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THE FUNCTIONING OF THE BIBLE IN PROTESTANT MISSION¹

ABSTRACT

To show how the Bible *functions* in the praxis of Protestant missions this paper uses a framework that expresses the key dimensions of mission praxis: a) the mission method or strategy employed; b) the agents carrying it out; c) the context analysis they employ; d) the theological concepts informing their thinking and action. It plots the wide variety of Protestant missions on a continuum ranging from 'conversionist' to 'liberationist' approaches. In the section on mission methods it discusses literature, educational, medical and evangelistic methods. Under agents it looks at the role played by mission societies and missionaries. In the part on context analysis the saved/lost approach is contrasted with the oppressors/oppressed perspective. Finally, under theological reflection the focus is on the classical mission passages of Mt 28 and Lk 4.

INTRODUCTION

The centrality of the *sola Scriptura* adage in the Protestant movement has made the Bible a key feature of Protestant mission. Due to the vast amount of historical material on almost 500 years of Protestant mission, this paper does not give an historical overview. Instead, it uses a thematic framework to explore the role of the Bible within it.

This paper tries to do justice to Protestantism as a culturally and theologically diverse movement, since Protestant mission is no longer a Western or Northern phenomenon. While acknowledging the influence of Northern missionaries in bringing the gospel to the Americas, Africa and Asia, and the continuing financial and intellectual dominance of Northern churches in the development of Christian mission throughout the 20th century, I will treat Protestant mission as an intercultural and polycentric

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movement. "The whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world" is increasingly becoming a reality, not least due to the contribution of groups like CEVAA and the Council for World Mission. I will therefore refer to Protestant missions in (and from) different continents.

The understanding of "mission" in this paper is not confined to projects involving (overseas) travel or directed exclusively at "saving souls" or "planting churches." I understand Christian mission to be an inclusive complex of activities aimed at the anticipation and provisional realisation of God's reign in history. It includes evangelism but is much wider. Mission is the "cutting edge" of the Christian movement, embodying a way of life that refuses to accept the status quo and keeps on trying to change it, being pushed and pulled by the Spirit of God towards the final dawning of God's reign.² This paper examines the role of the Bible in the whole spectrum of activities included in this definition.

To show how the Bible *functions* in the praxis of Protestant missions I have chosen a framework that expresses the key dimensions of mission praxis: a) the mission method or strategy employed; b) the agents carrying it out; c) the context analysis they employ; d) the theological concepts informing their thinking and action.³

In an overview article like this, one can adopt either a diachronic or a synchronic approach. The former requires a careful periodisation. The latter approach, which I have chosen, requires a typology or set of models to create order amid the wide variety of missions. Paul Gifford (1998:50) is correct in saying that too many studies talk of churches "as though Christianity was a single recognisable entity, playing exactly the same role wherever it appears." On the other extreme there is the temptation to use such a complex typology that the explanation of the terminology takes up an undue amount of space.⁴ At the risk of oversimplification, I refrain from using a set of types (or models) and settle instead for a continuum stretching between a liberationist (or activist) and a conversionist (or evangelistic)

2 This definition is adapted from Botha, Kritzinger & Maluleke (1994:21).

3 These four dimensions are similar to the four 'moments' of the pastoral circle (insertion, analysis, theological reflection, pastoral planning) devised by Holland & Henriot (1983). However, I change the order of presentation and start with methods and strategies (i.e. pastoral planning), rather than with insertion or theological reflection, to give concreteness to my presentation.

4 The seven-fold typology of religious 'sects' developed by the sociologist Bryan Wilson (1969, 1973) comes to mind. He distinguishes between the following (overlapping) types: conversionist, revolutionist, introversionist, gnostic manipulationist, thaumaturgic, reformist and utopian types of religious movements.

approach.⁵ It can be portrayed as follows:

LIBERATIONIST/ACTIVIST	CONVERSIONIST/EVANGELISTIC
gaining credibility for the gospel locally communal, structural emphasis conscientisation re injustice empowerment for transformation prophetic confrontation this-worldly	"saving the lost" worldwide individual emphasis fostering a "burden for the lost" boldness to call others to conversion evangelistic confrontation otherworldly

By constructing a continuum I avoid the language of polarisation between "ecumenical" and "evangelical" tendencies that David Bosch (1980) used some years ago.⁶ I am not describing "warring factions on the ground." This continuum is a construct, attempting to open up space within which the wide variety of Protestant missions may fruitfully be described. I use a continuum well aware of the fact that it gives a synchronic snapshot and is therefore not well suited to express historical developments *within* theologies or patterns of interaction *between* them.

A continuum is explained by characterising its two poles. The conversionist approach can be characterised by the words of Dwight L. Moody: "I look on this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, 'Moody, save all you can.' God will come in judgment and burn up this world.... If you have any friends on this wreck unsaved, you had better lose no time in getting them off" (in Weber 1979:53).⁷ Another feature at this end of the spectrum is the dimension of worldwide witness, as emphasised by Donald McGavran in his challenge to the World Council of Churches before its 1968 Uppsala Assembly, entitled "Will Uppsala betray the Two Billion?":

By 'the two billion' I mean 'that great number of [persons] at least two billion, who either have never heard of Jesus Christ or have no real chance to believe in Him as Lord and Savior.'... The Church, to be relevant, to discharge her humane duty to the

5 I follow Roozen, McKinney and Carroll (1984:87 *passim*) by using the terms "activist" and "evangelistic" to describe publicly proactive mission orientations that are "this-worldly" and "otherworldly" respectively.

6 Theo Sundermeier points out that, in spite of various attempts, the polarisation in mission theology between 'ecumenical' and 'evangelical' is still evident. This paper shares his concern (and that of many others) to "get out of the cul-de-sac of mission theology discussion still conducted in terms of opposites – 'evangelical' and 'ecumenical'" (Sundermeier 2003:561).

7 I wish to acknowledge the help of my colleague Willem Saayman in drawing my attention to this quote. He also made other helpful comments on an earlier draft of the paper.

'masses' of [humankind], to act with justice, and to manifest compassion, must plan her activity, marshal her forces, carry on her campaign of mercy and liberation, and be faithful to her Lord *with the two billion in mind* (in Thomas 1995:158; italics in original).

Roozen *et al.* (1984:87) emphasise that an "evangelistic" mission orientation stresses: salvation in a world to come, a sharp distinction between the religious and the secular, acceptance of existing social structures, and opposition to "sinful" lifestyles.

The liberationist end of the continuum, on the other hand, is described well by Tinyiko Maluleke (2000:88), when discussing the 20th century "crisis" in Christian mission:

The emergence of contextual and liberation theologies ... both deepened and highlighted another side to the crisis. Shifting away from the emphasis on 'foreign missions,' contextual and liberation theologies put the local context at the center. This had several important implications. Firstly, a new conception of local mission as *the* primary form of mission emerged. Instead of mission being viewed as emanating from the North to the South, the new understanding was one of mission as essentially local and in this sense the current of Christian mission could flow from everywhere to everywhere. Secondly, no meta-narrative understanding of Christian mission and being could be held to be binding and true for all contexts at all times. Thirdly, it was soon realised that all Christians were capable of becoming agents of mission. For Southern Christians, this meant a shift from being mere objects of mission to being both agents and subjects of mission. Fourthly, emphasis moved from a quantitative view of mission and salvation to a qualitative one. What mattered was not merely the number of 'heathens' saved, but the quality of life into which both believers and nonbelievers were 'saved.' Fifthly, with their call for solidarity with the poor, contextual theologies unmasked the myth of Christian neutrality at both the ecclesiastical and individual level.

The wide variety of Protestant approaches to mission can all be placed somewhere on the continuum between these two poles.

METHODS AND STRATEGIES

In a classical formulation of conversionist mission, John R. Mott (1900:11) identifies the "principal methods of missionary work" as "educational, literary, medical and evangelistic." I will use this as a framework for my discussion, but change Mott's order by starting with literature methods.

Literature methods

In the conversionist Protestant approach, the foremost literature strategy has always been the translation of the Bible. Since *sola Scriptura* was a key

slogan of the Reformation it is understandable that Protestant missionaries began translating the Bible as soon as possible in a new culture. In the process they were responsible for “reducing” many languages to writing, by developing orthographies, dictionaries, grammar books, etc. Bible translation is not a Protestant monopoly, since there was an established tradition of translation stretching back to the Septuagint, aptly called “the first missionary Bible” (Schaaf 1994:5), the Vulgate (Jerome), the Gothic Bible (Ulphilas), the Slavonic Bible (Cyril and Methodius), and various Arabic Bible translations (9th-13th centuries). However, the Reformation in Germany and England was inextricably bound up with Bible translations in the “vernacular” (initially by Luther and Wyclif respectively) and this had a lasting impact on Protestant theology – and missiology.

One result of this emphasis on Bible translation was that literacy became virtually synonymous with Protestant Christianity. If one asked a rural South African some twenty years ago whether s/he was a Christian, a common answer would be “Yes, I went to school” or “No, I didn’t go to school.”⁸ By idealising literacy, at the expense of the oral culture, conversionist Protestant missionaries were agents of far reaching social change, encouraging the development of more individualist subcultures within broader collectivist cultures, with serious implications for leadership patterns in the local church (see e.g. Klem 1982) and for the culture more generally.⁹ This split was further exacerbated by the missionary method of building “mission stations,” complete with schools and hospitals, where the expatriate missionary community lived and to which converts were often encouraged to move, to learn to “live like Christians” and to become “productive” workers.

Lamin Sanneh (1989:7) has argued that Christianity is inherently a “vernacular translation movement” that spreads by translation rather than “diffusion” and in the process *relativises* a culture that has already been Christianised and *destigmatises* every culture into which it moves. After all, if the vernacular is good enough to become the vehicle of divine revelation and if the name for God is chosen from the existing “high god” alternatives in that language, then it places a huge trust in that culture and language. On the basis of this, Sanneh makes a strong case that we should stop the

8 See also the distinction between “School people” and “Red people” in the Eastern Cape (Pauw 1963:17).

9 Jean and John Comaroff have pointed out what far-reaching influence missionaries had on African communities, even though this influence was often not what they had intended. See their reflection on the role of mirrors, beads, clocks, etc. in Jean & John Comaroff (1991:181ff).

“missionary bashing” of anti-colonial political rhetoric and begin to appreciate the tremendous contribution missionaries made to the revitalisation of Africa (and other Southern countries) through their Bible translation projects:

There is a radical pluralism implied in vernacular translation wherein all languages and cultures are, in principle, equal in expressing the word of God... Equally important, such stress on the Bible as alone sufficient to effect God's purpose, conferred on the vernacular an autonomous, consecrated status as the medium of God's word, a consecration often more in tune with indigenous attitudes toward language than the attitudes of missionaries toward their own culture (1989:208).

One thing is clear; there would have been no African theology or Black Theology, let alone African Initiated Churches (which have now numerically become “mainline” Christianity, at least in South Africa), if the Bible had not been translated into all the important African languages. So, whatever the weaknesses of the conversionist missionaries and their translations, they set the ball rolling that African Christians would take further, even if many of them subsequently picked it up, ran away with it and invented a new game, in ways totally unforeseen by the missionaries.

At the other end of the continuum, *liberationist* Protestant missions have done little about the translation of the Bible, because they usually originate in the context of established churches, where the credibility of the gospel has been dented due to social injustice perpetrated by other Christians.¹⁰ By and large these movements take the existing Bible translations as a given and concentrate on re-interpreting them in liberating ways, to empower marginalised and oppressed people to stand up and work for justice. They have done much work on producing other forms of literature to spread their ideas, but as far as Bible translation is concerned, this is such a specialised and expensive enterprise that all the movements, across the continuum, gladly leave in the hands of the trained specialists of the Bible Societies. Since many activist missions work in poor communities, where functional literacy is low, they often concentrate on oral communication and on projects of “conscientisation.”¹¹

Between these two poles there are many different forms of Protestant

10 Robert Schreier's (1985:6-16) threefold typology of local theologies (translation, adaptation, contextual), in which progressively more responsibility is taken by local Christians in producing a theology, also expresses the fact that translation is a key dimension in the early phases of Christian presence, and that contextual or liberational approaches arise later, as strong local leaders take over the initiative.

11 The work of Anne Hope in grassroots African communities is a good example of this. See Van Schaikwyk (2001).

involvement in the use of literature for mission. Some missions set up their own printing presses to produce literature, especially in local languages, to educate, evangelise and empower communities. These mission presses have made an important contribution to the establishment of Protestant churches but also to the creation of vernacular literatures, thus enabling local elites to develop and propagate their political and cultural ideals.¹² However, these presses were also an integral part of the larger colonisation process and therefore share the ambiguity of Protestant mission in its entanglement with Western colonialism.¹³

Educational methods

Closely related to the concern for Bible translation among *conversionist* or evangelistic Protestants, is their commitment to *education*, often conceived as "civilising" mission (see e.g. De Kock 1993). As Mott (1900:12f) has argued,

Education has done more than any other agency to undermine heathen superstitions and false systems of belief, thus facilitating the work of preaching the Gospel by removing false ideas which already had possession of the mind: It would be a calamity to the missionary enterprise to leave the mighty weapon of education to be wielded alone by agencies hostile to the spread of Christianity.

Churches and mission societies controlled most of the schools in Africa well into the twentieth century (see Saayman 1991b). South Africa may not be typical in this regard, but the situation was such that, even though successive colonial authorities *subsidised* mission schools for African children since 1856, the first "native school" (i.e. intended for Africans) erected and staffed by a South African state authority dates from 1908 (Saayman 1991b:29). In 1953, when the newly elected white Nationalist government passed the Bantu Education Act and started taking over African education, the missionaries were still the "backbone of African education"

12 Graham Duncan (2001:488) refers to *South African Outlook*, a journal established in 1870 as the *Kaffir Express*, which "reflected a wide range of political, social, economic and religious themes in keeping with its status as a major vehicle of expression for Southern Africa's liberal, multiracial Christian elite."

13 The "editorial interference" of missionaries was an example of this: "The printing of original manuscripts ... was virtually dependent on the goodwill of those missionaries who controlled the mission press.... Lovedale effectively manipulated its control over the production of Xhosa manuscripts until its monopoly was broken by the state in the 1950s" (Switzer in Duncan 2001: 488).

(:29). This was not accidental; it was part of a deliberate mission strategy, shared by Catholic and Protestant missions. In fact, it was Arthur Hinsley, the Visitor Apostolic of Roman Catholic missions in British colonies in Africa, who told Catholic missionaries in 1927:

Collaborate [in education] with all your power; and where it is impossible for you to carry on both the immediate task of evangelization and your educational work, neglect your churches in order to perfect your schools. Who owns the schools will own Africa (:30).

On this matter Protestant and Catholic missions agreed, but sadly this often led to intense competition between Protestant and Catholic mission schools, at least in South Africa. A government-commissioned research project on the rural "Bantu Reserves," under the leadership of Prof. F.R. Tomlinson and completed in 1954, pointed out that the vast majority of missionaries working in South Africa were from outside South Africa (many of them Roman Catholics) and that they were teaching black people values that were contrary to the values informing the fledgling apartheid state. The result was a huge upsurge of interest in missions among Afrikaners, with numerous ministers and theological students of the Dutch Reformed Church volunteering for "mission work" in rural areas, where they established mission stations, each with (at least) a school and a hospital (Saayman 2001).

Schools were crucial to Protestant missions, firstly because literacy and a good Western education was perceived as a prerequisite for Bible reading and the development of a self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating "indigenous" church. If Christianity was really to take root and become indigenous, according to Protestant missions, then an intelligent and self-motivated indigenous expression of the faith had to develop, and without education the missions would not be able to produce the kind of leaders required for that task. Mott (1900:13) argued as follows: "Education, from the point of view of evangelization, is essential as a means for raising up and training native preachers and teachers and Christian leaders for all departments of life."

That is why the teaching of the Bible took up a central place in these mission schools, and why seminaries to train local church leaders (and school teachers) usually followed hard on the heels of mission schools. A good example of this was the strategy followed by Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg in the Danish colony of Tranquebar (South India) in the early 18th century: He made Tamil translations of the New Testament, part of the Old Testament, hymnbooks, catechisms, and other Christian literature; he also established schools for boys and girls, and a seminary for training Indian

assistants (Gensichen 1998:761f). The indigenous church had to be a Bible-based church and therefore great emphasis was placed on teaching the Bible to converts and their children.

Secondly, in the minds of most Protestant missionaries, civilisation and evangelisation belonged together, and civilisation was understood ethnocentrically (see Luzbetak 1988:102). Mission schools were seen as "very efficient and strategic aids in this civilising process" and as "beachheads of Christian civilisation in pagan territory, which had helped in vanquishing pagan culture" (Saayman 1991b:30). Informed by the logic of the Enlightenment, mission schools were characterised by the objectification of knowledge, an emphasis on rationality and individual progress, and the production of an autonomous individual who became more important than the community of people among whom s/he lived (:35).

At the other end of the continuum, *liberationist* Protestant missions were also deeply concerned about education, but in a very different way from conversionist missions. In their concern to restore the credibility of the gospel among people disillusioned with an oppressive Christianity, they had neither the desire nor the resources to erect schools or employ teachers.

Working as they did with limited resources among the poor and suffering, liberationists concentrated on adult education and organised workshops and community projects to conscientise the marginalised to stand up and work for justice. In this regard the pedagogy of Paulo Freire was hugely influential; it informed most of the conscientisation projects launched among groups of university students, workers and women (see Van Schalkwyk 2001). In these forms of Protestant mission, significantly, there was widespread cooperation with members of other churches and with community organisations comprising people from different religions and organs of civil society. So the goal of this type of mission was not conceived as conversion in the sense of adding new members to the church. And yet they also aimed at a profound conversion, which I discuss under evangelistic methods below. The functioning of the Bible in this conscientising approach to adult education will be discussed there.

In between these two poles of conversionist and liberationist mission, there is a wide variety of Protestant positions on the role of education in mission. One intermediate approach aims at educating people to reclaim their cultural traditions and to reconceive their Christian faith in those terms. In this quest for authentic contextual theologies the development of Christian art played an important role. The art of Azariah Mbatha, a member of the Lutheran Church, is a good example from Africa, but similar Christian artists are active all over the world. Biblical characters abound in Mbatha's work, the vast majority of them portrayed as Africans. In a unique way, biblical

stories are thus reinterpreted for the African context (Rosen 1993). In an ongoing "translation" process, the biblical message is made culturally accessible and understandable to a wider African community.

Medical methods

John Mott (1900:14) presents medical missions as "a necessary factor in the great work of evangelizing the world."

It disarms hostility and breaks down prejudices and barriers, thus making possible the preaching of the Gospel in communities otherwise inaccessible.... Medical missionary work is an incontrovertible evidence of Christianity and of the power of the Gospel. The ministry of healing also wins the heart, and thus gives acceptance and added meaning and power to the message of salvation.... The true medical missionary will constantly commend the Gospel to his patients by word as well as by deed, and will be satisfied by no lower aim than that of winning them to Christ.

At the same conversionist end of the continuum one finds Pentecostal approaches to healing, which are not dependent on hospitals or clinics (as a matter of fact, early Pentecostals regarded it as a sign of unbelief to consult a doctor or visit a hospital) but which also regard healing as an essential dimension of salvation. One of the most frequently mentioned reasons for becoming a Christian and joining a Pentecostal or AIC church is healing. De Wet (1986:161) says: "Seeing the millions of people that have been reached for Christ directly through wonders, I have no alternative but to believe that signs and wonders will be one of God's choice missiological strategies to reach the lost."

If one asks how the Bible functions in conversionist approaches to healing, a variety of views are evident. There are biblicist readings (mainly among Pentecostals) that interpret verses like Mk 16:15-18 literally: "Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.... And these signs will accompany those who believe: by using my name they will cast out demons; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." In other words, healing miracles are promised to the church; if the church is obedient to Christ's command, it can also claim this promised power to heal.

Other views emphasise Jn 20:21 ("As the Father has sent me, so I send you... Receive the Holy Spirit") as an overall perspective on Christian mission and point out that the Holy Spirit is given to the church to continue the whole ministry of Jesus – including healing. Missions that have been influenced by the logic of the Enlightenment and therefore subscribe to the bio-medical model of health and healing (see Saayman & Kriel 1992:39ff), erected mission hospitals and clinics on the basis of verses like Jn 20:21,

but often there were serious debates on mission stations about the role of medical work in the overall missionary vision and the precise relationship between medical care and evangelism. Much depended on the theology of the doctors recruited by the mission, whether they saw their work: a) as including direct personal evangelism of patients; b) as a drawcard to attract people to the mission station (to hear the gospel from the preachers); or c) as part of the service of the church to suffering humanity, revealing the compassion of Christ to those who were like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36), even if people did not become Christians in the process.

The intentions of conversionist Protestants in healing activities were always sincere and biblical in its concern for people, but since there was no proper integration between science and faith in the "biomedical" model of health care, the Bible often played a minor role. A prayer by medical staff before an operation or some personal witness to a recovering patient by nurses or doctors often merely made up the "brackets" between which the "real" (biomedical) healing activities such as surgery and the dispensing of medicine took place. This lack of integration left a huge vacuum in medical care in Africa, which led to the development of various types of "dual religious system" (Schreiter 1985: chapter 7).

At the liberationist end of the continuum, the emphasis is not on signs and wonders, because liberation approaches are more influenced by materialist approaches to reality than by idealist or pre-modern ones. The possibility of divine intervention to heal the sick may not be ruled out entirely by liberation theologians, but this is not where their emphasis lies. In liberation approaches the emphasis is on the healing of social rifts and structural divisions, flowing from economic exploitation and political or cultural oppression. The goal of missionary engagement is not merely the achievement of inner peace for individuals, but *shalom* – comprehensive social, economic and political healing or well-being – all of which is impossible without justice. In other words, healing is here seen not merely as the absence of dis-ease, but as the presence of comprehensive well-being, in the cultural, economic, social and political sense of the word. Old Testament passages such as Exodus 3, Isaiah 1, Isaiah 58 and Amos 5 are frequently quoted as justification for such social activism. The personal dimension of healing is very much part of liberation theologies, and I discuss it under evangelistic methods below.

Between these two poles of conversionist and liberationist approaches, there is a wide variety of views among Protestants on the relationship between healing and mission (see Bosch & Jansen 1968). An important development is the attempt of some Christian medical workers to cooperate with indigenous African healers, particularly in combatting the scourge of

HIV/AIDS in Africa.

Evangelistic methods

After discussing the first three missionary methods (educational, literary and medical), Mott (1900:115) says the following, as he starts discussing evangelistic methods:

Notwithstanding the value of other methods, the proclamation of the Gospel by the living voice will always hold the pre-eminent place.... The value of medical, educational, literary and all other forms of missionary activity, is measured by the extent to which they prepare the way for the Gospel message, promote its acceptance, manifest its spirit and benefits, multiply contacts with human souls, and increase the number and efficiency of those who preach Christ.

This is clearly the heartbeat of conversionist Protestant mission. A significant term in this quotation is "contact with human souls." One of the most influential expressions in conversionist approaches is the expression "saving souls." It became popular in Protestant mission as a result of the influence of the Moravians. Nikolaus von Zinzendorf, when he sent out the first two Moravian missionaries in 1732, passionately commissioned them: "Go, then, and attempt to win souls for the Lamb" (in Schoonhoven 1974:56 – my translation). The likely biblical sources of this view are verses like Mt 16:26, "For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?"; Acts 2:41, "Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls"; and Rev 6:9, "I saw under the altar the souls of them that were slain for the word of God, and for the testimony which they held."¹⁴ The reading of these verses through the lenses of a hellenistically influenced European worldview led to the notion that all people had eternal souls that would spend eternity either in heaven or in hell and which needed to be "gathered in for the Lamb" before they died.

It was this dualistic "biblical" anthropology that European missionaries took with them to the rest of the world. The series of dichotomies associated with this (soul/body, sacred/profane, faith/reason, church/politics, etc.) caused a serious devaluation of human life and the human body, which not

¹⁴ These three quotations are from the King James Version, which was the authoritative English translation at the time of the rise of the Protestant missionary enterprise and which therefore shaped it in a fundamental way.

only made the Christian message difficult for Africans to understand, but also caused an awkward intrapersonal split in the lives of those who became Christians.

According to conversionist mission souls were saved primarily through *preaching*. This kerygmatic emphasis in conversionist mission is based on many New Testament portions. Mott (1900:15) mentions three: Mk 16:15, "Preach the Gospel"; I Cor 1:21, "It was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save them that believe"; and Rom 10:13f, "How shall they hear without a preacher?" The concrete way in which the Bible was used in missionary preaching ranged from emotional appeal to moralistic instruction and rational debate, depending on how the preachers perceived the nature of their audience.

At the other end of the continuum, *liberationist* approaches to evangelism was also aimed at conversion, but one that can generally be described as a conversion to self-acceptance and self-love, the creation of a new positive self in opposition to the negative self-image foisted on people by alienating and oppressive social, economic and political structures. This destructive self-image was characterised by "a slave mentality, inferiority complex, distrust of themselves and continued dependence on others culminating in self-hate" (SASO 1971:17). Black theologians in South Africa have interpreted this as sinning against themselves, thus leading to a broken humanity. Black Theology therefore propagated a radical conversion from an imposed "non-white" to a self-chosen "black" identity.

This emergence of a new human being, struggling to shake off the internalised self-image imposed by the coloniser in the mind of the colonised is a slow and painful conversion: "For people to become authentically black ... is an experience similar to a rebirth, a total conversion, the participation in the creation of a new humanity" (Boesak 1977:27). One black theologian, Lebamang Sebidi goes even further by describing the work of Black Consciousness organisations as attempts to "exorcize the demon out of the black man's mind, the internalized demon of the 'white master' within the black man's mind and heart" (Sebidi 1986:258). For black Christians the role of the Bible in this conversion was central (see below), but many black South Africans who were not Christians underwent a similar cultural-political conversion experience into dignified and self-respecting black human beings.

Christian activists, working among fellow black Christians, used particularly the biblical notion of human beings as *image of God* (Gen 1:26-28) to facilitate this conversion to a new humanity. This notion of having been created in God's image gives worth and dignity to every single human being, whatever other people may think of her or him. *Image of God* was

therefore not seen as a static concept that needed to be merely acknowledged rationally: "To be created in God's image means to struggle against everything that tries to rob me of this likeness" (Kameeta 1978:97 – my translation). In this sense it would be apt to speak of mission as a *struggle for humanisation* in liberationist Protestant mission.

This insight into the nature of conversion has far reaching implications for preaching among suffering and oppressed people in a liberationist approach:

The emphasis on self-love, self-acceptance and self-affirmation in Black Theology is a fundamental critique of traditional missionary preaching, which sees people only (or primarily) as *sinner*s, thus overlooking the fact that they are also (at the same time) *sinned-against* people. To put it graphically, many Christians preach to people who are lying on the ground, telling them that they should 'turn around'. This does not go to the root of the 'spiritual poverty' (Biko) of oppressed people, but instead worsens their plight, since it suggests that they should accept their inferior and dispossessed status as the will of God, and concentrate on private morality. Surely the *first* word of the Gospel to oppressed people is that they should *stand up!* When people who have for centuries been treated as 'stupid, lazy, dishonest and ignorant,' hear from the church only that they are 'rotten sinners', such a message contains no good news for their lives and actually adds to their oppression!... Christian mission cannot be liberating in its effect on the lives of oppressed people unless it exercises this empowering, humanising and uplifting function. What makes Black Theology (and other liberation theologies) *evangelistic* movements is the fact that they do not leave oppressed people in their beggarly powerlessness, but call on them to be empowered by the Holy Spirit and to take the courage to become human subjects, even while the oppressive social structures are still in force around them (Kritzinger 1990:42).

Having surveyed the functioning of the Bible in key mission methods employed by Protestant missions across the continuum, I now move to the agents of Protestant mission and how they were/are recruited.

AGENTS AND RECRUITMENT

This section looks at the "who" of missions: Who were/are the "agents" that carry out Protestant mission? How are they called or recruited? What are their social or class positions? And what role did the Bible play in all his?

Mission societies

One characteristic of Protestant mission is that it was, initially at least, not done by the insitutional churches but by *voluntary mission societies*. This had to do with the fact that the Reformation was initially an exclusively

European movement that believed it had rediscovered the true gospel of God's grace and that its primary mission was to restore this to the existing (European) church. It was also influenced by the common belief at the time that the apostles had already preached the gospel to all nations and that Christians were not under obligation to act on passages like Mt 28:16-20. The adage *cuius regio eius religio* ("each region has to follow the religion of its ruler" – Bosch 1991:241) was also influential, since Protestant rulers had control only over European territories – as opposed to the vast colonial empires of Portuguese and Spanish Catholics at the time. Protestants therefore did not initiate mission activities outside Europe until Protestant countries started colonies¹⁵. But even then it was mission societies who made the first moves, with the churches following only much later.¹⁶

The Pietists introduced the principle of voluntarism in mission: "It was not the church (*ecclesia*) that was the bearer of mission, but the small, revived community, inside the church, the *ecclesiola in ecclesia*" (Bosch 1991:253). One result of this was that the volunteers who presented themselves for missionary service to Protestant mission societies were not necessarily intellectually gifted or well trained theologically. Since what mattered in a Pietist approach to mission was one's commitment to Christ and one's sense of calling, thousands of missionaries were sent out without adequate theological training or intercultural preparation. William Carey, the hugely influential Protestant missionary, often called the "father of modern Protestant missions," started off as a cobbler and was a largely self-taught scholar.

At the conversionist end of the Protestant missions continuum, which includes most of the burgeoning Pentecostal movement, the biblical notion of Christ calling common fishermen to discipleship (Mk 1:16-20) has often been emphasised, reinforced by the words of Luke in Acts 4:13: "Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and realised that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognised them as companions of Jesus." This anti-elitist streak in conversionist Protestant missions represents at once a strength and a weakness. It succeeded in mobilising thousands of working class and peasant Christians over past five centuries to dedicate themselves to intercultural witness, often at great

15 The first Protestant groups to break away from this tradition were the Anabaptists, who made a clear separation between church and state – and suffered much for that stand.

16 "Because many European Protestant churches were unable or unwilling to initiate, administer, or support foreign mission, voluntary mission societies came into being throughout Europe in the nineteenth century" (Bliese & Rzepkowski 1998:322).

personal cost and under very difficult circumstances. Bosch (1991:255) says of Pietist missions: "Now ordinary men and women, most of them simple artisans, went literally to the ends of the earth, devoted themselves for life to people often living in the most degrading circumstances, identified with them, and lived the gospel in their midst." The amount of energy mobilised in this way is truly amazing.

And yet, it also represents a weakness. The unwillingness to give thorough theological training to missionary candidates allowed Protestant mission to become ideologically compromised in various ways. In the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa, for example, candidates for the ministry in white Afrikaner congregations were given a seven year theological training, including Greek, Hebrew and Latin, whereas candidates for "missionary service" in black communities were given an inferior training. The latter were not allowed to preach or serve sacraments in white congregations and were not addressed as "dominee" but only as "eerwaarde."¹⁷ The underlying racism of this missionary practice was obvious to any critical observer, but it was justified by the urgency of the missionary task and by arguing that "uncivilised" hearers did not need preachers with sophisticated theological training. The tragedy is that for many decades nobody realised the fatal mistake of training intercultural witnesses less intensely than monocultural witnesses!

At the liberationist end of the continuum, recruitment functioned rather differently, since this approach is far more directed and driven by a community. Instead of gathering funds to send people away to work in intercultural contexts of witness or service, liberationist missions were committed locally and succeeded in mobilising students, workers and women's groups for empowering actions in a community. Such missions depended far more on "lay" and voluntary workers, predominantly Christian students and workers who were optimistic about the difference they could make to the lives of people through projects like adult literacy classes.

Missionaries

Another key component of recruitment in Protestant missions has been the role of biography and autobiography. Pioneer missionaries became powerful role models to attract others to become involved in frontier-crossing mission. One need only think of biographies and autobiographies of pioneers like

17 The same double standard between pastors and missionaries was practised by German churches and their mission societies in Africa.

Hudson Taylor (China); Adoniram Judson (Burma), Alexander M. Mackay (Uganda), David Livingstone (Southern Africa); etc. In the prestigious journal, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, two regular features are "The legacy of ..." (On deceased missionaries/missiologists) and "My pilgrimage in mission" (by the living), in other words, biography and autobiography. Gerald Anderson (1998) has edited a biographical dictionary of 850 pages with missionary biographies from every conceivable denomination and country.¹⁸

This tendency to idealise individual missionaries may not be unique to Protestant mission, but in the Protestant community it has given rise to some typical features. One is the inclination of historians to write the history of the churches in the South as a history of missionaries. However, recent research has shown that African interpreters, evangelists, translation assistants and lay believers were far more original and influential in spreading the gospel and in creating a theological and liturgical vocabulary for the fledgling Christian churches in the "mission fields" than the career missionaries could ever be.

A second, specifically biblical dimension of this emphasis on individual missionary biography is the key role played by the apostle Paul as the archetypal Christian missionary in Protestant missions. It is not accidental that Paul's journeys described in Acts have come to be called "*missionary journeys*." We grew up with the term, but it is clearly not the way Luke described them, and it is by no means obvious that they should be so called. By projecting our missionary journeys back onto Paul and by making him the archetypal missionary-as-traveller, we end up calling his travels "*missionary journeys*." The centrality of Paul (and especially his Letter to the Romans) to the Reformation generally made this understandable, but there is the added fact that Paul – rather than Jesus – travelled across the sea into other cultural communities, which made him a lot more like the European missionaries of the 18th and 19th centuries. It is not accidental, then, that Paul's vision of the call of the Macedonian man to "Come over to Macedonia and help us!" (Acts 16:9) became a key mission text in Europe during the formative period of Protestant worldwide mission (Bosch 1991:289, 339f).

¹⁸ A dictionary containing many biographies of Asian Christian leaders has also appeared (Sunquist 2001) and Dr Jon Bonk spearheads a "Dictionary of Christian Biography" project to produce a similar publication with biographies of African Christian leaders.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS

Context analysis plays a key part in missionary praxis. The “answer” of the gospel in a particular situation depends on what the mission(ary) perceives the “questions” to be. It is at this point that stark differences are evident between conversionist and liberationist missions.

Saved and lost

Conversionist Protestant missions place great emphasis on the lostness of human beings outside of faith in Christ. It is one of the key theological insights of the Reformation, based primarily on Paul's theology, that salvation is *sola gratia*, *solo Christo* and *sola fide*, which means that, without a personal experience of God's grace in Jesus Christ through faith, people are lost, “by nature children of wrath, like everyone else” (Eph 2:3), “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12).¹⁹ This theological insight has led to the fundamental context analysis that there are only two kinds of people – the saved and the lost – and that these are two rigid groups.²⁰ All other dimensions of a context, whether economic, political, cultural or personal, are made subservient to the major concern of mission, namely to “save lost souls.” This form of context analysis is clearly an extreme and doesn't often occur in the unmitigated form stated here. Most Protestant missions have a more inclusive approach, giving attention to issues of health, education, economic empowerment, etc. as well, but in many cases such activities are seen as secondary, not belonging to the essence of mission, being at most drawcards to attract people to the preaching of the gospel.

Where does such a context analysis originate? It seems to be a product of the marriage between Christian faith and hellenistic (particularly Platonic) philosophy. While contextualising itself in the hellenistic world, the Christian faith adopted many features of European mystery religions and in the process became a salvation religion promising safe passage to heaven, the “world above,” after death. The birth right of the Jesus movement is its historical, forward-looking hope for the reign of God, for a new heaven and a new earth in which justice dwells (2 Peter 3:13) and where all things in heaven and on earth are gathered up into Christ as Head (Eph 1:10),

19 See also Rom 3:23-26; Eph 2:1-10; Gal 4:8-11.

20 This body/soul dichotomy is one of a whole set of dualisms that cluster together. See the list of dualisms discussed under evangelistic methods above.

growing out of the modified Jewish apocalyptic of Jesus and Paul, and based on the notion of the overlap of the old and new ages and the breaking-in of the new age (the liberating reign of God) by the work of the Holy Spirit. This birthright, this forward-looking and mobilising Christian hope, was traded for an upward-looking, individualistic hope of eternal bliss in heaven. In the process the holistic concern of Jesus for people's physical and mental suffering, expressed in his healings and his open table fellowship (see Crossan 1994:66-70), was eclipsed and eventually disappeared. Instead, a *disciplinum arcanum* developed that excluded visitors, children and catechumens from the eucharistic service. The bread and wine became *pharmakon athanasias* (medicine of eternity), strictly reserved for baptised insiders.²¹ In the process high walls arose around the church to ensure its distinct identity, reinforcing the distinction between the saved and the lost.

The Reformation, in its claim to restore Christianity to its pristine purity, did not break fundamentally with this heaven-directed and church-centred mindset of European-hellenistic Christianity. It was especially in the missionary wing of Protestantism, which developed under the influence of Pietism (as I have indicated already) that a heaven-ward and individualistic view of salvation was promoted, even though we must note that early Pietists had a more holistic approach (Bosch 1991:254). Luther's tortured personal question: "Where can I find a merciful God?" and the Pietist "Busstkampf" (an intensely personal penitential struggle for certainty of faith) contributed to this theology, leading inevitably to a reductionist analysis of a context and a consistently negative theology of religions.

Another root of this context analysis is in a deep-seated sense of "election" and calling as God's unique covenant people, derived from the Old Testament and applied to the church as the "new Israel." It also flows from a pessimistic anthropology (described above) which insists that all people are lost – and incapable of doing good – until they are regenerated by the Holy Spirit. The long shadow of Augustine of Hippo falls over conversionist mission and biblical passages like John 3:16, Acts 4:12 and 1 Timothy 2:5, interpreted in an explicitly exclusivist way, play a key role in shaping this approach.

21 The interpretation of the Eucharist as *pharmakon athanasias* dates back to Ignatius (Ephesians 20), who lived in the early 2nd century CE. The practice of restricting the Eucharist to the baptised dates further back (see Didache 9:5, with an appeal to the words of Jesus on not giving what is holy to the dogs [Mt 7:6]).

Opressors and oppressed

At the other end of the Protestant missions continuum there are liberationist approaches that analyse a context primarily in terms of economic, social and political categories. If the conversionist approach reduces reality to a simple duality of saved and lost, liberationists are in danger of reducing reality to a simply duality of oppressors and oppressed. The *Kairos Document* (1986:2) is a good example of this approach: "... we come to see that the conflict in South Africa is between the oppressor and the oppressed."²² Refusing to accept the context analysis of the apartheid government and its supporting churches that South Africa was primarily a multi-ethnic society where cultures and "races" needed to develop separately in order to avoid friction, or that it was facing a "total onslaught" from the side of communist agitators, the *Kairos Document* (KD) proposed that a life-and-death struggle was taking place between a tyrannical state (armed with its own "state theology") and the majority of South African people who were being denied the possibility to exercise their human rights and responsibilities. In the light of this context analysis, the KD then proposed a mission of liberation, a prophetic theology leading to concrete action: "It is ... not primarily a matter of trying to reconcile individual people but a matter of trying to change unjust structures so that people will not be pitted against one another as oppressor and oppressed" (KD 1986:22).

What biblical warrant does the KD adduce for its context analysis? Three key notions are the call to "read the signs of the times" (quoting Mt 16:3), to "interpret this *kairos*" (quoting Lk 12:56) and the notion that God is "always on the side of the oppressed" (quoting Ps 103:6). The KD accuses "church theology" of criticising apartheid cautiously and superficially, "because instead of engaging in an in-depth analysis of the signs of our times, it relies upon a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then uncritically and repeatedly applies them to our situation" (KD 1986:9). A prophetic theology, on the other hand, "must know what is happening, analyse what is happening (social analysis) and then interpret what is happening in the light of the gospel (KD 1986:17).

22 Influential Catholic theologians like Albert Nolan played a key role in the writing of the *Kairos Document* and it is therefore not specifically a Protestant document. One of the contributions of liberation theology was to break down barriers between theological traditions. In the face of a *kairos* such as South Africa faced in 1985, emphasising denominational differences would have been a luxury. Furthermore, since a large number of influential Protestant theologians signed the *Kairos Document*, it can be used to illustrate a liberationist approach to mission among Protestants.

The KD then gives a survey of what the Bible says about suffering and oppression and states that "...throughout the Bible God appears as the liberator of the oppressed" and that Christians should take sides against oppression by uniting themselves with God. In the light of this analysis, it urges churches to transform their activities "to serve the real religious needs of all the people and to further the liberating mission of God and the Church in the world" (KD 1986:29).

Liberationist Protestant mission, in reading the signs of the times, developed "... more potent ways of analyzing the world ... than the 'Christian' versus 'non-Christian' world categories. Thus, for example, the concepts of race, class and gender gained prominence ... within theological discussions" (Maluleke 2000:89).

Conclusion

In between the conversionist and liberationist poles of context analysis in mission, there are many other positions, having various aspects in common with the two poles. One of the most influential of these approaches focusses on cultural analysis and cross-cultural (or intercultural) encounter. Protestant missiology as a field of study has always been in dialogue with cultural anthropology, and one of the strongest movements in this regard is the Church Growth school linked to the Fuller School of World Mission in California, with its controversial "Homogeneous Unit Principle."

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This section addresses the "biblical foundations of mission" and the central theological notions in a Protestant theology of mission, in other words the way the Bible functioned as inspiration and as normative guide for mission practice. A good place to start is the classic statement of the threefold aim of mission by Gisbertus Voetius, a Dutch theologian of the 17th century: a) "The conversion of non-believers, heretics and schismatics; b) the planting, gathering and establishing of churches; and c) the glorification and manifestation of divine grace" (in Jongeneel 1998:708).

In a context of proliferating Protestant missions, where many were influenced by Pietism's compassion for human need as the key missionary motivation, there was a constant refrain that missions needed to be anchored in an overall God-centred theological framework. Voetius's ultimate aim of mission did that in some way. However, only in the 20th century did Protestants reach consensus that the churches' many missions

are all embedded in the *missio Dei*, the triune God's gracious and ongoing intervention in human history, moving onwards to the final coming of God's reign (see Vicedom 1960:18). It was one of the main achievements of the International Missionary Council (IMC) to have highlighted this theological insight.²³

However, predictably there is a wide spectrum of interpretations of the *missio Dei*, ranging from conversionist to liberationist. Within the ambit of this overview article, no more can be done than to highlight one representative biblical passage from each pole of the continuum.

Matthew 28:16-20

Without any doubt Mt 28:16-20, often called "The Great Commission," is the *locus classicus* of conversionist Protestant missions. William Carey placed this text at the centre of "modern" missions in 1792, when he wrote his pamphlet, *An enquiry into the obligations of Christians, to use means for the conversion of heathens*. At the time the dominant view in Protestant circles was that Mt 28:18-20 had already been fulfilled by the Apostles and that there was consequently no need for Christians to pursue a worldwide mission. The Anabaptists disagreed fundamentally with this interpretation and sent wandering preachers all over Europe, without any regard for the geographically delineated "parishes" of the Protestant or Catholic churches, something that regularly landed them in court. The Anabaptists based their whole mission strategy in Europe on the Markan and Matthean versions of the Great Commission, along with Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it; the world and those who live in it" (Bosch 1991:246). However, Protestant orthodoxy (with rare exceptions) insisted that "present generations of Christians had no business to get involved in a mission to the heathen, since the apostles had completed the task" (:250).

European Pietists gradually started engaging in missions outside Europe, and in North America some Puritans started working among American Indian communities. Among the latter John Eliot (1604-1690) was most notable and Bosch calls him the "undisputed Protestant missionary pioneer" (:257). These influences gathered momentum, but it took the courage and personal sacrifice of someone like Carey to move Protestant

23 It was particularly the Willingen IMC meeting in 1952 that emphasised God as missionary God and mission as participation in God's action in the world. See Van 't Hof (1972:155ff) and the whole October 2003 issue of *International Review of Mission*, titled "Missio Dei revisited; Willingen 1952-2002."

churches to reinterpret Mt 28 fundamentally. However, this set of circumstances caused a narrow concentration on Matthew 28 in Protestant missions, elevating it to the most important missionary text in the Bible. This has led conversionist Protestant mission to be understood and practised in a seriously reduced way, without a broader emphasis on justice, service or dialogue. An example of this is the recent movement calling itself "Great Commission Christians," who state: "There are two kinds of Christians. They are either doers of the Great Commission, or disobedient ones."²⁴

Softening this emphasis on mission as obedience to an external command among conversionists, the Reformed missiologist Harry Boer (1961:63) has argued that "the missionary power revealed in the early Church did not arise simply out of obedience to an external command, but it was expressive of an urge to witness which had its roots in the new spiritual life."²⁵ Roland Allen (in Páton 1960:27) also persistently emphasised this point: "The Spirit given to the apostles is thus seen to have created in them an internal necessity to preach the Gospel." The worldwide Pentecostal missionary movement, as part of conversionist mission, also bears witness to the fact that the experience of inner renewal and empowerment by the Spirit is the wellspring of mission.

Luke 4:18-19

A key passage for liberationist Protestant mission is Luke 4:18-19, sometimes called the "Nazareth Manifesto" of Jesus. Willem Saayman (1991a:5), writing from a liberationist angle, has called it "the most comprehensive and satisfying paradigm for the *missio Dei*." Since Luke presents this as Jesus' first public words, Lk 4:16-21 becomes a "programmatic text" that is meant to characterise Jesus's entire ministry as liberating.²⁶ The "preferential option for the poor," made popular by Latin American Catholic theologians, was shared by Protestant liberationists, among others on the basis of this passage: "He has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." It must be pointed out, though, that liberationists

24 See www.cmalliance.org/whowearé/worddocs/gchristians.doc

25 Boer (1961:123) quotes Robert Speer: "The men who have done the work of God in the world are men in whom the Spirit of God was at work, and who would have done God's work even in the absence of expressed legislation as to the nature of the work God wanted done."

26 See Nolan (1976:44f). Also Nolan (1988:130), where he interprets Lk 4:18-19 as follows: "Jesus set out to change not only the government or rulers of his time, but the whole social, political, economic and religious system."

generally do not have a biblicist hermeneutics in which “proof texts” are adduced to justify their actions with and among people suffering oppression.

Among liberationists the “year of the Lord’s favour” in Luke 4:19 has been linked to the notion of the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25, interpreted as “the year of God’s all-inclusive liberation” (Saayman 1991a:5; Arias 1984:289). Ulrich Duchrow (1995:168ff, 183) has taken this further and used both the Jubilee and Luke 4 in a theology for developing economic alternatives to global capitalism.

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to give an overview of the functioning of the Bible in five centuries of Protestant missions by constructing a conversionist-liberationist continuum of approaches. By distinguishing between the four dimensions of a praxis cycle (methods and strategies; agents and recruitment; context analysis; theological reflection) an attempt was made to avoid a narrow “biblical foundation of mission” approach to the question. However, to get a fuller picture of the actual functioning of the Bible in Protestant missions, one needs to follow up this overview by researching how these four dimensions have interacted in the lives of concrete missions and missionaries. That could give rise to an interesting research project, in which the generalisations and oversimplifications of an article like this can be overcome.

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