

Anabaptist Missiology: Biblical Foundations¹

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Introduction: God's Mission and Our Mission

Mission was central to the early Anabaptist movement, when much of the church had neglected that dimension of faith because they insisted that the Great Commission was given only to the early church. Anabaptists accepted both the Great Commission of Matt 28:19–20 and Jesus's model for compassionate mission in Luke 4:16–20. They were concerned that people of unfaith become believers.

We affirm that mission begins with God (*missio Dei*—the mission of God). The triune God is the subject of mission, the author of mission. Mission is God's cause, God's work; God loved and sent (John 3:16). God is a missionary God—God sent Christ; God sent the Spirit. Mission originates in God's nature and intention for the world. God acts on behalf of the world. Mission is thus a gift of God's grace. Our message and model for mission are found in Jesus Christ. As David Bosch has said, "Mission is the predicate of Christology."²

1 This presentation by Calvin E. Shenk was one of four papers presented at the inaugural meeting of the Association of Anabaptist Missiologists (AMM) at Techny Towers north of Chicago, IL, in January 2000, under the title "Anabaptist Missiology: Biblical Foundations." At the time of the presentation, Shenk was serving as a Mennonite Board of Missions worker in Israel for six months of each year, and as a professor at Eastern Mennonite University in Harrisonburg, VA, for six months. The presentation had first appeared in an unpublished collection of articles he edited for the Council of International Ministries by other Mennonite missiologists called *A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990s* (Council of International Ministries, 1990), 63–92. Shenk died in 2015.

2 Calvin E. Shenk, the author of this piece, makes occasional references to other missiologists in his text. Since this was originally an oral presentation, however, the citations were not footnoted, leaving the reader without the usual documentation to track down sources. Lisa Guedea Carreño, AMBS Interim Director of Library Services, spent considerable time trying to track down the sources of these citations. We will report her findings in the footnotes. Where she was unsuccessful, we will simply include the quotation without a corresponding reference. As for the current David J. Bosch statement, this is found in his book *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*

Mission is essential to the church. Emil Brunner was right when he declared, “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning.”³ The church participates with God in mission. Mission is the church-in-movement for the salvation of the world. Mission is the church crossing frontiers, bearing witness to the gospel at the borders of faith and unbelief. We need to emphasize the centrality of mission in our day when there is loss of conviction for Christ-centered mission.

Mission is not just obedience to a commission but grows out of an encounter with Christ. Without love for Christ, obedience to a command can become legalism. Mission becomes an “ought” instead of joy, hope, love, and thanksgiving. The commission of Christ in Matt 28 must be connected with the promise of the Spirit (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:8). We are enlisted and led by the Spirit. Mission is more than a humanly structured activity; it is first of all the ministry of the Spirit.

Secularism and pluralism have undermined our commitment to mission. The fear of arrogance has led to a profound crisis of faith in the Western churches. People feel embarrassment and guilt because of some forms of missionary practice. Clearly, we need to make sure that we do not do mission from positions of superiority and power. But some have another kind of embarrassment. Their problem is not only with the *how* of mission, but with the *why*. They are not sure faith in Christ is so decisive that it must be shared with others. Can we focus on mission as the work of the triune God in which we are invited to participate? This understanding will condition our motivation and attitude.

Theology and Mission

If we are concerned today for a relevant Anabaptist missiology, careful theological thinking is required. Theology is the child of mission. As the first Christians crossed frontiers, they theologized. From this we got our New Testament. As Hans Kasdorf said, “Mission theology is a theology of the road, a pilgrim theology.”⁴ If this is the nature of theology, it is important to keep reflecting on our theology. Strategies and methodologies must not be allowed to override biblical-theological principles or usurp the place of the Holy Spirit.

One of our important tasks is theological formation of people for mission. How can we help people to think theologically about what they are doing?

(John Knox Press, 1980), 82. Bosch’s full quote there is “Mission is therefore, according to the New Testament, a predicate of Christology.”

3 In Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (Student Christian Movement Press, 1931), 108. The exact quote is: “The church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning.”

4 A possible source for this statement is in Kasdorf’s *Design of My Journey: An Autobiography* (Center for Mennonite Biblical Studies; Verlag für Theologie und Religionswissenschaft, 2004), 295, where he writes, “Missiology’s . . . greatest challenge lies in its pilgrim-like nature, always on the move along the paths on which the missionaries are moving. . . . It has not arrived; it is on the open road to an open future with a blessed hope.”

Mennonites have not done enough in this regard. In the context of ministry, every missionary confronts important new questions. In responding to these questions missionaries on location often borrow theologies, and they become eclectic in that process. They develop an implicit theology without full knowledge of its rootage or implications.

We affirm theologizing in context, but this must be done with discernment. Often people are not aware that they have borrowed other theologies or to what degree such theologies are compatible with an Anabaptist theology. Responsible borrowing is possible when one knows one's own heritage, understands various biblical, theological, and ecclesiastical traditions, and grasps the culture in which one is working. When adequate knowledge or discernment is lacking, there can easily be dissonance between missionary practice and the Anabaptist vision.

But there is yet another opportunity before us. We have the obligation to clarify the theological basis of our mission initiatives. Two non-Mennonite missiologists, Charles Taber and Samuel Escobar, have urged Anabaptists to be truer to our theological tradition.⁵ Our theological statements are often eclectic. Is it that we do not understand Anabaptist perspectives, or that we prefer and deliberately borrow from other traditions? Our statements often show insufficient insight into the relevance of Anabaptist theology.

All theologies, of course, are selective in their use of the Bible or Christian tradition. Mennonites are no exception. How shall we develop an adequate theology? Clearly it must be biblical. It must be consistent with the whole Christ. And it should be compatible with our tradition. We share much with other traditions, but we also differ in important respects. As we develop a theology, we will certainly interact with other traditions—but let us not shortchange our Anabaptist tradition. We have learned much from others that is beneficial, but frequently we borrow others' agendas, which are not consistent with our tradition: either with our theology or our style of working.

I will try here to focus my remarks on significant themes that confront us as Anabaptists in the years ahead. I have sketched foundational theological understandings in relation to selected topics and then identified current implications,

5 Taber and Escobar, close colleagues of many Anabaptist missiologists, were invited to contribute to the collection of essays produced by the Council of International Ministries called *A Relevant Anabaptist Missiology for the 1990s* (Council of International Ministries, 1990). Taber's piece, entitled "Sociocultural Comments on Mennonite Statements on Mission," appeared on pages 25–33, and Escobar's essay, "Present and Future Realities for Anabaptist Mission," is found on pages 35–41. In addition, Escobar wrote two essays where he discusses the importance of Anabaptist mission theology: "The Distinctive Traits of an Anabaptist Mission Theology," in *Collected Essays on Mission, Culture and Theology*, ed. Mark Greenwood (Fortress Press, 2022), 135–144; and "Latin America and Anabaptist Theology," in *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition*, ed. John D. Roth (Herald Press, 2001), 75–88.

possible deviations from our tradition, and what directions our theology should move in.

The Kingdom of God and Mission

Christians believe that the message of mission and the goal of mission is the coming kingdom of God. In recent years, *kingdom of God* is used more than the *church* in theologies of mission. What are the implications of this shift? How are we to understand Jesus and the kingdom? How do we understand the church in relation to the kingdom and the kingdom in relation to the world? There has been much confusion in the way in which the kingdom of God is used.

The kingdom of God is the rule of God. Jesus inaugurated the kingdom. In Jesus we have the proclamation and presence of the kingdom. The kingdom has a name and a face. There is no kingdom without the king—Jesus. Jesus’s words and works witnessed to the kingdom “at hand” (Matt 4:23, 9:35; Mark 1:14, 15; Luke 4:43). The kingdom is “now,” and the kingdom is “not yet”; the “now” points forward to the “not yet.” The kingdom came in Christ; it will come in fullness when Christ returns. Jesus spoke of the kingdom; the early Christians spoke of Jesus.

Jesus said believers were given the keys of the kingdom (Matt 16:19). He sent out the twelve and “gave them power and authority over all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal” (Luke 9:1, 2). When the seventy were sent out, they were to “heal the sick and say to them, the kingdom of God has come near you” (Luke 10:9). When kingdom is connected with mission, preaching, healing, and exorcism belong together.

The church is part of the kingdom movement. It is a sign and foretaste of the kingdom. The church does not embody the fullness of the kingdom but points to the kingdom. The church’s identity and role are in relation to the kingdom, but the church is penultimate. The kingdom is ultimate. The kingdom has begun to manifest itself in the church, though the church only partially and imperfectly models the kingdom. There is more to the kingdom. God’s kingdom is not the property of the church. The church is always judged by the kingdom of God. If the characteristics of the kingdom are not visible in the church, its witness is invalid. The world evaluates the kingdom based on what it sees in the church.

When Jesus told us to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10), he implied that Christians could make a difference in the world. Jesus’s own modeling of the kingdom suggests that spiritual, ethical, and social concerns are also concerns of those who are kingdom citizens. Jesus invites us to join the kingdom through a new birth (John 3:5) and be his disciples, but he also shows us how discipleship bears fruit in compassionate ministries that point people toward the kingdom.

Those who do not come under the rule of God by following Jesus are part of a competing kingdom—the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of this world. They are lost and confused because they are under another’s rule.

The kingdom of God judges all other kingdoms. We participate with Christ in the ongoing struggle between God’s kingdom and the powers of darkness. Principalities and powers will eventually give way to this kingdom. The kingdom is in conflict with national security, the pride of ethnocentrism, and competing ideologies and religions.

At the same time, Christians confront other kingdoms with the radical claims of God’s kingdom. Without losing sight of the kingdom, we seek to identify with people in their struggles and work for more humaneness, yet never expecting to bring about a new social order known as the kingdom of God. We are not naive about utopian schemes for social order, because we know the power of sin. Changing society was not the primary goal of Anabaptists. No human effort can bring the kingdom of God. But the claims of God’s kingdom of righteousness, when witnessed to, can be signs of what God intends for the universe and an invitation for persons to join that kingdom. A theology of the kingdom demands that we think clearly about its implications:

1. The kingdom of God is the foundation for a more holistic view of mission. If God’s reign is concerned with all aspects of life, mission includes concern for both spiritual and material welfare. And the kingdom of God enables us to think more broadly than the mere privatization of faith. The kingdom is more than the inner rule of God in the moral and spiritual disposition of the soul. Kingdom helps us bring together God’s relationship to persons and society.
2. We must emphasize that one does not become a member of the kingdom by experiencing the signs. Liberation from oppression is not itself the door to the kingdom. The signs are designed to lead one to make a commitment to the king’s rule by receiving forgiveness and becoming a disciple.
3. While the kingdom and the church are not identical, they should not be separated. If the church is a messianic community, the presence and power of God’s rule must be seen in its life. Is the church credible and functioning as a sign? How will the kingdom of God as the final goal of history affect the church’s mission now?
4. We are often told to look at God’s activity in history and name him there. This can easily lead to a definition of the kingdom of God that is too wide. God’s presence in creation and in secular history (sovereignty) should not be confused with God’s presence in salvation history. God’s kingdom is more than God’s providence as expressed in love and righteousness. The kingdom should not be separated from God’s saving action, God’s rule over people’s lives.

5. The kingdom of God is not achieved through mere transformations in the historical process. Human history does not evolve into the kingdom of God. We do not introduce God's kingdom by our social programs. Secular movements may bring greater freedom and a fuller humanity, but the liberating rule of God in Christ is more than a humane sociopolitical program.
6. We must keep the message of the kingdom and the person of Jesus together. As Lesslie Newbigin said, "When the message of the kingdom is divorced from the Person of Jesus, it becomes a program or an ideology, but not a gospel."⁶

Christology and Mission

Our understanding of the person and work of Jesus Christ is foundational to all mission theology. Such understanding will determine what kind of gospel we announce as we witness to the kingdom. Without Christ there is no Christian mission. Emphasis on the whole Christ leads to holism in mission. Too often in mission we have difficulty keeping the divine and human nature of Christ in balance (tension), so missionaries have tended to emphasize one or the other. Some focus on spiritual needs and others on physical needs.

But when we read the New Testament, we see a Christ who both saves from sin and shows solidarity with despairing humans. We see the earthly Jesus and the exalted Lord. Through Jesus Christ we are converted, justified, and transformed, and his life becomes a pattern for us as we become his obedient disciples. Christ incarnate and crucified becomes the model for mission. The cross is the means of our salvation and the model for our life. We should not prioritize aspects of Christ's life. Will we witness to the whole Christ or just the Christ that suits us?

A whole Christ offers comprehensive salvation. When people respond to the saving lordship of Jesus Christ, they experience personal transformation, but the impact of salvation extends beyond their personal transformation and personal relationships. Since sin erupts in antisocial behavior, salvation influences one's social behavior. Christians feel called to work for some degree of social transformation. They believe that the life and death of Jesus can effect change. To be sure, salvation is more than sociopolitical liberation or particular political programs, but those who follow Jesus place no limit on their compassion for people victimized by social sins..

Christians affirm that Christ is unique, decisive, and universally significant. He is the source of salvation. Salvation is not found in human goodness, other religions, ideologies, or political programs. Central to our understanding of salvation

6 Pulled from a longer sentence in Newbigin's *Sign of the Kingdom* (William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 18–19.

is the cross and the resurrection. It is “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). The cross is the basis of salvation. It revitalizes the church and sustains it under oppression; it is the model for discipleship and the paradigm for our engagement in the world. If we ignore the cross, we ignore Jesus of Nazareth.

The cross must be a way of life, not something to which we turn only in moments of particular need. The degree to which we die with Christ determines the degree to which we experience resurrection. We know, of course, that resurrection power is only a small measure of the coming final resurrection. Alister E. McGrath once noted that “the cross may ultimately defy explanation, but it certainly demands a response,”⁷ a thought further amplified by Lesslie Newbigin in saying, “The cross is not defeat reversed by the resurrection, but it is a victory proclaimed by the resurrection.”⁸

The cross is not simply an idea; it focuses on the person and action of Jesus. From the perspective of Jesus’s cross-life we turn toward the sin and suffering of the world. In the face of the powers of this world we wonder if we can accomplish anything, but it is then that the cross and resurrection give us a clue. As H. A. Williams said, “The background of Resurrection is always impossibility. . . . Resurrection is always the defiance of the absurd.”⁹

In relation to Christology, there are several issues that need further clarification in our witness. The issue of the whole Christ offering comprehensive salvation will be discussed later, as will the significance of the cross. In addition to these issues, careful thought must be given to the following:

1. There are many different Christian interpretations of Jesus Christ. We recognize that there is not a single model for interpreting Jesus in the New Testament, because the message of Jesus is contextualized in differing cultures to address specific needs. But this can be abused. For example, some Christians emphasize the Synoptic Gospels and not the Johannine literature or Paul’s epistles, and other Christians do just the opposite. The Synoptic Gospels, which describe Jesus’s life and ministry, are used to speak mainly of the humanity of Jesus, whereas Paul and John’s writings focus more on Christ’s divine lordship and his provision of salvation. The Synoptic Gospels are said to have a “low” Christology and Paul and John’s writings a “high” Christology. Can we let our witness to Christ be informed by the full range of views of Christ in scripture?

7 Alister E. McGrath, *The Mystery of the Cross* (Academie Books, 1988), 188–189.

8 Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (William B. Eerdmans, 1986), 127.

9 Two sentences pulled from a longer statement in H. A. Williams, *True Resurrection* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), 57.

2. In some circles there is a tendency to speak more of the Cosmic Christ (John 1:1–18; Col 1:15–20) than of the incarnate and crucified Christ. Christ, it is asserted, is not only the head of the church but also of the cosmos. The Cosmic Christ is said to be at work in the best of other religions or in liberating sociopolitical movements. We are asked to concentrate on how all things are being united in him in the face of the pluralisms of our time (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20). We don't deny that Christ is head of the church and cosmos, but only in the church is his headship recognized. By what criteria do we discern when we have found Christ in the cosmos? Let us never separate the Cosmic Christ from the incarnate and crucified Christ. They are held together in John 1:1–18 and Col 1:15–20. The Cosmic Christ does not work inconsistently with Jesus of Nazareth. The incarnate Christ (Jesus) interprets the Cosmic Christ, not the other way around.
3. It is important to understand Christology in relation to Trinity. Mission is rooted in the triune being of God. If any of the persons of the Trinity are taken in isolation, the meaning of mission is distorted. Lesslie Newbigin insists that we recover the Trinity and participate in the work of the triune God. Trinitarian theology is the only way to have a whole monotheism. Neglect of the Trinity leads to theocentric understandings that minimize Jesus.¹⁰ In an effort to be more accepting of religious pluralism, some have contended that Christocentrism is a stumbling block and that we need to move to theocentrism. It is suggested that if all people focus on God, we can have a “Copernican Revolution” and be more accepting of one another because all religions are then equal. But what kind of theocentrism do we have if Christological understandings are diminished? God is revealed in Christ and deals with the world through Christ. A theocentrism that marginalizes Christ cuts the heart out of mission.
4. An opposite and equal danger arises when we develop a Christomonism that speaks only or primarily of Jesus Christ with little reference to the Father or the Spirit. This can be an impediment in witness to Jews and Muslims, in particular, because their belief that Christians worship more than one God seems to be confirmed.

The Holy Spirit and Mission

A trinitarian understanding of mission requires an adequate doctrine of the Holy Spirit. The church was drawn together by the Spirit at Pentecost and launched on

¹⁰ For more on Newbigin's view of the Trinity, see *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (William B Eerdmans, 1995), esp. chapter 3 (pp. 19–29) and page 65.

its mission by the Spirit (Acts). It's the Spirit who calls to mission, enables mission, and prepares the way for mission. The Spirit converts, equips the church with gifts, guides the church into truth, and sanctifies in holiness. The Spirit is the pledge and guarantee of our kingdom inheritance (2 Cor 1:22; Eph 1:14). The Spirit guides and goes before the church. Since the Spirit is sovereign over mission, the church must follow where the Spirit leads. Mission is not what the church does, but what the Spirit does.

Spirituality for mission comes by revitalization from the Spirit. We need to depend upon the Spirit to touch people. The Spirit draws people from unbelief to belief and responds to human hungers. The Spirit convicts of sin, draws to Christ, and transforms lives in accordance with the teachings of Jesus. As we "walk in the Spirit" we are changed radically. But without the tenderness of the Spirit, radical Christian faith either cannot be maintained or becomes harsh. Only the Spirit produces the sensitivity that recommends radical faith. We can only be confident and hopeful as we trust the Spirit's work to compensate for our weakness. The church has been faithful in the midst of opposition and persecution by the enabling Spirit. Many signs and wonders testify to the work of the Spirit in encounter with kingdoms that are in conflict with God's kingdom. The Spirit penetrates and dethrones alien spiritual realities.

Mennonites often fail to recognize the importance of the work of the Spirit in the Anabaptist movement. Anabaptism then becomes an ideology. Sometimes the work of the Spirit becomes routinized or institutionalized, maybe even predictable but lacking power. The forms are frozen and the life is gone. Yet the Spirit can subvert our plans. Do we welcome what Wilbert Shenk calls the "subversion of the Spirit"? Renewal often comes at the margins; the Spirit works at the creative edges. The two-thirds world is frequently more open to the surprise of the Spirit, perhaps because there is more dependence or emphasis on the movement of the Spirit than on the church as an institution.

Going forward, the church will face crucial issues in relation to the theology of the Holy Spirit and mission. These issues include the following:

5. We have become increasingly aware of the need for spirituality in mission. There are spiritual dimensions to evangelism, church formation, and ministries of social action. The charismatic movement is one response to this felt need. We have learned anew to be open to the surprise of the Spirit and the subversion of the Spirit. But sometimes there have been unnecessary "schisms" of the Spirit! We need a theology of the Spirit that does not lead to schism in the body. We need to be more open to charismatic expressions but broaden the meaning of *charismatic* if we are to be faithful to the whole New Testament. *Charismatic* has been too narrowly defined when a particular definition has been used as the norm for evaluating other legitimate expressions. More at-

- tention will need to be given to the relationship of spiritual renewal and radical faith. Can Anabaptists help to bridge this gap?
6. Power evangelism has recently established itself in our theological vocabulary. Often the church was more “truth conscious” than “power conscious.” We had message centeredness but saw little power encounter. Signs and wonders, healings and exorcisms are a needed corrective to this imbalance. We have come to understand anew the Spirit’s confrontation with demonic personalities and structures. We have learned not to underestimate the power of evil in confrontation with the kingdom of God, because when God’s kingdom is present evil raises its head in new ways. But when we emphasize power, new temptations lurk close by.
 7. We can be overconfident in predicting the power of the Spirit or diminish the surprise of the Spirit by institutionalizing the forms of power. Do we unknowingly seek to coerce the Spirit? Do we want to be in control instead of submitting to God? If the kingdom is “now” but “not yet,” are we to expect “now” all the manifestations of power that Jesus experienced? We can expect too little or too much from the Spirit. The *Manila Manifesto* strikes a helpful note when it suggests that “We reject skepticism which denies miracles and the presumption which demands them, both the timidity which shrinks from the fullness of the Spirit and the triumphalism which shrinks from the weakness in which Christ’s power is made perfect.”¹¹ We should not deny miracles nor demand them. We need to live with expectancy and openness to God’s surprise, always trusting God’s sovereignty. Let’s remember also that there are multiple kinds of power—the power of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of ethics, of suffering. Very little is heard of suffering in many power theologies.
 8. Power encounter is frequently spoken of in terms of “spiritual warfare.” Spiritual warfare takes place when the Spirit confronts principalities and powers and when we put on the armor of God against such powers (Eph 6). But when we speak of warfare, a measure of humility is required. We are not so self-confident that we can “name it and claim it.” We too often seek immediate results. If we know that Jesus is greater than all other powers, we can *trust* the Spirit of Jesus. Without trust, warfare can lead to arrogance. Unless our spirit is sensitized by the Spirit of God, we can so easily regard the non-Christian as the enemy. All spiritual warfare must be tempered by the cross and sacrificial love, or it becomes a triumphalist program that is counter to the kingdom.

11 *The Manila Manifesto: An Elaboration of The Lausanne Covenant Fifteen Years Later* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1989), 18.

9. There are theologies of the Spirit that suggest our primary task is to identify where the Spirit is working in the world, particularly in life-giving elements of religious or political systems. It is said that the Spirit is at work in ways that surpass human understanding. The inference is that such work of the Spirit is not confined to our understanding of the work of Christ. Since the Spirit is at work everywhere, we are told to join with the Spirit in missions and de-emphasize preaching, evangelism, and nurturing the church.
10. We are confident that the Spirit goes before us into mission and leads us into mission. Of course, there is much about the Spirit's work that we do not fully grasp, but we can be sure that the Spirit sent by the Father is eager to bear witness to the Father's revelation in the Son. According to the New Testament, the Spirit makes the person and work of Christ present in the world. The Spirit magnifies Christ by bringing to the knowledge of all people what God has done in Christ. The Spirit does not supersede Christ. Rather, the mission of the Son continues in the mission of the Spirit. The work of the Spirit is complementary to that of Christ, not an adversary that competes with Christ by bringing another agenda. When the Spirit moves before us in witness, we should expect to see the Spirit working in surprising ways, but this should invite us to witness to the fullness in Christ, not preclude such witness. We need to discern where the Spirit is working and exalt the person of Christ. Indeed, it is in witnessing to Christ that we often discover where the Spirit is working. A trinitarian understanding of mission helps us discern where the Spirit is working and where there are movements that must be rejected because the spirit is anti-Christ. We do not define Christ on the basis of the presumed workings of the Spirit. Our Christology determines what is truly of the Spirit.
11. While remaining open to the mysterious workings of the Spirit, let us not separate the Spirit from the Trinity. Perhaps the Cornelius experience (Acts 10) can be a trinitarian model for mission. Cornelius had awareness of God, and he was moved by the Spirit, but he needed to hear Peter declare the message of Christ to come to a full understanding of salvation. The responsibility of the Peters may be a more important question than knowing precisely how and where the Spirit is at work.

The Church and Mission

Anabaptists believe the church is at the center of mission and that mission is central to the nature of the church. The church is a foretaste, a sign and exhibit of the kingdom. A church that is not a sign of the kingdom is a countersign to the kingdom. The church is the body of Christ, the people of God, a community

of believers. A believers' church witnesses to people that they might believe. Believers are not detached individuals; the gospel creates churches, not just new individuals. We reject the idea that one can believe in Christ and not believe in the church.

The primary manifestation of Christ is in the community. We don't deny Christ's sovereign power in history, but the focal point of his action is in the church. We must emphasize the church as the corporate embodiment of salvation. A new quality of whole life in Christ is attractive when it is embodied in the church. The being of the church is crucial. A reconciled fellowship is part of the good news.

The church is more than a platform or tool for achieving something else. Liberals use the church for social action and evangelicals use the church for evangelism. But the new social reality is itself a challenge for individuals and societies to be transformed.

H. W. Gensichen spoke of the two aspects of mission as "dimension" and "intention."¹² The dimensional quality (being) of the church as community must precede intention (witness beyond); intention can only exist and be sustained on the basis of dimension. This requires dynamic interaction between dimension and intention so that the church, which is the product of mission, is also the instrument for mission. The church is the center of God's agenda for redemption. The church is a community in mission, a movement more than an institution. The church is in mission by its very nature, not just on the basis of some specific texts. If a church is not a sending church, it is not the church of Jesus Christ.

Evangelism calls people to a radically new community. It is concerned that a peoplehood be formed, not just that individuals assent to Christ. That peoplehood will not be a perfect community. Indeed, it is often a failing community, but it is a community that has learned to depend upon grace and forgiveness. Evangelism calls people to discipleship within community. The church as community will differ from place to place, from society to society, and from culture to culture.

God works through the church in the world. This church-centered approach holds that the church, not the world, is the locus of God's mission, that it is primarily the church that sets the agenda, not the world. The church lives in solidarity with all humankind and serves in the world, but it cannot lose sight of the lostness, fallenness, and evil of the world. This division between the church and the world must never be erased. David Bosch argues that the church "can only be meaningfully apostolic if her being-in-the-world is at the same time a being-different-in-the-world."

Church-centered mission believes that every congregation should be an instrument for mission. If the church is the bearer of mission, this means that the local

12 We were unable to locate the source of this assertion.

church must be taken more seriously. Individuals or mission agencies may not be “freelancers” who ignore or compete with the local church. Local church structures will need to be flexible, as is demanded by the character of God’s own action in the world. Churches will adapt to the local life of each area while retaining the true marks of the church.

But our doctrine of the church also transcends localism—regional, ethnic, or national. The new identity in Christ transcends all other identities. If the church is a foretaste of the kingdom of God, it is intercultural and international, as is the kingdom. Christ’s lordship is international, and the gospel is cross-cultural. When the church discovers its missionary nature, it also discovers its oneness in faith, life, and mission. David Bosch suggests that “there is a dynamic relationship between mission and unity . . . it is impossible to choose in favor of either mission or unity. The only possibility for the church is either for or against both.”¹³

Mission belongs to the whole church. Many churches no longer see themselves as objects of mission but as agents of mission in their own right. They want church-to-church relationships rather than the old bilateral links to mission agencies. We need to move away from former understandings such as donors and receivers, senders and receivers, older and younger.

We must think in terms of mutuality, reciprocity, interdependence, co-responsibility, and equal partnership. When we respect each other as equals, we are able to maintain self-respect. We are a worldwide family of God, a worldwide community of discernment. We need to listen to one another and help each other understand the meaning of discipleship. The insight of every community should be shared with the total peoplehood. As mutual partners we challenge, correct, inspire, enrich, and support one another. If we compete with each other or ignore each other, we fracture mission. When we are paternalistic, we fail in love and mission is obscured. As Charles Williams said, “One cannot love downwards. One cannot love when one thinks oneself superior.”¹⁴

Mutual sharing of gifts can enable us to act more confidently, decisively, and wisely. The gifts of human and spiritual resources are more important than material resources. We in the West need self-emptying so that we can receive from others the wealth of their spiritual resources. Mutuality can lead to new and creative ventures in mission. Mission may still be primarily the responsibility of the local church in each place, but when we unite our efforts there can be an

13 We were unable to locate the exact source of this and the previous statement attributed to Bosch.

14 The full quote by Charles Williams here is, “One cannot love downwards, *de haut en bas*. That is reserved to God. One cannot love when one thinks oneself superior—even if one is superior,” from “Antichrist and the City’s Laws,” in *The Image of the City and Other Essays*, selected by Anne Ridler (Oxford University Press, 1958), 120.

even fuller witness to the kingdom of God. These understandings of the church should have an impact upon our theology in several ways:

1. Anabaptists have emphasized the church as community. The “dimensional” character of the church has received a lot of focus. As we appropriate mission methodologies from whatever source, let us make sure they reinforce the role of community in mission. We may be disillusioned with certain forms of community, and we should acknowledge that communal forms change from decade to decade and from society to society, but what are those “dimensions” that transcend cultures and invite people to faith? What kind of church participates in the mission of God?
2. Anabaptists believe that one is called to a life of radical discipleship in community. In much of our history we have found it difficult, however, to be intentional about mission. Others have helped us to catch a vision for mission beyond ourselves. In that process we have been eclectic in the choice of mission strategies. It is important that we continually evaluate our mission theories and methodologies in terms of what they produce. Are they in conflict with our theology of the church? Are they producing disciples? Do they lead to the church? Are they mainly individual-centered or church-centered? North American Mennonites might inadvertently compromise their ecclesiology for “engineering techniques,” which tend too easily to manipulate, calculate, program, or quantify. Numerical success must never be pursued at the expense of ethical concern and other aspects of integral growth.
3. The new community breaks down the old “walls of partition” that are antithetical to life in the kingdom of God. How can we develop methodologies and structures that transcend rather than perpetuate ethnicity, race, and nation? Does our theology prepare the way for mutuality, or is our practice ahead of our theology? What structures facilitate spiritual unity?
4. When we are part of the kingdom of God we are committed to a worldwide fellowship. One-way mission is over. But how can we, from the North and West, balance ecumenism and missionary initiative at the same time? How can we move toward a fuller understanding of global mission? What is the shape of mission in the framework of interdependence? The call for self-reliance, cultural identity, and re-adjusted relationships should lead to power sharing and new structures but not to the demise of mission.

Holistic Mission

Holism in mission is reinforced when mission arises out of the kingdom of God and the whole Christ. Anabaptists believe that salvation is through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. This is good news—the gospel. Anabaptists also believe that one needs to follow Jesus. This is also gospel. Discipleship is obeying the demands of the gospel. One can't separate conversion from obedience. If Christ is in one's heart, he must also be in one's daily life. We seek to follow the message and example of Jesus.

The cross not only provides atonement but becomes the model for our life—our personal lifestyle and our engagement in the world. Ethics, radical discipleship, and holiness are not elective elements but essential to faith. If the cross is central to our theology, we must be marked by the cross. We are called to participate with Christ, not merely to imitate him. Christian faith is more than a truth to be accepted or an ethic to follow; it is to be in relationship with Christ. Mission is calling people to faith in Jesus Christ—a faith that involves conversion and a radical commitment to follow Jesus.

From the Gospels we receive a vision of the kingdom of God that helps to keep the word of the gospel and the deed of the gospel together. Jesus preached and healed and commissioned his disciples to follow the same pattern. Words and deeds both announced the kingdom. When one sees the gospel in terms of the totality of Jesus's ministry, it is impossible to discern any tension between word and deed in his life.

Jesus's life is characterized by compassion and service. He “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Matthew reports that “when he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd,” and that Jesus told his disciples to pray for laborers for the plentiful harvest (Matt 9:36). Later Matthew records, “As he went ashore he saw a great throng; and he had compassion on them and healed their sick” (Matt 14:14). Here concern for harvest and concern for sick both elicit Jesus's compassion. To see need, whether spiritual or physical, and not respond compassionately is unbelief. The opposite of compassion is indifference or aloofness. Jesus's story of the Good Samaritan shows the contrasts between compassion and indifference.

The gospel lacks visibility and credibility if we merely speak it or express interest in the soul with no regard for the needs of the body in specific physical or social situations. But it is not fully authentic if we act responsibly but deny the validity of words in calling people to conversion. Love expresses itself wherever there is need. Love responds when people fall among robbers, and love responds to loss when people seek meaning in life. It would be a failure of love not to invite people to find meaning in discipleship and a failure of love to ignore human need. We are sent into the world as Jesus was sent into the world (John 17:18, 20:21). Jesus came with words and deeds. He invited people to follow him as disciples.

We are eager to make disciples of all nations. He fed the hungry, washed dirty feet, healed the sick, comforted the depressed. We make every effort to minister to the brokenness of our world.

In Acts there is a rhythm of word, presence of the Christian community, and action. This pattern is established in chapters 2, 3, and 4. Peter preached at Pentecost, a community was formed, Peter and John were led outside the community to heal one who suffered, and this was followed by a confrontation with the powers. Subsequent chapters of Acts illustrate the rhythm of word and deed in the context of Christian community. Words and signs were part of Philip's ministry in Samaria (8:5–8). Peter was involved in healing and a raising from death at Lydda and Joppa, which caused many to believe (9:32–42). At Lystra Paul and Barnabas were instruments of healing for a crippled person and called upon the crowds to turn to the living God (14:8–18). At Philippi a girl was released from an evil spirit, and people were called to believe in the Lord (16:16–34). At Ephesus there were sermons, healings, and exorcisms (19:8–17).

At their best, Anabaptists have held to a holistic theology of mission, but we sometimes succumb to a dualism that divides soul and body, spiritual and material, heaven and earth, faith and works. This creates confusion and lack of clear purpose, which in turn causes us to define the gospel too narrowly. What we need is a larger view, a vision of the kingdom. Fullness of mission is something we have understood, and we should not let other people's agendas confuse us. Our task is to witness to the kingdom with words and deeds, remembering that it is not we who inaugurate the kingdom. As David Bosch said, "The light people see is not the light coming from the lantern we carry in our hands in the dark; it is the glow on our faces which reflects the approaching dawn."¹⁵

As citizens of the kingdom, we are willing to do whatever that citizenship leads us to do. We proclaim the kingdom by confronting the world with God's call to salvation in Christ. We wish that all would come to know Jesus as Savior and experience forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation with God. We hope that spiritual hunger will be satisfied with the Bread of Life. We do not forget the transcendent dimensions of personhood.

But as citizens of the kingdom, we are also concerned that the preaching of the gospel not be separated from acts that witness to the kingdom. We who are justified are concerned about justice because the God who justifies us in Christ calls us to do justice. Acts of liberation point to the fullness of liberation to come. They help us understand what salvation can be like, but they are not the whole of salvation. God's kingdom is a kingdom of justice and peace. When we act justly it is a sign of God's kingdom. We believe in human dignity regardless of an individual's faith commitment. We offer the Bread of Life, but also bread. Good news and good works are inseparable.

15 We are uncertain about the exact location of this statement.

Christians do not reject the world; they participate in the world's suffering and struggle. Christian marginality is ghetto-like if there is no solidarity with people. There needs to be a marriage of religious experience and social dynamism. Crucial to our understanding of holistic mission is our theological diagnosis of the world and our theology of salvation. How comprehensive is sin and how comprehensive is salvation? The gospel has social implications, even if social action is not to Christianize society or effect the kingdom of God. Changing political and economic structures to bring about justice is important, but that is only partial. We are also eager for people to be converted to the "kingdom of justice."

One of the failures of contemporary witness is that word and deed have been separated. Instead of having a whole we have divided it into parcels. We then try to distinguish between essentials and non-essentials. But mission cannot be explained under only one category if we take seriously word and deed in Jesus' announcement of the kingdom or the example of the early church.

Theories about the relationship of word and deed provide helpful perspectives but are faulty when understood as formulas or norms. We know that we must become good news before we share good news, that we must love the neighbor before we win the neighbor, that witness of life is the most effective vehicle for the gospel. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right when he said that it was not abstract argument but concrete example that gives power to the church's word.¹⁶ When word is wedded to deed both are enriched and enhanced. Deeds and words interpret each other. Integrity demands that we keep them together. We need a renewed commitment to the gospel in every part of life. Faith without works is dead, but works without faith suffers from the lack of nourishment that sustains them. Those who work seriously at keeping word and deed together will attract the attention of the world. If we are to continue to practice holistic mission, there are important areas that need our attention:

1. It is clear that deed and word are not the same. Reconciliation between humans is not reconciliation with God, social action is not evangelism, political liberation is not full salvation. But word also does not automatically save. Deed and word point to the one who saves. Deed and word are distinct, but they must be inseparably bound together. We must not confuse them in definition or separate them in practice. An incarnational theology helps us maintain this balance. When we separate the two, we are reductionist and make either one a whole by itself, or we develop priorities that become rivals competing for supremacy. Mission is not just deed, one-dimensional telling, confrontation of

16 The exact quote from Bonhoeffer is, "The church's word gains weight and power not through concepts but by example," from "Outline of a Book, Tegel, August 1944," in *Letters and Papers from Prison: Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 8, ed. John W. de Gruchy (Augsburg Press, 2010), 504.

- power, Christian community, or church growth. It is doing, telling, confronting, nurturing, and growing.
2. We must avoid attempts to prioritize aspects of the gospel. Let us talk about the *priority of the gospel* in all its aspects. Is feeding the hungry “gospel,” or is it charity that prepares the way for the “gospel?” Some argue for the primacy of “pure evangelism.” Is it not more important to work at an integral relationship between social action and evangelism? Lausanne II at Manila spoke of “Word and Deed,”¹⁷ and the World Council of Churches Commission on World Mission and Evangelism at San Antonio spoke of “Deed and Word.”¹⁸ Is a different order of priority implied?
 3. While we reject attempts to set one dimension in priority over the other in the abstract, we do develop priorities on the basis of specific situations, and witness is diversified according to the gifts of people. The Good Samaritan did not preach to his victim. Neither did Philip offer the Ethiopian medical care. Sometimes actions are called for. Other times words are essential.
 4. A challenge to contemporary Anabaptists is to keep word and deed together in practice. This is consistent with our theology. When we separate the two or minimize either, we are borrowing agenda from other theological traditions. The danger for us is to make either one a whole by itself. Some among us emphasize word almost to the exclusion of deed, and others stress deeds and seem to neglect word. Each exclusion is equally unbiblical. We need to encourage greater cooperation between our agencies when possible so that present structures do not present a dichotomy inconsistent with our theology.
 5. We must symbolize our commitment to word and deed by the way we allocate resources. We should work for balance in the commitment of financial resources and call out the gifts of people for both. We need greater affirmation for the gifts of each other. It is unchristian either to devalue or deny the validity of the gift and ministry of the other. Given the specialization of our culture, some institutions and persons will engage primarily in deed and others will be concerned for word. We

17 Pulled from a longer statement in *The Manila Manifesto: An Elaboration of The Lausanne Covenant Fifteen Years Later* (Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1989), 12.

18 The full quote here is, “To those who hear or experience a twisted or partial gospel, or no gospel at all: Mission in Christ’s Way calls us by deed and word to share the wholeness of the gospel, the love of God revealed in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ,” in *The San Antonio Report: Your Will Be Done: Mission in Christ’s Way*, ed. Frederick R. Wilson, World Council of Churches (WCC Publications, 1990), 23.

cannot *all* do everything. But we can affirm each other in our respective tasks so that the impact of the body's unity is more apparent. Unfortunately, it is much easier to stereotype one another or ask, "Who is the greatest?"

6. Because of cultural and religious pluralism, deed is more acceptable in certain places in the world than word. Therefore, we must insist that word is not minimized. It is sometimes easier to hear the "cry of the poor" than the "cry of the lost." We may feel more comfortable speaking to the "sinned against" than to "sinners." But we must not distort any aspect of the finality of Christ's lordship. If we are easily calloused in not hearing the "cry of the poor," we are equally insensitive if we do not hear the "cry of the lost."
7. We need to clarify what we expect to accomplish from action. Here there is a lot of confusion. Some wonder why we seek to perfect the world if it is not really perfectible. Why get involved in that which is doomed for destruction? Others seem to act as though the Sermon on the Mount were addressed to the world's structures. Confusion in relation to this issue has frequently led to discordant notes in both action and word. Word and deed announce the kingdom. When kingdom values are lived in the world there are social consequences that impact the structures, but they are an invitation to become part of the kingdom, not a crusade for a new form of Christendom. The church cannot "right" all of history, but it can witness to grace and justice, which challenges injustice. We should not expect too much from our actions. We witness to the kingdom, and this gives us hope. If we focus on our achievements, we soon despair.
8. For some Mennonites action is easier than word. They are strong on deeds but reluctant to speak. Some even question whether speaking is part of our role as Christians. They feel drawn to a silent witness. Radical Christians often have difficulty verbalizing their faith. Have we over-emphasized the need to behave well so people will "see our good works and glorify our Father who is in heaven?" Or perhaps we rightly criticize some forms and manner of words as inauthentic. We may have a bias toward deeds in order to balance out "word-oriented" Christians. We may seek to counter an over-emphasis on orthodoxy with orthopraxy (living ethically) so that we do not cheapen words, but our hesitancy to speak may also reflect uncertainty about the message or equivocation about who Jesus is. We wonder if conversion is necessary. Jesus offers us a word of forgiveness and a model for reconciling action. He justifies us and leads us to acts of justice. When we understand who he is, word and action flow naturally together.

9. The poor are sometimes considered the new “missionary yardstick” (Emilio Castro). In the years ahead more attention must be given to the poor. Our response to the poor will determine the credibility of our theology of mission. The whole Bible is clear in its empathy for the poor; God has a particular concern for the poor. We need to show compassion for the poor without pushing the rich beyond the reach of God’s grace. Christians must respond to the poor whether we bear some personal responsibility for their state of poverty or are free from such guilt. Identification with the poor is not an option; it is imperative.
10. Poverty itself is not a virtue unless it is voluntarily chosen. We should not idealize the state of poverty or sacralize the poor as though they need no salvation. The poor are not saved because they are poor. It is not enough to identify with the poor simply because they appear to be more open to the gospel, for once again the poor become objects. How can we learn from the poor new understandings of the gospel? How does one help the poor without demeaning them? How can one be an advocate? If we are to empower the poor and help them recover their dignity, we must communicate in love and humility. This cannot happen without our lifestyles being affected. Christ not only loved the poor, he became poor.
11. We have seen a shift in the church’s attitude in recent years. We used to speak of simple living and downward mobility. Now we talk about empowering the poor, but we retain our comfortable lifestyle of wealth, power, and status. “Simple living” has passed as simply another fad, but we are “poorer” for it! Are we not called upon to sacrifice some of the privileges of our social class for the sake of the poor? Our theology will not be sustainable unless we concretize our compassion for the poor in costly and specific practice.
12. We need to give more attention to the theological rootage of our social concern. How does Christian action differ from other action? We may never marry our social concern to one ideological position. Liberation, justice, human rights, and peace can easily be co-opted by ideological systems. God’s justice can never be identified with the position of a particular political cause, nor can we completely identify with the cause of the oppressed. Human understanding of justice is always relative, ambiguous, and flawed by fallenness. Causes for justice can be fraught with self-righteousness and self-interest. Concern for human rights can degenerate into insistence on “my rights.” When the church promotes the values of the kingdom in sociopolitical processes, it is not a political party. It is concerned for morality, not partisan politics.

13. God's justice judges all human understandings of justice. Oppressed and oppressor must be called to consider Jesus. Our commitment is not to a program but to Jesus. There is a difference between commitment to a cause and commitment to a person. Causes become ideological. Christian acts of liberation point to the Liberator, justice to the Just One.
14. There are many pacificisms, but Christian pacifism is rooted in Jesus. Concern for creation cannot be divorced from the Creator. It is important that we examine more carefully the relationship between salvation in Christ and our particular concerns and avoid one-sided interpretations of liberation, righteousness, justice, justification, and shalom. Greater awareness of our theological rootage will give us discernment in determining what social, economic, and political tools we can use. Beyond that we have the weapons of faith, the power of the cross.
15. Careful thought should be given to a spirituality for peace and justice. Holistic mission must be concerned for a holistic peace—personal life, congregational life, social life—and in that order. We need to work at our own unresolved conflicts and the “burnout” we experience in action. Christians need a spiritual basis for action that grows out of the presence of God's Spirit. As Arnold Snyder asked, “Do we have a spirituality of non-violence or just an ethic?”¹⁹ He said theology can lead one to work for peace and justice, but it does not help one love the enemy if spiritual resources are lacking. Snyder's probing must be taken seriously, for words and deeds are only authentic as they are empowered by the Spirit. They must emerge from the context of one's spiritual journey and from the worshiping community. Without the nurturing and leading of the Spirit we burn out and our witness dissipates.

Incarnation and Mission

Incarnation is foundational to all mission. Incarnation emphasizes the importance of embodying the divine presence, embodying the gospel. Christians not only have a message for the world but are concerned for a way of life. An incarnational presence helps us not to dichotomize between word and deed. We do not have a disembodied spirituality. We believe that the church is Christ's body in the world and that Christians individually and corporately identify with the human situation. Faith is human-centered because it is God-centered. Witness is never in a vacuum. Incarnation has as its model the incarnate, *kenotic* Christ (Phil 2:1–11).

19 We were unable to identify the exact location of this statement.

Incarnation presupposes a lifestyle of vulnerability and servanthood. This has been an important dimension of an Anabaptist understanding of mission. As Christ modeled self-emptying, we are called to downward mobility instead of mere self-fulfillment. We need to be truly present in people's lives. Passivity must give way to involvement and solidarity. We speak and act from the ground level, not from the top down.

We are not always strong; we cannot have inevitable success. When we are strong, we are dangerous and least effective; we often distort the gospel. Israel was more successful when it was weak; Israel in exile became more missionary. When we are weak—emptied of self—God can use us. We cannot make history come out right; that is in the hands of God. We more often feel like we are “crying in the wilderness.” We do not coerce people into the kingdom; we can only appeal to them. Let us not forget that the early church was a church of the catacombs rather than a church of power. Triumphalism gives way as we identify with the sufferings of Christ. How can we balance powerlessness with the power of the Spirit?

Incarnation is concerned for contextualizing the gospel in the lives of individuals, in local forms of the church, and in specific cultures. Without contextualization in a culture, we live in a ghetto. Theologies will be specific to language, worldview, and cultures. Our faith must be at home in every culture yet not identical with the cultural context. The universality of the gospel must also be maintained, but it is universally valid only as it is particular.

How can we be a remnant on the margin, a diaspora without being a caste (Andrew Walls)? We resist being a caste, yet we must not conform to culture to the extent that we no longer hear God's critique of culture. In both cases we fail to understand adequately the relationship between gospel and culture. The tension between gospel and culture must be maintained, or culture will disfigure the gospel. We want to express faith in the symbols and images of the local culture so that the gospel is illuminated, not betrayed. Since cultures change, the process of contextualization must be ongoing, not just one-time. We need to give more attention to both the anthropological and the prophetic roles of the church. Anabaptists have understood that there needs to be a prophetic word to culture, that the gospel transforms, that the church is counter-cultural.

As people from the West, we are often not open to insights from other cultures, particularly when they challenge our own cultural biases. We speak of the richness that comes to us from other cultures, but we resist change when there is critique of our syncretistic cultural understandings. We are discovering that contextualization of the gospel in the West is becoming more important and that we have done this inadequately.

Incarnation cannot be separated from the cross. If this was true of Christ, it was also true of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles. Suffering love is the essence of the cross. Disciples share in Christ's suffering; they take up the cross to follow. Only as we identify with the suffering Jesus can we have meaningful

solidarity with a suffering church. In many parts of the world the church is facing opposition from ideologies, religions, economic systems, and demonic personalities and structures. While there seems to be a movement toward more freedom in some regions, much suffering remains in other parts of the world. Churches that Western initiatives have helped to birth can teach us much about suffering. In the coming years, we will need to explore in greater depth the meaning of incarnation in several respects:

1. Anabaptist-Mennonites have emphasized a style of mission, not just ideas or doctrine. Phil 2:1–11 is a crucial part of our theology. With our growing wealth, power, and sophistication, can our theology and lifestyle continue to be shaped by embodiment, vulnerability, servanthood, self-emptying, weakness, and the cross?
2. We will be called in new ways to express solidarity with all people, not just believers. Unconditional love to those who do not follow Christ is a significant witness. Special attention will need to be given to the most destitute.
3. If the church is indeed universal, we will need to find ways to participate in the struggles and suffering of the whole church in the whole world. We need first of all to learn from those who suffer and then encourage them or initiate action when appropriate. But our solidarity will be hollow unless we develop an appropriate lifestyle that identifies us with a suffering church.
4. Suffering is not a common theme in missiological literature or in theories of church growth. Anabaptists have a theology of suffering, but it needs to be restated in the face of current suffering. Can our theology of suffering be informed by the early church, our Anabaptist experience, and the suffering church with whom we partner? Martyr and witness, both etymologically and in action, are bound together in the New Testament. We tend to think that whenever there are successful movements, God is at work in the world. But we frequently misread the situation. God often works more in weakness, suffering, and persecution. Suffering gives credence to words and actions. Suffering has led to church renewal and more effective evangelism. The miracle of the church's revival and growth when persecuted makes it impossible not to believe in the resurrection.
5. A theology of suffering will need to include a spirituality for suffering. Here we must learn from those in the midst of suffering. Suffering should not lead to timidity or triumphalism. Timidity minimizes the presence of God, but triumphalism ignores the fact that Christ's power is manifest in weakness. Believers need wisdom, grace, courage, hope, and confidence that the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church.

Theology of Religions for Mission

The relationship of Christian faith to other religions is one of the most important issues in theology and missiology. Other religions have not collapsed, as was earlier anticipated. Indeed, there has been a resurgence of the world's religions. Some of them have become missionary, and some seek to prevent further conversion from their ranks or to win back those who converted to Christian faith. Through mission engagements we have become more aware of other religions and have discovered that many of their adherents are good people. Their behavior can even be an implicit rebuke of us. We regret our limited understanding and arrogance, which expressed itself in triumphalism.

We know that we need to witness in an increasingly pluralistic world. But in the face of religious pluralism and relativism, and with guilt for past mistakes, we sometimes equivocate in our conviction about the truth of Christian faith and the missionary character of the church. This calls for courageous thinking about a theology of religions for mission.

In the history of Christian theology of religions three major positions were developed: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. *Exclusivism* holds that Jesus is the full and final revelation of God and is the only way, truth, and life. *Inclusivism* regards Christ as the unique revelation of God and as the only savior but acknowledges the possibility of salvation outside of Christian faith or beyond the walls of the visible church. But the agent of such salvation is Christ and the revelation in Jesus is normative for assessing such salvation. Jesus Christ is believed to be the center, and other ways are evaluated by how they relate to him. *Pluralism* denies any uniqueness for Jesus. Jesus is no longer central or normative. Christian faith is not truer than any other religion.

Religious pluralism is supported theologically on several grounds. Some have suggested that Christ-centeredness (*Christocentrism*) should be replaced by God-centeredness (*theocentrism*) and believe that Jesus himself models that by speaking of the kingdom of God. A few have moved beyond this to salvation-centeredness (*soteriocentrism*) because of the common quest for salvation. Others emphasize the Trinity as the foundation for pluralism, arguing that the Spirit is free to be present anywhere. Still others believe God is expressed differently in different religious traditions and argue that there are even differences within the Godhead. Some religious pluralism denies that God can be identified with any specific name, form, image, or story. Since there is no objective reality to provide the center, the only center is religious experience.

Religious pluralism does not entirely remove Christ from the equation. Some want to hold to Christ without holding to exclusiveness by suggesting that Jesus is no longer the final revelation or norm but is decisive and normative for Christians. For those outside the Christian tradition his revelation is relative. Christ is then the "pioneer" who is moved from the center to the "leading edge" of the religious

quest. Or Christ becomes a prophet, a guru, an emanation from God, a spirit master, a Christ idea, or a mythic figure.

Proponents of religious pluralism believe there are many paths to God. All religions are equally valid. God is revealed to human beings in a variety of forms, and all revelations are believed to have saving intent. Emphasis is placed upon the parity and parallelism of the religions. Religious experience itself becomes the norm. What is “truth” in one’s experience is more important than “the truth.”

However, when we think biblically about Christian faith it’s clear that the gospel challenged the variety of religions in the New Testament world. Jesus Christ was Lord, and all people of all cultures and nations were invited to follow him. This message was shared with Jews, with Samaritans, with an Ethiopian (a Jewish proselyte?), with Cornelius (a God-fearing Gentile), with “pagan” Gentiles at Lystra (Acts 14:15) and with sophisticated religious Gentiles at Athens (Acts 17:30). On the missionary journeys from Antioch, the good news of Jesus was shared with Jews and Gentiles. Paul refers to the people of Corinth and Thessalonica as having turned from idols to serve the one true God (1 Cor 12:2; 1 Thess 1:9–10). At Ephesus the gospel threatened the occultists and the goddess Artemis (Acts 19:1–41).

The early church was convinced of the uniqueness of Jesus. He was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), the only name given under heaven by which people are saved (Acts 4:12), the one foundation (1 Cor 3:11), and the one mediator (1 Tim 2:5–6). In the midst of religious pluralism and syncretism, Christ was considered the fullness of deity and the one who provides fullness of life (Col 2:2–23). Jesus alone showed us who God is.

The world into which the first Christians carried the gospel was religiously plural. The letters of Paul show that there were many lords and many gods. Christians had to understand what the lordship of Christ meant in that situation.

The early church entered into sustained discussion and encounter with some of these groups and sought to formulate the truth of the gospel in Greek-thought forms. Paul believed the gospel was able to bring fulfillment to their Greek yearnings. Paul did not deny the validity of insights in other religions. He recognized religious awareness of the rural pagan Gentiles at Lystra (Acts 14:8–19) even if they were worshipers of Zeus and Hermes. They could observe the witness of God in creation and the cycles of nature. At Athens (17:16–34), in a more sophisticated religious-philosophical environment, Paul both affirmed and connected with the religious sensitivity that they had by referring to the “unknown God” and their being “very religious.” He interacted seriously with the Stoics and Epicureans. He extended their understanding of who God is.

From Lystra and Athens we learn the importance of assessing one’s hearers, acknowledging correct understanding already present, and addressing the issues. Paul showed appreciation for the truth the gospel had in common with their culture. He did not discount that truth or exaggerate it. He did not

over-romanticize the beauty of other religions. He had a clear position; he was gripped by Jesus Christ. He was bold but not arrogant or sarcastic. He did not ridicule. Though respectful and gentle, he clearly rejected their idolatry. He invited them to conversion. The people of Lystra were told “to turn from vain things.” At Athens he said God does not live in shrines nor is served by gold, silver, stone, or the art and imagination of humans. Ignorance must therefore give way to repentance. Paul did not bless them as they were, nor did he call for a synthesis of the gospel and “pagan” religion. The gospel was more than another theory of religion or ethical system. It was more than following the example of a new teacher. It was an invitation to convert from the past to Jesus.

We need to find a balance between respectful recognition of the insights that people have and the need for turning to Jesus. In addition to Acts 14 and 17, one can note John 1 and Rom 1 and 2. John recognized the light of the logos, which brings understanding, but that understanding in itself is not complete. The logos needed to become flesh. Rom 1 and 2 clearly recognize the knowledge people have of God through creation and conscience, but even that knowledge has been exchanged and suppressed. Knowledge in itself is not sufficient for salvation.

These passages are in the context of Rom 1:16, where Paul declares his confidence in the gospel as the power of God for salvation to those who have faith, both Jews and Gentiles. Explicit knowledge and response to the historical disclosure in Jesus is called for. In the past we frequently emphasized the uniqueness of Christ by denying or depreciating the truth in other religions. Today we sometimes over-idealize the good in other religions and waver in our conviction about the once-for-all-ness of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament announces a new fact: In the ministry, death, and resurrection of Christ, God has acted decisively to effect the possibility of redemption for the whole world. There are different interpretations of this within the New Testament according to each context, but the fact of Christ cannot be discounted. The New Testament writers agree that Christ is decisively important for all peoples everywhere. Jesus was proclaimed as the truth, not as one possible option among others.

What are the crucial issues that concern us as we develop a theology of religions? (Some attention was already given to theocentrism, Cosmic Christ, the mystery of the Spirit's working, and the Trinity.)

1. How can we affirm the ethical and spiritual truths in other religions without surrendering our conviction concerning Jesus Christ? We acknowledge the “search for truth,” “rays of truth,” or “seeds of truth” in other religions as seen in goodness, beauty, spirituality, devotion, and sacrifice. We do not need to reject anything that is true and holy. Given our finiteness, we do not fully understand truth and should not set limits on God's power, but real discernment is required here because we are not obliged to accept that which contradicts the truth revealed

in Jesus. How much emphasis we put on the “seeds of truth” is the interpretive question, because truth is often mixed with untruth. Some aspects of other religions are a preparation for the gospel, but other aspects are judged by the gospel. There are “points of contact,” “redemptive analogies,” and “bridges,” but there are differences and contradictions to Christ. We need to distinguish between seeking and finding in other religions. We believe the search for truth finds its fulfillment in Jesus. Where there is goodness, we believe with Thomas Aquinas that “grace does not annul nature but perfects it.”²⁰ The presence of truth in other religions should call us to relate that to the truth in Jesus; it does not negate the urgency of witness. Truth in other religions is not the expression of God’s kingdom or an alternate way to salvation.

2. If there are truths in other religions, how are we to understand *revelation* and other religions? Christians have frequently spoken of “general revelation” or “natural revelation.” We assume that since humans live in a God-created world and express the image of God, they will have some correct religious understandings (Rom 1, 2). Humans are created to respond to God; they are God-oriented. God has not left himself without witness (Acts 14:17). There is a quest for the spiritual, a universal consciousness of God. But religions not only seek God; they flee from God because of alienation (Rom 1:21, 23). General revelation has been distorted because parts of creation are in rebellion. This provides balance in our assessment of other religions. They should be neither divinized nor demonized.
3. Some move beyond the concept of general revelation to suggest that different religious traditions represent separate revelations from God. This raises the issue of how we define revelation. Is God disclosed partly to some and partly to others? Is there more than one self-disclosure of God? Here we must proceed with great caution. I believe we confuse “revelation” if this term is used for special revelation outside of salvation history in Israel (Old Testament) and Christ (New Testament). Our theological assessment of other religions should not include an understanding of them as alternate ways of revelation and salvation.
4. There is insight in other religions, but it is not the same as revelation in Christ and scripture. The purpose of God’s revelation in Christ is

20 There are multiple English editions of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, so there are multiple citations that could be used here. We were unable to locate the edition that uses the word “annul,” but one version says, “Since grace does not scrap nature but brings it to perfection, so also natural reason should assist faith as the natural loving bent of the will ministers to charity,” in Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Thomas Gilby (Image Books, 1969), I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

to show God's mercy, goodness, and compassion, and God's desire to overcome alienation and restore a relationship. The revelation of God in Christ is a normative revelation. What God has done in Christ opens our eyes to what God has done in general revelation. Revelation in nature, history, and conscience is a partial revelation. We do not belittle that light; we expect to find light and rejoice in it wherever it is found, but we bear witness to the light in Christ.

5. In our discussion of a theology of religions, we must give more attention to creation, history, and providence and their relationship to redemption. How is Christ related to other religions? What is the place of religion in the activity of God in history and creation? It is important that we work at a careful theological assessment of other faiths. Some concentrate more on discerning the work of God in history than on God revealed in Jesus Christ. If Christ enlightens all persons (John 1), and the Spirit anticipates the church's ministry, divine power and grace is to some extent present in creation, history, or providence. We should not use God's presence in creation, history, or providence to diminish his place in redemption. For example, what does it mean that Christ will unite all things in himself (Eph 1:10; Col 1:20)? Is this happening now as Christ works in other religions, or does this happen as people accept him as their salvation? Some argue that Christ is united with each person without exception, even if that person is unaware of it, and that all religious longing is validated by Christ's cross, or that the Spirit is carrying out God's design in history and is guiding all to the fullness of truth. Where is the place for repentance, conversion, and acceptance of Christ? The Ephesians and Colossians passages should be seen in the context of Christ's redemptive work and the church. God purposes the salvation of all humans, but that purpose is not accomplished in ways that bypass the historic event in Christ by which it was revealed and effected.
6. In some circles Christians have moved from "people in other religions may be saved" to "people in other religions *can* be saved." Do other religions have salvific potential? Do other religions express universal Christological grace in less perfect forms? Do we meet Christ in the person who follows another religion? Is Christ the origin, center, and destiny of other religions, even if their adherents do not acknowledge him? Are other religions outside or inside the history of salvation? Does the church have a monopoly on God's grace?
7. Related to this issue is the question, "What happens to those who have no explicit knowledge of or make no explicit confession of Christ?" If God is working in their lives, is it revelation and salvation? Are people saved through other religions or through Christ apart from the explic-

it knowledge of the gospel? What if people, through no fault of their own, have not heard of Christ and the gospel? This is sometimes an issue for Mennonites who emphasize behavior more than creed. Some ask whether those who are doing Christ-like things are really following Christ though not themselves aware of it. On the basis of Matt 25, it is said that what one believes is not so important, as long as one acts correctly.

8. I believe we need to be more explicit about what we mean by salvation and the uniqueness of Christ. Christ is unique, but so also is the Buddha. But *how* is Christ unique in particular? Can we accept Jesus as the one mediator of God in history? We need to explore more deeply the person and message of Jesus and the salvation found in him. We waver in our witness because we don't fully understand the uniqueness of Christ specifically. We believe the kingdom of God has come in Jesus, not in other religions and ideologies. There are no alternate gospels. There is one gospel because there is one Christ. The central theme of the gospel is that Christ reconciles. Even religious people need to hear that gospel.
9. The central issue in many of the questions is the universality of God's grace. We believe that God's grace is present throughout God's universe, but is that grace salvific if it is not accepted? People might be moved by prevenient grace through the Spirit of God, but that doesn't necessarily mean that they have become disciples. Awareness of God or good behavior do not in themselves constitute salvation. Grace is an invitation to repentance and transformation.
10. If grace is present in the universe, so also is judgment. The Bible speaks of God's love and God's wrath. There are consequences in not belonging to Christ—darkness, lostness. But that judgment is Christ's. He is the one who saves or judges. It is not our job to condemn people to destruction nor to give them uncertain assurance. Either one is a judgment, which is not our prerogative. The cross brings judgment on all, including religious people and even Christians. We all stand beneath that cross. Our language is witness—confession, testimony, invitation—not condemnation. Our witness will sometimes be perceived as an implicit judgment, but the gospel must be the judge, not us.
11. Are people then saved outside of explicit knowledge and faith in Jesus Christ? The answer rests with God and not us. We can speculate, but it remains a mystery. If there is such salvation, we believe it will not be through other religious systems or by human effort or merit, but by the assistance of God's grace to those who seek mercy based on the work of Jesus Christ alone. But we have a clear responsibility to witness to that grace precisely because it is such good news, in contrast to all the

- bad news of alienation from God. This is our “operational principle,” explicit in scripture and modeled for us by the New Testament apostles.
12. We in the West are burdened with guilt from the past. In the name of giving up the superiority of Western culture we surrender our understanding of the uniqueness of Jesus. Additionally, we approach questions concerning other religions very theoretically. Can we hear people from other cultures who live in the midst of other religious options? When we listen to first-generation Christians who have left their religion to follow Christ, we are helped in our understanding of the uniqueness of Christ. They can help us distinguish between Western culture and the essence of the gospel. No theological or missiological reflection on this most essential topic can be complete without their voice.
 13. In our concern for a theology of witness, we should not forget the style of witness. We witness as those who have found the gift of grace and wish to share news about that gift. But before such news can be heard, our style must be characterized by qualities that recommend grace—listening, patience, humility, modesty, empathy, and joy. We see the other as a subject, not as an object. Our belief in the uniqueness of Christ should cause us to respect, not demean, the other. Our concern for truth must not eclipse a concern for the person. We do not dilute our commitment to Christ or keep Christ on the periphery. We present the uniqueness of Jesus as positively as possible. Our witness moves beyond the exchange of religious ideas to the good news in Jesus.
 14. Harry Moore, of the Church Missionary Society, asks whether we can move away from the language of conflict and conquest in witness, noting that Bethlehem and Calvary are not images of conquest. He reminds us that our attitudes in mission are frequently triumphalist. He warns of the danger of a “belligerent Christianity.”²¹ This is a particular problem when other religions are aggressive and violent, because we tend to respond in kind. But when other religions are gentle, we frequently have an opposite response. We think that respect for them precludes concern for their conversion. The attitude of Christians should not be conditioned by the stance of other religions toward us but should be motivated and directed by the Spirit as we respond to Christ in each situation.

21 We are uncertain about the exact source of Moore’s statements here.

Eschatology and Mission

It is urgent that more thought be given to the relationship between eschatology and mission. The end of this century is full of expectation and foreboding. There are many secular eschatologies, but there is a sense of pessimism and disillusionment because people have lost faith in the meaning and purpose of history.

What is the Christian hope for the future? What is understood by “new heavens and new earth”? How do we witness to the kingdom in a way that prepares for the return of Christ? Anabaptists had an eschatological passion. They interpreted the present in light of what was to come and accepted mission as a sacred trust. We need a lively hope of Christ’s return. Eschatology, Christology, and mission are intimately connected. Christ is the “clue to history” (Lesslie Newbigin).²² The church is an eschatological community with urgent news to share. It lives between the dawn of Easter and the dawn of Christ’s return. Those who have caught that vision are bearers of hope.

Eschatology helps us keep a balance/tension between the kingdom of God as present and as future, as “now” and “not yet.” This is necessary for wholeness of salvation. We can only understand present manifestations of the kingdom if we see them in the perspective of the coming kingdom. Mission keeps before our consciousness hope for the coming fulfilled kingdom. We need that transcendent dimension. We live in the “penultimate” before the “ultimate.” The coming consummation will bring the final manifestation of the rule of God in history, an “inaugurated eschatology.” It is tragic if we are so preoccupied with the present that we fail to see the future.

There has recently been a theological emphasis on the “now-ness” of the kingdom, a “realized eschatology.” It is important, of course, that we speak of salvation now, but that cannot be separated from the fullness yet to come. Over-emphasis on “pie in the sky” can lead to an equal over-emphasis on renewed life now. There is much more to the significance of Christ than this present life. Without the hope of the end, we have a deficient spirituality. The future is brought into the present, but that should not blot out the future. Rather, it anticipates the future.

We are engaged in the present because of our hope in the future, not a hope that leads to disengagement or escapism but to involvement as we erect signs of the kingdom. We are part of a kingdom movement toward the end. Eschatological hope tempers our disillusionment, despair, and frustration. We are assured that all is in God’s hands even if we don’t see immediate results. Hope is groundless if Christ is not coming back. “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ we are . . . to be pitied” (1 Cor 15:19). Hope stands in contrast to hopelessness and lostness.

Can we communicate hope as we bring light into the darkness of despair? This is not a false hope, but a hope rooted firmly in the sovereignty of God.

22 Lesslie Newbigin, “Christ, the Clue to History,” *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, chapter 9 (William B. Eerdmans/WCC Publications, 1989), 103.

It is not a hope built upon detailed predictions of the future. Preoccupation with the future is as unfortunate as preoccupation with the present. A biblical eschatology must stand in contrast to popular apocalypticism. Obsession with a “signs-of-the-times” theology easily becomes speculative, calculating, or fanatical. But, on the other hand, detailed theories and their abuse or honest differences in our interpretations of eschatology should not cause us to de-emphasize eschatology. Anticipation of a new heaven and new earth is more important than speculation. The details are within God’s providence. We can be faithful because we know something of the character of the kingdom even if we do not understand details of the end precisely.

Those who live in hope for the future live tentatively. We live “between the times” with watchfulness and patience, redeeming the time. Eschatology inspires urgency in mission. While overstatements of urgency can lead to disappointment or even cynicism in mission, a biblically informed urgency undergirds enduring motivation. We proclaim Christ until he comes (Matt 24; Mark 13).

Some theologies teach that we hasten the coming of Christ by our witness. Is it true that the end of the world will not come until we have gone to the ends of the earth with the gospel? Is it really *we* who determine the end? In discussions concerning unreached people groups, there is sometimes an implicit understanding that if we complete the task, we will effect Christ’s final coming. Let us be more careful in our statements. The promise of his coming is an incentive for mission, and witness is a sign of the “dawn of the end,” but let us not try to hasten the end by our mission fervor. James Scherer said that we need to find our way between “feverish activism” and “lazy eschatological indifference.”²³ David Bosch rejects the idea that mission is a “hand on the clock of the world.”²⁴

We are called to the ends of the earth until the end of time. Eschatology reminds us that our task is not finished. And the fullness of witness is contingent upon eschatology, for Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again.

23 Source unknown.

24 David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, American Society of Missiology Series 16 (Orbis, 1991), 505.