

BIBLE HERMENEUTICS IN MISSION – A WESTERN PROTESTANT PERSPECTIVE

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This essay will not reflect on the question of what kind of mission theology we can elaborate out of the Bible.¹ This question is an important one, but in this chapter we focus on the question of how to use the Bible in mission fundamentally and practically. We also do not present the history of the dissemination of the Bible with its many translations.² This history of the Bible shows how essential it has been in Christian mission through the centuries. But there remains the important question of how to use the Bible in mission correctly. How can we avoid using the Bible in a quite selective manner to sustain church and mission practice? What can we do or should we not do when we wish to bring the Bible into a new culture? Especially in the West we may ask whether the Bible still has relevance in a context of secularisation and postmodernity. We do not claim to have all the answers to these questions but we want to offer our contributions to this challenge of the right use of the Bible in mission. Of course the Bible is not merely a tool in mission; it is also the manifesto of the Kingdom of God and the guideline for Christian life and mission. At the same time the Bible is an essential tool for mission. So this essay will deal with the question of the right use of the Bible in mission while keeping in mind that the Bible is much more than a tool.

1. The Relevance of the Bible in the Contemporary World

‘The Bible – a spoken symphony!’ This was the title of a project by the German artist Ben Becker.³ Produced in 2007, it has become quite a success, if you look at the high interest in the CDs and DVDs and at the huge number of people enjoying Becker’s live presentations in different theatres in Germany. At the heart of this dramatic performance was the reading of key passages from the Bible, both Old and New Testament. Maybe public interest was due not only to the content of the Bible verses

¹ C. Wright, *The Mission of God. Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downers Grove: IVP 2006).

² P. Beyerhaus, *Er sandte sein Wort. Theologie der christlichen Mission. Band 1: Die Bibel in der Mission Heilsgeschichtliche Missionstheologie 1* (Wuppertal/Bad Liebenzell: Brockhaus-Verlag/Verlag der Liebenzeller Mission, 1996).

³ <http://www.bibel2010.com/index02.html> (18.2.2013)

but also to the artistically excellent reading of the texts, reinforced by sensitive music composed for this purpose, but the fact is that people in Germany go to the theatre to listen to the words of the Bible!

This experience demonstrates that the Church does not have to hide the words and messages of the Bible in its testimony to the world. In the midst of varied religious attitudes in modern societies, the Bible, as Holy Scripture, has its place. Even today the Bible remains the world's bestseller. Its words, mostly transmitted in the form of stories, touch people in a special way. This might seem surprising because these stories are ancient and appear far removed from the reality of modern women and men.

It is not because of the Bible that traditional churches in the Northern world are losing their members, or that people are looking for God outside of the churches. There are other reasons for these changes, perhaps linked to the churches themselves and to certain current tendencies such as extreme individualism and the prevailing general distrust of moral or religious organisations. The missional challenge for churches is that people are often unfamiliar with them, are not interested in them or their message. Churches try to overcome this indifference to their message and ministry by offering more accessible, popular meetings and services. It is understandable that churches must do something in order to signal to people that churches and their message are relevant to them. Through these more secular or social strategies, churches try to make contact with the surrounding population. They hope that after this low-threshold contact people may remember their experience of the church as positive and come to the services or to other spiritual events – for example at Christmas or when they have problems and are seeking existential answers. It is only gradually that unchurched people may be ready to come to Sunday services, Bible classes and house groups in order to listen to the words of the Bible.

Despite this widespread indifference to church, people are interested in religion, and also in the Bible as a deeply religious book. The special missional power of the Bible relates to its character as a book of stories. All these stories testify to experiences with the almighty and living God, no matter whether people call him El-Shaddai, God of the Fathers, Father of Jesus or 'our Father in heaven'. God enters into the life of men and women, people discover the presence of God, tell their experiences to their friends and family members, and those first groups begin to write down these stories. These experiences all relate to the same God. This criterion of commonality of spiritual experiences and doctrines was essential for the Fathers of the Church in the second century as they collected the books and letters that would become the New Testament. They built on the collection of books that formed the Old Testament. This collection was made according to the use and decisions of the rabbis of the Hellenistic world who edited the Greek edition of the Hebrew Scriptures, the *Septuagint*,

which was Holy Scripture among the churches of the first centuries. The criteria for the biblical canon were, first, its theological content guaranteed by its prophetic and apostolic origin, and secondly, its practical acceptance in most of the churches.⁴ In the past and in the present, people have discovered the Bible as a Holy Book, because in reading its words and listening to them, believers feel that their own life stories, their needs and hopes are revealed. If they follow the way of faith to which the biblical stories invite them, they experience the presence of the almighty God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ as a God full of righteousness, love and grace.

This does not mean that we have to *read* the words of the Bible in order to experience their missional power. Even artists use certain hermeneutical criteria in choosing biblical texts to illustrate. When we look at the biblical texts they depict we have to ask why they have chosen certain texts and ignored others. Artists and actors will illustrate their understanding of the texts by the way they read and by their choice of background music or the decoration of the stage.

2. Hermeneutical Criteria for the Right Use of the Bible in Mission

The Bible develops its missional impetus as we use it in the right way. There are principles that we have to respect if we are not to misuse the Bible for our own purposes and preconceptions. We cannot avoid our preconceptions. Every experience, feeling and thought influences our understanding of the biblical texts. This is not wrong, it is part of the hermeneutical circle of the communication between the Bible and human beings. In view of the multiple voices in the Bible, everyone can find something to justify his theory or action. Many sectarian groups or dictatorial 'Christian' regimes have referred to biblical verses, tearing them out of their context. Even Christians fall into this hermeneutical trap.⁵ For example, if you choose certain texts and omit others, you have made a theological decision that you must be aware of. You should allow others to

⁴ For the Canon history of the Bible see: U. Swarat, Die Entstehung des neutestamentlichen Kanons, in W. Heinz-Neudorfer and E. Schnabel, eds, *Das Studium des Neuen Testaments. Band 2* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus-Verlag, 2000), 267-289; H.v. Lips, *Der neutestamentliche Kanon. Seine Geschichte und Bedeutung* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag, 2004), 114-116.

⁵ The Dutch-American missiologist Charles van Engen ('The relation of Bible and Mission in Mission Theology' in C. v. Engen, D. S. Gilliland and P. Pierson, eds, *The Good News of the Kingdom* (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis, 1993), 27-36)) distinguishes between hermeneutical approaches "from below" (anthropological) and "from above" (dogmatic), pleading finally for the dialogical "critical hermeneutics" of D. Bosch, *Transforming Mission. Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* American Society of Missiology Series 16 (New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 20-25.

challenge your choice, and you need to find arguments to justify your selection. These arguments may refer to the particular weight of certain biblical texts and stories within the Bible or they may touch the particular situation of yourself or your addressees. Whether we use the Bible within the church or outside the church in missional outreach, we should respect firstly the historical contexts of the Bible and secondly the context of the whole of the Bible. A third aspect of understanding biblical texts correctly is to look at their impact in the history of Christendom and in Christian systematic theology. ('Wirkungsgeschichte' in German). In a third section we will consider the fourth context of Bible use in mission: the context of the missionary church and of the addressees of the biblical message today.

If we, as Protestants, want to interpret the Bible in the right way, we must avoid the temptation of those rather sentimental enthusiasts ('Schwärmer') to neglect the characters and historical context of the biblical books, and speak only of the Spirit who leads into all truth. Following the way of the great Reformers we should instead engage in interpreting the Bible as a book written by human beings, so that we can freely use historical critical methods. But we must always be aware that in these naked human words God reveals his love and righteousness. An additional element typical of the Protestant approach is the determination to locate engagement with Scripture positively in current society. The environment in which the Church exists is not simply hostile; it is the situation in which God has placed his Church to witness to the gospel by word and deed.

2.1. The historical context

If we want to interpret the Bible in the right way in mission, we should pay attention to the historical context of the biblical texts. The Bible is not simply a book full of dogmatic assertions. We do find dogmatic statements in the Bible, but they are always born and expressed in their time and context, enveloped in stories which have their origin in a certain historical period and situation.

All believers, past and present, rely on the fact that the biblical traditions go back to the authority of the prophets and the apostles who have experienced these words as divine and inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16), filled with liberating, judicial and healing power. The biblical texts testify to the love of God and his justice as a reality in the sinful world, through Jesus, the Christ. This message has become 'flesh' in the human characters of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible is the word of God in the mouth of men and women. We cannot regard some biblical verses as 'divine' and disregard other words of the Bible as human. Martin Luther rightly says that the saving revelation of God is expressed through the 'skeleton' and 'bones' of

the human words.⁶ The Bible has not fallen directly from heaven; its words and stories have been passed on and written down by specific persons in specific historical situations. If we want to understand these words clearly, we have to understand their historical background as clearly as possible.

To enter the Bible's historical context helps modern interpreters to step away from their own preconceptions. Historical methodology rationalises and objectifies our Bible reading. Using this method, we do not read the Bible simply for ourselves in our present situation; rather we are looking for the truth of the biblical texts in their original situation and in many situations throughout the history of the church and its mission. It may be seeking to understand the biblical texts as strange 'former' words, outside our own pious self-understanding, may be painful for some people. But this methodological step of locating the biblical words in their own context is necessary if we are to understand the different ways they have been understood in church history and finally to contextualise them in our contemporary context as readers and recipients. The missional task of contextualising the biblical message has therefore as its first step the understanding of the Bible texts in their respective historical contexts. The specific questions of the historical critical method reflect this methodical step because they urge the exegetes to understand the text fully in its own context.

In fact, every reconstruction, however conscientious, of the historical context of a biblical text remains hypothetical. It may be that the exegetes come to very different conclusions in their historical research: some may question the authorship of a biblical book; others will argue for the contrary. Some will deny the historicity of some events in the Old Testament; others will argue that events happened as the Bible describes them. The results of scientific Bible research should therefore not be made absolute. In spite of this reservation, there is no real alternative to historical methodology, used with humility. Every method should serve the goal of making the word of God as clear as possible. The clearer the biblical words shine, the more the theologian can recognise his own preconceptions. At the scientific theological level, every method which seeks to detect the original meaning of historical documents like the Bible should also be critically examined for its own preconceptions. All these approaches by theologians and historians working scientifically serve the higher goal of understanding the biblical texts in their historical context in order to grasp their message 'outside of us' as precisely as possible. If we understand the

⁶ Against the background of the incarnation of God in Jesus, the German theologian Johann Georg Hamann (1730-1788) speaks of the Bible as an act of the "Condescendence of God" and as "an act of the utmost humility". Since the Bible is fully divine and fully human, every exegete has to interpret it with humility – Hempelmann, H., *Gott ein Schriftsteller. Johann Georg Hamann über die End-Außerung Gottes ins Wort der Heiligen Schrift und ihre hermeneutischen Konsequenzen* (Wuppertal: Brockhaus-Verlag, 1988).

message of the text, we can translate it better and in a more appropriate way into other contexts. Both the historical-critical method and missiology ask questions of the context: the first to examine the context of the Bible and the second to understand the current context of the Bible reader. This is the missional relevance of the historical-critical method of biblical research.

2.2. *The biblical context*

If we want to understand the message of certain biblical passages we have to understand them

- a. in the mirror of their textual context and
- b. in the mirror of the whole of the Bible.

We have to recognise the *narrative context* of the text we are interested in. We cannot use the Bible like a quarry where we dig for single stones. If we pick out single passages of the Bible which correspond to our preferred convictions, it may be that we miss the message of the text which we can only understand clearly if we read it in the context of its biblical narrative. To evaluate biblical texts in their textual context means to renounce any subjective misappropriation by the reader or interpreter. To examine a biblical passage in its narrow context of the surrounding texts and in the wider context of, for example, the biblical book in question throws light on the main topics of the passage. But the textual context is even wider.

Every single biblical narrative is part of the *big biblical narrative*. The stories of the conquering tribal God of the people of Israel in the first historical parts of the Old Testament continue step by step to the revelation of the universal God as the creator of the universe and the Lord of all of history. His appeal to righteousness becomes balanced with his desire to offer pardon and grace to his sinful people, finally offering redemption to his creation. In Jesus of Nazareth, Christians discover finally the God of Israel as the God of justice and of love for the whole world. According to the Reformation, the whole Bible has its centre in the salvation work of Jesus Christ: in Jesus Christ God reveals his loving and righteous intention to save women and men from evil. Even in the Old Testament, we discover this character and mission of God: for example, the blessing of Abraham in whom all nations shall be blessed (Gen 12:3, 4) should be read in relation to the second book of Isaiah (Is 40-55) with its promise that the last word of God is not judgement but salvation. The prophet interprets the catastrophe of the exile of the Israelites as a result of the disobedience of the people of God, announcing the grace of God in forgiving their sins and leading them back to their home country.

We certainly find Old Testament passages that are strange, even cruel, to modern ears. But the Old Testament also contains words and stories that reflect the essential message of love and justice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, because the God of Jesus is the same God of the people of Israel. The prophets express their hope for the coming Messiah and the psalmists

hopefully pray that all nations will bow their knees before the God of Israel as God of the whole earth. But in its understanding of mission, there are differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Most passages in the Old Testament about God and the nations demonstrate the hope and faith of Israel that God will influence the nations while Israel itself stays passive. Nowhere in the Old Testament do we find an indication of an *active cross-cultural_mission* of the people of Israel to the non-Israelites. The Old Testament talks about Israel being a priest to the nations and about God's message going out to the distant coasts and people, but the movement is *from the nations to Zion* (Mic 4:1-5; Is 2:1-5) and less from Israel to the nations. The prophet Jonah had to be forced by God himself to preach among the Gentiles. This prophetic book demonstrates the 'anti-missionary' attitude of Israel over against the missionary intention of God. The book of Jonah already marks a turning point in the history of Israel which will be brought to completion in the sending of the disciples of Jesus to the nations. In the New Testament, the apostles and the emerging church receive this call of Jesus to become active in calling people to faith, people of all nations.⁷ This new drive is possible because the authors of the books of the New Testament testify to Jesus the crucified as resurrected into the new world of God. In Jesus, the saving presence of God and relationship to God are no longer limited to the Israelites; now people of all nations profit from God's love and the justice. Strongly driven by this experience and conviction, Christians open up and move towards other people to share their faith and life. The Story of Jesus completes the Story of Israel as the Old Testament testifies to it. The God of Israel is also the 'Father' of Jesus Christ. The New Testament with its testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ throws new light on the Story of Israel. So to read and interpret the Bible adequately involves taking seriously both Testaments and discovering their grand narratives, instead of selecting isolated biblical sentences as guides to the truth. The Bible's grand narratives deal with mission since they contain the basic guidelines for mission and for mission theology.⁸ [I have cut this last sentence heavily, not really understanding what the author wants to say.]

⁷ Mission scholars speak of a "passive, centripetal mission" in the Old Testament and an "active, centrifugal mission" in the New Testament (Blauw, Johannes, *The Missionary Nature of the Church. A Survey of the Biblical Theology of Mission* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2003 [1962]); Wright, *The Mission of God*).

⁸ T. Wright, *The Bible and Tomorrow's World* (London: Church Missionary Society, 2008), 4-7 (<http://www.fulcrum-anglican.org.uk/page.cfm?ID=334> (18 February 2013)); C. Wright, *The Mission of God* (especially Part I: Bible and Mission, 29-70).

2.3. *'Impact history'*

The impact of biblical texts in the history and theology of the church is a new field in biblical hermeneutics. The 'impact question' involves becoming aware of different contextual receptions and interpretations of the biblical text in the history of church and mission. Impact history may reveal the roots of one's own preconceptions about a text. We develop a healthy 'suspicion' of ideological interpretations of the biblical texts. But impact history not only fulfils the function of manifesting 'suspicious' attitudes towards these preconceptions. It also sensitises us to the contextual questions that are so crucial in mission. At what time, in what situation, did people understand the text, and in which way and why? The spiritual impact of the biblical text does not end with its textual and historical understanding. There is still the history of the Holy Spirit who interprets the biblical texts anew in many different times in various situations.

If we want to use the Bible in mission in the right way, we have to interpret the biblical message with the help of historical and textual methods, discovering the historical and the textual context of the biblical texts. Reading the Bible with these methods, mission does not fall into the temptation of emphasising biblical passages that may be more marginal or historically limited. In order to understand the impact of a particular biblical text, one should also examine its impact history, how Christians and theologians in different times and situations made use of the texts in their thinking and doing: They read the texts, interpreted the texts and tried to live according to their reading and interpretation. All these exegetical methods are strongly concentrated on the meaning of the text in a certain context. Going through these reflections, one is well prepared for the central missiological question: how to contextualise the biblical text in the present situation. Using the Bible in mission also means to translate it correctly into the contemporary context.

3. The Present Context of Mission and its Importance for Understanding and Using the Bible

3.1. Contextual preconceptions

The narrative of the Bible does not end with the Revelation of John and the history of its interpretation. Scripture is a coherent and on-going narrative or drama in which we participate as those who read the biblical texts and try to live them. It is not only understanding the Bible itself which plays a major role in mission but also understanding the current context of people who approach the Bible. In the mission situation two groups of persons play a major role in relation to the Bible: the missionary and the addressees of his message. The missionary presents the Bible through the mind-set of his pre-understanding of the Bible according to his personality, history and

context. His culture, experiences and personal situation make him sensitive to certain passages in the Bible whereas other passages are like closed doors to him. Every person has his/her special spectacles through which he/she reads and understands the Bible. Nobody reads or listens to the Bible without preconceptions. This is not something negative. The words of the Bible must be rooted in culture. But the missionary must be alert to the fact that he does not possess the whole truth of the Bible. He might come close to it if he interprets the Bible using a self-reflecting and critical method (see above); but even with the best method no one can claim to have grasped the whole truth of the Bible.

3.2. *Process of inculturation*

When missionaries seek to bring the message of the Bible to people, they will do so in a particular way with certain preconceptions. They may do their best to communicate it in a culturally sensitive way. Especially at the beginning of the task of communication, they may even select parts of the Bible which are more likely to be comprehensible for their audience. But in the final analysis it is not the missionary who inculturates the Bible into the concrete world of people but the receiving people themselves. It is the receivers of the message who truly inculturate the gospel. They listen to the words of the Bible, spoken by the missionary, with their own particular ear. They might understand certain words in a completely different way from the missionary because they are hearing a message that originates in another culture and history and another personality. Inculturation is a complex process with three agents: the missionary, the addressees and the gospel itself.⁹ [In the previous paragraph the author states that *two* agents are present in this process. Maybe these paragraphs, which are very repetitive, can be combined and corrected.] Whether the message of the Bible bears fruit in its new context depends on the grace of God. By his Spirit God enables the contextual understanding of the receiver. It is the Spirit of God who enlivens the words of the Bible.

It is a big challenge for the missionary to bring the message of the Bible to people as sensitively as possible, and simultaneously to be ready to lose control when he has delivered the message. In communicating the message of the Bible he should leave aside personal ambition. His role is that of an adviser, or of a spiritual *companion* to people, helping them to understand and to live out the gospel. Furthermore, the missionary, relying on the work of the Holy Spirit as the best interpreter of the gospel, is open to the new theological and spiritual insights of the addressees as they understand the Bible in their way. In this process of inculturation, the missionary plays

⁹ H. Wrogemann, 'Wer betreibt Inkulturation? Evangelium und Kulturen im Spannungsfeld von Machtkonstellationen, Anerkennung und kritischem Dialog', *Zeitschrift für Mission* 32 (2006), 234-252.

more than a minor role; the new believers need the understandings and knowledge of the missionary. In this situation the missionary represents the church in its ecumenical dimensions on her way toward the kingdom of God. Both the biblical understanding of the missionary and the reception of the Bible by the addressees may have their shortcomings. No inculturation process is free of human misunderstandings. The task of the church and its mission is a brotherly dialogue about different understandings. Only by entering into a broad and open conversation may we overcome some of the shortcomings of our biblical comprehension and our missional use of the Bible.

4. Bible Dialogue in Mission

4.1. Importance of dialogue

To find the right way to interpret biblical texts in the current situation, one should, in a figurative sense, work at a big 'round table'. Many voices contribute their knowledge and experiences with the biblical texts: the historical exegetes, the church historians who describe the history of the reception of the texts and the systematic theologians who explain the text in the context of church doctrine. Indeed, studying books or articles about the biblical text by authors of different generations is already part of the dialogue. In the mission situation, the primary dialogue partner is the people we seek to reach. The theologian and missiologist Lesslie Newbigin¹⁰ speaks of several partners in the missional conversation: the Bible, the missionary, the (ecumenical) churches, and the addressees. This hermeneutical model¹¹ for reading the Bible in the right way in mission produces great energy which can benefit all parts of the mission process.

4.2. Not a hierarchical approach

As we emphasise the importance of dialogue in interpreting the Bible, we would challenge another approach to biblical hermeneutics in the mission situation: the hierarchical approach. In the history of mission, it was, for example, the Vatican that had the right to define the proper interpretation of the Bible in the Roman Catholic Church. When Chinese Christians in the 17th century wanted to develop their own church rites in accordance with their culture, the voice of Rome forbade this. But we also find this

¹⁰ L. Newbigin, 'Christ and Cultures', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 31 (1978), 1-22.

¹¹ Building on the critical hermeneutics of D. Bosch (22-25) C. v. Engen (*Relation of Bible and Mission*, 31) – with his "tapestry approach" working on common motifs of the biblical and the current world of today – pleads finally for many levels of dialogue between the biblical text, its interpretations in history and in the present situation.

monopoly thinking about Bible interpretation in evangelical churches when certain theologians or theological directions claim to represent the only objective and true interpretation of the Bible. They may dialogue with certain exegetical, historical and theological systematic representatives who share their denominational conviction, but they avoid the conversation with both the ecumenical body of Christ and the culture they want to reach with the gospel. In this model, the correct interpretation of the Bible is strictly defined by church hierarchy or certain theological schools, and mission simply means to convey this truth into the new missionary context, allowing for cultural compromises only in marginal questions. In this way, one may adhere to one's own preconceptions and thus reduce faith in God to a small human philosophy.

4.3. Ecumenical dialogue

Mission should always be open to ecumenical dialogue, especially when interpreting biblical texts in mission situations. In most situations, several churches are engaged in mission. All churches claim to be based on the biblical message. Their goal is to transmit it according to their denominational reading. Human congregations as cultural entities are generally denominational so to some extent denominational mission and confessional Bible reading are necessary and acceptable. But most denominational mission work takes place in cultures where other missions also are active. It would not only strengthen the visible appearance of the unity of church to enter into an ecumenical dialogue, but all missions concerned could benefit by sharing their experiences with one another in the common mission context. At the same time, during this process all sides would become sensitive to the value of dialogue in Bible reading and preaching and would discover that God is always greater than their denominational Bible understanding and faith. A further step would be to include in the conversation how the mission addressees are understanding the Bible because God also is present among those who do not yet belong to the people of God (see Acts 10).

4.4. Missional dialogue

The dialogue about understanding and using the Bible in mission is only complete when the receivers of the message also read the Bible in their way and bring their understandings into the conversation. It is not only through direct teaching of the Bible that people open up their hearts to the gospel. The really deep acceptance of the biblical message takes place when they themselves understand the biblical texts at a deep and active level. The church should be courageous and have confidence in the Spirit of God so that it refrains from controlling people's understanding of the Bible. To read the Bible together with people who are not used to dealing with

Scripture is always a fresh experience. In the missional dialogue, Christians can contribute their understanding of the Bible and bear witness to their experiences with biblical texts. In this dialogical space, the addressees of mission can also articulate their understanding and non-understanding of biblical texts.

This kind of Bible dialogue is especially fruitful when all participants in the encounter have learnt to share their lives, as in the German model of 'convivence missiology'.¹² 'Convivence', from the Spanish word *convivencia*, describes a certain way of organising Christian grassroots communities in the slums of Latin America, and simply means 'living together'. Mission takes place when all partners in the mission process share their lives, start to take care of one another, learn from one another and experience new forms of encounter in celebrating common festivals. The existing Church is important in the transmission of the Bible in mission, but this process only reaches its goal when people in the church and people outside the church meet face-to-face and genuinely communicate with one another. The use of biblical texts by modern artists shows that the Christian Holy Scriptures have not lost their fascination for people. The Spirit of God may lead everyone concerned in the dialogical mission process into a new understanding of his love and justice. This mission process will provide new energy as long as it goes beyond theoretical discussion to provides opportunity for praxis.

5. Bible Practice in Mission

In his book *Models of Contextual Theology*,¹³ the Catholic theologian Stephan Bevans mentions a contextual approach that he calls the 'Praxis Model': Bible and context come together in a reciprocal movement. We mirror our life praxis in the Bible. This will lead us to new understanding but also to a renewed praxis. We live out this new praxis, and mirror it again in the light of our biblical understanding and so on. Bevans illustrates this movement as a spiral.¹⁴ If it works well, the whole process of re-reading scripture and re-finding a new praxis will move the church forward in its mission to communicate the love of God and his justice in this world. We find this model of contextualisation particularly in the theologies of liberation where the praxis of faith comes prior to the theory of faith.

¹² M. Kisskalt, 'Mission as Convivence. Life sharing and mutual learning in Mission. Inspirations from Germany Missiology', *Journal of European Baptist Theological Studies* 11 (2011), 6-14; T. Sundermeier, 'Theology of Mission' in K. Mueller, T. Sundermeier, S.B.Bevans (eds), *Dictionary of Mission: Theology, History, Perspectives* (Eugene/Oregon, 2006), 429-450.

¹³ S.B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology* Revised and Extended Edition, Faith and Cultures Series (Maryknoll/New York: Orbis, 2002).

¹⁴ Bevans, *Models* 76.

If we apply this model to our question of the role of the Bible in mission, we discover the importance of practice in our understanding of the Bible. People in church and society do not understand the biblical message simply through theoretical reflection, but by practising what they think they have understood from the Bible. A missional church should provide opportunities for people to live out their Bible understanding. There are successful courses about the Christian faith that close every meeting with the challenge to live consciously with the biblical text that has been read in the group during the week, and to write down one's experiences. At the beginning of the next meeting, people talk about their experiences with the Bible text. When people have experiences with their faith, big or small, they want to read the Bible again and again; they experience this book as a truly Holy Book, full of life-relevant content. This practical approach to the Bible in mission must always be completed by the dialogue described earlier; if not, people will remain stuck in their own assumptions and practice. On the other hand, a merely theoretical dialogue will hinder the biblical message from entering the inner heart of people.

6. Conclusion

Those churches and Christians who want to live in a missional way, open to people outside the Christian communities, will use the Bible well if they learn to open up their understanding of the Bible. The Spirit of God who is the Spirit of the Bible is able to inspire new life in the biblical words when we enter into this broad dialogue with as many participants as possible. The biblical word, which Christians believe and experience as the Word of God, will be inculturated into new contextual situations and it will form old and new expressions of Christian faith. If the church enters the public arena with the Bible, she must respect the rules of dialogue in this arena and give witness to the Word of God in a 'constructive and interactive mode'.¹⁵ If the church is able to communicate the gospel humbly and self-critically in this form of dialogue, she will experience that 'the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart' (Heb 4:12).¹⁶ When Christians in mission are ready to share their lives with people, they will be surprised that the word of God will indeed not return empty but will accomplish what God desires and achieve the purpose for which God sent it (Is 55:11).

¹⁵ Lategan, B.: 'The Function of Biblical Texts in a Modern Situational Context' in T. Fornberg, D. Hellholm (eds), *Texts and Contexts: Biblical Texts in Their Textual and Situational Contexts. Essays in Honor of Lars Hartmann* (Oslo/Copenhagen/Stockholm/Boston: Scandinavian University Press, 1995), 955-957.

¹⁶ New International Version, 2011.

Bible in Mission



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