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**CHURCH-BASED
MISSIONS:
CREATING A NEW
PARADIGM**

Huge changes are taking place in the world in which we live. These are truly historic times. In a matter of a few years we have seen a significant upheaval in the political power system that has been in place since World War II. Communism is no longer a dominant worldview. The times are still treacherous, yet significantly altered. Many are arguing that in terms of power a whole new paradigm is emerging. A new kind of war lurks on the horizon—economic wars. Japan and Germany, with their communal capitalism, are poised to dominate as America's individual capitalism wanes.

Other paradigms are shifting as well. Many feel that we are seeing a paradigm shift of enormous proportion, not unlike the experience of the Enlightenment. David Bosch, in his work *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Missions*, points to this growing awareness of being on the verge of a new paradigm.

“Kuhn’s theories have a particular relevance in our own time since, in virtually all disciplines, there is a growing awareness that we live in an era of change from one way of understanding reality to another It is abundantly clear that the twentieth century, particularly after the Second World War, shows evidence of such a major shift in perceiving reality. Since the seventeenth century the Enlightenment paradigm has reigned supreme in all disciplines, including theology. Today there is a growing sense of disaffection with the Enlightenment and a quest for a new approach in understanding reality. There is, on one hand, a search for a new paradigm; on the other hand, such a new paradigm is already presenting itself.”¹

One does not have to look long and hard to see that major changes are in the air. Some look at these with great fear and cling to what they know with ever-increasing fervor, trying to avert change by sheer effort in trying to improve what already exists. Others look ahead with a great sense of adventure and anticipation. Most sit still, waiting for whatever is going to happen. The anticipation and the focus on new paradigms is accentuated in this decade more than any other in recent time in part because it is the last decade of the millennium after Christ. What will life in the next century, and the next millennium, actually look like? *Time* magazine recently published a special issue entitled “Beyond the Year 2000—What to Expect in the Next Millennium.” The subtitle of the first article, “The Cosmic Moment,” reads as follows:

“The Millennium represents the ritual of death and rebirth of history, one thousand-year epoch yielding to another.”

¹ *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, by David J. Bosch (Orbis Books, 1991), p. 185.

These realities present a whole new set of opportunities, and challenges, for churches that live and minister during these times. Associations of churches around our country are rising to the challenge and designing strategies, often with very aggressive goals, seeking to maximize the impact of reaching something monumental by the year 2000. In the midst of these elaborate aspirations is an emerging tragedy that is typical of the church throughout the centuries. Rather than thinking ahead, and looking for ways to respond to the new era, which is emerging, the church is almost completely trapped in its institutional way of life, which accompanied the current paradigm of the Enlightenment. We have a unique opportunity to look back in time to the Early Church and forward in time to the world of the twenty-first century. Yet the church seems almost unaware of the current paradigm in which it operates, a paradigm that emerged from the Enlightenment, with its desire to colonize, educate, and civilize, and its accompanying institutional forms.

Many of its strategies were appropriate for its day, but are no longer in our present world. Just as the church started out—unaware of its cultural clothing, often interpreting them as angelic robes—so it is going out with the same lack of self-understanding—unaware of the difference between culture and Scripture. It still exists within the colonial paradigm, with extensive plans to burst on the scene of the new millennium with hundreds of thousands of new churches. And these churches, without a clear understanding of their own cultural trappings, are destined to be ineffectual in the next generation, if they survive a single generation.

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To understand the complexity of our time with enough clarity to seize this very unique opportunity in a manner that will lay firm and lasting foundations, it is necessary to gain a basic understanding of the cultural engine that the Church used to power the missionary enterprise of the last 200 years. We must begin with a critique of the colonial paradigm of missions.

A Critique of the Waning Colonial Paradigm

1. Taking its cues from the Enlightenment, *civilizing* became the missionary goal, parallel to that of evangelism, and missionary strategies were wedded with the colonizing spirit.

Our current missions era is often referred to as “the colonial era” in missions. Bosch calls it the Enlightenment paradigm. The broad strokes of the paradigm grew from entrepreneurs who saw tremendous open doors for the gospel through the colonizing efforts of their nations and sought to bring the gospel and their cultures to the heathen. It was not uncommon for some of the great pioneers of the colonial missions era to be heard

setting forth such challenges as William Carey when he wrote the following:

“Can we hear that they are without the gospel, without government, without laws, and without the arts and sciences and not exert ourselves to introduce amongst them the sentiments of men and of Christians? Would not the spread of the gospel be the most effectual means of their civilization? Would that not make them useful members of society?”²

Harvie Conn goes on to conclude:

“Colonialism was often seen by these early missionaries as the handmaid of the process of civilizing. And it could easily be defined as the grand movement of Europe that promoted the cause of rational behavior in the face of barbarous superstition.”³

The logic of their strategy was brilliant, and it worked. Christianity spread throughout the globe. Colonizing was an effective tool. The problem, which was to eventually become the Achilles’ heal of the movement, was not the opportunistic response to cultural opportunity, but the lack of understanding between what was Scripture and what was culture. Without a clear philosophy of ministry based on solid biblical principles, cultural ideas and pragmatic concerns ruled, and churches and institutions were wrapped in Western garb rather than culturally relevant forms—garbs, by the way, that are still wrapped around adult nationals. Concerning this era, Bosch correctly offers the following summary, which captures the essence of the era with remarkable balance.

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“The entire Western missionary movement of the past three centuries emerged from the matrix of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, it spawned an attitude of tolerance to all people and a relativistic attitude toward belief of any kind; on the other hand, it gave birth to Western superiority feelings and prejudice.... The Western missionary enterprise of the late eighteenth to the twentieth century remained, in spite of the valid criticism which may be aimed at it, a most remarkable exercise.... Within the absence of the movement Western Christians—in their emerging relationships with people of other cultures—did the only thing that made sense to them—they brought the gospel as they understood it. For this we owe them respect and gratitude.”⁴

Under this Western colonial expansion of the gospel, a whole new paradigm of missions developed. In almost all cases, the missionaries supported the missionary expansion idea, under the belief that the “natives” would be

² This statement by Carey was originally taken from *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History* (London: SCM, 1965), p. 46, and quoted in *Eternal Word Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology and Missions in Dialogue*, by Harvie M. Conn (Zondervan, 1984), p. 35.

³ Conn, p. 36.

⁴ *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, by David J. Bosch, (Orbis, 1991) p. 344.

better off. They expanded rapidly throughout the world, setting up missionary stations as sort of expansion outposts. The colonialism paradigm developed the three “C’s”:

- Christianity
- Commerce
- Civilization

Bosch quotes John Philip of the London Missionary Society as a typical example. In 1828, Philip wrote this about missionary stations:

“Missionary stations are the most efficient agents which can be employed to promote the internal strength of our colonies, and the cheapest and best military posts that a wise government can employ to defend its frontier against the predatory incursions of savage tribes.”⁵

This expansion was then followed by huge maintenance systems, which were needed to complete the colonization:

- Formation of mission societies and agencies.
- Career missionaries over institutions, established in the name of Christianity.
- Educational institutions designed to fully indoctrinate.

2. Unaware to most, the goal to civilize resulted in a failure to separate culture from the gospel, and institutional concerns dominated, allowing a Western theology to go unquestioned, and evangelical theology’s insensitivity to its own culture-boundness resulted in irrelevant categories and unestablished churches.

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reproducing churches, filled with real leaders, able to think theologically in their own culture. This is logical in light of the colonial paradigm, in which one unwarily mixes the gospel and their own culture. We all live and think in a given cultural milieu and must be taught to think biblically in our own culture. This can only be accomplished by thinking at a principle level. Again, Conn brings the problem clearly into focus:

“Theologizing as an activity of the Third World church was a question missions did not raise. Its struggles were institutional questions—the organization of missions, the relation of missions to the national church, the future structure of the national church. The debate over the indigenous church formula did not cover the question of indigenous theology; its concern was methodological strategy.”⁶

⁵ Bosch, p. 305.

⁶ Conn, p. 115

So as you can see, if the missionary enterprise under the era of colonial expansion had seen colonialism as a vehicle for the progress of the gospel and not become identified with its objectives, instead laying careful foundations according to biblical principles and images of ministry, churches would be thriving and multiplying globally, as the missionaries would gradually retreat. Instead, it takes an act of God or a “missionary go home movement” to loosen our ironclad grasp on the churches in other cultures. In building a new model, we must return to the first century before turning afresh to the twenty-first century.

The Emergence of a New Paradigm

Significant “winds of change” have been blowing in missions, just as in theological education, for more than twenty years, putting more emphasis on New Testament models and practices. It is clear that going back to the writings of the Early Church is the foundational source for all ministry principles.

1. Birth pangs indicating the emergence of a new paradigm.

Many signs are on the horizon but two stand out—both point to major changes in how we do missions. The first sign involves Theological Education by Extension (TEE), which is primarily a missions movement. TEE, even with its pragmatic beginnings, spread like wildfire around the world, carrying with it a key message—there is an especially great need for leadership training throughout the Two-Thirds World, and our rigid, colonial-style theological institutions are not doing the job.

The second sign is more indirect but impressive. The detailed and carefully researched books by Conn and Bosch both muster enormous evidence in the direction of a major shift on the horizon and the emergence of a new paradigm. Bosch outlines what he believes are the six major paradigms of church history and claims that the sixth is just about to emerge. The following are Bosch’s six major paradigms:

1. The apocalyptic paradigm of primitive Christianity
2. The Hellenistic paradigm of the patristic period
3. The medieval Roman Catholic paradigm
4. The Protestant (Reformation) paradigm
5. The modern Enlightenment paradigm
6. The emerging ecumenical paradigm

I have concerns about Bosch’s title for this new emerging paradigm, the ecumenical paradigm, and yet I can easily see why he chose it. We are fast moving towards becoming a global village. We are entering a new technological era, and we have just begun understanding its implications for global power shifts. Economic wars loom on the horizon. And communication is unparalleled since the tower of Babel. The church can talk to one another as never before. The church can strategize together as never before. This is good news and bad news. Yet the idea of working together and strategizing together does produce certain ecumenical tendencies. And the church will move one of two directions: one which tries to build one church and one religion or the other direction which tries

to build Christ’s church according to His administration. Both have implications for this emerging ecumenical paradigm.

What are some of the reasons for the decline of the colonial missions paradigm? Primary reasons include:

- The enormous cost of mission institutions and career missionaries.
- The need to restructure funds for nationals.
- Global restructuring—the colonizing nations are no longer respected.
- Many nations are no longer open to traditional career missionaries.
- Apparent ineffectiveness of many missionaries.
- Lack of ownership by churches in the missionary enterprise itself, instead relying on the expertise of mission agencies.
- Ineffectiveness of Western theological institutions to produce leaders and the resulting desperate cries for national leadership on the mission field.
- Inability of missionaries to turn over *their* institutions and churches to national leadership.
- Inability to shed the superiority attitude, which has become part of the psyche of so many career missionaries.

2. If existing mission agencies are to remain relevant, several megashifts must take place. When these are pulled together, they become the broad strokes of a new paradigm for missions.

Mission agencies, as we know them today, were created out of the culture of the colonial era and therefore are designed to be effective in a world of colonization and civilization building. But the world has changed. The old forms will no longer work. The existing systems either need to be dismantled, let to die a natural death, or retooled for useful service in a new era. Here are some of our recommendations:

Conn reminds us,
“Revolutions in thinking, are not created by new information but by new paradigms that allow more information to be fitted more fully and adequately.”

- Critical assessment by agencies of the effectiveness of their missionaries, cutting all but the outstanding ones within one furlough.
- Build the remaining attitudinally-mature missionaries into “itinerant apostolic-like missionary teams” based in “Antioch churches.”
- Build relationships with key “Antioch churches” that will commit to getting involved in mutual strategies designed to assist churches throughout the world to become vital and multiplying, building a network of “itinerant apostolic-like missionary teams”
- Strategically place experienced leaders in a specific field only after a plan has been designed for when the task is expected to be completed.
- Create a plan to dismantle the deputation system.
- Systematically redo colonial terminology and replace with biblical, partnership-oriented terminology.

A New Paradigm for a New Millennium: Church-Based Missions

We are in the midst of a massive paradigm shift in missions that will revolutionize our existing forms, if not completely eliminate them. “Revolutions in thinking,” Conn reminds us “are not created by new information but by new paradigms that allow more information to be fitted more fully and adequately.”⁷ In one sense, new paradigms simply emerge as old ones wane through ineffectiveness. It is a natural process of growth. On the other hand, the broad strokes of a paradigm usually emerge or are often helped along by the writings of many who are in a new tradition of reflection. They serve us much like the early sketches of an architect as he conceptualizes a building. The following is an attempt, out of the dialogue of a growing network of mission-minded leaders who are also churchmen, to begin sketching a new paradigm for missions. (In a previous article we clarified our understanding of church-based.)

1. The Idea of Church-Based Missions

When we refer to an enterprise of the church being *church-based*, we mean that the local church is at the very center of the enterprise. It must have ownership. It must participate significantly at every part of the process. For more than 200 years, the missionary activity of the church has been para-church-based. We are calling for a contemporary paradigm that is truly church-based. The following definitions are offered for your discussion and debate.

Local church-based: A missions strategy that builds off the centrality of the local church, involving the training, commissioning, and serious partnership with leaders developed in its midst.

Para-church-based: A missions strategy in which the church is peripheral to the missionary enterprise itself; its role is relegated to an agency recruitment center and a token support base.

The idea of church-based missions has its roots in the first-century churches, as recorded in the book of Acts. From this narrative a core set of guiding principles are identified, which can serve us in sketching a new paradigm. The ideas of this core set of principles clearly point to the biblical nature of the missionary enterprise being church-based.

- Missionaries who went out to do missionary activity were the most experienced leaders who knew how to establish churches (Acts 13:1–4).
- Their gifts were confirmed by the leaders with whom they served, and they were commended to a specific work. They reported back to their sending church concerning that work (Acts 14:25–28).
- The church continued to minister to Paul and his team in very direct ways, such as sending finances as well as people to assist him (Phil. 1:3–6; 4:10–18).

⁷ Conn, p. 54

Today, the old paradigm is being stretched to limits previously considered unreachable. It is an unusually complex network of agencies, missionaries, and church-growth analysts who have created a mammoth network and a few important goals focused on the year AD 2000. The network is full of many good and creative ideas, and the gospel has been furthered. Yet, I believe that under careful analysis it can be convincingly demonstrated that this movement is jump-starting the old colonial paradigm and attempting to breathe new life into its old, dying forms. Reality is: Rather than finishing the task by the year 2000 in some sort of grand culmination of the 200 years of colonial missionary activity, we are instead looking at an enormous investment of time, talent, and resources in what will probably go down in church history as a last-ditch effort by misguided zealots who did great harm to the genuine progress of the gospel worldwide by operating in the colonial paradigm.

2. A Church-Based Missions Network for the Twenty-First Century

When applying this concept to the local church, it seems vital to develop a broader network of churches and leaders, a network that desires to build on the biblical guidelines as well as design creative models for the twenty-first century.

- A network of “Antioch churches” committed to raising up leaders, commending them out to the task of missions, and fully participating with the leaders they commission.
- A network of skilled leaders—experienced “itinerant, apostolic-type missionary teams”—raised up and commissioned by churches to participate in establishing churches in strategic points throughout the world.
- A core curriculum, principle-centered and committed to encouraging the development of a belief framework in culture, which breaks free of the Western categories of theology—built of fresh and solid foundations of biblical theology while being mission driven.
- A network that identifies and empowers key national leaders, and assists them in assuming their rightful place of establishing and leading their churches.
- An interface strategy for cooperating with mission agencies that have a clear vision to break free of the colonial paradigm.

At BILD International we are working to create such a model. The essentials of the model are explained in detail in our 16-page prospectus and accompanying material and more in-depth in our seminar training manuals and in our foundational course—*Acts: Keys to the Establishment and Expansion of the First-Century Church*. The core ingredients of our model include the following:

- A 30-year strategic intent focusing on the broad strokes of a new church based paradigm.
- A 10-year church-based strategy guide for churches.
- A 30-course core curriculum and lifelong-learning update system.
- A comprehensive seminar training network.

- A comprehensive church-based assessment strategy built around a life development portfolio, with a minimum of seven years ministry experience built into the assessment.
- An online computerized resource center.
- A publishing and translation network.
- An interface strategy with mission agencies that are willing to participate in a new church-based paradigm.
- An international network of resource scholars.
- An international network of individual churches and associations of churches.
- An interface strategy with theological seminaries, graduate schools, and Bible colleges, and other training organizations.
- The cultivation of church-based regional resource centers—a new generation of seminaries.
- An international network of such resource centers for the purpose of writing, holding councils, and sharing resources.

We are living in marvelous times filled with almost unparalleled opportunity. But we must think differently. We must act boldly. And we must be change agents.

What is really at stake? Why are these challenges so important? Are we committed to change for change's sake? Let me close with a couple of illustrations that drive home the point—the need and the urgency of getting on with ministry in the new era.

In Sao Paulo, Brazil, there are approximately 3200 missionaries from the United States alone, most living in the better sections of Sao Paulo, which costs approximately \$125,000,000 a year. This does not even count the maintenance of the institutions themselves. When discussing this matter with a respected Brazilian leader, he commented, without hesitation, that he was not sure that the Brazilian churches would be affected in any negative way if 80 percent of the missionaries were sent home tomorrow. Now I'm not for throwing \$100,000,000 at the Brazilian churches, but can you imagine what they could do with \$100,000,000 a year to help fund a well-designed strategy for establishing their existing churches and training leaders?

The second illustration comes in the form of a challenge from Jonathan Chao, in an article he wrote more than fifteen years ago. Although he was primarily speaking about Western theological education, it applies to missions as well.

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“A critical and historical analysis of the traditional missionary model of ministry exported from the West shows that it is built on the administrative structure reflecting the Roman mentality rather than on a functional structure of service as found in the New Testament.... This kind of rethinking, although by no means new, implies that any attempt to “improve” the present form of theological education is not enough. What we need is not renovation, but innovation. The whole philosophy and structure of theological education has to be completely reshaped.... If we reshape the ministry and restructure leadership training along biblical lines in the Third World, I believe that we will see the release of a spiritual dynamic in the churches that could produce a great awakening for world evangelization.”⁸

Resources:

1. *Eternal Word and Changing Worlds: Theology, Anthropology and Mission in Dialogue*, by Harvie Conn (Zondervan, 1983).
2. *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, by David Bosch (Orbis, 1991).
3. *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth and Violence of the 21st Century*, by Alvin Toffler (Batam, 1990).

⁸ “Education and Leadership” by Jonathan Chao, chapter 11 in the *New Face of Evangelicalism: An International Symposium on the Lausanne Covenant*, edited by Rene Padilla (IVP, 1976).