

Mission Educators Forum: The Continued Relevance of David Bosch

Dr John Corrie

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity – even though I'm not teaching mission full-time now, my passion for mission and the teaching of mission is undiminished, as is also my passion for Bosch. So both those passions happily come together in this conference. I began teaching at ANCC in 1991, the year of publication of *Transforming Mission*, so that was a tremendous gift to me as I started to work out a theology of mission and how to teach it. I didn't have a theology of mission before that – at least not one that was worked out. I had certainly not been given it at theological college, so I was working it out as I went along in ministry. So Bosch has been my ever-present friend and mentor as I have travelled that journey over the last 25 years. Students would say that if Barth had a newspaper in one hand and a Bible in the other, Corrie had Bosch in one hand and a Bible in the other.

The key question I have grappled with over the years is this: what is our aim when we teach mission? One of my main aims has always be to give students the knowledge and tools to be able construct their own theology and ecclesiology of mission and to be able to use that in their future practice of mission. As we know there are theologies and ecclesiologies (plural) of mission and students need to be aware of the range of the alternatives and be able to critique them, including being aware of the strengths and weaknesses of their own approach. From my experience Bosch's *Transforming Mission*, has been, and I suggest remains, one of the best resources to achieve that aim. Although Bosch had his own preferences – and who doesn't – he had an impressive breadth of perspective which surveys biblically, theologically and historically the main models of mission and explores their strengths and weaknesses. There are lacunae which have been often pointed out – the inadequate treatment of the OT, the absence of the Johannine mission theology, the near absence of the Pentecostal model of mission, the important role of women in mission, ecology, indigenous spirituality, and other gaps in the story....So Bosch cannot be the only resource of course.

But as I have encouraged students to read it, even in bite-sized chunks, there are a number of lessons which I have hoped they would learn from it as they have constructed their own theology and practice of mission. I would like to summarise those lessons and suggest that they are lessons which students still need to learn today. One thing I discovered teaching mission over a number of years is that I found myself teaching the same things to each new generation of students, because the message of mission did not seem to have got through to them. I sometimes got quite tired of going over the same ground, but realised how necessary it was.

For example I thought we might have settled the dispute over the relationship between evangelism and social action a long time ago, but apparently not, judging by the struggles which successive intakes of students had with it. I judged that many of them came from evangelical churches which had not yet got the message about holistic/integral mission. Or they had heard of holistic mission, but associated it with social action, and then said 'Ah yes, but where's the evangelism?' not realising that from the outset evangelism is integral to the model.

So although Bosch's book is now 25 years old this year – an anniversary not especially commemorated to my knowledge – its themes remain just as relevant today even though a good

deal of missiological water has flowed under the bridge since 1991. Again I am not suggesting that these lessons could not be learnt from other missiologists, or even that *Transforming Mission* is necessarily the best resource to do it, especially at undergraduate level. It is possible to pull out lots of juicy quotes, and Bosch is very quotable, but to expect most undergraduate students to read more than digestible sections of *Transforming Mission* is unrealistic. In my experience students really begin to get into it at Masters level. Some have suggested that a more accessible way in to Bosch's thought may well be to begin with *Witness to the World* (1980), though that is quite a long way back in his thinking.

So what do I hope that students will learn from Bosch? Here are ten points to get the discussion going:

1. **That theology and mission are integrally related.**

Like love and marriage, which used to 'go together like a horse and carriage', you can't have one with the ...other. You can't have theology without mission or mission without theology. Many academic theologians have not realised this, let alone students. They imagine they can do pure theology that somehow has no missiological implications, or biblical studies that take no account of the mission dimension of the text or the mission dimension of the context in which the text is applied. But it works the other way too: some mission practitioners think they can do mission without thinking about it theologically, so it works both ways. One of the many things we have learnt from Chris Wright is to read the Bible as the story of God's mission, the unfolding of God's mission purposes from Genesis to Revelation. Bosch also reads scripture missiologically, not simply cherry-picking the mission texts, but outlining the thematic developments of a gospel or Paul and carefully assembling the relationship between the Bible, theology, mission and church. He shows us why mission needs a theology of creation, salvation, the Kingdom, the Trinity, eschatology...every dimension of theology is drawn into the relationship... so we build up what we call a 'theology of mission' which the practice of mission needs.

Maybe I am unnecessarily worried – please reassure me that I am - but I am concerned about the theology of mission, or missiology if we prefer. Where is it in theological college curriculums? Where and how are students being taught to do theology missiologically and mission theologically? Are students 'getting' the integral relationship between theology and mission? Is the theology of mission as a subject in its own right even still taught today in the theological colleges? That's my first question for discussion... I was speaking to the General Secretary of the Latin American Theological Fraternity just last week when he was in the UK, Marcelo Vargas, and his observation was that missiology as a discipline seemed to him to be in decline in Europe, whereas in Latin America it is growing. Is that true do you think?

2. **You can have a marriage between theology and mission**

And you can create a family by including the church, so that theology, mission and ecclesiology are inextricably bound up with each other, like the persons of the Trinity. Bosch teaches us that **ecclesiology and mission are also integrally related**. In the intervening years this has become generally accepted: that the church is 'missionary by its very nature', so we now have a number of 'missional ecclesiologies', especially from the 'new ways of being church movement'. There is a long history of compartmentalisation in theological education which separates: biblical studies, history, dogmatics, ethics, ecclesiology, oh and mission. I think this is an inheritance of the Enlightenment. Students have a class on the gospels, pack up their notes and move on to a class on ethics, pack up again and move on to pastoral theology, and move on again for their final

period to mission, without anyone thinking to bring them together. But we cannot stress often enough to students the integral relationship between theology, mission and church. At Trinity we introduced the concept of 'Integrated Learning Weeks', the idea being to spend a whole week focussed on one theme (eg sexuality), and looking at it from biblical, theological, historical, ethical and missiological dimensions, seeking wherever possible to integrate our thinking across these dimensions. Students must go into church leadership with this principle of integration firmly in their minds. It means that mission for them will not be an 'add-on' to an already full agenda for the church, or just something which the mission committee does. But that is how many churches still see it. So next question: how do we teach mission and ecclesiology integrally?

3. There is another important aspect of integration:

We learn from Bosch that **mission is intrinsically holistic, or integral**. I have mentioned this already in my introduction. Bosch throughout seeks to hold together the dimensions of mission so that they mutually reinforce one another. We may think this is self-evident, but it's an ongoing discussion in my own church here in Birmingham, where we have a large Childrens' Centre doing a brilliant job for children and families, mostly Muslim, and the challenge is to see where and how appropriate evangelism is happening. I believe it is there, not in the traditional sense, but in the many conversations Christian volunteers have with families who use the Centre, and in the values which are promoted through it. In the most recent edition of *Mission Studies*, the Journal of IAMS, we have yet another discussion of the relationship between evangelism and social action.

I was speaking earlier this week to the International Director of the Micah Network Sheryl Haw, and she was telling me what a struggle it is to get the message of integral mission across in the church worldwide, especially to mission practitioners.

Some evangelicals think that holistic/integral mission compromises evangelism and that it loses its priority in our commitment to compassion. But the whole point of integral mission is that Word and Deed work together from the outset and mutually reinforce one another. But it is true that holistic mission is a theme some evangelicals do not feel too comfortable with, and many students will come to us with their suspicions. I have found that Bosch helps students to get the point about integral mission. But my question this time is this: is mission taught as intrinsically holistic/integral, and if so how?

4. There is another integral relationship, this time between mission and context.

Mission is inescapably contextual. Commenting on the title of a book about Andrew Kirk which Cathy Ross and myself chose: *Mission in Context*, Chris Wright in the introduction is provoked into asking: "what other kind of mission is possible? All mission, like all theology, happens in some context. The only question is whether those doing their theology or their mission are as self-consciously and self-critically aware of their own context and its impact as they ought to be". Bosch is ironically critiqued for lack of engagement with SA context, or any other context for that matter, although his friends in SA point out that he actually did a lot of this, theologically and practically, even if it does not come out in *Transforming Mission*. The importance of context comes out clearly enough in the book as a whole. But again, some evangelicals are wary of contextualisation, especially that it can lead to syncretism or a dilution of the biblical absolutes. But if we're turning out students who have little or no awareness of the importance of context, or if they are not engaging with contextual theologies, we are not serving them well with either theology or mission. Next question: how do we teach contextualisation?

5. Related to the point about context, every context has a culture or cultures

which characterise them, so we have always thought of **mission as 'cross-cultural', or as I would prefer 'intercultural'**. Bosch spends much time exploring cultural issues, indeed his main aim is to develop what he calls an 'emerging ecumenical paradigm' which will be fit for purpose in our so-called 'postmodern cultural context'. This relationship between mission and culture again for us is self-evident, but I used to find that the cultural awareness of many students was quite low, especially if they came from a predominantly white middle-class background. Many of them have had little interaction with people of other cultures, though many now have had some short-term experiences.

Bosch is never far from discussing cross-cultural relationships and communication. Where is the awareness of culture in our curriculums and how are we teaching cross-cultural and intercultural dynamics?

6. We can learn from Bosch that **mission is inherently dialogical**.

Bosch's thinking, like that of Lesslie Newbigin, and others more recently like Bevans and Schroeder, is essentially dialogical and relational. This is not just, or even mainly, about interfaith dialogue. This is an approach to mission based from the outset on mutual respect, listening, and conversation with individuals, with the context and with the world. I mentioned my preference for the word 'intercultural' and I have written about this in an article in *Transformation* (Oct 2014, Vol 31:291-302) Briefly I argue that the phrase 'cross-cultural' is associated with a way of doing mission that is one dimensional: it's about us crossing cultural boundaries to go to them with something which we think they need to hear, or to do something for them which we think they need to have. 'Intercultural' is much more relational and implies a mutuality and respectful listening which is much more prepared to give and receive. You could use the associated word 'dialogical', and I believe Bosch is essentially dialogical in his approach. Bevans says that dialogue is the way God does mission. Not that this denies the importance of proclamation, so we need what Bevans calls a 'prophetic dialogue', although for him the prophecy comes within the dialogue. Bosch wanted to create a dialogue with postmodernity; but I think he can be critiqued in underplaying proclamation (curiously proclamation is a word not once mentioned in his discussion of Paul's mission!), and Bosch certainly does everything to avoid being judgmental. But I think he is right to say that our approach must be relational before it is confrontational. We do mission with a 'humble boldness and a bold humility'. So how do we use Bosch to help us teach dialogical mission?

7. There is a creative tension between proclamation and dialogue.

In fact mission is full of creative tensions, another theme I suspect some evangelicals find difficult. But this is one theme that I myself have learnt from Bosch, and again have written about it. In fact I have an article at the moment being considered by *Missionalia*, so look out for that. These tensions are intrinsic to theology as well as to mission, and Bosch saw them as critical in engaging with postmodernity, which takes ambiguity in its stride as a given. Students need to learn that theology is not 'black and white', right or wrong, but there are many what Jim Packer called 'antinomies' in our understanding of God. There have been calls more recently for a 'both/and christianity' which acknowledges that we cannot reduce issues to an 'either/or' dichotomy. This is as much about how we do theology as how we do mission. How do we teach students how to hold theological and missional truth in creative tension?

8. Related to this because it is also about how we do theology,

Bosch's approach to both theology and mission is one of critical realism. As we know this reassures us that there are truths which we can affirm (realism), while at the same time being willing to critique how we express those truths (critical). It was Tom Wright who first taught me of t

he importance of critical realism. It has a certain open-endedness which does not foreclose the discussion. Mission for Bosch is an on-going exploration of possibilities. The end of the book does not give us a neat conclusion, it invites us to continue the discussion. We want to turn over the page and keep reading, but then we discover that that's it! Critical realism encourages students to be self-critical about the truths that they may take for granted, it teaches them that there are valid approaches other than their own which give a different perspective on truth, and it discourages both cynical liberalism and unthinking fundamentalism. Bosch's critical engagement with pretty much every missiological theme encourages what educationalists call 'critical distance', and it's vital that we nurture this. I have found that even at postgraduate level some students struggle to achieve this. How do we encourage critical distance and self-critical awareness?

9. We learn from Bosch that **mission takes history seriously**.

Bosch has been critiqued in the way he handles history. He certainly takes a broad-brush approach, and his paradigms for each period can be seen as rather too reductionist. Also as we know the whole analysis of six periods of Christian history has been questioned, and respected mission historians like Andrew Walls cut the cake rather differently from Bosch. Maybe with Alan Kreider we can only say that there is pre-Christendom, Christendom and post-Christendom. But the general point remains: we must learn from the past or we are forever condemned to repeating its mistakes. Which of course we do! I like the short poem by Steve Turner: "History repeats itself. It has to. No-one listens". Well, no-one who has listened to Bosch can possibly adopt a colonial attitude to mission. But there are too many examples of neo-colonial attitudes in mission today, and not just from the west to the rest, but in every direction. This brings me back to the discussion about 'cross-cultural' mission. Most courses teach church history; but is mission integrated into that? How is the history of mission being taught?

10. Finally, we can learn from Bosch **to see mission AS rather than mission IS**.

If mission is multidimensional or 'in many modes', as Bosch puts it, trying to define it locks it into one of these dimensions at the expense of the others. We have had too many arguments about THE definition of mission, without realising that mission, as Bosch puts it, is...
"a multifaceted ministry, in respect of witness, service, justice, healing, reconciliation, liberation, peace, evangelism, fellowship, church planting, contextualisation, and so much more". So although Bosch offers what can be read as definitions of mission, he prefers to think in terms of mission AS contextualisation, AS evangelism, AS the pursuit of justice etc. Mission AS sets mission free to relate meaningfully to the priorities of each context, without having to fulfil the terms of a universal definition. So are we too much in the pursuit of an adequate definition of mission?

So there are my ten lessons which I hope to pass on to students from Bosch. I'm sure there are others if I thought about it more, or maybe you can think of others I am sure. My contribution is just a starter for ten.

What about Bosch's overall project? Is that still relevant today? He was proposing an 'emerging ecumenical paradigm' for mission, an agenda which I don't think has ever been taken up seriously, or maybe even fully understood. What was Bosch trying to do? It is true that the idea of paradigm shifts has been somewhat discredited...the ecumenical movement has not won much support at grass roots level...and whatever consensus is emerging is not obvious since mission in the last 25 yrs has become more fragmented. So we are probably as far away as ever from an ecumenical paradigm. Many interest groups have their own agendas and they have co-opted mission, or their version of it, to validate their approach. So if your thing is fresh expressions, then you can have an off-the-shelf missional ecclesiology to support it. If your thing is unreached peoples then mission is obviously about evangelism and church planting. If your thing is short-term mission then there are biblical verses about mission to back up your enthusiasm. The danger is that mission becomes

whatever is required of it to fulfil the agenda. So the idea of a consensus around an 'emerging ecumenical paradigm' seems to me to be as far away as ever. True there have been many changes in mission in the last 25 years, some of them of course good and necessary to reflect new global realities; but changes are not paradigm shifts. But maybe we should not be looking for a single paradigm shift, but a number, each relevant to mission in different global contexts.

What was Bosch really trying to do? It was never clear to me whether Bosch was recognising a postmodern paradigm which was emerging out there somewhere, trying to describe it and then encouraging us to develop a missionary response to it; or whether he was proposing a paradigm which he hoped would emerge through our engagement with postmodernism. So maybe we need to ask first: where is this emerging ecumenical paradigm? before we try to promote it.

And then relatedly there is the question of how Bosch deals with postmodernity. If his paradigm shift is intended to meet the challenge of doing mission in a postmodern context, one might expect much more engagement with this theme. Robert Schreiter pointed out in a review of the book when it first came out that the book is much better at giving us a historical perspective on what has happened and what is happening in mission, but much weaker at outlining what a new fresh postmodern missiology might look like. There are signposts and themes – such as the inclusion of poeisis, the importance of metaphor, symbol, narrative etc – and especially for me the theme of 'creative tensions'. I have tried to explore that myself as one key to a relevant epistemology. But some have asked: does Bosch really help us with a new missiological epistemology that would move us beyond the subject-object dichotomy of the Enlightenment? So Nico Botha asks in an article in *Missionalia* how postmodern is Bosch's postmodern missiology? (I recommend this volume of *Missionalia*: Vol 39, No1/2 April/August 2011). He thinks Bosch missed an opportunity to spell this out more clearly. For example what might a postmodern reading of the classical missionary gospel texts look like?

So I am not sure how realistic Bosch's overall aim ever was. But that does not detract in my view, and in my experience, from the lessons we can learn, even as we critically engage with his own approach. I come back to my concern about the theology of mission. Bosch gave us a comprehensive theology of mission – perhaps too big for most undergraduate students to take on board. But every student needs a missional theological framework within which to work out their own approach to mission and ministry, and I'm not sure where this is coming from today. Maybe we can be confident that that is what indeed we are giving them – OK, great! Bosch will not be the only contributor to a missional theological framework, but he is still a key player in the discussion.

Discussion questions:

- What is happening to the 'theology of mission' today? How are we giving students the tools they need to construct their own theology of mission?
- Of the ten lessons which John outlined which do you consider most important? Are there other lessons from your experience which we have not mentioned?
- How do we assess the project of the 'emerging ecumenical paradigm' as relevant for today's world?

