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MISSION AS RECONCILIATION

ABSTRACT

For a long time, missiology operated in the paradigm of civilisation and good citizenship. Since the end of the 19th century, inculturation and social justice have replaced this paradigm. The current focus is on self-affirmation. In his work, Pieter Verster pleads for understanding mission as reconciliation, and this not so much as a variation on social justice, but as a fundamental new relation of God to human beings. Christology is the centre of his missiological paradigm. Renewal of humanity is only possible in the perspective of transcendence: God's coming in Christ and resurrection to eternal life. In this article, it is argued that it will be a great challenge for scholarly missiology and for the churches to accept this new paradigm, which involves a reconsideration of the basic paradigm of Christianity.

1. MAKING GOOD CITIZENS

“Currently mission evokes many different opinions” (Verster 2008:1). After writing this at the beginning of his book on Christian mission, Verster explains his own approach to mission. His core concept is reconciliation, not only in this book, but also in his later publications (Verster 2017).

It is not self-evident to deal with mission in the perspective of reconciliation. For a long time, Christian faith was usually propagated through education in good civilisation and good



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citizenship.¹ When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire in 380, the subjects were exhorted to become Christians like their emperor. It was a matter of loyalty and education. People in the countryside, the farmers, *pagani*, were still heathens, and soon word for a provincial and a heathen. They were pagans. People in the cities were better informed, more educated, more civilised and thus Christian.

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, this perspective did not change much. Being a good Christian was being a good citizen and a civilised member of European culture. This culture should be secured against other cultures such as Islam, first the Spanish and later the Turkish Islam. Expansion of Christianity in Europe was achieved through the development of the Latin civilisation by monasteries and their missionaries among the people of the north. They had to be converted to the culture that was shaped by Jerusalem, Athens, and, most of all, Rome.

When travelling the world, explorers obviously assumed that the countries they entered should also become part of this Christian civilisation. The crosses that were erected for Vasco Da Gama and Bartholomeu Diaz showed whom they served – not so much the crucified Christ, or even the church, but rather the Christian nation to which they belonged. The Latin American countries and the Philippines became Roman Catholic, and Portuguese and Spanish their language.

This view of mission was not about reconciliation, but about submission, often accomplished by brutal violence. The last continent to be conquered was Africa. Asia had its own religions and highly organised empires and cultures. Conquering Asia for Christian civilisation was no option. Africa, with its organisation of small entities, was easy prey. Western European countries hastened to use the dream of a Christian civilisation as a justification for their imperial goals. The United Kingdom was the most successful in this respect. Civilisation and Christianisation were changing the face of Africa to British Christian culture. Mission and colonisation were inextricably intertwined. The United Kingdom was the most successful, but other colonisers did not have a very different opinion of mission. Mission is submission to the Christian culture of European nations. For one and a half millennium, this was the dominant view concerning mission. Even private missionary organisations were influenced by, or even part of this enterprise. “The world for Christ” implied “the world for European culture”. Roman Catholic mission may have been more open to contextual practices than Protestants, but culture and Christianity were intertwined in both traditions.

1 For detailed overviews of the history of mission and missiology, see Bosch (2012) and Bevans & Schroeder (2004:73-280).

This does not mean that many individual missionaries did not devote their work and life to Christ as the crucified and risen Lord. However, their work was incorporated in a larger movement of Christianisation as Western civilisation. It was embedded in the mental framework of Christendom. Missionaries

remained indebted, even in their 'best' moments, to a world shaped by a most peculiar constellation of events and creeds. ...The entire Western missionary movement of the past three centuries ... gave birth to Western superiority feelings and prejudice (Bosch 2012:352).

2. PARADIGM SHIFTS

The publications of Venn (1971) and Anderson (1872) marked a fundamental paradigm shift in missiology.² They argued that churches should no longer be dependent on European culture and funds, but develop their own independent identity, characterised by the famous "three selves", namely self-supporting, self-governing, and self-propagating. A shift occurred from colonising European culture to contextual self-development of Christian life and thought. Contextualisation was the new keyword in missiological reflections. At present, this concept may be obvious, but it was a tremendous about-turn after a missionary approach of fifteen centuries. Christian faith is not dependent on Europe, but it can take root in any culture. The Moluccan symbol of the power and presence of the ancestors, the *tiang laki laki*, the central post of the communal house of the village (Ririhena 1995:20), can be viewed as a symbol of the cross of Christ as the first of the ancestors (Van de Beek 1995:73; 2002:220).

It was not long before even the concept of "contextuality" was criticised. It could easily be used to justify existing suppressive structures. The *tiang laki laki* is also the symbol of patriarchal social power and female exclusion. The Three Selves Church in China can be used as a means to consolidate the power of the state, no different from the imperial church in the Byzantine empire. Mission should be aware of this trap. "There is the 'pilgrim' principle, which warns us that the gospel will put us out of step with society" (Bosch 2012:466). A new paradigm for missiology arose: the liberating power of the gospel for the oppressed. Christian faith sets people free. Social and political changes became the centre of Christian missiological studies and declarations. Initially, the focus was on ministration of the poor and oppressed, but churches were increasingly called to action (Van de Beek 2018). Political situations challenged churches to become

2 See also Yates (1978:116-124).

involved in actions such as the programme against racism and apartheid, and the movement against nuclear weapons. The paradigm of missiological thought was no longer traditional contexts, but justice and freedom.

Since the 1990s, however, the focus on societal and political oppression has waned. This may be partially due to the end of the cold war and of apartheid in South Africa (Van de Beek 2018:37), but also as a result of a broader shift in Western culture. Postmodernism favours individualism and this also influences missionary approaches. Church planting and personal empowerment replaced political involvement and social empowerment. Missionary success became evident in megachurches and in people who enjoy enthusiastic meetings and services, as a means of personal expression and security. The spiritual and often material well-being of the members predominated. Social activities still take place, but the main focus is on those who participate in worship.

Reconciliation is not the first concept that comes to mind with each of these new approaches. Contextualisation is concerned more with the self-affirmation of traditional communities and cultures. Social involvement is a struggle for emancipation and justice. It concerns “combat”. Postmodern megachurches afford an opportunity for personal self-expression and well-being. Postmodernism is first of all a Western phenomenon, fitting into the Western tendency to individualism. However, in a globalizing world it influences people all over the world. It is not overdue to consider globalization as a new form of colonization, now not by imperial governments but by multinationals and their consumers.

3. RECONCILIATION

Against the background of this historical situation, considering reconciliation as a paradigm for mission is unusual. However, Verster is not the first to do so. Although reconciliation has not been the core of missiological studies, it came to the fore as a result of the social approach of missiology. Its first focus was to combat social and political wrongs. It was a trigger for conflict. However, once the evils were abolished, people were left with former opponents, even with former enemies. Reconciliation was now needed to pave the way to the future. It was introduced as a new paradigm for mission. At the consultations of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2002, Christopher Duraisingh argued for a vision of mission as reconciliation (WCC 2002). One can understand, especially in view of the fierceness of the conflict in South Africa, that the call was raised for reconciliation and for awareness due in the churches to view it as their mission to contribute to a new society. After the shame of wrong

decisions, false attitudes, exclusion and humiliation were confessed as sin, people were in need of reconciliation.

Reconciliation has neither the power to call for justice, nor the expedience of spiritual expression, nor the self-affirmation of contextualisation. It involves the vulnerability of confession of sins, the difficult acceptance of the enemy, the slow growth of mutual trust, and faithfulness in wounded lives. This approach is so different from the other mission paradigms of the church that it must be learned from the beginning. It is the difficult process of considering others more important than oneself (Phil. 2:3). This is not only difficult, because we have to accept the former enemy as a brother or sister in Christ. It is even more so, because a culture of fighting for one's power, rights, and opportunities; of living against, and at the expense of others; of subduing or fearing others has been integrated in Christian missiological thought for such a long time, that it is difficult to become liberated from it. Instead of being pacifists (Origenes, *In Mattheum* 102), Christians have learned to use weapons in the name of Christ since the time of Constantine. It is very difficult to get rid of the consequences of this training in violence. An easy reparation will not suffice. It concerns the fundamentals of Christian thought and Christian mission. Changing the full paradigm from power and empowerment to weakness and the foolishness of submission requires a total re-rooting of missiology. Re-rooting means resourcing in a religious tradition. This is exactly what Verster proposes in his work. Resourcing is listening to Scripture. However, it is not Scripture as a source of truths. Scripture testifies to Jesus Christ and he is the hermeneutic key to interpreting Scripture. Christ himself is the only source of salvation (Verster 1997:74).

From this perspective, mission can never become *merely* a social gospel. Mission may not be *absorbed* into the missionary diaconate. Mission is the all-encompassing ministering of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, so that the holy love of God can be manifested in the world (Verster 2008:108).

4. RECONCILIATION IN THE BIBLE

Before investigating resourcing in the work of Verster, the basics of reconciliation in the Christian canon should be pointed out. In Christian theology, resourcing means, in the first instance, listening to what is written in the Bible. What does Scripture say about reconciliation?

“Reconciliation” is the rendering of the Greek word *katallagè*. When this concept and the verb, to reconcile, *katallasso*, is examined in the Greek

Bible, it is remarkable that this core concept in modern theology does not appear frequently. *Katalasso* is never used in the Greek translation of the Hebrew of the Old Testament, and *katallagè* only in a different meaning (Is. 9:4; Jer. 31:39 = Masor. text 48:39). *Katalasso* and *katallagè*, meaning “reconciliation”, is only found in the deuterocanonical book II Maccabees (1:5; 5:20; 7:33; 8:29). Paul is the only New Testament author who uses these words, and only in four text sections. An even more remarkable observation is that it is only used once for exclusively interhuman relationships. While reconciliation between people is a central concept in the present theological discourse, specifically in South Africa, only one phrase can be found in the Bible. And even this phrase is not about human relationships in general, but about a very specific case of a woman who returns to her husband. Paul argues that a woman, having left her husband, is not allowed to marry somebody else. She should either remain single or be reconciled with her husband (1 Cor. 7:11). This use of *katallasso* conforms to classic Greek usage, where it is also applied to the reconciliation between marriage partners. It does not refer to deep emotions, but merely to the return. The wife goes back. Nothing is implied about her or her husband’s guilt when she left him, and nothing is implied about their feelings. It is merely a statement of fact: she returns. In this regard, it does not differ from *agape*, which, in modern theology, is interpreted as deep emotional love (Nygren 1930), while in the New Testament it denotes objective faithfulness (Van de Beek 2013). Objectivity prevails in both reconciliation and love. Do we return? Are we faithful? Both are concretely based in trade and money. *Agapè* comes from being trustworthy in trade, and the basic meaning of *katalasso* is exchange of money. Reconciliation between people is thus restricted to the sober fact of a woman returning to her husband – without any judgement about what happened before or what the intentions or emotions are following her return.

The other texts are about the relation between God and human beings. An intriguing text is Romans 11:15: The apostasy of Israel is the *katallagè* of the world. In this instance, “reconciliation” is not the best translation of the word *katallagè*. *Katallagè* is about exchange, replacement (Muller & Thiel 1969:384; Büchsel 1957:254). It means that the world is accepted in God’s house in place of Israel who was expelled. The rejection of Israel thus meant the heathen received a home.

In order to understand the other texts, the verses in II Maccabees are most enlightening. Israel disobeyed the Lord. His people continued to neglect the Torah. Finally, God abandoned them. After the people’s penitence and prayers, God returned.

After the sabbath, they gave a share of the spoils to those who were tortured and to widows and orphans; the rest they divided

among themselves and their children. When this was done, they made supplication in common, imploring the merciful Lord to be completely reconciled with his servants (II Maccabees 8:28).

God accepts their remorse and decides to return to his people.

And what the Almighty had forsaken in wrath, was restored in all its glory, once the great Sovereign Lord became reconciled" (II Maccabees 5:20).

Though for a little while our living Lord has been angry, correcting and chastising us, he will again be reconciled with his servants (II Maccabees 7:33).

That is his grace. The book opens with a prayer that God will convert them. "May God ... open your heart to his law and commandments and grant you peace, hear your prayers, and be reconciled to you, and never forsake you in time of adversity" (II Maccabees 1:2, 4, 5). God is reconciled with his people, but it is also on account of Israel's merit, not because they previously kept the commandments, but because of their recent conversion.

The texts of Paul have the opposite meaning: Human beings are reconciled with God. The apostle even prays, on behalf of God, that they be reconciled with God. From the perspective of II Maccabees, one could conclude that human beings are angry with God, but they decide to return to God after a change in God's deeds. As such, this conclusion would not be impossible for a Jew such as Paul. Israelites often blamed God for abandoning them. Indeed, in their canon, they have the story of Job, who continues to tell God that his governance is not honest. How often does a Jew not ask God: "Why did you do this to me?" However, from the context of Romans 5 and 2 Corinthians 5, it is clear that it is not God who must be blamed, but humanity. God reconciled us with him while we were enemies, and he gave his Son while we were still sinners. Human beings thus caused the estrangement between God and humankind. This is similar to the situation in Israel as described by II Maccabees. The difference, however, is that the return, according to II Maccabees, is initiated by the people with their conversion and prayers, whereas Paul states that reconciliation takes place on God's initiative. He has reconciled the world with himself. Though he was the wronged party, he returned to humankind, humbled himself and took on their guilt by sending his Son, whom he made sin for us. The concrete meaning of exchange surfaces, in this instance. The consequences of human behaviour cannot be overlooked. God takes humanity seriously – so much so that, in order to rid humankind of guilt,

he himself became human, took on humanity's guilt in all their trespasses and brutal obstructions to his faithfulness, and paid for it by death, as the Torah required. In his forgiveness, God remains just and his Word trustworthy. He came to his people when they refused to return to him. That is Paul's message in Romans 5 and the basis of his discourse in 2 Corinthians 5. He continues his discourse to the Corinthians. God has reconciled them with him – brought them back to his house. Now they are asked to return to him again. This does not mean that the reconciliation that he provided can be undone. The gifts of God are irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). The Corinthians are Christians. They dwell in God's house. But they do not behave according to this new reality. They do not share their lives with him. Paul, therefore, states: "We are sent by God to ask you: 'Please, come back!' Live and behave as befits the home of God and do not use it only as sleeping place for a life somewhere outside. Come back and live in his home." This is as real as the choice of the partner with whom we share our life. In his letter, Paul admonishes them to behave according to the standards of God's love (2 Cor. 6) and not to be yoked with unbelievers (2 Cor. 6:14).

In the later Pauline letters, Colossians and Ephesians, the word *katalasso* is replaced by a neologism with a more definitive character, *apokatallasso*. It refers in one verse, Ephesians 2:16, to interhuman relationships and again to a specific case as in Romans: the relationship between Israel and the gentiles. Christ reconciles both. The image is very concrete: the separating wall has been broken down. Now they live in one and the same house. Romans 11 still claims that the gentiles receive a place in the house of God, because Israel was expelled. According to Ephesians, both dwell in the same house in the unity of Christ. In fact, the relationship between Israel and the gentiles is not about mutual human relationships, but about the relationship of God to human beings who lives in communion with him.

Colossians 1:20-22 relates reconciliation to the whole of creation, just as 2 Corinthians 5. The subject is God and the creation is reconciled to him. In both Colossians 1 and Ephesians 2, the focus is even more Christocentric than in Romans and 2 Corinthians. Though God is the basic subject of reconciliation, so much is achieved through Christ that the subject almost automatically shifts to Christ who fully reconciled us in the body of his flesh (Col. 1:21). In Ephesians 2:16, Christ is the only subject of the new relationship between Jews and gentiles.

5. A NEW BEING IN CHRIST

In the New Testament, reconciliation is especially about a new relationship with God. One can wonder why the concept is so infrequent in the New Testament. It is always difficult to determine why certain concepts are used, and even more why they are not used. Speculation may lead one astray. One might wonder whether the concept was unsuitable for New Testament authors, because the coming of Christ was not about the return of human beings to God, but God's coming to us. We are not saved by our return as II Maccabees argues, but because of Christ who became human. This coming of God is not so much conceived of as a return after divorce, but as a bringing home of people who turned away from him.

More important is that, for describing salvation in Christ, the New Testament has other concepts that are more comprehensive than reconciliation. Salvation itself is such a word. While reconciliation has a more formal meaning in Greek than it has in modern thought, salvation is more comprehensive. It is about a totally new era. After a time of hardship, suffering and confusion, a new period of prosperity has dawned. This is especially related to the Saviour, the *Sotèr*. Hellenistic kings and Roman emperors viewed themselves as the introducers of such a new world (Jonkers 1951:179-185; Foerster 1963:1009-1012). When this title is used for God and Christ, New Testament authors proclaim that the new world has dawned by God's salutary action in Christ. This is much more than a return and coming on speaking terms by estranged partners. It can even be described in terms of life and death. Being saved in Christ is resurrection from the dead.

This is how reconciliation in the New Testament must be understood. Both sections about reconciliation are written in the context of the new being. In Romans 5, it is followed by the pericope about the first and second Adam. Christ is the new humanity and people who are baptised in him are a new humankind. In their baptism, they were buried with him in his death (Rom. 6:3) and in him they live his eternal life (Rom. 6:11). 2 Corinthians speaks about reconciliation in the context of the new creation. He who is in Christ is a new creation (2 Cor. 5:17), not only a new being, but part of God's new reality in the body of Christ.

Total and radical redemption is gained in Jesus Christ, who makes people new and gives them the possibility to live with God, with a new home and a new future (Verster 2008:23).

When Verster takes up the concept of reconciliation within the context of South African society, church and theology, he recalibrates it from

the context of Paul's references to it. Reconciliation is not mere human reacceptance of each other. Reconciliation is a new relationship with God. From the context of Paul's texts, the meaning of the concept also goes beyond its original formal meaning in Greek and even beyond its use in the Septuagint. It is not God returning to us, but God who reconciles us, brings us in his reality, and implores us to live according to this reality. It is not only returning to the relationship with God, but also participating in God's own reality. Reconciliation is being in Christ, who is the new reality (Verster 2008:50). He not only brings reconciliation to us, but he *is* our reconciliation (Verster 2008:64; 2017, title).

It is important to state at the onset that God's great turning towards the world in the form of His Son Jesus Christ is mission's point of departure (Verster 2008:5).

When Verster makes this the core of his missiological reflection, he joins the apostles in their missionary work. The shortest summary about mission in the New Testament is: "He told him the good news about Jesus" (Acts 8:35). All sermons in the book of Acts focus on Christ and any reflection on the missionary work in the letters point to him. The very first sermon in the church is about Christ, his death and his resurrection, ending with:

Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36).

Paul states that his own preaching as an apostle has a similar focus: "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). God exalted the crucified Jesus. He is the criterion for the judgement of the world, because he has risen from the dead (Acts 17:31); he is thus the fulfilment of God's election of Israel (Acts 13:39). Proclamation of the gospel is proclaiming Christ. Proclaiming God's reconciliation of humanity is proclaiming the new being who is Christ. Those who believe this proclamation participate in this new reality. "God's turning towards human beings through Jesus Christ is radical and complete" (Verster 2008:3). They are the new creation, with Christ as the new Adam in whom the new humanity arises (Verster 2008:21). When the concept of reconciliation is filled with this meaning, it not only indicates a return home, as in the metaphor of partners, but the church as the bride of Christ. Paul refers to Christians as children of God and brothers of Christ, co-heirs of the inheritance of eternal life (Rom. 8:15-17). Then Paul goes even beyond childhood. The most extensive metaphor is the body. Christians are members of the body of Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:13). They are one and the same reality. Speaking about Christ is speaking

about his body. Christ and Christians cannot be separated, for that would mean tearing apart the body of Christ. Because Christ is in heaven, in the glory of the Father, our being is with him. Christians share the eternal life of Christ and their home is where his home is: in heaven. "Our citizenship is in heaven" writes the apostle (Phil. 3:20). This reality defines their being, thinking and acting. Consequently, they are foreigners on earth. Other letters in the New Testament stress this even more than Paul does. Peter makes it the focus of his first letter, and Hebrews compares Christians with the patriarchs who were aliens and strangers on earth (Hebr. 11:13).

6. RECONCILIATION WITH GOD AND TRANSCENDENCE

Verster has changed the paradigm of missiology. He does not follow one and a half millennium of propagating Christian faith in order to make people good citizens of an earthly nation. He does not follow a century of missiology that focused on traditional or critical identity in social life. He does not follow the longing for new communities where we can be ourselves and safe in God's care. He does not even follow those who, more critical than their predecessors, speak about reconciliation instead of affirmation. He speaks about eternal life instead of earthly security and ideals.

Reconciliation can also be inserted in the old paradigm of making mission an instrument of social and political earthly goals. When reconciliation is mentioned in consultations, it is usually about the mutual reconciliation of human beings. This does not differ from the use of eschatology in missiological discourse. Eschatology returned to the centre of theology in the 20th century. However, although the eschatological office was reopened (Bosch 2012:513), it was not about transcendent eternal life, but about a utopian world in the future, as the ideal destination of history. Similarly, reconciliation is dealt with in futuristic ideals to which the church calls and contributes. This is the common factor in all modern paradigms of missiology.

A witness that is not a witness to justice, that is not sufficiently inculturated so as to be understood as good news, that is not evident in the church's life of prayer and action, or that is not of a community that is reconciled and reconciling – such a witness is not a witness at all (Bevans & Schroeder 2004:394).

Mission can be summarised as "a prophetic dialogue" (Bevans & Schroeder 2008:395). Together with all other religious and ideological

communities and human beings, the church and Christians contribute to finding a way for a new world order, the utopian Kingdom of God.

Verster does not deny the impact of mission and its calling for social and political changes and reconciliation of people. However, its base and centre is found in God's deeds, reconciliation with God and eternal life in God's reality. "Transendensie is vir die sending onontbeerlik" (Verster 2017:3).

Sending moet vanuit die transendensie in Christus verstaan word. Mense se lewe verander en hulle kom in 'n nuwe verhouding met God. Daarom moet die sending altyd Christologies verstaan word. ... Christus staan inderdaad as die sentrum van die sending. Hy bepaal die sending. Daarom sal die Christologiese benadering essensieel wees. Transendensie is ononderhandelbaar (Verster 2017:34).

God is one and the one God reveals himself to the world by sending the Son, and the reconciling act of God is the result of this coming (Verster 2017:8). Therefore, as the witness to Christ and as God's revelation, Scripture always enjoys priority in the hermeneutic process (Verster 2017:16). This implies that a dialogue with other religions cannot begin on common ground. Christ is the truth and Christ is known by Scripture. Truth is found in the Bible. Verster is consistent in this regard. When dealing with other religions, he does not end with a comparison or even a dialogue, but with witness, without any introduction (Verster 1997:73). When comparing churches, we do not come to the church that we select as the best one, but the church comes to us, taking us into truth. We do not come to the true church, but the true church comes to us (Verster 2012:67). The Son reveals the transcendent God who judges the world at the cross and the resurrection of the Son results in eternal life in communion with God's transcendent life.

Jesus Christus is Koning. Hy is egter 'n totaal unieke koning. Hy is die Koning van die versoening en die lyding. Hy gaan deur die dood heen ... Sy koninkryk is nie van hierdie wêreld nie. Hy bring die nuwe ryk van God (Verster 2017:160).

This is in contrast with the modern and postmodern paradigms of reality, both outside and within the church. The origin and destination of human life are not in this world, but in God's transcendent presence.

Dit beteken dat daar ook 'n nuwe begrip van transendensie onder die mens moet posvat. In 'n wêreld waarin daar vir die hier-en-nou gelewe word, in 'n wêreld waar die teologie die transendensie

prysgee vir 'n aardse Jesus wat hier en nou optree, moet die transendensie van God weer bevestig word. Alleenlik wanneer die volle transendensie van God sigbaar is, kan die sending nog 'n boodskap vir die wêreld waarin ons woon, hê. ... Alhoewel Christus volledig mens geword het, en die inkarnasie van God in Christus sigbaar is, beteken dit nie dat hierdie werklikheid, hierdie bestaan, die laaste woord het nie. Daar moet dus vanuit die belydenis van die transendensie van God en die ontmoeting met die transendente in God, bely word dat hierdie werklikheid verbygaande is en nie die laaste antwoord vir ons bestaan het nie. Die wêreld is dus nie ons woning nie (Verster 2017:269).

Verster makes transcendence a key concept of missiology. He does so not for the sake of eternal life as such, as an escape from the world. He does so because of Christ, who *is* eternal life, who *is* the new glorious reality, who *is* reconciliation (Verster 2017:3). He is not a being next to the eternal God, for God is One.

7. THE IMPACT OF BACK TO THE BASICS

Verster's paradigm is not new. He did not invent it. It is the original paradigm of Christian mission as we find it in the New Testament and as it was practised in the earliest centuries of Christianity. Verster's approach is not a revolution. It is rather a reformation: Back to the sources as the Reformers of the 16th century did in the doctrine of grace. But this reformation will be felt as a revolution if the church in her missionary practice works in this paradigm. It will not only change the missionary work of the church, but the church as a whole, in all her practices (Verster 2008:72-75).

Understanding the criticality of Verster's work has not yet been realised either in missiology or in the practices of the church. This may be due to the fact that he does not combat other approaches. He just poses his own paradigm, in the conviction that this is not his own finding but that it was found in the writings of the apostles. Verster does not enter into polemics. This is a disadvantage for evoking debates and attention. However, the advantage is much greater: It gives the freedom to enter his paradigm without the need to defend ourselves when coming from elsewhere. Trustworthy work will prove itself. It is not necessary to run others down.

'n Christen word gekenmerk deur liefde, respek en eerbied vir ander. Nooit mag ons ander verneder en verdag maak nie (Verster 1997:76).

A return to the basic early Christian paradigm on mission will have a fundamental impact on human relationships. Christians live in a new

reality. The old has gone; everything has become new. In mere human reconciliations, the old always remains present. People can carry on life with each other and partners can be reconciled, but the past is always remembered, the scars are always present, and the pain of the past is felt continuously. Christian faith confesses that the past has gone. Because our identity is in Christ and because we have received eternal life in him, we are free from earthly powers.

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your heart on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things (Col. 3:1).

We do not have to fight for our future or to strive forever more at the expense of others. We participate in Christ, in his life, and we share his compassion for the world.

We are co-heirs with him and so we have the abundance of the heritage of God (Rom. 8:17). He is our firstborn brother (Rom. 8:29) and reconciliation means sharing in everything as brothers in a family do. That is the way in which early Christian life was organised in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44; 4:34). This had to do with very concrete earthly things, with bread and money. The Church is a community of love: "This means that the church should also be the community of love for the poor" (Verster 2012:76) and this has very concrete implications for the way in which the church deals with very concrete needs such as food, health and hope for the future (Verster 2012:83). If reconciliation is filled with the ultimate glory, the most concrete meaning of this word is not left out, but included. The concrete meaning is about money, exchange of money and giving interest (Muller & Thiel 1969:384). When Christians are brothers and sisters in Christ, they share their needs and their plenty. If we have a beloved brother in need, and we are wealthy, of course, we will help him. What a brother would we be if we would not do so (1 John 3:17)? Because our real treasure is in heaven, we do not have to collect treasures on earth (Matt. 6:19), but we can use them for helping our brothers and sisters. This is not only a mission for wealthy Christians on behalf of the poor. It is a basic attitude for all Christians and for poor communities in informal settlements (Verster 2017:275).

If it is about money, it is also about land, for land is the most solid investment. In Jerusalem, Barnabas (Acts 4:37) as well as Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-3) knew this. Nowadays, Christians also know this. Do we live in the freedom of Christ about which Paul writes in Philippians 2? Christ gave himself on behalf of others. Being in Christ implies thinking and acting in him. Are our decisions made in such a way as befits being in

Jesus Christ? (Phil. 2:5). This means that others are more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:3).

The book of Acts explains that Christians were not urged to give their possessions to the poor. It is a free act of giving (Acts 5:4). The poor cannot grab it or even claim it. Christian life in the freedom of Christ is: “Everything I have is yours” and not “Everything you have is mine”. However, this cannot be an escape for the wealthy to leave their brothers in poverty. Early Christians did not steal from their more fortunate brothers. They knew their lives to be safe in Christ, and that nothing can separate them from his love, neither poverty nor any hardship (Rom. 8:38). However, the rich are blamed if they cling to their wealth, for by doing so they show that they do not share the identity of Christ. James raises his voice loudly.

Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that will come upon you. Your wealth has rotted. ... You have hoarded wealth in the last days (James 4:1-3).

James does not call on the poor to steal, or the labourers to revolt. His call is much more probing. He blames the rich:

Look, the wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence (James 5:4).

James is straightforward about money. So was his older brother, Jesus. Jesus often speaks about money: “You cannot serve both God and Money” (Matt. 6:24). We cannot keep to earthly wealth and have our citizenship in Christ in heaven. “For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also” (Matt. 6:21). Think and decide in such a way as befits our being in Jesus Christ – who did not cling to his divinity. He emptied himself (Phil. 2:7). He took his very identity and turned it upside down, shedding it until it was empty. If this attitude is his, it should also be the attitude of those who are in him. Then it is a trivial thing to turn our purse upside down and shake it out until it is empty. Reconciliation is sharing eternal life in Christ. Sharing earthly possessions is a triviality compared to this.

8. A HARD CHALLENGE

Verster (2015:65) argues that churches must be judged according to their focus on Christ. This is not a mere theoretical discourse. Doctrine is not about theory. It is about teaching the reality of life and how to relate to it.

Teaching that Christ is the centre of the church's identity implies living according to his standards – the standards of the cross.

The church is ... the church under the cross. Therefore, the church reaches out to desperate people who are also living under the cross to allow them to experience the love of Him who, by dying on the cross, has opened up a new life of the new people before God. The cross is not the end. The cross is followed by the resurrection. As people of God, the love of the resurrected One is radically proclaimed to the poorest of the poor (Verster 2012:84).

Christ is our reconciliation. Verster's paradigm challenges theology, the church and all Christians. Because Christians have focused on earthly life for over one and a half millennium, they will find it difficult to identify with it. It will be difficult for the poor to do so by not claiming what they eagerly long for. But it will be much more difficult for the wealthy. Reconciliation asks for a love that demands all our heart and influences all our decisions about everything. To love God, and in Christ to love others is the same, for it is one body that we share in the eucharist, the body of Christ.

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