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Bosch, David J.

1995 Believing in the Future: Toward a missiology of western culture.
Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

David J. Bosch, “until his tragic death in 1992, was Professor and Head of the Department of Missiology at the University of South Africa” (1995: back cover). Additionally, he is the author of the much renowned *Transforming Mission* (Orbis Books, 1991), a magnum opus of missiological work.

In this brief book, Bosch addresses the “response of the church in the West to the malaise of the moment” (ibid: 4). The moment to which he is referring is the cultural context of postmodernity in which the church finds itself. He develops this line of reasoning by briefly setting the cultural stage of the “post-“ era. “We have truly entered an epoch fundamentally at variance with anything we have experienced to date” (ibid: 1).

Before he develops a strategy by which to engage the Western world missionally, he reviews the impact of the Enlightenment on our social situation. Though the Enlightenment has been demonized by many, Bosch is careful in his evaluation of its effects. He does not advocate for a pre-Enlightenment regression or a wholesale embrace of Enlightenment suppositions. Rather, a balanced approach of critique and appreciation for how Modernity has shaped our culture. The place in which we now find ourselves, by his terminology (building off the work of Küng and others), is postmodernity. Into this mix we find ourselves living with a stark dichotomy drawn between the sacred and the secular, even while there is increasing doubt of the omnipotence of reason. Bosch’s conclusion of this is that neither modernity’s autonomous individual self, fueled by all-powerful reason, or the hopelessly subjective, anti-meta-narrative claims of postmodernity are capable of comprehending “what humanity really is” (ibid: 25).

Bosch concludes his brief cultural overview and turns his attention to a missiology of Western culture (ibid: 27). He notes the common dichotomous thinking within the Western church between mission and theology, particularly the relegation of mission as something done outside the church in pagan territory. His contention is that the church

“is missionary by its very nature,” as the Vatican II Decree on Mission (paragraph 9) put it, and it is impossible to talk about church without at the same time talking about mission. Because God is a missionary God, God’s people are missionary people” (ibid: 32).

Out of this reality, he develops several important themes, the kingdom of God as formative for the church’s missional task, the church’s responsibility for the Third World, and the reemergence of “religion” in contemporary culture. Next, he turns his attention to what it means to “communicate to the Western “post-Christian” public” (ibid: 48). He concludes this to mean the demonstration of “the role that plausibility structures, or, rather, worldviews, play in people’s lives” (ibid). Bosch concludes the book with six other themes important to a missiology of Western culture. They are: 1) ecological attentiveness, 2) the necessity of being countercultural, 3) the need to be ecumenical, 4) the conviction of being contextual, 5) the ministry of the laity, and 6) the credibility of our witness as it is lived out in the local Christian community. Finally, Bosch advocates that though this task before us is difficult, it is our commitment to God in this context, rather than whatever success, or lack of it, which we encounter.

Believing in the Future is important, if for no other reason, it is Bosch’s last published work. It was published posthumously by his wife. Bosch’s work represents a towering force in the world of missiology. In the forward to this book Wilbert Shenk refers to him as a prophet and understandably so. Even in such a short piece, especially compared to the daunting *Transforming Mission*, Bosch covers a vast amount of territory without seeming to gloss over the depth of the subject matter at hand.

This has been an important book for this course, *Contemporary Culture in Missiological Perspective*, because it provides an appropriate and helpful overview of the challenges facing the church today. Bosch aptly deals with both the cultural situation and the church's missional engagement without weighing too heavily on either. Personally, this has been a helpful reading because it frames the specific issues I deal with in local church ministry in the context of larger, cultural issues. Essentially, this book helps me to lift my eyes from the daily realities of ministry to the big picture.

In conclusion, Bosch does a good job of balancing cultural critique, both sociological and philosophical, with the forward movement of developing a missiology of Western culture. The book is easily read and accessible. However, two areas of concern are; first, the "five ingredients of a missiology of Western culture" (ibid: 55), these five ingredients are difficult to discern and given the importance that he places on them, it would be nice to know more precisely to what he is referring. Second, despite the movement he makes toward a missiology of Western culture, it would be extraordinarily helpful to "flesh out" what the living of this missiology could look like. For instance, he places great concern on the "mission as social ethics", focusing on the reign of God. This is very good and helpful, and highlights a real tension that I, and others, feel as we seek to live missionally in our context. It would be helpful to hear of possible ways "to express, ethically, the coming of God's reign" (ibid: 35). Surely, this is an understandable oversight. It is a short book with little space for illumination, not to mention the fact that the book was published after his death. And yet, too often those in the academy offer cogent arguments and critiques and not enough guidance in the lived reality faced by pastors, missionaries, and church leaders. Finally, I am grateful for Bosch and this little book that points to a hopeful future of a missiology of Western culture.