Comments on "Visa for Witness: A New Focus on the Theology of Mission and Ecumenism"
(continued from Nos. 6 & 7)

6. Witness under Cross-Examination

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In the following I shall try to offer a combined appraisal of the reactions to my paper "Visa For Witness: A New Focus of the Theology of Mission and Ecumenism" (in: MISSION STUDIES III-1, 1986, 51-60). Contributions on the part of D. Bosch, L. Newbigin, G.M. Soares-Prabhu, H.D. Beeby, and J. Parratt were published in MISSION STUDIES III-2, 1986, and IV-1, 1987. My appraisal will be rather short because the study project is still in progress; I hope to write a concluding essay as the third stage of the project, as I announced in the editorial foreword to Martin Walton’s survey Witness in Biblical Scholarship, which was the first stage of the project. The second stage was devoted to an analysis of policy statements on the theme of witness issued by the World Council of Churches, the Roman Catholic Church and some conservative evangelical groups. Here I select a few issues which were raised by my distinguished correspondents.

1. The scope of the study project as a whole

The concentration of the BISAM project on the witness theme is greatly regretted and criticized by David J. Bosch and this issue is naturally the first I want to address. D.J. Bosch pleads for a return to the original project as he has understood it: 'a concerted effort in which scholars from various disciplines, confessions and cultures cooperate, (to) uncover for our own time what has traditionally been referred to as the "biblical foundations for mission"'. In this area there are many other biblical notions besides 'witness' that are essential for the foundations for mission. Furthermore is D.J. Bosch very much aware of the need for practical relevance of this study project; the intention should be to provide the church with a comprehensive set of criteria allowing a reliable assessment whether or not our missionary enterprises are 'biblical'. The notion of witness is too narrow for this purpose.
I am quite prepared to acknowledge that the witness theme is not the only one that could have been chosen but I still believe that the broad theme of mission in general is too large for a single study project. May I recall that our preliminary bibliographical project on Bible and Mission resulted in the collection of more than one thousand items and identified more than thirty clusters of relevant topics. I want to put on record that D.J. Bosch does not offer a new proposal concerning the research methodology of the BISAM project. Instead, he suggests that two rounds of preliminary studies at least should be done; in the first place the whole hermeneutical question should be settled; secondly, the social contexts of missiologists should be investigated in the framework of an ecumenical and intercultural discussion. Of course, all kinds of preliminary studies can be imagined, but the risk is that we stay in preliminaries and never come to the real point. I prefer the other risk i.e. to be incomplete and partial but at least to touch the real issue.

Generally speaking, our experience of research management along the years has taught us that a limited topic is far better and safer than a general one. All disciplines apply the method of sampling; I consider the witness material we have collected to be a core sample which can tell quite a lot about biblical studies, missionary and ecumenical theories and policies.

2. The hermeneutical problem

All my correspondents point to the hermeneutical problem that arises either in biblical studies or in missiology. Every approach to the Bible is conditioned by the point of departure, or technically speaking, by the paradigm of knowledge adopted by the scholar or the simple reader.

There is a clear difference between the paradigm adopted by a biblical scholar committed to scholarship only, and the paradigm adopted by a Bible reader committed to social and religious relevance.

Lesslie Newbigin emphasizes the captivity of Western scholars to the Enlightenment paradigm i.e. 'the belief that the way to arrive at the truth is the way of observation and induction from observable facts'. D.J. Bosch also refers to the 'principle of the empty head' (in the words of Bernard Lonergan) i.e. the (deceptive) idea that the ideal exegete should and could drop all preconceptions of every kind in order to attend simply to the text and let the biblical author interpret himself. I for my part am not sure that this kind of empiricism or positivism is really belonging to the legacy of Enlightenment.

G. Soares-Probhhu insists that the meaning of a biblical text is more than its 'author-meaning' and will only emerge from the ongoing dialogue between the interpreter's pre-understanding and the open-ended message of the text. He concludes his remark on the hermeneutical problem by stating that the elaboration and use of a missiologically relevant hermeneutics is a priority in the missiological agenda for today. This implicitly means that the study of the witness theme is premature as long as no acknowledged hermeneutics exist in both biblical scholarship and missiology. Furthermore there is a very little chance that Western and Third World theologians come to a general agreement on the hermeneutical problem as long as the Western culture is 'dominant' and other cultures are 'dominated'.

The challenges put to me and to the IAMS are formidable. However, I dare to doubt that they destroy my very small and specific enterprise.

In the first place they do no justice to the actual involvement of our association with the hermeneutical problem. At the IAMS IVth Conference at Maryknoll, New York, in