

The Book of Generations

Victor Raj

Abstract: This essay focuses on but a few aspects of Gospel proclamation in a changing world. Christian witnesses remain faithful to Scripture and the church's tradition as they in each generation boldly present the claim the Lord Jesus Christ has on the human race in a world lost in sin and its aftermath. An appreciation of the Church's origins in the apostolic times is an incentive for Christians of every age to better identify the world around them and the opportunities it presents for Gospel proclamation in contextually meaningful ways. The Scriptures present witnesses that took advantage of their knowledge of the first-century world as they were addressing an audience estranged from God's ways. They did so with confidence in the Holy Spirit's leading and directing that transforms people's lives to return through Jesus to their Creator. These models speak directly to the church and the world that is as competent as the church in everything except the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The New Testament witnesses the culmination of the unfolding of the Gospel of God for the whole creation (Mk 16:15), as the Lord Himself directed His first disciples to proclaim that good news for all people throughout the world (Acts 1:8). Since the fall of the first man from the grace and favor of God, the created order has been subjected to bondage and corruption and groaning for its redemption in the pains of childbirth (Rom 8:18–24). Contrary to God's intention Adam and Eve fell victim to Satan's sedition and treachery and succumbed to their inescapable distancing from the Divine Presence. Of no little consequence is the curse that human rebellion to God's ways has wrought upon the entire universe. What once took place in a garden continues to show its recurring consequences throughout the world, submitting everything that has life to pain, sorrow, and suffering. History is replete with illustrations of how one man's disobedience and trespassing of God's statutes brought the wrath of God upon God's creation. No aspect of human destiny is exempt from that tragic situation.

With the introduction of sin to God's perfect world, humanity's direct encounter with God has become forever impossible and the intention to follow His ways unviable. God's righteous indignation on human defiance severed the divine-human relationship, and human aspirations operate regrettably contrary to God's design. The already severed relationship between God and His creation has resulted in the

Victor Raj is Mission Professor of Exegetical Theology at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis and occupies the Buehner-Duesenberg Chair in Missions. Raj is also Editor of Missio Apostolica, the journal of the Lutheran Society for Missiology.

inexorable deterioration and disintegration of everything that exists. In a fallen world, peaceful co-existence and justice shall forever remain an unrealizable utopia, however hard anyone tries to achieve such ideals with all honesty and integrity. Scripture puts the blame on one man's disobedience for inflicting God's vengeance on His handiwork (Rom 5:15–18).

The interplay of God's fury in the created order is evident in the futility of the daily hard work that everyone puts in with sweat on the brow and in the unending struggles that each one goes through to make ends meet. Juxtaposed to all honest and sincere intentions, the human race constantly encounters disharmony among fellow humans and within the rest of God's creation. Injustice prevails. Socio-economic inequalities generate deep divides. People plot. Nations rage. Peace talks fail. Discord and dissonance persist in every sphere of life. Death and decay spare nothing at all in all of creation.

The Gospel is the good news that God has taken the initiative to rescue His creation and the human race from this jeopardy. God has perfected in His Son, Jesus Christ, His eternal plan of salvation and redemption for the whole world. In Jesus Christ, God intercepted history and turned the world to a new and eternal direction, recreating it to fit the pattern He originally had for it. In Jesus Christ, God kept His promise of a Savior and Redeemer, discounting humanity's sin and lifting from His creation sin's recurring consequences. The Christian church of every age everywhere celebrates God's salvific intrusion into the human epoch as it boldly declares in word and deed its Savior and Lord as a testimony before all. As Christians come together to celebrate Jesus Christ and His redemptive work, they experience God's presence with them now and a foretaste of things to come.

Since the fall, God began to unfold His plan of saving the world, beginning with the Garden of Eden. The prophetic utterances echoed throughout Scripture in God's promises of a Savior from sin and its reverberations. In God's appointed time, His Messiah came to our earth to accomplish for the whole world His eternal plan of salvation (Gal 4:4). In the temple in Jerusalem and with great anticipation, Simeon was blessed to hold in his hands the long-awaited consolation of Israel in the person of Jesus (Lk 2:30). Later, in nearby Jericho, the Messiah Jesus visited with the wealthy but infamous tax collector, Zacchaeus, and declared to those who had gathered there that salvation had come to that house (Lk 19:9). At the completion of His earthly mission, during His heavenward departure from the disciples, Jesus authorized His eyewitnesses to bear witness to the ends of the earth His life, death, and resurrection (Acts 1:6–11). At His command, God's mission extends the world over through His church on earth. The Church can only be a witness to what it has received through the apostolic witness. The church engages this mission as a participant in the mission of God. We exist as a church to serve God's mission. One mission observer has stated so clearly that "It is not so much that God has a mission for his church as that God has a church for his mission."¹

Jesus inaugurated His earthly mission by proclaiming God's rule and reign and demonstrating its presence among people through the actions He performed, beginning with Galilee His hometown (Mk 1:14, 15). It announced a call to repentance, the necessary threshold for the listeners to enter God's kingdom. In fact, the Evangelists testify that at the coming of Jesus the kingdom of God had drawn near. The resurrected Lord confirmed that in Him God's kingdom activity has been fulfilled, and that in His name repentance and forgiveness of sins will be proclaimed to all nations by way of inviting them to enter His kingdom (Mt 28:18–20; Mk 16:15, 16; Lk 24:46; Jn 20:21–23). The four Gospels therefore conclude with a call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior.

The Acts of the Apostles is the narrative history of how, since the Lord's heavenward ascension, the first Christians continued in His mission on earth. It begins with the early disciples, gathering in Jerusalem and awaiting the Spirit of God to descend on them, and continues through the apostolic ministry as the Gospel reaches Rome, the fount and source of power in the first-century secular world. Beginning in Jerusalem, people gathered in one place as God first drew them to Him in Christ's name and then scattered them to nearby and faraway villages and towns to proclaim to everyone God's reconciling act in Christ. Acts depicts both the centripetal and the centrifugal nature of the church and mission. In the name of Jesus both Jews and Gentiles gathered initially in the holy city of Jerusalem. From there, they scattered abroad as God's witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to terrains beyond Israel's borders to Gentile territories such as Philippi, Athens, Greece, and Rome where non-Jewish populations dominated.

Empowered by the Holy Spirit, the church had but one message to announce throughout the world to both Jews and non-Jews alike: Jesus was put to death on a cross for the sins of all people and God raised Him from the dead, assuring life after death for all who believe in Him as Savior and Lord (Acts 5:31). For those whose sins have been forgiven in Christ, there is life and salvation. The preachers in the book of Acts crafted their message by taking into account how best to communicate this one truth meaningfully to the hearers, whether Jews or Gentiles. They boldly encountered the religions and cultures of their hearers even as "the typical Gentile audience of the time could not resonate with the message as they were not present at the time when the events summarized in Acts 1:1–4 were taking place."² The platforms of the first witnesses of the Lord spread quickly from the temple precincts of Jerusalem (Acts 2) to the various towns and villages far beyond Judea. The proclaimers of the new faith addressed the households of God-fearing Gentiles (Cornelius, Acts 10) and spoke at riverside prayer meetings (Lydia, Acts 16:13). They preached the Gospel in the public square and the shrines of pagan gods (Lystra, Acts 14) and participated in the think tank of truth-seekers and philosophers of the time: the Areopagus (Acts 17). Kings and governors could not gainsay their message. Craftsmen and tentmakers, business owners and academics, idolaters and

sorcerers, men and women of means, and the rich and the poor heeded their call to repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. The church is never stationary, limiting its life and service to one specific locale or to a particular people. God's people go with Him to wherever He leads.

Already from the beginning, God had set apart the Apostle Paul for a specific mission, that of proclaiming His salvation to the Gentiles and kings (Acts 9:15; cf. Mt 10:18). Paul joined the cadre of apostolic witnesses, having received the revelation directly from the Lord (Gal 1:12; 2:2). To his listeners and readers Paul acknowledged that he was passing on to them what he had first received from eyewitnesses before him (1 Cor 15:1–4). In other words, the apostle was confident that God was the one who entrusted him with the unique ministry of proclaiming Jesus Christ as Savior, crucified and risen. Paul did not make up a message of his own; rather he was God's vehicle for making known to both Jews and Gentiles the truth that God made Jesus, who knew no sin, to be sin in order that those who believe might become righteous before God (2 Cor 5:14–18). Paul was interpreting the Gospel in a language with which his audience could resonate. He was intent on passing the good news of God to as many others as possible.

Reverberating in the Pauline corpus is the rhyme that the church of Jesus Christ is on a mission, the mission of God for all people, especially to the Gentiles. In Romans, his magnum opus, Paul presents the case that he and his fellow servants have the obligation to make known to all nations the mystery of salvation God revealed uniquely in Jesus Christ. That indeed, to be sure, was a mystery that lay hidden in the annals of history until the coming of Christ into the world incarnationally. Christ in His flesh and blood unfolded that mystery for all people. That this Christ lives in those who put their trust in Him is the mystery that Paul and his companions were committed to making known to both Jews and Gentiles (Col 1:27; Rom 16:25, 26), as his mission and composition make clear.

Paul began his letter to the Christians in Rome with the claim that God had endowed him and his companions with grace and apostleship for bringing about among all nations the obedience of faith for the sake of Christ (Rom 1:5). Paul concluded his Roman correspondence with the same assertion: that he by divine intention had the scriptural warrant to bring about the obedience of faith to all nations (Rom 16:26). Romans 16 is a lengthy catalogue of Paul's friends and acquaintances resident in Rome or visitors to that city, men and women and their families, his kinsmen and fellow prisoners, those who "risked their necks" for Paul, the church that met in a house, and a patron of Paul's mission and ministry. The book of Acts shows that Paul met these men and women during his missionary journeys and that they were brought to the obedience of faith through his missionary activities. In Rome, Prisca and Aquila opened their house for worship and prayer, making that into a house-church, *domus ecclesiae* (Rom 16:5). Furthermore, this chapter makes honorable mention of Paul's beloved Epaenetus (v. 5), who was "the

first convert to Christ in the province of Asia.” The English translation “the first convert” reads in the Greek original as the “firstfruits” for Christ. This reading also matches the Apostle Paul’s ambitious claim that he had for the Lord a harvest waiting among the Romans as well as among the rest of the Gentiles (1:13). With the conversion of the Asian Gentile Epaenetus, harvesting for the Lord in the Gentile nations typically had already begun.

Lest the Lutheran eyes see a tad of synergism in the phrase “obedience of faith,” commentators suggest that in order to avoid such nuanced connotations the expression is better translated as “commitment to faith,” since the relationship human beings have with God is “more a commitment to the service of God in Christ and through the Spirit.”³ The substantive “obedience” should be placed appositionally with faith, that is, when translated this way, obeying God becomes descriptive of believing in God. Further grammatical analyses make possible other rewordings, such as “faith manifesting itself as obedience” or “obedience that springs from faith.” For Paul, the express purpose of his mission was that Gentiles may commit themselves to Jesus as Lord, that is, they may in faith take the step of believing in Jesus as Savior. Simply put, Paul was preaching and writing letters so that through such instruction everyone will follow Jesus to benefit fully from Him and His redemptive work. Thus, the Christian life becomes a lifetime of worshiping and praising God for what He has done and continues to do for all in Christ. As a result, Gospel proclamation becomes “a sacred liturgical act” of its own for passing the faith on to future generations (Rom 13:6; 15:16).⁴

Are the events recorded in the book of Acts essentially descriptive of the first-century Christianity, or are they also prescriptive for the church of all ages? A wise way to engage this question is to do so in a “pleonastic pluperfect sense,” that is, claiming for the present the abiding results of the events of the past as they first occurred, relative to the reader and listener. To be sure, Acts is St. Luke’s record of the events that took place before eyewitnesses from whom he had gathered firsthand information and also in his own hearing, as Luke himself participated in some of Paul’s missionary travels as his unnamed companion (e.g. Acts 16:11). As pioneers in the field, the early Christian missionaries had no model (prescription/ roadmap) to follow but the divine mandate to makes disciples. If the church’s ministry and mission is apostolic, then the apostolic model includes for each generation proclaiming the Gospel among unbelievers and making them the Lord’s disciples.

In his book, the *Apostolic Church*, Robert Scudieri has argued that an apostle is one who is commissioned. A person could not simply choose to become someone else’s apostle. The act of commissioning makes the one being sent the authorized representative of the sender. The commissioned one is as good as the one who commissions.⁵ The apostles are authorized representatives. The authorization, Scudieri suggests, is for a specific purpose. For the apostle, there is a task to be accomplished in the name and on behalf of his sender. The apostolic authority is

extended to another only for a specific task. The apostolic church therefore by definition “is God’s authorized messenger, sent with God’s authority for his specific purpose: to evangelize the world.”⁶ God has placed in the world His community of believers for making known what He has in store for the whole world. “Apostolic” is an appropriate self-description of the followers of Jesus. The apostolic mission flows from the heart of God for the world’s redemption and reconciliation to Himself. The church, therefore, is One, Holy, Catholic, Apostolic, and Missionary, as the title of the book claims.

If not already from the beginning when God called Abraham as the father of His covenant people (Gn 12:1–3), at least since God redeemed His people from slavery and bondage under alien powers in a foreign land, God invested in them His missionary agency. Israel had been designated a kingdom of priests and a holy nation set apart for God (Ex 19:6). They would be His special agents who will impart to the world His matchless blessing for their salvation and well-being. Israel would mediate for the whole world God’s covenant blessing, while keeping intact their own identity as God’s covenant people. As G. B. Caird observes, only people with a unique identity had the right to embark on a mission to the world. With that status and privilege, “They could go into a direction of religious nationalism—Israel as a nation with a king and a country or move toward syncretism at the expense of preserving the uniqueness of their religion.”⁷ The story of the people of Israel had been such that as a nation they were becoming syncretistic and apostate, compelled perhaps by the circumstances in which they lived. The Bible has recorded apostasy as a recurring phenomenon in the Israelite history.

In the Old Testament, the prophetic voices of God were chastising relentlessly the nation of Israel for their apostasy and calling them to repentance and trust in God alone, especially in adverse circumstances when other nations and their gods seemed to be enticing and persuasive and claiming their allegiance. Conversely, many prophetic utterances display a more generous and kind-hearted sensitivity toward the Gentiles, Israel’s neighbors who were not yet God’s people; nevertheless, the God of Israel controlled their destinies as well. The prophets announced that God would use Gentile nations for the working out of His sovereign and salvific purposes (Am 9:9–15; Is 10:1–4). In fact, the Rabbinic traditions of the first-century Judaism speculated that God, in making a covenant with Noah, had revealed to all nations certain basic moral obligations, as evidenced in the commonality seen even today in the ethics and civil laws of other nations and cultures. Beginning with the common ground of the natural knowledge of God (Rom 2:14–16), in due course, all nations will recognize God’s matchless authority and power over them, as God alone can save people from their sin and its consequence, death (Is 2:2–4; Mt 28:18–20; Acts 28:28–31).

Students of the first-century religious history claim that in New Testament times polytheism was the most popular and widespread belief among the common people, while “assertions of God’s unity are not infrequent in pagan writers, perhaps among

some intellectuals.”⁸ In sharp contradistinction to the public approximation on the plurality of gods and religions, Christianity had but one specific message to convey to the world. The apostolic proclamation was exclusive in the sense that the Christian religion was founded solidly on the uncompromising monotheism of Judaism. Jesus Christ is the final and ultimate revelation of the One God of the whole world. Paul was committed to distinguishing this God from the pagan idea of many gods and many lords (1 Thes 1:9) and the “gods of this age” (2 Cor 4:4). The apostle elucidated God’s ongoing operation specifically in the lives of believers as he testified that there is only “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:5–6). Only through Jesus Christ is the full, complete, and comprehensive knowledge of God possible for all people, including seekers and searchers. A certain notable dialectical pattern was evident in much of Pauline discourse, as it was grounded in the affirmation that Jesus Christ was crucified and was raised from the dead as God’s ultimate self-revelation for humanity’s sake. Paul’s missiology was grounded solidly in his Christology. As he wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, wherever he went, Paul elected to know and speak of nothing other than the crucified Christ and His resurrection (1 Cor 2:1–2). The crucified Messiah had now become a new paradigm of God’s decisive action for the world.⁹ Even so, the new paradigm of preaching and teaching the crucified God remains scandalous to the Jewish way of theologizing and the Gentile way of philosophizing the truth about God. Yet, it is through the crucified and risen Christ that God draws both Jews and Gentiles to Himself and builds His community on earth.

House Churches

Several generations ago, New Testament students had claimed that “There is no decisive evidence until the third century of the existence of special buildings used for churches. The references seem all to be to places in private homes, sometimes very probably houses of a large size.”¹⁰ More recently, social historians have produced credible and invaluable data confirming that at least during the first two centuries the early Christians were meeting as small groups in homes, building their faith and life together in the Lord Jesus Christ. The followers of Jesus constituted with intentionality communities that grew primarily “through the united and motivated efforts of the growing members of Christian believers, who invited their friends, relatives, and neighbors to share the ‘good news.’”¹¹ Individual households served as the basic unit of the Christian religion for its maintenance and expansion, just as homes and households were foundational for the constitution and sustenance of various cultures and nations. Sociologically, villages and cities expanded to clusters, settling in specific areas organized as neighborhoods and nations.¹²

During the early centuries, Christianity achieved only minimum numerical growth.¹³ Along with their intentional efforts at witnessing the faith to proselytes and

to the heathen, Christians were also marrying non-Christians (1 Cor 7:16) and raising children of mixed races, religions, and cultures. In the early days, Christians were a small minority to be sure, having little impact on the community and culture, as believers were ordinarily from the lower classes, albeit a select few representing the middle and upper classes. Not until the third century did the idea of constructing church buildings develop, and the cathedral model churches began to surface as Christian communities increased in number. Christian congregational buildings were patterned initially after the local and national governmental structures. Since the Roman emperor Constantine declared Christianity the religion of the state, a movement that began in a small town in Palestine became the dominant factor that helped shape the faith and culture of the then-known world.

Wayne Meeks has emphasized the importance for future generations of reclaiming the matrix of social patterns within which the doctrines of the church were first articulated. According to Meeks, “abstracted from that setting or placed in a different one, the stated belief is liable to mean something quite different”¹⁴ to those who might be accepting it newly. Rodney Stark has reiterated that “*people are more willing to adopt a new religion to the extent that it retains cultural continuity with conventional religion(s) with which they are already familiar.*”¹⁵ These observations speak volumes for Christians who are privileged to serve as witnesses of the Gospel of God in the twenty-first century in a constantly changing cultural context where religions and spiritualities are emerging forever new.

Barna’s research catalogues numerous critical shifts in values and attitudes that have been occurring in the twenty-first century, especially in North America, that Christians need to take into serious account.¹⁶ The study shows a deflation of values and value judgments, *as well as* the norms the world has set to evaluate them, a change from what people used to embrace to what they actually now embrace. According to Barna, in the American cultural and religious landscape noticeable changes have been occurring, causing the nation to become a “place where anything goes.” Our generation, especially of the younger adults, is bent on moving us toward a yet-to-be-defined framework of alternative values in which personal choice is of pivotal value, says Barna. This will take the nation to a new direction that is highly individualistic in all phases of life. What was once deemed excellence is now compromised with adequacy: Common Good with Individual Advantage, Delayed Gratification with Instant Gratification, Respect with Incivility, Christian God with Amorphous God, Truth with Tolerance, Trust with Skepticism, Knowledge with Experience.¹⁷

Individuals, local congregations, and the institutional church in recent years have been intentional about bringing Christ across the spectrum of nations and cultures. Dedicated and committed Christian men and women, on their own or teaming up with kindred spirits, are traveling with their backpacks to faraway places hitherto unfamiliar to them with the primary goal of making the love of Christ

known to those who could otherwise have never known the Savior and experienced His love on a personal basis. Unlike during the early centuries of Christian mission, independent and entrepreneurial mission societies have been looming large globally, several of them headquartered in the historically non-Christian cultures, and commissioning fully funded Christian missionaries for service in the Western hemisphere. The centuries-old Mission Boards of institutional Churches are constantly being reconstructed and reinterpreted with a view to facing boldly the ever-increasing challenges of local and global Christian mission. The Lord's parabolic teachings on the growth of His kingdom applies both descriptively and prescriptively to the twenty-first-century mission. Some seed fall on the wayside, others on rocky ground. Some fall among thorns, and yet others fall on good soil, growing and increasing and yielding great harvest. Wherever the harvest has yielded well, the communities that are brought to faith are confessing their commitment to the One Lord in their vernacular in expressions indigenous to their language and culture.

Building Faith Communities.

Modern studies in the art and practice of communicating call for an interactive, participatory experience between the speaker and the listener/the author and the reader. Meaningful communication results in the building of an interpersonal relationship between the speaker and the listener and impels the listener to engage in a new mission pursuant on what he has newly learned. The speaker is hopeful that as he delivers the speech it will generate in the listener an exciting and suitable moment of learning and understanding of what he hears. The encounter therefore creates a conscious awareness in the listener's mind that he has now encountered something new that has value for him and his community for the present and for the future. As the mouthpieces of God, Christian witnesses are bound to be cognizant of this fact as they engage the world with Gospel proclamation. New generations need to be reached by employing new methods, benefiting liberally from the new and emerging ways and means of effective communication. Religious and theological discourse must therefore tackle this reality intelligently and wisely in order to retain the historic and conventional identity of the Christian faith while lending a listening ear to the cultural and social identity of those for whom being a Christian is a brand new experience.

Two observations from a critique of the recent reader-response theory on communication are of particular relevance here: "A book is not only a book, it is the means by which an author actually preserves his ideas, his feelings, his modes of dreaming and living."¹⁸ And "reading is just that: a way of giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them."¹⁹ These statements signify that during the process of composing a text the writer (speaker, while delivering a discourse) brings a certain

meaning to the text as he composes it, and the reader while reading it contributes his share in order to comprehend and appreciate what the author wrote and to make it his own. Readers come with their own understanding as they approach a certain text and interpret what they read in words and concepts that are familiar to them. Speakers are bound to concede that hearers are the final arbiters of what they hear in spite of the intentionality of the speaker. Gospel communicators understand the challenge of balancing the ontological meaning of the words they employ and their phenomenological implications that depend on the culture and context of their listeners. Standard dictionaries in any language define the essence of words ontologically, without in any way letting the context or the environment in which the words are used determine their lexical meaning. Phenomenological meaning, on the other hand, is dependent on the environment in which the words are used and on the contribution of the listener who participates in the conversation.

Meaningful conversation relies heavily on the mutuality created between speakers and listeners. Languages connect people and invite conversation partners. As Eugene Peterson observes, “We often assume that the problem of interpreting words is a matter of knowing what they mean and linking meanings together in some reasonable order in our minds. . . . The problem is to decide at any moment what our relation to the words should be, even when we know what they mean.”²⁰ If the meanings of words are to be determined relationally, then words also serve to build healthy relationships between people who use them. Proclaimers of the Divine Word have the responsibility of speaking the word as well as assuring that their hearers understand what the proclaimed words actually mean to them. If the speakers are speaking “over their heads,” then the hearers benefit the least from such speeches.

Theology is recognized generally as *second-order* didactic language that must be conceptually precise, as it is the exposition of doctrine within the household of faith. Theology is a systematic exposition of the self-understanding of the foundational teachings of a religion a particular people have embraced and hold corporately. Missional conversations, however, are best held in what theologians call *first-order* religious discourse that may not be conceptually precise at all, yet expressive of the human religious relationship with God.²¹ Communication of Christian mission expresses the faith in the language of the heart, focusing particularly on the listener who is practically unfamiliar with the raw fact of the theological and doctrinal formulations being relayed to him. Christian mission is the interpretation of the faith for the sake of those outside the faith and do not yet belong to faith communities in order that they, too, can come to know in their heart language the heart of God who desires all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth. Genuinely missional conversations happen at the level of the first order of religious discourse. A theology of mission must discover a happy medium between the first and second order language and reflection.

Mission is the attempt at connecting the experience of the past (God's acts in the history of His people) with the realities of the present by way of communicating Christ to all people. For this purpose, systematic study of linguistics, world religions, and cultures became part of the liberal arts curriculum in colleges and universities where missionaries were trained intentionally in communication. The European model of teaching history and religions in theological colleges and seminaries was established primarily for equipping Christian missionaries for service in the non-Christian world as witnesses of Christ. Institutes for the study of religions and cultures were established wherever missionaries were trained prior to their departure to faraway lands as witnesses of the Gospel.

Numerous models have been suggested by both theologians and missiologists for accomplishing this important task, a considered appraisal of which is far beyond the limits of these present reflections. On contextualizing the Gospel, for example, Stephen Bevans has surmised that the church preserves and defends its theological tradition on the basis of God's revelation in Scripture and the church's own "experience of the past."²² In today's context, however, when doing theology well, the experience of the present demands equally careful attention of the church's leadership in ministry and theologizing as it includes personal as well as communal experiences of the people the church has been called to serve. Whether Christians live in a religious or secular culture, in their daily living they are constantly encountering issues and challenges such as societal changes, the plurality of religions, poverty, injustice, minority status, conflict of interests, and the global move from modernity to postmodernity.²³ The Christian church must address these and related concerns for the sake of effectively communicating to the world the one message it is privileged to embrace.

Bevan's appraisal of the models of contextualization shows how theology and missiology operate largely on the horizontal lines that move from transmitting the experience of the past to engaging the present, giving various weights to the influences of the past and the present in today's church and world. The Word of God speaks directly to the conscience of people and transforms their lives in ways human calculations are rendered powerless to measure.

Nevertheless, the Christian Church has a unique privilege and responsibility to serve God and the world He has created. As Robert Kolb observes, "we are called upon to explain his unchanging truths and Scripture's unchangeable insights into the proper rules and structures for the life of his community as an institution entrusted under Scripture's direction to human design and ingenuity."²⁴

Missional theologians are committed to making known to the world of all times the one truth that there is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Endnotes

- ¹ Christopher Wright, *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 148.
- ² G. B. Caird, *The Apostolic Age* (London: Duckworth, 1955), 107.
- ³ Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans*. The Anchor Bible, Vol. 33 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 238.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 711.
- ⁵ Robert J. Scudieri, *The Apostolic Church: One, Holy, Catholic and Missionary*, Lutheran Society For Missiology Book Series (Ft. Wayne, IN: Lutheran Society for Missiology, 1996).
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.
- ⁷ Caird, *The Apostolica Age*, 172.
- ⁸ Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 165.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.
- ¹⁰ William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *Romans*. The International Critical Commentary. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1895), 420.
- ¹¹ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (New York: Harper One, Harper Collins, 1996), 208.
- ¹² Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 29ff.
- ¹³ Stark has evidence to show how numbers were exaggerated in the first-century culture, in history and geography, even when they report populations in towns and cities. A similar approach is appropriate when considering the growth of Christianity today. The global South and the Far East are the two specific geographical areas where significant increase in church membership is being reported. From these regions, more people are drawn to faith in Jesus Christ from the lower levels of the socio-economic structures and fewer from the upper and higher classes of the society.
- ¹⁴ Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*, 164.
- ¹⁵ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 164. Italics are Stark's.
- ¹⁶ George Barna, *Futurecast: What Today's Trend Means for Tomorrow's World* (Carol Stream, IL: Barna, 2011), 53–79.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.
- ¹⁸ Georges Poulet, "Criticism and the Experience of Interiority" (reprinted) in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins, 40–49. (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980), 46.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.
- ²⁰ Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: a Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 107.
- ²¹ Hans W. Frei, *Types of Christian Theology*, ed. George Hunsinger and William C. Placher. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 35. Frei in the chapter on Five Types of Theology notes the distinction that Friedrich Schleiermacher made between two kinds of theology.
- ²² Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*. rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2002), 8.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 3–15.
- ²⁴ Robert Kolb, "The Sheep and the Voice of the Shepherd: The Ecclesiology of the Lutheran Confessional Writings," *Concordia Journal* 36, no. 4 (Fall 2010): 339.