Gerard Hall: Review of Bevans’ & Schroeder’s *Constants in Context*

* Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today
  
  Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder

**Constants in Context** [CC] is a timely, scholarly work whose self-declared, ambitious aim is to provide "a contemporary theology of mission in light of the faithful but always contextual growth of the Christian movement" (xvi). It takes its place alongside David Bosch’s monumental study, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis, 1991), which CC duly acknowledges and, in many ways, complements. Both works deserve pride of place in any missiological course and other theology studies which seek to illuminate Christian faith today from biblical, historical and ecumenical perspectives.

CC is divided into three major sections: (I) Biblical and Theological Foundations; (II) Historical Models of Mission; (III) a Theology of Mission for Today.

Part I begins with biblical data in the Books of Acts which the authors divide into seven missionary stages starting with the time before Pentecost and ending with explicit mission to the Gentiles. Mission is not something that emanates from an established church; rather, mission is prior to Church, representing the early Christian movement's response to constantly changing contexts. "To be church is to be in mission". This, according to the authors, is the ongoing motif that characterizes Christian history. It forms the basic sub-text and theological argument of the book.

Theological foundations are introduced in the form of six constants and three theology types. The six constants are best understood as questions to which there are diverse responses according to changing contexts and theological paradigms: (1) Who is Jesus Christ? (2) What is the church? (3) How do we approach the eschatological future? (4) What is the meaning of salvation? (5) How is the human person understood? (6) What is the role of culture? Relying on the work of Justo González (who also provides the book’s Foreword), theological typologies are identified with Tertullian (Carthage, law, Roman culture), Origen (Alexandria, truth, Hellenistic culture) and Irenaeus (Antioch, history, near-Eastern culture) respectively. The categories and typologies provide the systematic framework for describing and organising the church’s diverse missionary strategies.

Part II provides six historical snapshots of missionary endeavour arranged chronologically: early church (100-301); monastic movement (313-907); mendicant movement (1000-1453); age of discovery
For the historical non-specialist (especially those from the West), there is a wealth of little-known information on missionary approaches, especially in Africa and the East (such as Ethiopia, Syria, Asian Minor, India, Egypt, Persia, China, Japan, Korea and Russia) that makes engaging reading. Each chapter gives attention to the role of laity and especially women in mission. Socio-political, religious and institutional contexts of time and culture are provided. The approach is intentionally ecumenical so that we are presented with missionary strategies of Arians and Nestorians, Beguines and Jesuits, Reformists and Orthodox, Evangelicals and Pentecostals, to name examples from different epochs.

There is a methodical attempt to describe various missionary strategies in each epoch according to the constants and typologies outlined above. Most intriguing in this regard is use of theological types (A = Tertullian; B = Origen; C = Irenaeus). In missionary terms, Type A is concerned with saving souls and extending the church, Type B focuses on the discovery of truth, and Type C highlights commitment to liberation and transformation. Each historical epoch may emphasize one typology over another but, in the mind of the authors, there are examples of all types in all epochs.

For example, in the second and third centuries there is: mission in the Latin-speaking Roman world with its emphasis on law and order (Type A); mission in the Greek-speaking Hellenistic world with its search for truth and cultural adaptation (Type B); and mission in the Syriac-speaking near-Eastern world with its more radical openness to historical diversity (Type C). These patterns are repeated throughout missionary history influencing the manner in which Christology, ecclesiology, eschatology, salvation, anthropology and culture are understood. In the main, western Christianity following Augustine adopts the first model, Orthodox-Byzantine Christianity follows the second, whereas the third type is embodied in prophetic figures (e.g. Francis of Assisi, Luther, Wesley, Teilhard de Chardin and liberation theologians) who emerge in different times, cultures and situations.

The reader will inevitably have questions to bring to the use of González’ theology types. One wonders, for example, of a hypothetical conversation among Francis of Assisi, Karl Barth and Gustaf Gutiérrez (all depicted in Type C). To what extent is Aquinas or even Augustine more associated with Type A’s emphasis on law and order (according
to CC) rather than Type B’s celebration of truth wherever it may be found? The authors are well aware of the problem of over-reliance on typologies which they often resolve through combining types to describe complex missionary realities. For example, in the chapter on the age of discovery (1492-1773), Roman Catholic missionary work in Asia is both *tabula rasa* (Type A) and accommodational (Type B); Protestant missionary work in the Americas and elsewhere is focussed on both law (Type A) and history (Type C). As all good authors realise, typologies are at best an aid to understanding when they are not taken as absolute.

Part III is the book’s attempt to fulfil the requirements of its sub-title: *A Theology of Mission for Today*. Relying mainly on twentieth century documents from Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Reform, Evangelical and Pentecostal churches, the authors outline a preferred model of mission as “prophetic dialogue”. This model integrates insights of the major Christian traditions including more recent biblical emphases on *Missio Dei* and reign of God. The prophetic dialogue model also takes up the challenge of reflecting on what it means to proclaim the Universal Lordship of Jesus Christ in a pluralistic world with its new sensitivity towards the religious ‘other’. The model has various foci: witness; proclamation; liturgy; prayer and contemplation; justice; peace; integrity of creation; reconciliation. These are each discussed in some detail.

The basic thesis of the book is reiterated in Part III and in the concluding reflections: Christianity has been radically contextual since its very beginnings. With the collapse of colonialism, Christian mission had to some degree lost its nerve. In face of the new challenges of globalism, and with the gravity of Christianity fast moving from the North to the South, the prophetic dialogue model provides the best hope of responding to the church’s missionary calling. We recall that “to be church is to be in mission”. Moreover, the authors provide evidence for the “missionary rebirth at the end of the twentieth century”, a rebirth that is strongest among Pentecostal and Evangelical churches.

The proposed prophetic dialogue model of mission wishes to be a synthesis of all three theological typologies. Presumably, as in the past, different Christian groups and denominations will emphasise diverse aspects. The authors do not presume to judge the adequacy of one type over another since “all three approaches are valid”. In
historical terms they do admit that, in particular contexts, some missionary strategies show greater or lesser fidelity to the Gospel and/or to the church’s missionary effectiveness. Still, the systematic theologian may be inclined to suggest there is room for more historical and theological critique of various strategies than the authors are sometimes inclined to employ.

CC is a work of historical and theological scholarship which provides many thought-provoking ideas in regard to how the Church should see and practice its missionary vocation in the twenty-first century. Its readability is aided by the use of Maps and Tables that clarify matters of historical, geographical and theological complexity. There is also a helpful Index. This work will stand the test of time.

The authors, Stephen Bevans and Roger Schroeder, have made an important contribution to the articulation of a contemporary missionary theology. Indeed, they are trying to make us realise that theology and missiology can no more be separated than the church and mission. One cannot exist without the other. The success of the work is no doubt related to the authors’ membership of the Missionaries of the Divine Word, one of the Catholic church’s largest and most successful missionary congregations, for whom Christian life and mission are inseparable.

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