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2. With regard to the effect of tradition in the fourth and fifth senses, the first and most difficult task is for any one of us to be able to discover our own traditions, and how in many different ways they affect our [p. 435](#) exegesis and hermeneutics. Here the only secret is no secret at all; it requires the effort of a lifetime—to be vigorously demanding of oneself, so as to spot when it is our biases that are at work, or when we are more truly listening to God’s very word for ourselves and for others. I think, for example, of such a simple thing as the recognition of our own personal histories in a thoroughly individualistic culture, and how differently—and more correctly—we will understand and apply texts when we recognize the essentially corporate—people as a whole people—presupposition that lies behind all the epistolary imperatives. Think, for example, how differently one understands [1 Corinthians 3:16–17](#) or [Philippians 2:12–13](#), when one thinks not in terms of individual obedience to such texts, but of their corporate nature—calling a community to obedience in terms of its new self-understanding in Christ.

Or I think further of the whole, generally rationalistic, and almost totally *literary* (= written) culture in which the North American inerrancy debate has taken place—without once recognizing how differently a basically *oral* culture handles such things as precision in wording or in the transmission of traditions. This is not to discount the concern that brought about that debate, but it is to question whether it would have had much meaning to the earliest Christians, whom we encounter in the pages of the New Testament itself.

3. Thirdly, and of equal—or perhaps greater—significance, is a willingness on the part of all of us to be open to one another—to reexamine how we perceive our traditions as affecting us, especially in light of how others perceive it. This, of course, can be terribly threatening, because most of us take considerable comfort—and rightly so—in the stability and security that tradition affords us. There can be little question that we are emotionally so constructed that we can handle the examination at the perimeter with much greater detachment than an examination of the core.

4. The final suggestion is the most difficult of all to put into practice, and that, of course, is that we actually change—or be willing to change or modify—rather than become more defensive. It may well be, of course, that such examination will lead to a greater confidence in the basic correctness, or value, of one’s own traditions. But may God the Holy Spirit give us integrity and readiness to change or modify, if that seems to be needed.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that these are merely probings, as was true of this whole series of essays. In all of them my concern has been singular. In a context of faithfulness to Scripture as God’s Word, how best do we understand these ancient texts—especially the biblical [p. 436](#) imperatives—as a word for all seasons, as a word that addresses us and calls us to obedience to the living God? I may not have resolved much for many, or any, of my readers; but I do hope that I have at least ‘stirred up our pure minds’ to think more carefully, and hopefully consistently, on these matters.

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Hermeneutical Principles in the Biblical Foundation for Mission

David J. Bosch

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(Kampen UJH Kok 1978).*

David Bosch is one of the most respected missiologists of our generation. He was a member of the Theological Commission of WEF and also widely accepted in ecumenical circles. His tragic death last year was an agonising loss to the whole church. We honour him by republishing this receptive article in which he argues that the whole Bible is permeated with the idea of mission. In going beyond proof-texting he parallels four hermeneutical principles in both Old and New Testaments. A stronger emphasis on mission as verbal proclamation would have completed this comprehensive survey.

Editor

It has become customary, in writing on the 'theology of mission', to begin with a chapter on the 'biblical foundation of mission'. The argument seems to be that we already know what 'mission' is and that, once we have established the biblical validity of mission, we may proceed to the exposition of mission theory and methodology.

Verkuyl, in his *Inleiding in de nieuwere zendingswetenschap*, follows a different approach. The section on the 'biblical foundation' comes up for discussion only after several introductory chapters which deal with the history of the study of mission. To me this seems to be a commendable approach. We cannot simply assume that our readers already know what 'mission' is, nor that they would agree with our definitions. I would, in fact, have preferred to go *beyond* Verkuyl: the section on the 'biblical foundations of mission' should be preceded not only by a survey of the study of the subject of missiology but also by an overview of the ways in which the Church, down through the centuries, has understood her missionary responsibility. This is, naturally, something different from the development of missiology as theological discipline. We usually assume far too easily that we can employ the Bible as a kind of objective arbitrator in the case of [p. 438](#) theological differences, not realizing that every one of us approaches the Bible with his own set of preconceived ideas about what it says. It is only after having engaged in the exercise of looking closely at the different ways in which the Church, during various stages of her history, has interpreted a specific issue, that we begin to understand the relativity of our own approach.

For our present subject all this means that it is of little avail to embark upon a discussion of the biblical foundations of mission unless we have first clarified some of the hermeneutical principles involved. Verkuyl is very much aware of this. He therefore, quite correctly, opens his treatment of the biblical foundations of the missionary mandate with a paragraph on hermeneutics.¹

In earlier Roman Catholic missiology the hermeneutic problem in dealing with the biblical foundations of mission was of only secondary importance. In the second edition of his *Inleiding tot de Missiewetenschap*,² Dr. Alph. Mulder devotes only ten pages to what he calls 'Bijbelse Missiethologie', and of these ten pages only a fraction deals with the problem of the actual *foundation* of mission. Much more time, energy and space is devoted to 'traditional' and 'dogmatic' theology of mission.

¹ J. Verkuyl, *Inleiding in de Nieuwere Zendingswetenschap*, Kampen: Kok, 1975, 122–124.

² Bussum: Paul Brand N.Y., 1950.

Protestants, on the other hand, have always prided themselves on the fact that they do what they do on the basis of what Scripture teaches. Still, in the case of the earliest Protestant missionaries, the Pietists and the Moravians, very little of a real biblical foundation for their missionary enterprises was in evidence. Wm. Carey was, in fact, one of the very first to have attempted to spell out such a foundation for the Church's missionary mandate. A. H. Oussoren, who has studied Carey's missionary principles carefully, says of him that he listened to the authority of Holy Scripture, that his missionary work was 'founded on the firm, objective ground of the Word of God' whereas the Pietists were much more subjective in laying stress on the misery of the 'poor heathens'.³

Carey's hermeneutics has to be subjected to scrutiny, however. He [p. 439](#) based his entire case on the argument that the Great Commission ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)) was as valid in his day (1792) as it had been in the days of the apostle. This in itself may be hermeneutically acceptable (we will return to the Great Commission) but it assumes just a little too much. For one thing, it assumes that the validity of the missionary mandate can be founded on isolated texts, for another, that everybody would agree with Carey's definition of what mission is.

Let us begin with the first assumption. Carey—like thousands of other missionary enthusiasts since—has built his case almost exclusively on the commission of the risen Lord. Christ has commanded us to go into all the world, therefore it is incumbent upon us to go. When critical scholarship since the 19th century began to cast doubts on the authenticity of [Matt. 28:18-20](#) as a saying of Jesus, this caused a real crisis in missionary circles. It had to be 'proved', at all costs, that this was an authentic saying because the validity of the missionary enterprise was at stake.

The reader should not interpret me as saying that the Great Commission is *not* from Jesus; I am merely arguing that discussions on such issues may be jeopardized by factors issuing from a wrong hermeneutic. In Carey's view mission was justified only on the basis of an explicit command of Jesus. Our approach, however, would rather be to show that a world-wide mission is valid whether or not this was commanded explicitly by Jesus.

In other circles there developed a hermeneutical approach not entirely unrelated to that of Carey: the Bible was used as a mine from which 'missionary texts' could be extracted. Most of the Bible, especially the Old Testament, was undoubtedly 'particularistic' and therefore hardly usable as a foundation for a world-wide mission. If, however, we searched carefully and persistently among the rocks and rubble we would find small nuggets of real gold—stories of pagans such as Ruth and Naaman, who accepted the faith of Israel, 'universalistic' expressions in the Psalms and in Deutero-Isaiah, encounters between Jesus and non-Jews, such as the Roman centurion, etc. Sometimes there are no such clearly visible nuggets of gold; then the ore would have to be melted carefully and the invisible gold meticulously extracted from it via the elaborate processes of exegesis.

I am not saying that these procedures are illegitimate. They undoubtedly have their value. But their contribution towards establishing the validity of the missionary mandate is minimal. This validity should not be deduced from isolated texts and detached incidents but only from the thrust of the central message of both Old and New [p. 440](#) Testaments.⁴ What is decisive for the Church today is not the formal agreement between what she is

³ Cf. A. H. Oussoren, *William Carey, especially his Missionary Principles*, Leiden: A. W. Sijthoff, 1945, 251.

⁴ See also Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 123.

doing and what some isolated biblical texts seem to be saying but rather her relationship with the essence of the message of Scripture.

This brings us to the second assumption of Carey and of, many others who followed after him: that we already know what 'mission' is and now have only to discover it in Scripture. For most Western Christians, Roman Catholics and Protestants alike, from the Middle Ages down to our own times, mission meant the actual geographic movement from a Christian locality to a pagan locality for the purpose of winning converts and expanding the Western Church into that area. Because this movement largely coincided with the West's colonizing of the non-Western world, it was inevitably mixed with overtones of Western superiority, imperialism, power and know-how and with the idea of the 'haves' going out to the 'have-nots'. It is not my intention to join in the popular contemporary chorus of disparaging 'the traditional Western missionary. By and large he was a breed fundamentally different from his colonizing countryman. Nevertheless, the historical situation in which he lived could not but influence his theological understanding. So mission was understood in the typical, activist Western categories of the crossing of (remote) geographical boundaries.

Mission was, moreover, defined almost exclusively as the verbal proclamation of an other-worldly message and a preparation for the hereafter. Consequences of mission, such as social and political changes, were, in essence, regarded as by-products. Other activities of the missionary societies, such as education and medical care, were only ancillaries to the verbal proclamation of the gospel.

When theologians with preconceived ideas about mission, such as those we have just described, look at the Bible, it is obvious that they would judge that at least the Old Testament reveals a 'thoroughly passive character' as far as mission is concerned.⁵ The same verdict has often been made about the Jesus of the gospels: the idea of a mission to the pagan world lay entirely outside his horizon. Adolf von Harnack was one of the first scholars to have come to this conclusion, and since then many others have followed suit. I believe, however, p.441 that the definition of mission which underlies this interpretation is open to question.

During recent decades there has been a remarkable shift in the Church's understanding of mission. At least as far as the Protestant churches are concerned mission started its life as a foundling child. For a very long period it was, at best, tolerated on the fringes of the household of the Church, almost as though the Church was embarrassed by its existence. Since the 1930s, however, mission has gained enormously in respectability. The foundling is now accepted as a legitimate child. The Tambaram Conference of 1938 made the first overtures in this direction; the New Delhi Assembly of the World Council of Churches (1961) finally legalized the relationship.

All this gradually led to an escalation in the usage of the term 'mission'. From being a mere footnote to the study of the Church, the study of the mission of the Church has developed into a theological discipline in its own right. The escalation of the usage of the term 'mission', however, also had an inflationary effect. 'Mission' came to mean—as Donald McGavran once put it—'any good activity at home or abroad which anyone declares to be the will of God',⁶ and Stephen Neill rightly commented that, if everything was mission, then nothing was mission.

⁵ Cf. F. Hahn, *Das Verständnis der Mission im Neuen Testament*, NeukirchenVluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1963, 14.

⁶ In D. McGavran (ed.), *The Conciliar-Evangelical Debate: the Crucial Documents 1964–1976*. South Pasadena: Wm. Carey Library, 1977, 241.

In spite of this inflationary spiral, however, some crucial elements—long neglected—in the biblical understanding of mission were rediscovered. The essential element remained: mission was the Church-crossing-frontiers, but the frontiers that had to be crossed were redefined. Mission, as we understand it now, is not necessarily a geographical movement from those who practise christianity to those who do not practise it, neither does it have to be restricted to the verbal proclamation of the gospel. Mission is, in fact, the totality of the task *God* has *sent* his *Church* to do in the *world*. In this statement everyone of the four words in italics is of crucial importance. The frontiers the Church will be crossing in executing this task may sometimes, indeed, be geographical; they may however be—and usually are—also ideological, cultural, religious, social, economic and ethnic.

What is at stake here is, naturally, more than just the crossing of frontiers as such. Mission is mission only if it aims at leading people to repentance and faith in Christ's finished work of redemption, if it seeks to incorporate those it reaches into the new Messianic community, and [p. 442](#) if it makes Christ's finished work of redemption relevant to the frontiers that are being crossed. Much of the devaluation of the concept of mission in our day is due to the way in which this indispensable concomitant to the crossing of frontiers has been disregarded in contemporary theology.

MISSION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Let us now take a closer look, first at the Old Testament and then at the New, to establish what the Scriptures say about a foundation of mission thus newly defined. As this has to be a very brief treatment we understandably have to be very selective. We concentrate on those elements that are usually neglected in discussions on the biblical foundation of mission.

As far as the *Old Testament* is concerned, it is vital to recognize that a missionary mandate cannot be derived from a few isolated universalistic passages. That this is a futile starting-point can be deduced from a close look at Deutero-Isaiah, who is usually regarded as one of the most 'universalistic' prophets in the Old Testament, even to the extent of incorporating the pagan king Cyrus into God's plan of salvation. Yet in this same Deutero-Isaiah there is a recurring and devastating judgment on the idolatry of non-Israelites.

Compassion

We would rather base the missionary significance of the Old Testament not on some universalistic text, but primarily on the fact that Yahweh reveals himself here as the One who champions the cause of the weak, the afflicted and the oppressed.⁷ This is why the 'I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery' ([Ex. 20:2](#)), formed the cornerstone of Israel's confession of faith. This distinguished Yahweh from all other gods. Because of their inability to do as he did they stand condemned ([Ps. 82](#)). He is the 'father of the fatherless, the widow's champion ... God gives the friendless a home and brings out the prisoner safe and sound' ([Ps. 68:5,6](#)). So the people of Israel are being challenged: 'Search into days gone by, long [p. 443](#) before your time ...; search from one end of heaven to the other, and ask if any deed as mighty as this has been seen or heard ... Or did ever a god attempt to come and take a nation for himself away from another nation, with challenge, and with signs, portents, and wars, with a strong hand and an outstretched

⁷ Cf. also Ferdinand Deist, 'The Exodus Motif in the Old Testament and the Theology of Liberation', *Missionalia*, No. 2, Vol. 5 (Aug. 1977), 58–69, and C. J. Labuschagne, 'De godsdiens van Israel en de andere godsdiens', *Wereld en Zending*, No. 1, Vol. 4 (1975), 4–16.

arm, ... as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt in the sight of all?' ([Deut. 4:32, 34–35](#)). Whereas the gods of the predominantly hierophanic religions laid emphasis on order, harmony, integration and the maintenance of the *status quo*, the violation of which would precipitate the wrath of the gods, Yahweh revealed himself as the God of change, the God who comes to the rescue of the poor and needy.

It was characteristic of Yahweh that he expected his elect to reveal the same compassion which he himself possessed. The purpose of election was service and where this service was withheld, election lost its meaning. Israel's besetting sin was precisely that she interpreted election as favouritism. However, election was not primarily privilege but rather responsibility. Israel who was a stranger in Egypt had to show compassion to the stranger in her midst. The 'alien' who lived with Israel had to be accepted without reserve (cf. [Num. 9:14; 15:14–16; Josh 20:9](#)).

Israel's guilt in this connection is superbly illustrated in the book of *Jonah*, a discussion of which, quite correctly, takes pride of place in Verkuyl's survey of the Old Testament foundation of mission.⁸ This short book has often, wrongly, been regarded as dealing with mission in the modern, Western understanding of the term. Here was a prophet who crossed remote geographical boundaries to proclaim God's message to a pagan people! In reality, however, the story of Jonah does not aim at the conversion of pagans. It is much more concerned with the conversion of the elect people of God: more specifically, a conversion to a compassion comparable to that of Yahweh. What is being castigated is Jonah's—and Israel's—appropriation of God's favour and compassion exclusively for themselves. The irony of the story is that Jonah knows that God is 'gracious and compassionate, long-suffering ... and always willing to repent of the disaster' ([Jonah 4:2](#)), but that it never dawned upon him that all this could be applicable to peoples other than Israel. The missionary significance of this *midrash* does not therefore lie in the physical journeying of a prophet of Yahweh to a pagan country but in the fact that Yahweh is compassionate and that this compassion knows no [p. 444](#) boundaries. As Verkuyl puts it: Jonah reproaches Yahweh for being the same to those outside the covenant as inside,⁹ and he adds that it is 'remarkable and disturbing' that the book concludes with an open question in this regard.¹⁰

History

In addition to the Old Testament emphasis on Yahweh's compassion for the downtrodden, and closely related to it, is the fact that the religion of Israel was a *historical* religion. This, too, has tremendous significance for the foundation of mission. The Old Testament has often been an embarrassment to the missionary Church because of its apparently exclusive concentration on Israel. This embarrassment is, however, due to an inability to understand the Old Testament revelation as historical. History, in order to be history, *has* to be specific. The concentration on Israel, far from being an 'unmissionary' element in the Old Testament, is precisely the opposite. Without this element of specificity, Yahweh's salvation would have been a-historical. A careful reading of the Old Testament thus reveals the enormous missionary significance of Yahweh's dealing with Israel. This already becomes apparent in the call of Abraham ([Gen. 12:1–3](#)). This event refers back to the Babel episode in [Genesis 11](#). Man's attempt at obtaining salvation has failed miserably; now God begins with a new thing. What Babel has lost, is promised and guaranteed in the

⁸ *Op. cit.*, 131–138.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137.

history of Abraham's election. [Genesis 12](#) follows [Genesis 11](#): The entire history of Israel is nothing but the continuation of God's dealings with the nations. Yahweh alone can make history by breaking out of the circle of the eternal return and by journeying into the future with his people, with Abraham out of Ur, with Israel out of Egypt, moving to the nations. Only a historical religion can be truly missionary. If, on the other hand, we discover in the Bible nothing but 'eternal, immutable truths', the missionary dimension will be quickly dissipated.

Suffering

There is a third element which is of vital importance for the Old Testament foundation of mission: it is, I believe, not accidental that what Verkuyl calls the 'universalistic motif' in the Old Testament, [p. 445](#) reached its zenith specifically in the period of captivity.¹¹ This is especially true of the prophecies of Deutero-Isaiah. Quite contrary to what Israel might have thought, it is not in national triumph but in national disaster that the possibility of being God's witness would come to fruition. This is, above all, true of the *ebedh* Yahweh: being God's witness to the world does not mean an aggressive campaign with much verbiage but a silent suffering on behalf of others. So [Isaiah 53](#) reveals both the highest and the deepest dimensions of mission in the Old Testament. In [Exodus 19:5–6](#) Israel was called a 'kingdom of priests'. She was allocated a priestly function in the world. The priest, by definition, does not rule; he serves. [Isaiah 53](#) shows that such service can, at times, consist in innocent suffering for the sake of others. The priest himself becomes, as it were, the sacrifice which he brings to the altar.

This happens at a time in history when Israel was, politically speaking, entirely insignificant. She appeared to have failed miserably in playing a role in the world. She had become the scum of the earth, 'whom every nation abhors, the slave of tyrants' ([Isa. 49:7](#)). Yet, precisely at this moment of deepest humiliation (and self-humbling!), kings and princes will draw nearer to Israel 'because of the Holy one of Israel who has chosen you' ([Isa. 49:7](#)).

Conduct

This leads us, almost naturally, to the last of the four elements in the Old Testament dimension of mission I would like to highlight: that Israel is not the subject of mission, but Yahweh himself. The 'proclamation' is not the spoken word, but the events concerning the *ebedh*. He is brought into the court of law in order to witness in the law-suit between Yahweh and the nations. He is, however, a most extraordinary and, in fact, apparently useless witness, for he can neither talk nor see ([Isa. 42:18–20](#); [48:8–13](#))! The whole point seems to be that the message of this dumb and blind witness does not consist in verbal proclamation but that merely by his existence and his experience he is a witness for Yahweh. His mission consists in his being there for others.

This has sometimes been referred to as the 'centripetal' dimension of mission in the Old Testament whereas, in the New Testament, mission would be conceived of as 'centrifugal': If the Old Testament people of [p. 446](#) God are obedient, the pagans will flock to Jerusalem, attracted by the light that shines forth from the holy city. In the New Testament, on the other hand, the emphasis is on going out from Jerusalem into all the world (cf. [Acts 1:8](#)).

Undoubtedly there is an element of truth in this distinction. The problem comes, however, when we—as Westerners tend to do—define mission in exclusively centrifugal

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

categories (a definition of mission we have already challenged), and when we argue that the 'centripetal' is absent from the New Testament. This is by no means the case, as D. van Swigchem has shown in his *Het missionair karakter van de christelijke gemeente volgens de Brieven van Paulus en Petrus*.¹²

The four elements of an Old Testament missionary foundation we have selected—out of many—are all very closely inter-related. The God who has compassion on all is also pre-eminently the God of history, who uses the specific history of Israel as the arena for his dealings with the nations. He is also, as the compassionate One and the God of history, the One who turns human categories upside down: he uses the weak and the downtrodden as his instruments to draw the world to him. Ultimately, therefore, it is not Israel who is the missionary agent but God himself.

MISSION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

When we now turn to the New Testament we make the remarkable discovery that all four elements essential to an Old Testament understanding of mission can be found here as well. Far too often discussion about the Church's missionary mandate were made dependent upon the question about the attitude of the historical Jesus to the Gentile mission. While this question is undoubtedly of theological significance for our understanding of the ministry of Jesus, it is of no more than secondary importance in our present investigation about the biblical foundation of mission. There would have been a post-Easter Gentile mission even if Jesus had never been in contact with non-Jews and never said anything about them. That he *did* meet non-Jews and *did* say some surprising things about them should not be interpreted as a *motive* for the Church to engage in a Gentile mission but as a *consequence* of the essentially missionary dimension of God's revelation in him. P. 447

Compassion

As in the Old Testament, one of the key words for understanding the New Testament's essentially missionary character, is the word *compassion*. Jesus' conduct in no way confirmed Jewish piety as expounded by the Pharisees. Unlike them he did not gather disciples so that they might learn the *torah* from him. On the contrary, he questioned traditional Jewish values at crucial points and he did this especially by turning to the outcasts of society. To them he proclaimed the possibility of a new life on the basis of the love of God.

It is remarkable to note how the people to whom Jesus turned are referred to in the gospels. They are called the poor, the blind, the lame, the lepers, the hungry, sinners, those who weep, the sick the little ones, the widows, the captives, the persecuted, the downtrodden, the least, the last, those who are weary and heavily burdened, the lost sheep. It is also significant that, whereas all these designations suggest boundless compassion, the Pharisees referred to the same categories of people derogatorily as 'the rabble who know nothing of the law'.

Jesus' love and service acknowledges no bounds. He mixes with taxcollectors, disreputable women and other shady characters. He even enters into the homes of pagans. He tells the story of the lost son, in which he undercuts all human righteousness by works and all pride of achievement, but he also tells the parable of the good Samaritan

¹² Kampen: Kok, 1955.

in which he denounces all Jewish national self-righteousness and pride of descent. In his sermon in Nazareth he explicitly says:

He sent me to preach the Good News to the poor,
tell prisoners that they are prisoners no more,
tell blind people that they can see
and set the down-trodden free,
and go tell everyone
the news that the Kingdom of God has come.

([Luke 4:18-20](#))

In the ensuing dispute he challenges the Nazareth synagogue with the stories of God's universal compassion in the Old Testament.

In all this he categorically calls his disciples to the same kind of boundless compassion. After the parable of the Good Samaritan he asks the lawyer: 'Who of these three, do you think, was neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?' And the lawyer had to admit grudgingly: 'It was the man who had compassion on him' ([Luke 10:36](#)).

Jesus sharpens and radicalizes the ethical demands of the *torah* and p. 448 concentrates all these demands in the command to love: more specifically, in the command to love the *enemy* (cf. [Matt. 5:44](#)). This kind of love excludes every vestige of vengeance in the disciple's heart. I therefore believe that Joachim Jeremias quite correctly attributes the cause of the dispute, which followed upon Jesus' Nazareth sermon, to the fact that he dared to omit the reference in [Isa. 61:2](#) to the 'day of the vengeance of our God'.¹³ In the preaching of the period it was especially on these words that the emphasis was laid. In fact, any truly Jewish preacher would read this passage with the primary purpose of using it as basis for an exposition of the coming vengeance of the Lord on Israel's enemies. And now Jesus deliberately stops short of the announcement about vengeance! How unimaginable! To read only the portion about grace, not the portion about vengeance! This was unforgiveable, especially as it implied that the same attitude would be expected of his followers.

Jeremias points out that the same occurs elsewhere as well. In Jesus' reply to John the Baptist ([Matt. 11:5-6](#); [Luke 7:22-23](#)) he quotes freely three passages in Isaiah ([29:18-19](#); [35:5-6](#); [61:1-2](#)). What is significant is that in each of these passages there is an explicit reference to the wrath of God while Jesus omits these references. Martin Hengel is therefore correct when he asserts that the proclamation of Jesus hardly had less 'missionary' character than that of his disciples after Easter. He also, with approval, quotes Erich Grässer who says: 'The Church saw in Jesus the archetype of the missionary'.¹⁴

History

Another important aspect in the New Testament missionary dimension lies in its historical character. As is the case with the Old Testament, missionary enthusiasts have been embarrassed about the absence of absolutely clear references to a Gentile mission in the stories about Jesus of Nazareth. This embarrassment reveals an inability to appreciate the historical character of God's revelation. Once again: history is specific, not general. Here it is specific in the extreme: God's revelation was incarnated and

¹³ Joachim Jeremias, *Jesu Verheissung für die Völker*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1956, 35-39.

¹⁴ Martin Hengel, 'Die Ursprünge der christlichen Mission', *New Testament Studies*, No. 1, Vol. 18 (1971), 35, 36.

concentrated in the history of this Man. Yet this in no way suggested that the rest of humanity was left [p.449](#) untouched. On the contrary: God was touching humanity through this Man, he 'was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' ([2 Cor. 5:19](#)).

History is moreover, by definition, an unfolding. It contains the idea of *καίρoι*, of fateful and decisive moments which inaugurate new, hitherto unknown events. And the gospel stories are straining towards the unfolding of the new events. Verkuyll puts it well: all Jesus' encounters with non-Jews vibrate with the holy impatience of him, who, while temporarily limiting himself to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, is yearning for the day when salvation will in its fulness go out to the nations.¹⁵

And so it was. The first advances towards a Gentile mission proceeded from the 'Hellenistic' groups within Jewish Christianity. To them this was the natural consequence of their understanding of the ministry of Jesus within the situation of contact with Gentiles in which they lived. They did not need a missionary command to engage in mission. In fact, what has become known as the Great Commission ([Matt. 28:18-20](#)) is no missionary command in the strict sense of the word. Verse [19](#) has usually been translated as though the real activity of the disciples was to be the 'going' into all the world. The Church has therefore understood [Matt. 28:28-20](#) almost exclusively in geographical categories. In reality, however, *πορευθέντες*, as an aorist participle, is an auxiliary simply reinforcing the action of the main verb. It does not command the disciples to go into all the world. It is simply taking it for granted that they will do this, and so they are told that, while going into the world, their principal responsibility will be that of 'making disciples'. The principal verb of the sentence is therefore *μαθητεύσατε* and its meaning is explicated by the two participles that follow: baptising and teaching.¹⁶

There is, in fact, a remarkable analogy between [Matt. 28:18-20](#) and [Philp. 2:6-11](#). The latter passage also refers to the exaltation and universal rule of Christ after his humiliation and then adds, not as a command but as a logical *consequence* of his accession to the throne, 'that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ...' The historical *καίρoς* for the Gentile mission has come and it needs no explicit command. [p. 450](#)

Suffering

Also the third dimension of the Old Testament understanding of mission is to be found in the New. In the Old Testament, so we said, the idea of mission reached its zenith in the period of the Babylonian captivity, more specifically, in the suffering of the *ebedh Yahweh* in [Isaiah 53](#). In the New Testament the zenith is reached in the suffering of the Son of man, more explicitly on Calvary, where he gave his life as a ransom for many. What appeared to be disaster was, in fact, God's way of victory.

Once again: this has vital consequences for the Church-in-mission. To follow the Rabbi of Nazareth did not mean studying the *torah* under his guidance, but identifying with his suffering. Nowhere does this come out as clearly as in Paul's second epistle to the Corinthians.¹⁷ Paul rejects here the conduct of the 'hawkers' ([2:17](#)) who define mission in the categories of demonstrable success and triumphalism. In contrast to them Paul is a 'captive' ([2:14](#)) who prides himself on his weakness ([12:9](#)). As a matter of fact, weakness (*ασθενεια*), affliction (*θλψις*) and suffering (*λύπη*) are key concepts in this epistle in

¹⁵ *Op. cit.*, 143.

¹⁶ Cf. also Peter O'Brien, 'The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-20. A Missionary Mandate or Not?' *The Reformed Theological Review*, No. 3 Vol. 35 (Sept.-Dec. 1976), 66-78.

¹⁷ See Horst Baum SVD, *Mut zum Schwachsein—in Christi Kraft; Theologische Grundelemente einer mmissionarischen Spiritualität anhand von 2 Kor.*, St. Augustin: Steyler Verlag, 1977.

which Paul has to defend his apostleship against the ‘superlative’ apostles ([11:5](#); [12:11](#)) of Corinth who recommend themselves. Unlike them, he has this treasure in an ‘earthen vessel’ ([4:7](#)) of which his many sufferings ([6:4–10](#); [1:23–28](#)) give ample evidence. Moreover suffering and affliction are *normal* experiences in the life of the apostle, but for those who can think only in terms of success they are a σκάδαλον. We should go even beyond that and quote these words of Paul, which are such a stumbling-block to Protestant ears: ‘It is now my happiness to suffer for you. This is my way of helping to complete, in my poor human flesh, the full tale of Christ’s affliction still to be endured, for the sake of his body which is the Church’ ([Col. 1:24](#)). To the Corinthians he says essentially the same thing: ‘So death is at work in us, and life in you’ ([2 Cor. 4:12](#)). True mission manifests itself only in a Church which agonizes with the victims of this world. The difference between Pauline mission and that of his opponents in Corinth lies in the Cross.

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Conduct

The last element in the New Testament view of mission we want to direct attention to, is that here, too, mission is understood as a matter of *being* rather than doing. The Church does not become missionary only when she crosses geographical boundaries. As a matter of fact, she may cross such boundaries without becoming missionary in the true sense of the world. She may be crossing geographical frontiers without crossing the many other frontiers that count so much more.

We have already referred to van Swigchem’s book on the missionary character of the Christian Church in the letters of Paul and Peter. Especially in 1 Peter the conduct of the Christians forms the basis of all mission. This and this alone will convince the pagans ([2:12](#)) and put their ignorance and stupidity to silence ([2:15](#)). Apparently these Christians do not themselves publicize their faith. The *pagans*, however, ask them for an explanation. Of what? Of the hope they have within them ([3:15](#))! This was so much in evidence that the pagan became both inquisitive and jealous. To put it in Pauline language: this was the way God used to ‘reveal and spread abroad the fragrance of the knowledge of himself’ ([2 Cor. 2:14](#)). Wherever the apostle lives as ‘Christ-fragrance’, something happens to the surrounding people.

CONCLUSION

We have come to the end of our brief discussion of the why and how of a biblical foundation for mission. Our conclusion is that both Old and New Testament are permeated with the idea of mission. There is only one scriptural symbol that corresponds to the question of the dynamic and functional relation of the Church to the world. That symbol is mission. Verkuyl quotes Hendrik Kraemer who once said: ‘A Church which is not engaged in mission is a galvanised corpse’.¹⁸ We have to elucidate this statement by adding: not everything we call mission is indeed mission. Paul dismisses the claims of the ‘hawkers’ in Corinth that they are engaged in mission. They are not, in spite of all their expansion programmes. They are what Hans Hoekendijk once called ‘a club for religious folklore’. It is the perennial temptation of the Church to become just that. She may slip so easily into this situation, without even becoming aware of it. The only remedy for this mortal danger lies in challenging herself unceasingly with the true biblical foundation of mission.

¹⁸ Verkuyl, *op. cit.*, 155.

The late Dr. David Bosch was professor of Missiology at the University of South Africa, Pretoria. [p. 452](#)

African Bible Guides: Preliminary findings of an experiment with African Christianity in Microcosm

Stan Nussbaum

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This article outlines the vision plan and process of a very significant development across Africa—preparing Bible Study guides for the grass root leadership of churches in Africa. They are designed for people who preach or teach every week without any formal Bible training. These include elderly pastors, village church leaders and women and people with limited reading skills. The guides are not ‘commentaries for the sophisticated’ but ‘sparks for the common people’. As with Jesus, profound truths can be taught in simple ways. The guide for [Colossians 1](#) is an example. In Africa they are printed in the vernacular languages.

Editor

A paper presented to the ‘Conference on Christianity in Africa in the 1990s’, for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, University of Edinburgh, 27–28 May 1992.

Since May 1987 I have been designing and coordinating an experiment upon which I would now like to reflect in the presence of such an august company of Africans and lovers of Africa. Because it has intensively involved twenty-two Africans deliberately selected as a fairly representative cross-section of the entire spectrum of African church leaders, I believe it is of considerable significance as an indicator of what African Christianity is, can be and may be in the 1990s. The experiment is still going on, so the findings reported here must be taken as preliminary. Suggestions for refining the experiment or interpreting the findings differently are therefore welcome.

The experiment brought twelve Africans together at INTERACT Research Centre from April to July 1990 and another ten from April to [p. 453](#) July this year.¹ The team members worked in groups of five or six to write ‘guides’ to selected books of the Bible which would be appropriate for the average African lay preacher or women’s leader who has no formal Bible training but nevertheless functions as the preacher/teacher in a group of Christians who meet weekly.

The experiment was designed so that its structure, process and results would address a number of the major problems besetting African Christians in this decade. We will consider these problems according to their sources-missionaries, African culture and the

¹ See appendix for listing and description of the participants.