

# David Bosch (1929-1992)

## TIMOTHY YATES

David Bosch, the South African missiologist, died as a result of a car crash on April 15, 1992. His loss, at the comparatively early age of 62, is a tragic blow to the Christian world mission and to his chosen field of missiology.

David was an Afrikaner by birth. Unlike Beyers Naude and Nico Smith he had never become a member of the *Broederbond*. Like these two break-aways, however, he was unable to share the Afrikaners' mentality towards South African society and their own place in it: his stance arose directly from his Christian conviction. It seems that this stand for principle cost David the chance of the chair of mission at the University of Stellenbosch later in his life. During his own student days he participated in student organisations which opposed the current orthodoxy over *apartheid*, although he remained a member of the Dutch Reformed Church. He did post-graduate work in Europe on the teaching of Jesus on the Gentile mission under the direction of Oscar Cullmann (*Die Heidenmission in der Zukunftsschau Jesus*). His facility to read fluently in German, Dutch and English was a special asset to him when he turned to missiology as a specialist field.

David returned to South Africa in 1957 to work as a missionary in the tribal homelands of the Transkei. One contemporary British leader of a missionary society has said that he could always trust David as thinker and writer because he had been a missionary in experience and was no ivory-towered missiologist. Certainly he remained an example of someone whose theology was living, rooted in a life of Christian obedience whether as missionary or academic. He combined high standards of rigour with a mind informed by both profundity and compassion. After fourteen years in the field he was appointed professor of missiology in the University of South Africa. He has led a department which has grown and developed with the stature of its head and numbers some thirteen missiological teachers. Some of them, in company with other scholars, paid tribute to David in a mini-Festschrift, when an issue of the journal *Missionalia* was devoted to him on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday and many of his characteristic emphases explored (vol.18, no.1, April 1990). In his years as professor (1972-92) David acted as dean of the faculty of arts for two separate periods and was general secretary of the South African Missiological Society. He received invitations to serve elsewhere in the world as a professor of mission, at least one coming from an 'Ivy League' university in the USA; but he believed that he was called to remain in South Africa, as she struggled with her future. He was chairman of the South African Christian Leadership Assembly (SACLA) from 1979 and of the South African National Initiative for Reconciliation from 1989.

In the English speaking world, David's two best known works are *Witness to the World* (1980), an excellent missiological text-book and introduction; and his final *magnum opus*, *Transforming Mission* (1990). The latter is a magisterial book, into which he distilled thirty years of thinking and writing about mission. In it he ranged widely over the history of Christian mission, the philosophical roots of post-Enlightenment developments as they bear on both the modern missionary movement (seen in part as a direct product of the Enlightenment) and on the contemporary predicament of the modern Church in mission. Like others, he has characterised our own as a post-modern age, which faces a paradigm shift from Enlightenment assumptions, if the gospel is to engage successfully with the world of the twenty-first century. It is a book for all who are seriously committed to the Church's mission and not only for professional missiologists and their students; and it draws equally on Roman Catholic, Orthodox, ecumenical and evangelical writings and statements, as much at home with the documents of Vatican II as those of the Lausanne Conference of 1974. Readers of *Anvil* will find it perceptively reviewed in an earlier issue (vol. 9, no. 2, pp 185-7). The present writer shares our reviewer's sense of 'exhilaration' at the handling of modern issues like contextualisation in the final sections of this magnificent book.

As a man of stature with an international vision, David set himself to be a reconciling figure, not only in the racial tensions and conflicts of South Africa, but also in the theological debates of the Church universal. Whether in the conferences of the International Association for Mission Studies or in the forum of the WCC's Commission on World Mission and Evangelism (CWME) he gave evidence of a mind which was open both towards the ecumenical and the evangelical agenda for debate and one which had the theological resources to interpret one to the other constructively. One recent example of this facility to give theological leadership was his chairmanship of the section 'Turning to the Living God' at the San Antonio meeting of CWME in 1989. In this respect, over and above his general contribution, his loss is grievous: but both his life and his writings will remain an inspiration to many. In the disputatious world of theological and ecumenical debate, David stood for largeness of mind, a strong yet gentle and courteous spirit which extended respect to those with whom he may have disagreed most fundamentally; and a depth of commitment to Christ, the mission of his Church and its deeper understanding which provided a fine model. We thank God for him.

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