
New Wineskins for New Wine: Toward a Post-Christendom Ecclesiology

Wilbert R. Shenk

Taking stock of more than a millennium of history, systematic theologian Hendrikus Berkhof asserted, "For centuries a static conception of the church prevailed."¹ Historical Christendom emphasized the institutional and pastoral character of the church. Hierarchical leadership and ecclesiastical tradition reinforced the authority of the church over the members. Theology was preoccupied with the intellectual and pastoral concerns of the church, not its missionary engagement with the world. Mission as intentional witness to the world with a view to winning the allegiance of men and women to the kingdom of God played no direct role in the life of the church of Christendom. When missionary impulses did arise, these were channeled through monastic orders or missionary societies so that the traditional patterns and structures of the church were not disturbed, challenged, or changed. By isolating the question of mission, the church was effectively insulated from the adjustments that missionary engagement inevitably brings.

Since the sixteenth century the missionary movement has contributed to the expansion of the church into the Americas, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, so that the Christian faith has put down roots in a wide variety of cultures and languages. By 1995 at least one book of the Bible had been translated into 2,092 languages, compared with only 60 languages in 1750. The scope and pace of Christian missions accelerated considerably after 1800, setting in motion forces that have reshaped the Christian movement worldwide. Defying powerful inherited habits of mind, this global development demands a rethinking of the nature of the church from every angle: biblical, theological, historical, sociological, and missiological.² This work of revision is by no means finished, but significant contributions have already been made. In place of the static and insular model of historical Christendom, it is increasingly acknowledged that only a *missional* church will dynamically engage a changing cultural context effectively.³

The new ecclesial varieties of this century are emerging from a wide array of linguistic-cultural contexts.⁴ We are beginning to recognize that from this diversity of sources we are starting to reap a harvest of new insights and fresh perspectives on the meaning of the Gospel, the varied ways it is being experienced by believers across the world, and the implications this *reformation* holds for the mission of each church. Although it has become commonplace to say that there is no language into which the Bible cannot be translated, we need to recognize that to be credible, the form of the church must engage its cultural-linguistic context in the idiom of that culture.

In this essay I argue that (1) the church was instituted by Jesus Christ for mission; but (2) with the rise of the Constantinian church in the fourth century, mission was eclipsed, and consequently the church became deformed. However, (3) the modern mission movement contributed to the undermining of this nonmissionary model of church by showing that, in the end,

missionary action cannot be divorced from the church, for the fruit of authentic mission will be new members of the body of Christ. Finally, (4) the evidence that a church is missional will be the quality of its life.

The Purpose and Constitution of the Church

Although the nature and purpose of the church may seem to be quite straightforward, history shows that it has been understood and interpreted in different ways according to the historical period and the particular social, political, and cultural circumstances. It is essential that we start with the biblical foundation of the church.

According to Scripture the church has been sent into the world by Jesus Christ to continue the witness he began. As such, the church is the primary instrument or means of mission to the world (John 17:18). The church glorifies God by declaring his glory to the nations, calling all people to renounce their idols and turn to the living God, and demonstrating the new reality of the kingdom of God in the way God's people live. Scripture emphasizes that the church has a special responsibility in relation to the world.⁵

Although the church emerges only at Pentecost, its roots can be traced to the calling of the people of God in the Old Testament. The basic pattern is set in Genesis 12:1–3, when God enters into a covenant with Abraham and his descendants: "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred . . . to the land that I will show you . . . and I will bless you . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'" The Abrahamic covenant has been called the original Great Commission. This covenant-commission is foundational for Abraham and the people of God. It becomes clear that God's strategy for redeeming the world is to call out a people that will be the means by which the nations will learn to know and worship God. This strategy is based on the principle of the "one or the few for the many" (i.e., *pars pro toto*).

Since the 1940s certain biblical scholars have argued that the Great Commission that Jesus gave to his disciples following the resurrection is essentially an ecclesiological statement.⁶ That is to say, in giving the Great Commission, Jesus renewed the Abrahamic covenant, instituting the church as a primary means of continuing the mission of Jesus in the world (John 17:18; 20:19–23), the one for the many. But the church was not yet ready to be launched. Only after the ascension of Jesus Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost could the church be called into being. The period between Pentecost and the return of Christ is the age of the Holy Spirit, the time when the church is dispersed throughout the whole world by the Holy Spirit with the mandate to call men and women to believe the Gospel, repent, and live under God's reign.

The Bible interprets the life and meaning of the church primarily through narrative and images that describe the church in living and dynamic terms. When Peter preached at Pentecost (Acts 2), he interpreted what was unfolding at that moment as being in continuity with what God had been doing over the centuries through the patriarchs and prophets. When New Tes-

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tament writers describe the church, they do so by using images such as people of God, body of Christ, and bride of Christ. Paul S. Minear's classic study *Images of the Church in the New Testament* has greatly enhanced our understanding of the nature of the church.⁷ In this book the author identifies ninety-six images used by New Testament writers to describe and define the purpose and functioning of the church. In other words, the Bible relies on word pictures and metaphors to convey to us what the church is and what the church is to do rather than giving us systematic dogmatic formulations.

More recently John Driver extended this line of inquiry by examining these same biblical word pictures from the standpoint of their missiological significance.⁸ These images readily cluster into four groups: (1) pilgrimage (the way, sojourners, the poor); (2) new-order (the kingdom of God, new creation, new humanity); (3) peoplehood (the people of God, the family of God, the shepherd and the flock); and (4) transformation (salt and light, a city, a spiritual house, a witnessing community). Taken together, these images describe the church as a covenant community of missionary witness and transformation that moves throughout the world—God's people among the peoples.

These studies yield two observations. First, the church as the people of God is "set apart" because of its special vocation *on behalf of all other peoples*. There are no people to whom it is not responsible to witness concerning God's saving purpose; the scope of its responsibility is the whole world. Second, the form of the church is not at issue. *No primal form is prescribed* that is to be introduced worldwide. Indeed, it can be said that the church is infinitely translatable or adaptable. The church can be established in every language and culture, taking the form that is appropriate to each particular cultural-linguistic group.

The Church in History

Although there is no consensus among historians as to whether the rise of Constantianism was a positive development or not, they do agree that the church was decisively changed by the decisions taken by Emperor Constantine after A.D. 313 that ultimately led to Christianity being recognized as the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380 under Emperor Theodosius I.

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Christianity was transformed from a movement located on the margins of society into the official religion of the Roman Empire, from being perceived as a threat to the security of the empire into a guardian of the status quo. Such a profound change in the identity of the church could not fail to have far-reaching implications. Indeed Europe would be known as Christendom until the twentieth century.

It is not our purpose here to evaluate this development. We only note that once Christianity was recognized as the official religion of the empire, it lost its sense of missionary purpose in relation to the world. The nature of evangelization changed. The concern of the rulers was to pacify the European tribes by whatever means necessary. Eventually, the claim was made that

lands governed by Christian kings were Christianized, and the notion of territoriality was linked to the meaning of "church."⁹ The church was understood to be the institution responsible for the pastoral care of the citizenry and one of the pillars of society. Whereas before A.D. 313 Christians were generally a disadvantaged minority, now as an official part of the establishment, the church played an essential role in the affairs of state.

The long-term consequences of the Constantinian settlement are well known. By the sixteenth century the hierarchy of the church had grown corrupt. The Protestant Reformation challenged certain Catholic practices and doctrines, especially in its great affirmation that sinful humans are "justified by grace alone," not by works. But the Protestant Reformers left intact, among other things, the traditional understanding of how church and state relate, including the assumption that Europe was a Christian culture. Indeed, one of the criticisms leaders of the Counter-Reformation leveled at the Protestant Reformers was that Protestants did not engage in missionary work—meaning sending missionaries from Christendom to other parts of the world.

Some Protestants did engage in evangelization in Europe in the sixteenth century, but only in the seventeenth century did a handful of Protestants begin to initiate missionary outreach beyond Christendom.¹⁰ Since Christendom offered no model of a *missionary church*, these early mission advocates turned to the only existing organizational model of cross-cultural process: the trading company.¹¹ Starting in the fifteenth century, when the Portuguese and Spanish crowns received authorization from the pope to carry out exploration beyond the borders of Christendom, it became a common practice among European monarchs to grant charters for the establishment of trading companies for the purpose of trade and exploration in other parts of the world. These charters, following the papal precedent, included the requirement that the companies hire chaplains to provide pastoral care of the European employees, along with conducting missionary work among the "heathen." As history shows, the companies allowed the chaplains to perform their pastoral duties among European staff and their families, but they generally discouraged or disallowed them from evangelizing among the indigenous peoples. The Christendom pattern of treating mission as an extraecclesial activity that was permitted only beyond the borders of Christendom persisted among Protestants through the nineteenth century.¹²

Mission and Church Renewal

Already in the seventeenth century concern about the widespread nominality among Protestants was growing. Spiritual life was at low ebb. The Pietist movement arose in Germany in 1675, and in the 1730s the Evangelical Revival started in the Anglo-American world. At each step the official church opposed these efforts to renew the church. Yet Pietism and the Evangelical Revival together were the catalyst for a multifaceted process of renewal that resulted in a range of new initiatives in Christian witness at home and abroad. These many new ventures generated resources for the extension of the church to other parts of the world while instituting a range of new ministries at home—antislavery movement, prison reform, Sunday school movement, literature, Bible societies, and social reforms.

The modern missionary movement emerged around 1800. The immediate evidence that a new initiative was under way was the rapid formation of new missionary agencies in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States between 1786

and 1825. As quickly as possible these agencies, often with considerable fanfare, began deploying their missionaries to various parts of the world. This movement has contributed substantially to the reshaping of the Christian movement, so that by 1990 more than half of all Christians were to be found beyond the borders of historical Christendom.

What is little appreciated is the way the world mission movement became a leavening influence (some have called it the “blessed reflex”) on the so-called sending churches of Europe and North America. In Andrew Walls’s telling phrase, the missionary societies aided and abetted “the fortunate subversion of the church.”¹³ Even though most leaders of Protestant churches in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were not prepared to endorse missionary work, the actions of groups of evangelicals—often laypeople—who were committed to foreign missions and a range of domestic philanthropic and evangelistic work became the engine of renewal of the Western church in terms of activity, although not of theology.

Some of the most prominent promoters of foreign missions were men who had been employed by the trading companies or were active in commerce and politics.¹⁴ Using the voluntary society, a legal device introduced into British law around 1700, as the mechanism for recruiting missionaries, raising financial support, and conducting the work, these “enthusiasts” created alternatives to the status quo. In the long term this initiative effectively undermined the ecclesiastical status quo. Over time missionary action exposed a fundamental defect in ecclesiological understanding and practice that kept the church from fulfilling its calling; it also provided a way for pent-up missions enthusiasm to find an outlet.

By the twentieth century the relationship between the churches and missions had changed considerably in terms of formal organizational relationships. The challenge to established modes of thinking came from multiple sources. In addition to the missionary movement that surged ahead during the period 1890–1914, the Pentecostal movement erupted around 1906. Committed to a pneumatically based faith experience and a sense of urgency about world evangelization, in the twentieth century the Pentecostals and the charismatics exerted influence on the wider Christian movement in terms of worship, spirituality, and the role of the laity. Their witness led to a renewed awareness of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Nonetheless, the overshadowing influence of Christendom continued to be felt throughout the Christian church, so that the ecclesiocentric attitude persisted. Notionally, “mission” has remained separate from “church,” and “missions” were activities that continued to be carried on through special agencies or programs. In practice, the long-established churches were content to maintain the status quo. The idea that “the church exists by mission as fire by burning” has remained a remote ideal.¹⁵ The process of re-formation cannot yet be said to be complete.

Up to this point we have followed the conventional way of tracing the history of the expansion of the Christian faith. This history starts with the Jerusalem church in A.D. 33 and then follows the spread of the church from the Mediterranean region into Europe. It then moves northward across Europe. From Europe the faith crosses the Atlantic to North and South America. It continues spreading to all the other continents from this European base. The entire Christian movement can be linked genealogically to one church or the other in the West. But an important corrective is needed if we are to give a more adequate account of what has happened since 1800.

Spread across the world today is another variety of church:

the indigenous Christian movement. This is not a united movement but rather a conglomeration, for these movements started locally with leaders drawn from their own ranks. Nonetheless, these indigenous groups do owe something to the Christian missions. The coming of the missions inevitably set up an encounter with the local cultures and traditional religions that sparked response.¹⁶ Some people became Christians and affiliated with the churches that were organized by missionaries, while others accepted the message the missionary brought but declined to join the “missionary” church with its foreign connotations. From the beginning, relations between mission-founded

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churches and indigenous churches were troubled. Whether one considers groups like the True Jesus Church and Little Flock in China or the many indigenous churches in Africa, the mission-related churches generally treated the indigenous groups with contempt mixed with suspicion. And the indigenous churches reciprocated in kind.

While the two groups share a common indebtedness to missionary initiative, presence, and witness, they have also been separated by a profound difference. The indigenous groups did not start from a formal relationship with missionary agencies; they have never experienced dependency on an outside agency or body. From the beginning, they have chosen to pursue Christian faith in their own way, adapting the Christian message to their context as seemed good to them. They have developed their own hymnody, church structures and polity, and theological identity. In other words, these indigenous churches, all of which have emerged since 1800, represent many new varieties of church.

At this point our conventional understanding of the church needs to be challenged. It is generally assumed that once a local church is established, as a self-sufficient entity it can be expected to grow and function as a viable expression of the body of Christ. The energies of the sponsoring church can be devoted continually to establishing new churches. But actual experience shows that this assumption must be questioned, for it fails to take into account an important issue: church growth dare not be separated from church renewal. The seeds of decay are present in every local church, no matter how healthy it appears to be. What is needed is an ecclesiology that addresses both dimensions by holding church *growth* in tension with church *renewal*. A *missional* ecclesiology attempts to do this.

Missional Ecclesiology

The quest for a new ecclesial vision will not be realized easily. The inertia of the old form is formidable. The new will come to birth only through struggle. It will involve a conversion in our understanding of the church and the role of the church in the world.

Mission the test of faith. Without mission the church dies. Although what we ordinarily call the church may continue to exist as a religious group, a missionless church is no longer an authentic church. The proof of its missionary character will be demonstrated by its response to the world. W. A. Visser ‘t Hooft

proposed that missionary witness is a test of Christian faith and ecclesial reality because of three requirements:

- In the missionary situation the church must demonstrate that it actually believes in the “happenedness” of what God has done in Jesus Christ.
- In the missionary situation the church must declare whether it believes in the universal claims of the Gospel.
- In the missionary situation the church must affirm that God’s Word is not bound to any one culture, and especially not to Western cultural forms.¹⁷

These requirements put the church on notice that it carries special responsibilities in relation to both God and the world. No other body or religious group is defined by these three criteria. When

the church no longer makes these affirmations, it has changed character and has forfeited its distinctive purpose.

Today we have grounds for believing that we can look forward to the flowering of a missional ecclesiology in the twenty-first century, for we have resources that hitherto were not available. The growth of the church throughout the world over the past two centuries has had a twofold effect. First, this development has decisively relativized the historical ecclesial model inherited from Christendom by showing that it belongs to a particular historical period. Second, this growth has occurred in a vast array of cultures and peoples where there was no church in 1800, which has opened our eyes to a conceptual and theological richness not recognized before. Furthermore, the authenticity of these newer expressions of Christian faith has been tested by persistent opposition and, frequently, in the fires of persecution.

Noteworthy

Announcing

Crowther Hall in Selly Oak, Birmingham, England, has been closed. For thirty-five years (1969–2004) it served as the center for missionary training for the Church Mission Society. The decision to close Crowther Hall, despite a growing student body, came from Anglicanism’s need for “more contextually appropriate [training] approaches as, increasingly, churches everywhere throughout the world are sending people in mission,” according to Tim Dakin, CMS general secretary. George Kovoov was director and principal of Crowther Hall, which was named in honor of African missionary bishop Samuel Adjai Crowther.

A Chinese-language edition of *Rescuing the Memory of Our Peoples: Archives Manual* has been produced by the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, Trinity Theological College, Singapore. The original, in English, was compiled by Martha Lund Smalley and Rosemary Seton and published in 2003 for the International Association for Mission Studies. Both editions are available online without charge at www.OMSC.org (Research and Publications).

Samford University’s **Beeson Divinity School**, Birmingham, Alabama, will commence a missionary-in-residence program with the 2005–6 academic year. In exchange for teaching two courses and speaking in various campus forums, the individual chosen will receive a stipend of \$15,000. Those who offer a minimum of five years experience in cross-cultural ministry and affirm both the Lausanne Covenant and Samford’s Statement of Faith may contact Mark R. Elliott for details at the Global Center, Beeson Divinity School, global@samford.edu or www.samford.edu/global.

The Outreach Foundation of the Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee, and Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, Eden Prairie, Minnesota, in cooperation with the Worldwide Ministries Division of the Presbyterian Church (USA), Louisville, Kentucky, will sponsor a mission conference, “**From Everywhere to Everyone: The New Global Mission**,” on October 20–22, 2005, at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. The conference will focus on ways Western churches’ evangelistic witness and missional identity are being shaped by the growth and mission initiative of the global church. Speakers include Samuel Escobar, missiologist and author of *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to*

Everyone (2003); Kwame Bediako, director of the Akrofi-Christaller Memorial Centre for Mission Research and Applied Theology, Ghana; and Andrew F. Walls, professor emeritus, Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, University of Edinburgh, Scotland. Details are available from The Outreach Foundation, info@theoutreachfoundation.org, or Presbyterian Frontier Fellowship, shells@pff.net.

To commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the establishment of a chair of missiology at **Radboud University**, Nijmegen, Netherlands, a conference is being organized for October 28, 2005, with the theme “Southern Christianity and Its Relation to Christianity in the North.” Philip Jenkins, author of *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (2002), will be the keynote speaker. Contact Frans Wijssen, chair of missiology, f.wijssen@theo.ru.nl.

The **Baylor Institute for Faith and Learning**, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, will host the Pruitt Memorial Symposium on “Global Christianity: Challenging Modernity and the West,” November 10–12, 2005. Dana L. Robert of Boston University School of Theology, Lamin Sanneh of Yale Divinity School, and Brian Stanley of the University of Cambridge, all of whom are contributing editors of the *INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH*, will be among the plenary speakers. Proposals for papers are welcomed until May 15. Contact Douglas Henry, director, at ifl@baylor.edu or visit www3.baylor.edu/IFL.

The British Library is hosting a project for Endangered Archives funded by the Lisbet Rausing Charitable Trust. The project is particularly concerned with endangered archives of non-Western societies and may therefore be applicable to missionary archives and related materials in those countries, according to Rosemary Seton, archivist at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. The **Endangered Archives Program** aims to safeguard archival material relating to societies before “modernization” or “industrialization” generated institutional and record-keeping structures for the systematic preservation of historical records. The time period will therefore vary according to the society. Any theme or regional interest will be considered, although particularly welcomed are applications concerned with non-Western societies. For details, visit www.bl.uk/endangeredarchives.

With the collapse of historical Christendom, the church today is a minority in most countries. To be viable the church must assume a *missionary* relationship to every culture.

Mission and the signs of the time. Mission is the means by which God is restoring humankind to God's original purpose in creation. Mission gives history a goal, namely, the realization of the kingdom of God. The present age of the Spirit is marked by intense conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. Mark 13 outlines the nature of this conflict and the way the church is implicated in it.¹⁸ We can make four observations about the role of mission in this "end time." First, the witness to the Gospel will take place in a situation of claims and counter-claims. Many pretenders will proclaim themselves to be messiah, but these false messiahs cannot deliver what they promise (Mark 13:6, 21–22). Messianic options can also take the form of ideolo-

gies and revolutionary movements that claim they will liberate humankind from its present dilemma. The people of God must engage in careful discernment of the times under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Unless the church is clear and convincing in its testimony, its witness will be confused and ineffective.

Second, the kingdom of the world will mount intense opposition, including resort to tactics of intimidation and physical abuse, but nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of witness "to all nations" (Mark 13:9–10) that Jesus is the Messiah. The church dare not make the mistake of thinking that it must gain control of society in order to proclaim the Gospel. God has not called the church to govern the world but to witness to God's plan to renew the world based on the justice/righteousness of God. There is no part of this world to which God has relinquished claim. God has ceded no territory or people to the control of

Personalia

Darrell L. Guder, professor of missional and ecumenical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, Princeton, New Jersey, has been appointed dean-elect of the seminary, effective July 2005. Recently named a contributing editor of the *INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH*, Guder is author of *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (2000) and editor of *Missionary Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (1998).

The **World Evangelical Alliance Mission Commission**, at its September 17–19, 2004, meeting held in the Netherlands, appointed **Bertil Ekström** as executive director-designate, effective in July 2006. Ekström, 52, is a missionary with InterAct, or Evangeliska Frikyrkan, a Swedish missionary society. A resident of Campinas, Brazil, Ekström has led the Brazilian Association of Mission Agencies, been president of COMIBAM Internacional, and chaired the Great Commission Roundtable. Outgoing executive director **William D. Taylor** will continue as a staff member, interfacing with North American mission movements and initiating a task force for mentoring younger global mission leaders. He will continue to edit *Connections: The Journal of the WEA Mission Commission*. **Jonathan Lewis** was released from his role as Mission Commission associate director to become full-time director of WEA's International Missionary Training Network and to focus on MC publications. At the meeting, the WEA/MC changed its name from "Missions Commission" to "**Mission Commission**," which, they said, "underscores the MC's intent to advance its missional and holistic commitments, while keeping a sharp focus on the cross-cultural mission of God's people."

Geoff Tunnicliffe, director of global initiatives, Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, has been appointed interim international coordinator for WEA, following the recent resignation of **Gary Edmonds** as WEA general secretary.

David A. Kerr, professor and director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, has been appointed chair of missiology and ecumenics at the Centre for Theology and Religious Studies, Lund University, Sweden. He is a contributing editor of the *INTERNATIONAL BULLETIN OF MISSIONARY RESEARCH*.

On September 22, 2004, **Hwa Yung**, director of the Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, Trinity Theological

College, Singapore, and former principal of Seminari Theoloji Malaysia, was elected bishop of the Methodist Church in Malaysia. Hwa is also chairman of the board of directors of the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies.

Died. J. T. Seamands, 87, Methodist missionary to India (1940–60) and professor of Christian mission at Asbury Theological Seminary (1961–87), August 29, 2004, in Wilmore, Kentucky. John Thomas Seamands grew up in India as the son of Methodist missionary parents. Known for his musical talent and linguistic skills, he mastered the Kanarese language of South India and wrote many Christian songs and his first two books in that language. Twelve more books followed in English, including his well-known *Tell It Well: Communicating the Gospel Across Cultures* (1982). In his 26 years teaching at Asbury Seminary, Seamands became famous for encouraging students to enter cross-cultural ministry and for teaching future pastors how to develop a church mission program. He was also the founding director of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism, in 1982.

Died. Jacques Dupuis, S.J., 81, of a cerebral hemorrhage, December 28, 2004, in Rome. Born in Belgium, Dupuis entered the Jesuit novitiate before departing for India in December 1948. He finished theological studies in India and was ordained there, received a doctorate from Gregorian University (1959), and returned to India, where he taught theology until 1984, when he was assigned to teach at Gregorian. Dupuis edited *Vidyajyoti* in India and *Gregorianum* in Rome. He wrote *Jesus Christ at the Encounter of World Religions* (1991), *Who Do You Say I Am?* (1994), *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (1997), and *Christianity and the Religions: From Confrontation to Dialogue* (2002). Dupuis's teaching and writing centered on articulating for the contemporary era a Christology that was faithful to Scripture and tradition, while dealing forthrightly with the challenge of religious pluralism.

Catherine Rae Ross, director of the School of Global Mission, Bible College of New Zealand, Auckland, has accepted the position of mission interchange adviser for the Church Mission Society, U.K. Ross and her husband spent time in Rwanda and Belgium prior to working with the Anglican Church for three years in the Democratic Republic of Congo. She previously worked for CMS, 1991–98.

Satan. That is why witness to the Gospel must be carried to the whole world. This claim is of course contested, and those who witness to the lordship of Jesus the Messiah will inevitably be called to suffer.

Third, the missional church will not lose sight of the fact that the mission does not belong to the church. Mission is the work of the Holy Spirit, who indwells the church. As Mark's gospel

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reminds us, "Whenever you are arrested and brought to trial, do not worry beforehand about what to say. Just say whatever is given you at the time, for it is not you speaking, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11 NIV). The missional church will be acutely aware that it is the instrument the Spirit is using to accomplish the mission of Jesus.

Finally, in spite of the threats the world will inevitably hurl at the church, it will quietly draw confidence from the conviction that God alone will determine the outcome (Mark 13:32b).

Missional ecclesiology tested. We can learn from the experiences of Christian disciples who have demonstrated a strong sense of missionary purpose in their particular situations at various times over the past two thousand years. The two examples cited here have not been chosen because they report on perfect churches. Rather, what we want to illustrate is what has been the instinctual faith-response of a missional church to its historical-cultural context.

In the first case we actually know little of the church(es) being described, but the description suggests a church that exhibited an authentic missional ethos. The *Letter to Diognetus*, believed to have come down to us from the second century, characterizes a particular Christian community:

Christians are not differentiated from other people by country, language or customs; you see, they do not live in cities of their own, or speak some strange dialect, or have some peculiar lifestyle.

They live in both Greek and foreign cities, wherever chance has put them. They follow local customs in clothing, food and the other aspects of life. But at the same time, they demonstrate to us the wonderful and certainly unusual form of their own citizenship.

They live in their own native lands, but as aliens; as citizens, they share all things with others; but like aliens suffer all things. Every foreign country is to them as their native country, and every native land as a foreign country.

They are treated outrageously and behave respectfully to others. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; when punished, they rejoice as if being given new life. They are attacked by Jews as aliens, and are persecuted by Greeks; yet those who hate them cannot give any reason for their hostility.

To put it simply—the soul is to the body as Christians are to the world. The soul is spread through all parts of the body and Christians through all the cities of the world. The soul is in the body but is not of the body; Christians are in the world but not of the world.¹⁹

The Meserete Kristos Church (MK) in Ethiopia provides us with a contemporary example. In 1982 the Communist government singled out this church for persecution by sealing all the MK church buildings and forbidding the holding of church services. The main leaders of the church were put in prison, but

the members of the church responded quickly. They worked out a plan by which the entire church was organized into house groups. Services had to be held in secret. Since there was always the possibility of a police raid, such things as hymnbooks were not brought to the meetings. The number of members in each group was limited so as not to attract attention. Women took charge of many of these groups. New converts were baptized in secret. Sunday school materials were produced and distributed. Communication among MK congregations was strictly by word of mouth, lest written documents fall into the hands of government officials. The ban against the Meserete Kristos Church was not lifted until the Communist government was overthrown in 1991. As happened in China during the years 1949–79, the Meserete Kristos Church grew during the years of persecution. In 1982 baptized membership was reported to be 27,440. When the ban was lifted in 1991, membership had risen to 48,056.²⁰ The MK has continued growing in the years since.

Defining characteristics. What can we say are the main features of a missional ecclesiology? At least five things will characterize a missional church:

- The missional church is intensely aware that its priority is to witness to the kingdom of God so that people are being liberated from the oppressive power of idols. The church is consciously discerning and naming the idols.
- The church is deeply committed to the world but is not controlled by the world. In other words, the church knows that it has been placed in the world but is never to be subservient to the world. The absence of this tension indicates that the church has made its peace with the world.
- Mission is patterned after the example of Jesus the Messiah; that is, mission is cruciform. The vision of Isaiah 53 is being fulfilled as God's people *serve and witness*. The cross is central.
- The missional church has a keen awareness of the *eschaton*. In Jesus Christ the kingdom has been inaugurated, but the people of God eagerly await the consummation of the kingdom.
- Church structures will serve and support its mission to the world. Human cultures inevitably change over time. The church must stay abreast of its changing cultural context, which will require the dismantling of archaic forms that impede missionary witness and the devising of new structures that support the mission.

Conclusion

When our Lord launched his earthly ministry, he called individuals to follow him. Questions were soon raised about the way the disciples of Jesus, in contrast to those of John the Baptist, were departing from traditional practice with regard to fasting. Jesus responded by interpreting his ministry in new terms. A new age was dawning, he said, in which the old rules no longer made sense. To clarify this point Jesus told two parables. He said the sensible person does not tear a piece of cloth off a new garment and use it to patch a hole in an old one; likewise, it is foolish to pour new wine into an old wineskin (Matt. 9:14–17; Mark 2:18–22; Luke 5:33–39). In effect, said Jesus, we must pay attention to what God the Holy Spirit is doing in a particular time and place. Forms and practices are not sacrosanct. The action of the triune God expressed as *missio Dei* is authoritative in determining what the people of God do.

The thrust of this essay has been to argue that the ecclesiology inherited from Christendom has been marked by a twofold distortion: (1) Christendom ecclesiology is nonmissional, and (2) it has been regarded as permanently normative. I have contended that the New Testament leaves no doubt as to the fundamental purpose of the church but does not prescribe the polity or form of the church. As the primitive church began spreading around the Mediterranean basin and into Asia, issues arose as to theology, ethics, and missionary engagement. Paul forged his theology in the thick of missionary witness. In his epistles to these new churches, the apostle grapples with the issues being raised in the context of Christian expansion into new cultures. At no point does he address the problem of structure and form. Rather, he focuses on matters of Christian commitment and discipleship.

When we turn to examples from history where churches have shown authentic spiritual vitality, we observe that such

churches have been marked by a strong sense of their identity as the body of Christ engaged in faithful witness to the world. To carry out this witness has invariably required new structures and forms appropriate to the cultural context. Old wineskins cannot handle new wine.

Over the past two centuries the modern mission movement has been the instrument for extending the church to all parts of the world. The cultural variety that marks the worldwide church today is without historical precedent. As the Gospel has penetrated these diverse cultures, it has yielded this extraordinary fruit. The Gospel is the pearl of great price that no human can ever fully comprehend. At best we grasp only a part of the Gospel. By the same token, the way the Gospel is heard and appropriated by any local church will reflect its cultural and linguistic particularities.²¹ What validates these diverse expressions of Christian faith is the vitality of the witness of each church in its own context.

Notes

1. Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 411–12.
2. The pioneering work by Lesslie Newbigin, *The Household of God* (New York: Friendship Press, 1954), shows how ecclesiology must be rethought from the standpoint of the church's missionary purpose.
3. The term "missional" has been used increasingly since the 1990s. However, already in the mid-1970s John Howard Yoder began teaching a course, "Ecclesiology in Missional Perspective," at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary. "Missional" describes the church defined by its relationship to the *missio Dei*, or mission of God. "Missiology" refers to the process of systematic study of missionary action. For a recent attempt to rethink ecclesiology from a missional perspective, see Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998). Note that this book develops a missional ecclesiology in relation to a particular cultural context.
4. See Sunday Babajide Komolafe, "The Changing Face of Christianity: Revisiting African Creativity," *Missiology* 32, no. 2 (April 2004), for a stimulating study of the repeated emergence of new varieties of church in Nigeria since 1846, but with emphasis on the twentieth century.
5. Inagrace T. Dietterich, *The Church and the Reign of God* (Chicago: Center for Parish Development, 2002), suggests that five things characterize the church: (1) the church was founded at God's initiative, not by human decision; (2) the church's God-given mission is threefold: to be *sign*, *foretaste*, and *instrument* of the coming kingdom of God; (3) the church is called to discern and participate in God's vision of the future, not a program of the church's own devising; (4) the church is called to continual renewal of its life and ministry around the "new thing" that God is doing (Isa. 43:19); and (5) each local church must discover the orientation for its life in terms of two processes: discerning God's vision and discerning God's call (pp. 2–3).
6. E.g., Otto Michel, "The Conclusion of Matthew's Gospel: A Contribution to the History of the Easter Message," in *The Interpretation of Matthew*, ed. Graham Stanton (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983), pp. 30–41 (first published in German in 1941); David J. Bosch, "The Structure of Mission: An Exposition of Matthew 28:16–20," in *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert R. Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 218–48.
7. Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960).
8. John Driver, *Images of the Church in Mission* (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1997).
9. Not until the Protestant Reformation was the principle *cujus regio, ejus religio* formalized. Such a principle was the logical outcome of the foundational concept forged by Constantine and Theodosius I.
10. See David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 245–48, for one discussion. The most complete survey of the period 1500–1800 remains Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity: Three Centuries of Advance, A.D. 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1939).
11. For one study, see William Kellaway, *The New England Company, 1649–1776* (London: Longmans, 1961).
12. Official Roman Catholic teaching continues to maintain this definition. See John Paul II's encyclical *Redemptoris missio* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1990), sections 34 and 37. Some ambivalence is evident in this restatement of traditional teaching.
13. From the title of chapter 18 of Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996).
14. Perhaps the best-known example was the Clapham Sect, so named because this group of men and their families lived in Clapham, South London, between 1785 and 1815. This group comprised prominent bankers, lawyers, members of Parliament, and merchants who were also convinced evangelical Anglicans. Included in their number were Charles Grant, a leading director of the East India Company; William Wilberforce, merchant and member of Parliament; and Zachary Macaulay, governor of the Sierra Leone Company in the 1790s. The Clapham Sect supported many of the new evangelical societies that sponsored foreign missions and philanthropy at home.
15. Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London: SCM Press, 1931), p. 108.
16. Based on his unparalleled knowledge of these movements worldwide, Harold W. Turner argued this point repeatedly. See his article "Religious Movements in Primal (or Tribal) Societies," *Mission Focus* 9, no. 3 (September 1983): 45–55.
17. In Ronald K. Orchard, ed., *Witness in Six Continents* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1964), pp. 23–24.
18. This section draws on Lesslie Newbigin, *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission* (Richmond, Va.: John Knox Press, 1964), pp. 38–46.
19. Tim Dowley, ed., *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 69.
20. Between 1991 and 1994 membership increased from 48,056 to 62,445. Grateful acknowledgment is made of this information supplied by Tesfatsion C. Dalellew, a former executive secretary of the Meserete Kristos Church, in personal communications January 22 and February 19, 2004.
21. See John V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* (London: SCM, 1958), pp. 252–53. Taylor approaches the issue as "a question of communication" and brilliantly illustrates how missionaries and Bugandans talked past each other, even though both were responding to the Gospel, and how a strong church emerged among the Buganda. In 1884–85 persecution of Christians broke out, and in early 1885 three young men sealed their faith in death. Persecution against the Christian community continued, but the church only grew in strength.

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