

Mission as “crossing frontiers”?

A New Mission Theological Reflection on the Mission Concept of David Bosch

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Abstract

Despite numerous appreciations, David Bosch’s multidimensional and comprehensive concept of mission is still confronted with the persistent core criticism that it is too comprehensive and does not contain a criterion by which the concept of mission can be narrowed down. As a counter-thesis, K. J. Livingston argues that the aspect of “crossing frontiers” constitutes such a criterion for Bosch’s concept of mission. This paper takes up this discussion and elaborates on the significance of “crossing frontiers” in Bosch’s main work, *Transforming Mission*, and the overall framework of his mission concept. This paper concludes that while the motif of “crossing frontiers” is a not insignificant building block in Bosch’s concept of mission, it is never used in a bold, contextless, and isolated way, but is accompanied by other aspects such as love and service giving. In a systematic final reflection, Bosch’s mission-theological concept is appreciated in view of its uniqueness and originality.

Keywords: David J Bosch; mission; crossing frontiers; transforming mission

1. Introduction

Without a doubt, the mission theological design of the South African missiologist David J. Bosch is a milestone on the way through the 21st century and has lost none of its relevance to this day (Kasdorf, 1992:49-53; Saayman, 1998:1702; Saayman, 1990:99-100). Shortly after its publication, Bosch’s (2011) magnum opus, *Transforming Mission*, established itself as a foundational work in missiology. For many missiologists, it is a monumental work for the study and research of a contemporary concept of mission.

In addition to numerous appreciative reactions (Reppenhagen, 2011:439-441),² critical reactions and comments from different theological directions and camps must also be taken seriously.³ A central point of criticism relates to the limits

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² Robert Schreiter, for example, called it “a milestone in late twentieth-century missiological thought” (Schreiter, 1991:180; cited in Reppenhagen, 2011:439). It is especially noteworthy that *Transforming Mission* has been translated into numerous languages and published in many countries around the world (Reppenhagen, 2011:439).

³ There is a wide range of different criticisms that have been raised, for example, from Pentecostal, feminist, liberalational, and Africanist perspectives. Some criticisms were expressed shortly after the

of Bosch's comprehensive concept of mission.⁴ The main accusation is that Bosch's dynamic multidimensional approach of an "all-inclusive mission" overstretches the concept of mission (Verster, 1991:251; Kritzinger, 1990:153-154; Yung, 1992:322-323), i.e. explicates it too far⁵ and thus possibly blurs *the primary focus of mission, evangelism*.⁶ In the light of this core critique, K. J. Livingston, who was particularly concerned with the earlier works of Bosch's mission theological outline, elaborated a counter-thesis (Livingston, 2014:210-237, esp. 222-223; cf. Livingston, 1990:3-19).⁷ According to Livingston, Bosch's comprehensive explication of "mission" does, on closer examination, exhibit a striking characteristic, namely, the aspect of "crossing frontiers" (in the direction of the world).⁸

To what extent is this aspect of "crossing frontiers" found in Bosch's *Transforming Mission*? What is its significance for the overall framework of Bosch's mission-theological concept? To what extent does this aspect contribute to possibly invalidating the accusation of an "all-inclusive mission"? The purpose of this paper is to critically examine these questions. The execution begins with a presentation of the criticism against Bosch's design and the aspect of "crossing frontiers." Critical secondary literature by J. J. Kritzinger, Yung and Verster or Livingston are used as examples. In the second section, textual analysis is used to examine the extent to which the aspect of "crossing frontiers" occurs in *Transforming Mission*, Bosch's central and final work, and what role it might play in Bosch's argumentation. Re-

publication of *Transforming Mission* (Yung, 1992:322-3). From a Pentecostal perspective, it was criticised that Bosch did not recognise and capture the global rise of Pentecostalism (see Tizon, 2001; Yong, 2019). It has also been repeatedly criticised that Bosch's analysis and understanding of mission history are heavily influenced by a Eurocentric perspective, thus insufficiently considering the contributions of non-Western churches (cf. Livingston, 1999:26-28). However, these interesting perspectives and questions do not play a role in the present article.

⁴ Connected with this, for example, is the problem of defining the relationship between mission and evangelism.

⁵ The term (lexical or analytical) definition (verb: to define) is deliberately avoided here. The language use of mission (and also evangelism) is used very differently in relation to various attempts at explication (verb: to explicate) and first requires clarification. These (competing) explication proposals which attempt to specify the language use, must always be critically examined.

⁶ These critical remarks will be discussed in more detail in the next section. It is by no means claimed that Bosch does not consider the dimension of evangelism. The criticism refers to a possibly inadequate definition of the relationship between mission and evangelism, or a misplaced emphasis on the social dimension in the context of an "all inclusive mission." However – this should be emphasised – "mission" and "evangelism" are terms in need of explication, which in turn should be explained in more detail.

⁷ This counterargument by Bosch which Livingston's thesis draws upon, while not directly addressed to the above critics, relates to the same core criticism, namely, that Bosch's concept of mission is too comprehensive.

⁸ Livingston's argumentation and the relevant statements of Bosch are to be analysed concretely in the next step.

sults from the two preceding sections lead in the third, final part of the evaluation to specify the meaning of the aspect of “crossing frontiers” in Bosch’s mission-theological design and, against this background, to reflect anew on Bosch’s concept of mission with regard to its specific nature.

2. Context: Criticisms against Bosch’s design and the aspect of “crossing frontiers”

2.1 Criticisms against Bosch’s mission-theological design

In a critical appraisal, Kritzinger discusses the problem of Bosch’s concept of mission in his earlier works (Kritzinger, 1990:140-155). He describes in detail how Bosch arrived at his comprehensive concept of mission in the course of the 1980s – at a time when the term was used in an inflationary way and different “schools” offered various explication proposals regarding the relationship between mission and evangelism (Kritzinger, 1990:143; cf. Bosch, 1980:11). Regarding Bosch’s explication of the concept of mission, Kritzinger refers to a short formula that Bosch used for the first time in *Witness to the World* (Bosch, 1980) and that he used again and again in further works, “Mission is the total task which God has set the Church for the salvation of the world” (Bosch, 1980:17; cited in Kritzinger, 1990:147). With strong reference to Livingston, Kritzinger outlines Bosch’s concept of mission, which is characterised by multidimensionality, holism, focus on God’s kingdom, and context-sensitivity (Kritzinger, 1990:147-149). Despite the general appreciation and agreement in some essential aspects,⁹ Kritzinger makes critical inquiries in view of Bosch’s multidimensional definition of mission, “Still, he [David Bosch – author’s note] is much more eloquent in his formulation of what mission *is* than what mission *is not*. [...] where are the boundaries of mission? What is *not* missionary?” (Kritzinger, 1990:153-154). The inquiry about the boundary or a boundary criterion is directly connected to the question of the practical feasibility or structural and personnel consequences of Bosch’s explication, “If we accept his theological reasoning as valid, what effect could it have on the mission practice of today and tomorrow?” (Kritzinger, 1990:154).

In his book review of *Transforming Mission*, H. Yung (1992:319-324) also analyses and appreciates Bosch’s design of a new concept of mission. Following the three-part structure of the book (“New Testament models,” “Historical paradigms,” and “Elements of an emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm”), Bosch’s line of argument is reconstructed. Yung acknowledges that Bosch, starting from an

⁹ Kritzinger agrees with Bosch that mission and evangelism have different meanings (not synonyms) and that the explication of mission is more comprehensive than that of evangelism. He also assumes a dynamic interlocking of the different dimensions of mission (Kritzinger, 1990:153).

ecumenical and eclectic approach, brought together the fruits of mission theological discussions and debates in recent decades (Yung, 1992:322). In contrast, Yung is critical of Bosch's listing of 13 elements of the new paradigm, in which ranking prioritisation is not evident (Yung, 1992:322). According to him, Bosch omitted crucial elements in his draft such as "apologetics," "power encounters,"¹⁰ "witness in the midst of suffering and persecution," and "people movements" (Yung, 1992:322-323). This leads to Yung's critical inquiry, "And no doubt other readers may also wish to add to the list. But would this therefore not create the problem of an ever-expanding list?" (Yung, 1992:323). He asks for a border criterion of the mission, "[...] nowhere has he [Bosch] stated his criteria for including some and excluding others from the list of elements in the emerging paradigm. For unless some criteria exist then there is nothing to stop everything from becoming mission" (Yung, 1992:323).

In a 1997 essay entitled *All-inclusive Mission – A discussion of Transforming Mission* by D.J. Bosch, P. Verster (1991:251-266) echoes the critique of the previous two. Verster acknowledges Bosch's main work published in 1991, which triggered numerous fruitful discussions, describes the "all-inclusive character" of his concept of mission, and summarises the countless preceding critiques, both in content and method.¹¹ His central critique, elaborated in section 5 of the essay, concerns whether this all-inclusive view of mission blurs the real focus of mission, namely, the ministry of reconciliation. In doing so, Verster biblically invokes 2 Corinthians 5:11-21 and emphasises that the church should not overstep the boundaries of its proper calling (Verster, 1991:262-264). Although – according to Verster – Bosch also emphasises evangelism and conversion, a tendency toward the socialisation of mission is discernible in his case (Verster, 1991:263-264). Following Reformation theology, Verster distinguishes between the church as the body of Christ and the kingdom of God, "Mission is the primary task of the church, but the deed of social regeneration must be brought about by the citizens of the kingdom in obedience to the Lord of the kingdom" (Verster, 1991:264). While mission, as the primary calling of the church, can proclaim the glory of the kingdom of God in its diversity, the main focus of mission remains the ministry of reconciliation (Verster, 1991:264).

Despite their appreciation for Bosch, the central criticism of Kritzing, Yung and Verster is directed at his comprehensive, multidimensional concept of mission.

¹⁰ What is meant are "power encounters" between the spiritual power of God and other spirit realities such as demons or evil spirits. Yung argues that the whole area of "power encounters" has been rediscovered in the West by the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements, whereas it has been an integral part of the ministry of the rapidly growing churches in various parts of Africa and Asia for some time (Yung, 1992:322).

¹¹ On the various criticisms against Bosch, see Verster (1991:257-261).

Central in this context is the inquiry concerning a *boundary criterion*, combined with the question of practical feasibility and a possible prioritisation or “core” of mission. In the current mission-theological debate, this criticism of a comprehensive concept of mission continues, which is no longer directed directly at Bosch’s concept of mission, but at the concept of the “*missio Dei*”, which he decisively coined (Bosch, 2011:333-336). This has developed into a “container concept” (Günther, 1993:98-99; cf. McKinzie, 2010) which is filled differently depending on the respective author and does not allow meaningful demarcation.¹²

2.2 Aspect of “crossing frontiers”

J. K. Livingston studied Bosch’s earlier works intensively and recorded his findings in his book *A Missiology of the Road* (Livingston, 2014). In chapter 6 of the book, Livingston deals with Bosch’s view of mission and evangelism and their relationship – a subject to which, according to Livingston, Bosch “devoted considerable energies” (Livingston, 2014:210-249; quote on p. 210). In the present work, I am interested in only two central passages where the aspect of “crossing frontiers” is clearly expressed.¹³

In the section “Bosch’s understanding of Mission and Evangelism”, Livingston summarises Bosch’s basic perspective in a few observations (Livingston, 2014:214-217). Livingston affirms that Bosch, in particular, challenges the contemporary tendency of an overly comprehensive explication of the concept of mission;¹⁴ by quoting Bosch, Livingston demonstrates Bosch’s position, “It [mission] becomes a collective noun for everything God does as well as for everything Christians believe they should be doing” (Livingston, 2014:215; orig. quotation in Bosch, 1980:15-16). Livingston quotes Bosch further and works out a kind of “border criterion” for mission or evangelism in Bosch’s concept, “Mission and evangelism have both to do with that aspect of the Church’s life where she *crosses frontiers toward the world*” (Livingston, 2014:215; orig. quotation in Bosch, 1980:17; italics added).¹⁵ For Bosch, mission is the overall task that God has given to the church

¹² Rosin argues that by using the term “*missio Dei*” as a “Trojan horse”, various theological deviations entered mission theology (Rosin, 1972:26). Hoedemaker comments, “The *Missio Dei* formula [...] is too open in all directions to be fruitful for a treatment of the problems at hand” (Hoedemaker, 1995:164; cf. Flett, 2010:161-162). For a very detailed discussion of the development and problems of the term, see Wiher (2015:90-103).

¹³ Regarding the idea of crossing frontiers, Bosch was influenced by the Swedish missionary Bengt Sundkler, who understands mission as “church crossing frontiers” (cf. Livingston, 2014:72, fn. 49; see also Bosch, 1969:3-19).

¹⁴ This remark of Livingston’s is interesting insofar as Bosch’s critics (see previous sections) precisely accuse Bosch himself of constructing too comprehensive an explication. Obviously, Livingston indirectly points out that Bosch is well aware of this danger (cf. Bosch, 1980:15-16).

¹⁵ This “criterion of explication” was emphasised again by Bosch shortly thereafter, “Mission has to do

for the salvation of the world and aims at the manifold crossing of borders and barriers in the most diverse contexts with the gospel of God (Livingston, 2014:215; cf. Bosch, 1980:17; Bosch, 1984:169); evangelism is in this context an essential dimension of mission, which is specifically about overcoming the *border between belief and unbelief* (Livingston, 2014:215; cf. Bosch, 1980:19-20).

Moving beyond these basic ideas, this aspect of crossing frontiers is further unfolded in another section of the book. In the section *Three Metaphors to Portray the Christian Mission* (Livingston, 2014:219-223),¹⁶ Livingston points out that Bosch uses three metaphors or models to illustrate his understanding of mission.¹⁷ The last model is the so-called “metaphor of crossing frontiers” (Livingston, 2014:222; cf. Bosch, 1980:17-20).¹⁸ This illustrates that mission, in particular, is a ministry of crossing frontiers, breaking through barriers into the world of its contextual multiplicity (Livingston, 2014:222). In the important fn. 61, Livingston documents Bosch’s response to Stephen Neill, who argued against too broad an explication of the concept of mission:

We must try to establish that characteristic property of mission which allows a particular church activity to be designated as mission. This characteristic aspect is the crossing of frontiers. Mission is essentially concerned with the Church’ moving beyond itself, with the crossing of [boundaries]. Thus the science of mission may be defined as the theology-of-the-Church-crossing-frontiers.”¹⁹

Livingston reflects that Bosch identifies seven specific boundaries or barriers: Geography, religion, culture, ideology, social class, racism and tribalism, and denominationalism (Livingston, 2014:222).²⁰ In the concluding section, Livingston sum-

with the crossing of frontiers” (Bosch, 1980:17).

¹⁶ Livingston, *Missiology*, 219-223.

¹⁷ According to Livingston, the first two models, the prismic refraction model and the Anglican Church mission society model, demonstrate the unity of the gospel while maintaining multidimensionality of missional engagement (“diversity in unity”) (Livingston, 2014:222).

¹⁸ Livingston also refers to the following main source regarding the model of “crossing frontiers,” Bosch, David J., *Mission – An Attempt at a Definition*, in *Church Scene*, April 25, 1986, 10-11.

¹⁹ Livingston quotes from Bosch, David, *Missiology*, in: *Introduction to Theology*, ed. I. H. Eybers, 1974, 2nd rev. ed. Pretoria, 1978, 230-243; quote on p. 240.

²⁰ Only to some of the specific frontiers mentioned does Livingston add a brief supplementary remark: the frontier of ideology refers especially to the Western capitalist worldview; in the case of the frontier of social class, Bosch takes into account the special situation that the church worldwide has increasingly become a church of the poor; with regard to the frontier of racism and tribalism, Bosch has his own South African context in mind. Obviously, the number of frontiers or categories is not relevant; in another place Bosch gives the idea in a modified adjectival form in six categories, “It [WCC (World Council of Churches)] identifies some of the frontiers the Church should cross in her mission to the world. There frontiers may be ethnic, cultural, geographical, religious, ideological or social” (Bosch, 1980:18).

marises Bosch’s view in terms of his own explications, “[Mission] is the church’s ministry of stepping out of itself, into the wider world, in this process crossing geographical, social, political, ethnic, cultural, religious, ideological and other frontiers or barriers” (Livingston, 2014:222).²¹

Contrary to the critical remarks against Bosch’s concept of mission, Livingston shows on the basis of his earlier publications that Bosch was already aware of the danger of a comprehensive concept of mission at an early stage. Moreover, Livingston elaborates that the aspect of “crossing frontiers” obviously plays a non-negligible role for Bosch and could possibly be considered a border criterion for his concept of mission. But to what extent is this aspect of “crossing frontiers” taken up again in his central work *Transforming Mission*? What is its significance in the overall framework of his mission-theological design?

3. Reconstruction: Crossing frontiers in *Transforming Mission*

3.1 Preliminary consideration

In the following investigation, I will try to find passages in which the idea of “crossing frontiers” is explicitly expressed. In particular, passages are to be considered in which there is a conspicuous accumulation of the relevant choice of words from the field of meaning “overcoming/crossing frontiers, borders or barriers.” Due to the enormous volume of the work, the completeness of the passages is not in the foreground; rather, the meaning of “crossing frontiers” is to be worked out highlight-like on the basis of a few central passages. In order to avoid switching between languages, the English revised version of *Transforming Mission* (2011) will be used as the primary source in the following. Formally, my argumentation follows Bosch’s tripartite division:²² While Bosch addresses the models of mission in the New Testament in the first part, in the second part he turns to the historical-paradigmatic development of the understanding of mission after the New Testa-

²¹ Orig. quotation in Bosch, David, *Evangelisation, Evangelisierung*, in: *Lexikon Missions-Theologischer Grundbegriffe*, ed. Karl Müller, Berlin 1987, 102-105; quotation on p. 103.

²² Methodologically, Bosch adopts Thomas Kuhn’s theory of paradigm shift. Essentially, the theory states that science does not progress cumulatively, but through “revolutionary” change due to a qualitatively different view of reality (Bosch, 2011:165-172). Hans Küng, Catholic theologian, was the first to apply this theory of paradigm shift to the history of theology in 1984. Following Küng, Bosch also argues that there have always been paradigm shifts in the course of history with regard to the understanding of mission (cf. Pillay, 1990:109-123). Furthermore, Bosch advocates a critical-hermeneutical approach, in which the respective self-definitions of Christians in different historical epochs are explored, recorded, and brought into a constructive dialogue (Bosch, 2011:38-9). Bosch assumes that reality is an interpreted reality, whereby these interpretations are always decisively influenced by the respective self-definitions. It is the different self-definitions that lead to different understandings of mission (ibid.).

ment period, Bosch builds on this to arrive at a new explication of mission in an ecumenical-postmodern paradigm.²³

3.2 “Crossing Frontiers” in the primitive Christian apocalyptic paradigm

In a preceding reflection, Bosch asks why one should not start with the Old Testament in the search for a revised explication of mission for the present (Bosch, 2011:33). In the passage in question, the concept of “crossing frontiers” is explicitly expressed for the first time in the book:

“There is, in the Old Testament, no indication of the believers of the old covenant being sent by God *to cross geographical, religious, and social frontiers* in order to win others to faith in Yahweh” (Bosch, 2011:33; emphasis added).²⁴

Citing Rzepkowski, Bosch posits that the crucial difference between the Old and New Testaments is mission. The New Testament is essentially a book about mission (Bosch, 2011:33).²⁵ In this, it is indeed evident that Bosch sees the crossing of geographical, religious, and social boundaries as an important sign of the New Testament model of mission.

In another passage, Bosch emphasises that this basic idea of crossing boundaries is already inherent in the logic of Jesus’ ministry (Bosch, 2011:41). The mission of Jesus is characterised by an astonishing *inclusivity*:

“The point is simply that Jesus turns to all people who have been pushed aside: to the sick who are segregated on cultic and ritual grounds, to the prostitutes and sinners who are ostracized on moral grounds, and to the tax-collectors who are excluded on religious and political grounds” (Bosch, 2011:41).

Jesus’ devotion to the poor, the lowly, the sick, the despised and the outcast goes hand in hand with the breaking in of the eschatological reign (Bosch, 2011:41). “His mission is one of dissolving alienation and breaking down walls of hostility, of *crossing boundaries* between individuals and groups” (Bosch, 2011:42; emphasis added). Two observations should be mentioned here: first, it is striking that the aspect of crossing boundaries is obviously linked to other aspects (often ethical in

²³ Following Küng, Bosch differentiates between six epochs or 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, and 6) the emerging ecumenical-postmodern paradigm (see Bosch, 2011:165).

²⁴ Bosch, *Mission*, 19 (own emphasis).

²⁵ Bosch citing Rzepkowski (Rzepkowski, H., *The Theology of Mission*, in *Verbum SVD* 15, 79-91; quotation on p. 80).

nature), such as self-sacrificing love, unity-building, and reconciliation.²⁶ Second, it is significant to note that a central concern of Bosch is to extend the logic of the ministry of Jesus and the early church across history into contemporary contexts in a creatively imaginative yet responsible way (Bosch, 2011:165). Thus, this moment of “crossing frontiers”, if indeed it is an important aspect of mission, is also to be maintained in contextualised form across church history into the present.

According to Bosch, this logic of service of Jesus was already taken up in the early Christian mission by the first Jewish Christians, which “was not opposed to the conversion of Gentiles” (Bosch, 2011:53). Accordingly, the Jesus movement had mastered its first great challenge: “whether it was to remain essentially within the confines of Judaism or live up to the logic of Jesus’ own ministry and transcend all barriers. It chose the latter” (Bosch, 2011:53). In the section *Where the Early Church Failed*, Bosch makes clear his criticism of the early church on this very point, which “ceased to be a movement and turned into an institution” (Bosch, 2011:60). Finally, for the Jerusalem party, “not mission, but consolidation; [...] not crossing frontiers, but fixing them; [...] not movement, but institution” was of central importance (Bosch, 2011:60). From this statement it is clear that, according to Bosch’s understanding, mission is essentially associated with the “crossing frontiers.”

In another section, Bosch intends to illuminate in depth the early Christian understanding of mission through the testimonies of three New Testament authors (Matthew, Luke, and Paul), which represent the “sub-paradigms” of the early Christian missionary paradigm (Bosch, 2011:63).

In the discussion of the Gospel of Matthew, the moment of crossing boundaries does not occur explicitly. In the Gospel of Luke, Bosch discovers the accent of crossing boundaries in the interpersonal relationship, where certain groups of people seem to be in the foreground (Bosch, 2011:89). In addition to the poor, who frequently appear in Luke’s Gospel, “Jesus’ association with women [is] a stunning crossing of a social and religious barrier in the patriarchal society of his day” (Bosch, 2011:89). Again, Bosch emphasises in this context the aspect of the bestowal of love:

“The entire ministry of Jesus and his relationships with all these and other marginalized people witness, in Luke’s writings, to Jesus’ practice of boundary-breaking compassion, which the church is called to emulate” (Bosch 2011:89; emphasis added).

²⁶ Immediately after the quotation on p. 42 Bosch adds, “As God forgives us gratuitously, we are to forgive those who wrong us – up to seventy times seven times, which in fact means limitlessly, more often than we are able to count.”

Another aspect, namely, the community and the readiness for reconciliation in view of the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, expressed especially in the Acts of the Apostles, also deserves great attention, according to Bosch (2011:103-104, 116-117). The ecclesiological community is a “new community in which barriers have been overcome” (Bosch, 2011:116).

According to Bosch, Paul emphasises this latter ecclesiological aspect, placing it in an eschatological-ethical context (Bosch, 2011:141). For Paul, Christ accepted every human being regardless of his or her origin, so that poor and rich, slave and free, Gentile and Jew, should live together in reconciled relationship, and the Christian community should present itself to the world as a unified body (cf. Gal 2:11-21; Bosch, 2011:141). Regarding Paul’s understanding of the Jewish-Gentile relationship, Bosch comments, “Above all, he [Paul] believes that the advent of Christ meant that the barrier between Jews and other people, buttressed by a false understanding of the Law, has been torn down” (Bosch, 2011:141; emphasis added). The sign of this transcending of “all human barriers” is baptism, through which all believers are united in Christ (Bosch, 2011:154-155).

The frequent occurrence of the aspect of crossing frontiers suggests that Bosch sees a corresponding understanding of mission as deeply anchored in the ministry logic of Jesus and in the biblical witness. It is important to note that crossing frontiers across geographical, religious, and social boundaries is always linked to the aspect of love-giving, unity and reconciliation.

3.3 “Crossing frontiers” in the historical paradigms

It is more than striking that the expression “crossing frontiers” does not occur explicitly in the part of historical paradigms. Although Bosch points out that “the Christian faith is intrinsically incarnational [...] [and] it will always enter into the context in which it happens to find itself” (Bosch, 2011:173) and thus implicitly expresses that border-crossing necessarily happens in faith; nevertheless, in my judgment, Bosch’s elaboration on another point should deserve greater attention: the out-of-context use of the term “crossing borders/frontiers” seems inappropriate and dangerous insofar as there is – besides the tendency of unwillingness to cross boundaries – also a *wrong* crossing of boundaries. For example, in the sub-chapters, *Ecclesiasticalization of Salvation*, *Missionary Wars*, and *Colonialism* (Bosch, 2011:193-194; 198-201, 202-204) of the medieval Roman Catholic missionary paradigm, Bosch shows the dark sides of church history. A geographical-cultural border crossing was not seldom violent, characterised by exclusivism, (warlike) clashes, and persecution of dissenters. This kind of “false border crossing” contradicts the original ministry logic of Jesus and the partly exemplary practice of love and reconciliation of the early church.

3.4 “Crossing frontiers” in the postmodern ecumenical mission paradigm

Bosch proposes a comprehensive concept of mission based on the principle of “creative tension,” the multidimensionality of which is reflected in the 13 elements of the emerging ecumenical mission paradigm, which Bosch unfolds in detail (Bosch, 2011:316-430).²⁷ In the process, the aspect of crossing borders appears sporadically in some elements of the new mission paradigm.

Before that, Bosch openly points out the danger of a “false border crossing” against the background of the considerable challenge in the new paradigm. Bosch is critical of alternative approaches such as the New Age movement with its mixture of diverse systems of thought. According to Bosch, its main proponent Fritjof Capra pleads for “a view in which all opposites are cancelled out, *all barriers wiped out*, all dualism superseded, and all individualism dissolved into a universal, undifferentiated, and pantheistic unity” (Bosch, 2011:315; emphasis added). For Bosch, neither reactionary (e.g., fundamentalism) nor excessively revolutionary approaches, such as the New Age movement, can provide a solution to the challenges we face in the new paradigm.

In the subsection “Mission as Evangelism”, Bosch emphasises, following his earlier works, that evangelism is an essential dimension of mission. It is remarkable that the idea that evangelism is the *special crossing frontiers* between faith and unbelief (Bosch, 1980:19-20; Livingston, 2014:215) is no longer explicitly taken up by Bosch.²⁸ On the other hand, the aspect of crossing borders appears briefly in two elements, namely, *Mission as Common Witness* and *Mission as Witness to People of Other Living Faiths*.

In the *Mission as Common Witness* section, Bosch emphasises the importance of ecumenical thought, which initially emerged from various revivalist movements and missionary enterprises (Bosch, 2011:388). For example, the Pietist movement at the beginning of the 18th century had led to “a newfound unity of Christians, which transcended denominational differences, and felt urged to involve themselves in a new, trans-denominational missionary movement” (Bosch, 2011:388). This transcending of denominational boundaries had its foundation in “God’s gift

²⁷ The 13 elements are: Mission as ... the Church-With-Others; *missio Dei*; Mediating Salvation; the Quest for Justice; Evangelism; Contextualisation; Liberation; Inculturation; Common Witness; Ministry by the Whole People of God; Witness to People of Other Living Faiths; Theology; Action in Hope.

²⁸ The reasons for this can only be tentatively surmised from the textual context: First, Bosch seems to emphasise the fact that a rigid dichotomous division can no longer do justice to the complex Western post-Christian pluralising context (cf. Bosch 2011:349-50); moreover, Bosch seems to pay attention to an inclusive style of language, whereby evangelism is understood primarily as an invitation to and witness of God’s love and grace; the expression “crossing frontiers” (between belief and unbelief) might be rather inappropriate insofar as it contains a militant-pushing or even violent connotation.

of unity in the one Body of Christ,” though unity should not be confused with a uniformity that leveled differences (Bosch, 2011:393).

In the *Mission as Witness to People of Other Living Faiths* section, Bosch outlines a design for a theology of religions. According to Bosch, the new mission paradigm must accept the reality of the coexistence of different faiths. Citing the *Guidelines for Dialogue with People of Different Religions and Ideologies* from the WCC, Bosch emphasises that “dialogue means witnessing to our deepest convictions, whilst listening to those of our neighbors” (Bosch, 2011:409). Dialogue, however, is only possible with a belief and expectation that God has already prepared people in their respective contexts, i.e., “God has already removed the barriers” (Bosch, 2011:409). Here the interesting aspect is that God is preparing for the crossing of frontiers.

In the postmodern ecumenical paradigm, the aspect of “crossing frontiers” is explicitly mentioned in some cases. In two elements of the new mission paradigm, the aspect of (denominational or religious) border-crossing, in particular, shines through briefly, whereby this, in turn, goes hand in hand with the aspect of Christian unity and reconciliation in Christ and love, devotion, respect, and openness to those who think differently. This also expresses that God himself is actively involved in preparing for the crossing of frontiers.

4. Reflection (I): Significance of the aspect of “crossing frontiers” in Bosch’s mission-theological design

Finally, results from the preceding sections serve as a basis for capturing the significance of the aspect of “crossing frontiers” in Bosch’s mission-theological design.

Inspired by Livingston’s study of Bosch’s early works, it is to be examined to what extent the aspect of “crossing frontiers” plays a role in Bosch’s central work *Transforming Mission*.²⁹ In doing so, it is clear from the textual analysis that Bosch sees the aspect of crossing frontiers as deeply rooted in the ministry logic of Jesus and the biblical witness within the context of a New Testament model of mission. The idea of border-crossing across geographical, religious and social boundaries,

²⁹ In a broader context and diachronic perspective, there is also the overall question of the development or continuity in Bosch’s works, which, however, requires detailed argumentation and would exceed the scope of this study. Nevertheless, some passages in his works give the impression that there has been a shift in emphasis or even a rearticulation of the concept of mission from *Witness to the World* (1980) to *Transforming Mission* (1991) – namely, from a mission concept with evangelism as the core of mission to a holistic mission concept that considers all elements as equally essential. Whether this thesis holds true and to what extent a possible shift in emphasis is related to the changed and changing theological situation in the world during the decade of the 1980s, will be examined through further investigations. The focus of this work is primarily to examine the role that crossing frontiers plays in *Transforming Mission*.

often found in the Gospels and Paul’s letters, always go hand in hand with the aspect of love-giving, unity and reconciliation. On the other hand, the expression of crossing borders does not occur explicitly in the section on historical paradigms. However, Bosch shows just in it that in the course of the church’s history, in the name of the mission, not seldom a border crossing, which is coercive and violent and lacks love and respect, was practised. Furthermore, inappropriate boundary crossing can also arise when revolutionary movements such as the New Age movement lose sight of the core of the Christian message in the face of the current challenges of the new paradigm (see discussion below). Thus, a context-free use of the term “crossing frontiers” may seem inappropriate. In the presentation of the ecumenical paradigm, the aspect of crossing frontiers is taken up again in two places without giving the impression that this is emphasised as an outstanding characteristic. Here, too, this aspect is connected with the aspect of love-giving, reconciliation and unity.

To return now to the critique of Kritzinger, Yung, and Verster, who partly question Bosch’s comprehensive, multidimensional concept of mission. As Livingston suggests, can Bosch’s aspect of crossing frontiers possibly serve as a boundary criterion of mission? Actually, *two sub-questions* need to be clarified: (1) What role does the aspect of crossing frontiers play in Bosch’s concept of mission, or in other words, does Bosch consider this aspect as a decisive boundary criterion? (2) Even if the first question is answered in the negative, it is still necessary to ask: Can the aspect of transcending boundaries nevertheless *theoretically* serve as a boundary criterion? In my opinion, both partial questions must be answered in the negative.

It is true that Bosch sees the moment of crossing frontiers as an essential characteristic of the New Testament model of mission anchored in the biblical witness; however, he neither brings it strongly to the fore in his entire elaboration nor does he explicitly unfold it as an isolated decisive boundary criterion of a new understanding of mission. Moreover, Bosch’s argumentation suggests that a context-free use of the term seems inappropriate: the history of the church and mission is marked by experiences of perverted wrong frontier-crossing; frontier-crossing, in its proper, correct sense, is always supposed to be accompanied by love, respect, unity, and reconciliation. The question should always be asked to which context this expression refers. In my impression, the moment of “crossing frontiers” is to be classified as *an* element of weight in Bosch’s comprehensive explication design with numerous other statements (“mission is ...”; “mission means ...”);³⁰ insofar as it can never be considered detached from its content filling (love giving, unity and reconciliation). While – as Livingston correctly describes – in Bosch’s earlier works, it is emphasised even more strongly as a special characteristic (Bosch,

³⁰ A string of different statements about the mission can be found, for example, in Bosch (1980:17-8).

1980:17-8), Bosch intends in *Transforming Mission* to avoid, at any rate, a contextless, striking use of the expression, which conceals in itself a danger of linguistic abuse. Thus, the first question is clarified: The aspect of crossing frontiers as a building block in connection with its content filling is not unessential for Bosch's mission-theological draft; however, especially in his main work *Transforming Mission*, Bosch does not consider it as a decisive boundary criterion for the explication of his concept of mission.

But can this, nevertheless – as Livingston suggests – *theoretically be* considered a limiting criterion to invalidate the criticism of an all-inclusive mission? This question must also be answered in the negative. In his earlier works, Bosch addressed the aspect of boundary crossing in various contexts, and the enumeration of various categories (e.g., geography, religion, etc.) is by no means an exhaustive list; other specific boundaries can be added. Bosch's concept of mission is essentially dynamic-contextual: mission has to be reflected anew depending on the situation, context and epoch, with the gospel taking on a specific form accordingly – it always has to do with all kinds of frontier-crossing. From this perspective of contextual missiology, the aspect of crossing borders is so general and comprehensive that one would have to concede the accusation of an all-inclusive mission to be justified.

5. Reflection (II): Peculiarity and originality of Bosch's mission-theological design

In my further reflection, attention will be paid to one central question: If the aspect of crossing borders cannot contribute to refuting the accusation that his concept of mission lacks a boundary criterion, does this mean that the core criticism of Bosch regarding an overly comprehensive concept of mission is justified? From my point of view, the critics are only justified to a limited extent. It easily gives the impression that in view of such a concept of mission, which is open in all directions, weighty questions arise, for example, regarding its practical feasibility. The argumentation of Bosch's critics can be criticised for possibly having (partially) misunderstood the point of his statement. In my view, the *multidimensional, dynamic-contextual aspect* is itself part of the essence of his mission-theological design, although Bosch – as mentioned – is well aware of the danger it entails:

“[...] We do need a more radical and comprehensive hermeneutic of mission. In attempting to do this we may perhaps move close to viewing everything as mission, but this is a risk we will have to take [...] And yet, even the attempt to list some dimensions of mission is fraught with danger, because it again suggests that we can define what is infinite. Whoever we are, we are tempted to incarcerate the *missio Dei* in the narrow confines of our own predilections [...]” (Bosch, 2011:431-432).

Bosch generally rejects any attempt to sharply delimit mission, since this would not do justice to the *missio Dei* and would lead to one-sidedness and reductionism (Bosch, 2011:431–432). In this context, I would like to insert a short *meta-theoretical* reflection: In my opinion, there is justifiably a pluralistic spectrum of different mission-theological designs and theories,³¹ which differ, for example, in degree of abstraction, degree of contextualisation, dynamic moment, and circle of recipients to whom the theory is addressed,³² and – to take up Bosch’s use of language – are in “creative (fruitful) tension” with each other.³³ Thus Bosch’s concept, with its holistic *missio Dei* approach, is ultimately to be located at the dynamic pole of the pluriverse of mission theological designs; it not only unfolds the richness and *fundamental dynamic character of mission*, but rather also urges us to a theological humility recognising the fact that *God’s activity in concrete contexts* cannot be stereotyped. On the other hand, these valuable impulses of Bosch should certainly be complemented in fruitful, mutual enrichment by other more “static” designs,³⁴ which possibly offer more concrete orientations in practice and can be more easily communicated to congregations.

One should recognise that a *theology of mission*, as developed by Bosch in *Witness to the world* and *Transforming Mission*, presents only *one* aspect or part of a full-blown missiology. When reflecting on mission from a “praxis cycle” approach, other practical dimensions of mission, such as context analysis, spirituality, and planning/discernment for action, must be factored in to get a full picture. The fundamental dynamic character of mission due to God’s infinitely creative activities in concrete contexts call not merely for a better theology of mission, but for a broader praxis approach; the creative tension between theory and practice needs to be taken into account.

One last question has to be answered: If an attempt to squeeze God’s mission into certain “pattern-like pigeonholes” is doomed to failure, then how can Chris-

³¹ There is probably never one mission-theological design, but there are good and bad, appropriate and inappropriate designs.

³² Analogous differentiations between theories can also be found in other disciplines such as sociology and philosophy. The sociologist Robert K. Merton introduced the term “middle range theories”, which he distinguishes from main theories (total theory, universal theory) and micro theories (Merton 1995). According to him, theories can be categorised in terms of their abstractness (degree of relation to empiricism) and complexity.

³³ Bosch comments in the introduction of his main work *Transforming Mission*: “It should soon become clear that at no time in the past two millennia was there only one single “theology of mission.” This was true even for the church in its pristine state [...]. However, different theologies of mission do not necessarily exclude each other; they form a multicolored mosaic of complementary and mutually enriching as well as mutually challenging frames of reference. Instead of trying to formulate one uniform view of mission we should rather attempt to chart the contours of “a pluriverse of missiology in a universe of mission” (Bosch 2011:27–8).

³⁴ For example, John Stott’s more static concept (Stott 1976:15–34).

tian mission be distinguished from, say, the New Age movement (cf. the discussion about “inappropriate boundary crossing” in sec. 4)? Is there, after all, some kind of “immovable boundary criteria” for Bosch? The present study aims to evaluate Livingston’s thesis that “crossing frontiers” is the constant leitmotif and boundary principle that gives focus and continuity to Bosch’s theology of mission. Even if this does not prove to be true based on the examination, it is worth noting that in a final section of the book entitled *Faces of the Church-in-Mission*, Bosch names six salvation events, namely, “incarnation,” “cross,” “resurrection,” “ascension,” “Pentecost,” and “Parousia” which act as pillars to give mission a kind of core and profile (Bosch, 2011:432-436). These statements by Bosch offer a new perspective that aligns with the shift from a “bounded set” to a “centred set” approach and enables an alternative approach to understanding mission. In his book *Christianity in Culture*, Charles Kraft (1979) argues for asking not defensively about boundaries but with bold humility about the core of the Jesus movement. In the latter case, the answer can be an unequivocal yes. It is the continuation of the praxis of Jesus, i.e., extending the logic of the ministry of Jesus and the early church across history into contemporary contexts in a creatively imaginative yet responsible way (Bosch, 2011:165; Kritzing & Saayman, 2011:159ff.), that constitutes the core of Bosch’s hermeneutics. Thus, while Bosch intentionally does not provide us with *demarcation* criteria, he does offer *focal* criteria that frame the heart/centre of mission. To what extent these rather basic Christian truths are sufficient or appropriate as criteria for the mission theology and practice and to what extent this presentation can be a satisfactory answer to the criticisms leveled at Bosch after all, is a matter for future investigation.

6. Conclusion

It is clear from the analysis that Bosch, in his major work *Transforming Mission*, sees the aspect of “crossing frontiers” in the New Testament model of mission as deeply rooted in ministry logic and biblical witness. In view of the danger of misunderstanding or misuse without context, Bosch does not present this expression as a conceptually isolated characteristic, but always embeds it in concrete content fillings, such as love-giving, unity, and reconciliation.³⁵ The aspect of crossing frontiers is indeed included in the explication of his new concept of mission as *an* essential building block (which cannot be separated from other aspects); however, in *Transforming Mission*, Bosch by no means emphasises this as a decisive boundary criterion – contrary to Livingston’s implied thesis in reference to his earlier works.

³⁵ Bosch already expresses this central idea as a pointed conclusion in his previous work, *Witness to the world*, “Mission is the church crossing borders - but in the guise of a servant” (Bosch, 1980:248).

Furthermore, it could be shown *theoretically* that the boundary crossing moment does not seem suitable as a boundary criterion due to its very general character.

Even if the aspect of crossing boundaries cannot contribute to invalidating the criticisms of a too comprehensive concept of mission, the criticisms of Bosch concerning this point are, in my view, only of limited validity. Instead, it should be acknowledged that the integrative-multidimensional, dynamic-contextual nature is itself part of the essence of Bosch’s mission-theological design (Herbst, 2012:xi-xiv). It is a dynamic concept in which barren antagonisms are avoided, and different emphases, models, and dimensions are expressed holistically in creative tension and interplay. Bosch argues here that any explicative attempt to sharply delimit the concept of mission cannot do justice to the *missio Dei* and leads to one-sidedness and reductionism. According to Bosch, the six salvation events should serve as pillars in the framework of which mission must be reflected upon anew depending on the situation, context and epoch. Thus, Bosch does not give us demarcation criteria, but rather focal criteria from which mission can be continually reimagined and practised in a creative and responsible way.

Bosch’s concept of mission remains challenging in an unmistakable way: How can this dynamic concept be put into practice, especially since no concrete assistance is given for the practical realisations? Thus, the contextualisations challenge Christians in different places and times and call for personal responsibility in the form of critical reflection and committed action (profiled-engaged character of mission). Bosch’s eclectic-dynamic approach can be “only” *one* draft that provides valuable impulses for an adequate understanding of mission in an ecumenical paradigm. It is not only to be complemented by other more “static” drafts in the diversity and mutual enrichment of mission theologies, but primarily by the other dimensions of mission *praxis*.

Finally, the dynamic dialectic between “transforming mission” and “transformed mission” should continue to inspire and fascinate posterity: It is the resulting controversy-potent mission-theological *unsettling power* that manifests itself in inexhaustible hermeneutical-contextual challenges, drives us to constant theological reflection with theological humility, and overcomes existing stereotypes of mission understandings. For this reason, Bosch’s mission-theological design is well deserving of the name “milestone on the way through the 21st century.”

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