John 20:11–18)—as a stranger. As he joins the two on the road, the stranger asks the disciples what they had been discussing and listens intently as they tell him. But then, having listened, he interprets the Scriptures for them in a way that begins to make sense to them and sets their hearts on fire. When the disciples reach their destination, they invite the

stranger to stay with them, for it was getting too late for further travel, and so the stranger accepts their invitation and becomes their guest. But then, as he breaks bread at the evening meal, blesses it, and gives it to them, the stranger becomes the friend, and they recognize him as Jesus, with them all along but now revealed. When Jesus disappears, the two disciples fairly run back to Jerusalem to share the news of the resurrection with their sisters and brothers.

The pattern of this story is one of prophetic dialogue. The disciples recognized Jesus in the breaking of the bread, surely. But perhaps they also recognized him in the pattern of his ministry—openness, listening, accompaniment, accepting hospitality, and yet bearing a message and a relationship that is saving and transforming, revealing a presence that was already there.

### *First Thessalonians 2*

First Thessalonians is universally recognized as one of the authentic letters of St. Paul and is further recognized as the oldest surviving writing of the New Testament. In chapter 2 Paul reminisces about the beginnings of his ministry in the city of Thessalonica. He writes about how, after being mistreated in Philippi, he found such hospitality in the city that he once more summoned the courage to preach the gospel plainly to the inhabitants there. Paul narrates how God had entrusted him with the precious gospel message, the reason that he could proclaim it so boldly—“not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts” (1 Thess. 2:4). This is a prophetic witness.

Nevertheless, the way Paul did this, he recalls, was not to pull his weight—as he could have—as an apostle. Rather, as he puts it, “we were like young children among you. Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you” (1 Thess. 2:7–8). He goes on to write about the relationship that he had cultivated with his new Thessalonian friends, sharing with them not only the gospel (in prophecy) but also his very self, treating them as a father treats his children (with an attitude and practice of dialogue). It is in this mode that Paul preached: exhorting and encouraging them to conduct themselves worthy of the God who called them into God’s reign (see 2:10–12).

The dynamic of prophetic dialogue is particularly evident here, and in the intercultural context of an Asia Minor–born (Tarsus), Jerusalem-trained rabbi turned Christian apostle preaching the gospel in ancient northeastern Greece. Paul paints a picture of himself as the persecuted prophet who boldly preaches the gospel, but at the same time as the friend whose manner of presentation is couched in deep gentleness and relationship with the people to whom he is preaching. In this passage particularly, we see traces of God’s own action



in ministry through the Spirit and the Word, through the ministry of Jesus as he embodies and proclaims a tender, gentle Father. Paul is only imitating his Lord in his boldness and gentleness for the sake of the gospel. He is practicing prophetic dialogue.

## Conclusion

The understanding of missionary thinking and practice that is evoked by the term *prophetic dialogue* is indeed profoundly Catholic. It has deep roots in the Scriptures, in the tradition of the early theologians and pastors of the church, in the theological tradition of the church, in its history of missionary activity, and in the Catholic Church's teaching office, particularly in the last fifty years in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

There is no question, of course, that Roman Catholicism has not always lived up to the challenge of prophetic dialogue in its missionary work. It has often erred on the side of prophecy with too little emphasis on dialogue—one only needs to think of the missionary work among the Saxons in the ninth century, the *tabula rasa* approach of Spanish and Portuguese missionaries in the sixteenth century, or the “three C” (Christianity, commerce, and civilization) approach of mission in the nineteenth century. It has also, although less often, erred on the side of dialogue, especially in its alliance in the past with the powerful and rich, and its reluctance in recent times, in the light of the truth of other religious ways, to boldly proclaim Christ (see Bevans and Schroeder 2004; 2011, 115–37; RM 1990).

Nevertheless, a study of the church's mission through the ages reveals a pattern of practice that is sensitive to dialogue on the one hand and confident in prophetic witness and proclamation on the other. The earliest Christians lived a prophetic life of mutual love, mutual care, and fearless courage to profess their beliefs. They also were very much in tune with the cultures of Rome, Asia Minor, and North Africa, especially evident in apologists like Justin Martyr (ca. 100–165 CE) and Origen (ca. 185–254 CE). In the sixth century East Syrian missionaries in China wrote in ways that reflected local Confucian culture and engaged in dialogue with Buddhism. In the ninth century missionaries like St. Cyril and St. Methodius preached the gospel among the Slavs in a way that also preserved their distinctive culture. And in the sixteenth century Matteo Ricci and his companions witnessed to the adaptability of the gospel to the rich culture of China, while at the same time emphasizing the unique saving role of Jesus. At the same time, the church has always given prophetic witness through the rise of monasticism in the fourth century, the

emergence of mendicants in the twelfth century, and the development of active orders of women and men in the centuries following the Reformation and French Revolution. Saints as varied as Catherine of Siena, Bartolomé de las Casas, Oscar Romero, and the women martyrs of El Salvador bore prophetic witness against church corruption, abuse by the powerful, and social injustice (see Bevans and Schroeder 2004; 2011, 115–37).

To practice mission as prophetic dialogue is therefore not something novel in Catholicism. The call today among missiologists and practitioners of mission to be more intentional about it is, however, something quite new and fresh. It has given new life to Roman Catholic thinking on mission and missionary practice in the last several decades, and promises to bring more life in the decades to come.

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