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Introduction to Missional Theology

Reflection Paper #1

The Eschatological Context and Ethical Conduct of the Missional Church

(A Conversation with Barth and Bosch)

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If asked to supply the charter verse for the mission of the Church, many Christians today would immediately quote—if not verbatim, at least in paraphrase—the “Great Commission” of Matthew 28, “go therefore and make disciples of all nations” (v.19a). Matthew’s words seem straightforward enough. Yet, given the centrality of “mission” to the calling of the Church and the potentially harmful effects of a distorted view of mission throughout the Church’s history one would do well to stop and focus on their precise meaning. In an essay published in 1961, Karl Barth does exactly this, meticulously exegeting each phrase in light of the context in which it was written and with an eye toward practical application by the Church of his day. This paper will be a theological reflection on Karl Barth’s essay, drawing from the thought of the great 21st century missiologist David Bosch. The reflection will proceed in two stages. First, it will explain Barth’s understanding of the two major themes of eschaton and ethics as presented in Matthew 28. Then, it will address the importance of these themes for the current Church’s understanding of its own context and conduct.

In his essay, Barth paints a picture of the early apostolic church as the “decisive event of the eschaton that has broken into time” (Barth, 24). Given the fascination with eschatology in recent Christian popular culture, any use of the word must be qualified and defined. For Barth, the eschaton is not primarily a pre-millennial rapture signifying the coming destruction of the earth. Rather, the eschaton is both yet to come at the end of “this last age” and has already come “as revealed in Christ’s resurrection” (Barth 30).

2 c.f. Hal Lindsey and Carol Carson’s Late Great Planet Earth or LaHaye and Jenkin’s Left Behind series.
Easter is the separation of the times, the “great turning point in history” (Barth, 26) and the “presence of the eschaton” (Barth, 18). The context in which the Church exists is precisely an “eschatological” one in this sense. The Church is the “eschatological Israel” (Barth, 24), fulfilling Israel’s vocation in this last age, called to be “a covenant to the people, a light to the nations” (Isa. 42:6; 49:6).

The Church can live up to this vocation only with the knowledge that the man Jesus was, and is, the Lord of all. The resurrection was the vindication and validation of Jesus’ lordship (Barth, 18), a common theme in the Gospel of Matthew (Bosch, 75). It is Jesus’ authority (ἐξουσία) over all things “in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18) that enables and empowers the Church to fulfill the command given by Jesus in verse 19 (Barth, 22). Only this post-Easter perspective, which understands that Jesus is “at God’s right hand—with angels, authorities and powers in submission to him” (1 Peter 3:22) but is also with us “to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20) allows us to properly carry out our missionary activity (Barth, 30; Bosch, 77). The lordship of Jesus is, therefore, the critical link between context and conduct, between eschaton and ethics.

What, then, is the proper missionary activity of the church according to Matthew 28? Jesus is calling the first disciples to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19): that is, to make other people “what they themselves are” (Bosch 74), people who follow Christ (Barth, 28). This is achieved through baptism and teaching (Barth, 27; Bosch 65, 73). These twin pillars hold up the mission of the church, forming a community for “missionary discipleship” (Bosch, 79). Through baptism people from all the nations (πάντα τὰ ἔθνη) are initiated into the “eschatological Israel,” a new community in which

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ethnic Jews can participate, only now without special privilege or rank (Barth 25, Bosch 64). All baptized Christians have equal share in the promises of Israel and equal responsibility to live out the vocation of Israel “for in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free” (1 Corinthians 12:13). Through teaching, the Church learns in each generation to observe Jesus’ commands, a process that continually draws the Church back to the Scriptures to discern what exactly Jesus has commanded (Barth, 29). It is the community unified in baptism, striving to follow Jesus, doing his commands, that becomes a missionary force in the world. This is the ethical import of the “Great Commission.”

Barth’s explication of Matthew 28 supplies the Church today with tools for understanding both the context in which it exists and the conduct to which it is called. The context in which the Church exists is one of eschatological tension. It is only in light of the eschaton that one can understand the mission of the Church. The tension between “now” and “not-yet” which Barth describes is essential. When the Church understands the eschaton as a solely future event, there is a tendency to diminish the current “lordship” of Jesus and to look forward to redemption as a radical break with the present world. Redemption becomes escape, and the primary ethical injunction is to “keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27b). Conversely, when one understands the eschaton as a fully realized event there is a tendency to “spiritualize” redemption in such a way that diminishes hope for a future time of shalom—“universal flourishing, wholeness and delight” (Plantinga, 10).4 Realized eschatology can tend to lead to one of two stances toward the world. On the one hand, the world is equated with the kingdom of

God. Consequently, the Church’s stance is an unqualified “yes” to the world with no “prophetic judgment” and God’s reign is equated with “human progress on the horizontal plane” (Bosch, 11). On the other hand, and perhaps more dangerous, the Church is equated with the kingdom of God. From this perspective, the goal of mission is to expand the scope and power of the Church. This leads to a triumphalistic understanding of the Church that does not allow for critical self-reflection. When the church is equated with the kingdom of God, there is no *semper reformata* (always reforming), only *compelle intare* (compel them to come in). The inaugurated eschatological vision of both Barth and Bosch allows for a creative tension that informs the Church’s mission. The Church must speak both “yes” and “no” to both itself and to the world around it. The Church must be engaged with the world but also must provide a prophetic judgment upon the world. As correctly noted by Bosch, neither a wholly realized nor a wholly future eschatological perspective leads toward proper engagement with the world in which we live (Bosch, 174). Our eschatology informs our ethics, our context informs our conduct.

Two aspects of Barth’s treatment of Matthew 28 stand out in particular for the Church’s understanding of its own ethical conduct: the role of Scripture and the formation of community. It is only from the Scriptures that, through the written work of the original witnesses of Jesus’ earthly ministry, one may know Jesus’ teaching and commands. In this sense, “teaching in the church can only be repetitive of apostolic teaching” (Barth, 29). In a manner of speaking, as Protestant Christians the Church’s teaching may not strike out on its own. It is eternally bound to the witness of the Scriptures. This is not to say that the words of Scripture may be uncritically applied to modern situations in a direct, one-to-one manner (Bosch, 21). Rather, the teaching of the
Church today ought to “prolong the logic of [Jesus’] own ministry in an imaginative and creative way” (Bosch, 34). To the extent that the Church actually does this, it is fulfilling the injunction to “teach them to obey all that I have commanded” (Matthew 28:20).

It is important, at this stage, to stress the profoundly communal character of this view of Scripture. It is not primarily the private use of Scripture for personal spiritual edification. In fact, the latter form of Scripture usage was almost impossible until the invention of the Gutenberg printing press. Originally, Scripture would have been read out loud, in public, and the primary mode of learning the Scriptures was to hear them along with everyone else in your community. The Scriptures, then, are much more profoundly about community formation than simply individual edification. If this is true, and if our teaching ought to be “repetitive of apostolic teaching,” then this affects one’s understanding of how Scripture ought to be read. In technical language, the Church must employ a missional hermeneutic. In more practical language, the Church ought to read Scripture with an eye toward the formation of a community for continued apostolic witness. From the very beginning, the apostle’s were called to be Jesus Christ’s witnesses so that the works of “all baptized… might become those of disciples and a Christian community may exist in the world” (Barth, 28). This does not mean that there is not room for personal application of scriptural truths. The overall trajectory, however, is communal. The goal is not only saved souls, but the “eschatological Israel.”

Barth, while correctly designating the function of teaching in the Church as one of building a community of disciples for continued apostolic witness, stops short in his explication of the content of such teaching. The question remains, “what then should we do?” (Luke 3:10). Luke gives two responses. First, he gives the response of John the
Baptist: “if you have two coats, give one away… do the same with your food… no more extortion… no shakedowns, no blackmail—be content with your rations” (Luke 3:11-14, The Message). Then he offers the response of Peter: “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.” (Acts 2:38). One might characterize the first response as “orthopraxis”—or right living. One might characterize the second response as “orthodoxy”—or right belief. In the continuing apostolic witness of the Church, both are equally important. “Discipleship involves a commitment to God’s reign, to justice and love, and to obedience to the whole will of God” (Bosch, 81). For Matthew, the will of God, we must remember, is not contained in the following of the Law but in the “twofold commandment of love… The criterion for every act and attitude is love of God and neighbor” (Bosch, 67). The living-out of this ethic of love is what it means to live as a community of missionary discipleship.

This essay, responding to Karl Barth’s exegesis of Matthew 28, and drawing on the thought of David Bosch, has sought to explicate the twin themes of eschaton and ethic in order to arrive at a better understanding of the Church’s context and proper conduct. By placing the Church in the “eschatological tension” of “now but not-yet,” one may avoid the dangers of viewing the eschaton as a wholly future or wholly realized event. In the time between the inauguration and the consummation of “this last age” the church is called to bear witness to—and rely on—the lordship of Jesus Christ. The “eschatological Israel” fulfills its vocation by “making disciples of all nations.” Baptism seals the Church together in unity, while teaching forms the community for continued apostolic witness. Being formed by the Scriptures, the Church community “prolongs the logic of Jesus’ ministry” through the two-fold ethic of love: love for God and love of neighbor, thereby
becoming a “light to the nations” (Isaiah 51:4). Truly, the Church’s missional witness is tied to the Church’s way of life. The Gospel must be proclaimed in word and deed. This is summed up beautifully in the Message paraphrase of the Great Commission:

“God authorized and commanded me to commission you: Go out and train everyone you meet, far and near, in this way of life, marking them by baptism in the threefold name: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Then instruct them in the practice of all I have commanded you. I’ll be with you as you do this, day after day after day, right up to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, The Message)