Mission in a Globalised World: A New Vision of Christian Discipleship

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Abstract

This contribution unpacks the underlying tensions between the core concepts within this conference theme. If the globalised world remains God’s world, what role do Christians have in God’s mission? I will suggest that, given the overwhelming threats, a liturgical vision, seeing the world through God’s eyes, may challenge activist discourse on discipleship, as if we need to and can do all of God’s work. This allows for a humbler role for Christians in understanding their place in the household of God.

Key words: discipleship, globalisation, mission, vision

Introduction

The theme of the conference is an intriguing one: “Mission in a globalised world: A new vision of Christian discipleship”. Since the theme is one that was given to me by the conference organisers, I understand my task as one of helping to reflect on the significance of the concepts embedded in this theme for Christian mission. I will therefore seek to unpack the underlying tensions between the core concepts in this theme. I will do that in the form of addressing the following five questions that may be identified on the basis of this theme:

1) What has changed with the advent of globalisation?
2) What difference does that make to Christian mission?
3) Why may discipleship be regarded as an appropriate response to that?
4) Why may a vision be required for such discipleship?
5) In what sense may such a vision be regarded as new?

In addressing these questions a constructive response to the theme will gradually emerge. In short, I will suggest that the vision that is required amidst overwhelming threats is a liturgical vision through which Christians may learn to look at God’s world through God’s eyes. This vision prompts a recognition of God’s mission that decentralises activist notions of Christian mission to save a planet in distress. This may allow Christians to see their distinct place and role in the whole household of God.

1) What has changed with the advent of globalisation?

It would be well-nigh impossible to offer a short overview of current discourse on the theme of globalisation. One would need to take into account a vast sociological and economic literature on globalisation and understand the historical changes over the past few decades since the word globalisation was first used. It would also be theologically suspect as one’s social analysis may then easily determine one’s theological response. Yet, the task of
discerning the signs of the time\(^1\) is also one that cannot be avoided as theological reflection is necessarily contextual. In order not to shy away from this task and to make it feasible I will therefore focus on Christian discourse on globalisation – which is equally wide-ranging.\(^2\) Moreover, I will focus on what is for me local discourse on globalisation, namely with reference to a project on globalisation initiated by the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology in which a number of colleagues based in the Western Cape region participated.

This project was prompted by the Accra Declaration entitled “Covenanting for justice in the Economy and the Earth” (2004) of the former World Alliance of Reformed Churches. It was structured in the form of cooperation between the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology and the German Evangelischer Entwicklungsdiensit and between two churches, namely the Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche in Germany and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. This project, in which voices from the North (Germany) were brought in dialogue with voices from the South (South Africa), led to two major publications entitled Globalisation: The politics of empire, justice and the life of faith (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2009) and Globalisation II: Global crisis, global challenge, global faith – an ongoing response to the Accra Confession (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2010), both edited by Allan Boesak and Len Hansen.\(^3\)

I will offer only three observations on this project that are relevant to the theme of this conference:

Firstly, the focus of this project is not on sociological changes that may be described under the rubric of “globalisation”. There can be little doubt that something has changed due to the advent of faster modes of transport, the connection between markets that allowed the global spread of local cultural and religious products, the impact of local images broadcasted by television enabling people to see from afar (tele-vision) and especially the impact of information technology with respect to cultural changes due to the role of the internet. Christian critiques of economic globalisation need not deny the immense advantages brought about by such social changes. We find emails convenient, eat pizzas, wear American blue jeans, drink good wine from Australia and may even be tempted to use McDonalds to gain free internet access. Admittedly, there may be many side-effects. The availability of religious products on an open market may for example have a profound impact since exchange requires an interchangeability, a rough equivalence where products may be compared with one another.\(^4\)

Secondly, the challenges posed by economic globalisation are by now clearly articulated. This

\(^1\) Jürgen Moltmann recently observed that the historical interpretation of the signs of the time has taken over the former function of a natural theology. Whereas earlier grace presupposed nature, now it has to presuppose history. See Sun of righteousness, Arise: God’s future for humanity and the Earth (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 201.

\(^2\) This may be illustrated by a comparison between the four volumes on God and globalization edited by Max Stackhouse (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2007) and the contributions by Cynthia Moe Lobeda entitled Healing a broken world: Globalization and God (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002) and by Rebecca Todd Peters, In search of the good life: The ethics of globalization (New York: Continuum, 2004), also published in the North American context.

\(^3\) See also the summary of the project entitled Dreaming a different world: Globalisation and Justice for Humanity and the Earth – The Challenge of the Accra Confession for the churches, edited by Allan Boesak, Johann Weusmann & Chalres Amjad-Ali (Evangelisch-reformierte Kirche in Germany and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa, 2010). This builds on the publication by the Justice, Peace and Creation team of the World Council of Churches entitled Alternative Globalization Addressing Peoples and Earth (Geneva: WCC, 2006).

\(^4\) For an extensive discussion of the implications of this insight, see Vincent Miller’s Consuming religion: Christian faith and practice in a consumer culture (New York: Continuum, 2003), 77.
was already done by the Nairobi assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1975 which captured the social agenda of the church under the rubric of “Towards a Just, Participatory and Sustainable Society”. It thus identified economic inequalities and injustices, the many faces of violence and ecological destruction as lying at the core of the challenges presented by a globalised world. These issues are not only interconnected; they are seen to be in tension with each other as global negotiations on climate change clearly indicate. The same issues were addressed in the Accra Declaration. At the heart of its critique of globalisation is a recognition of the impact that the removal of market regulations since 1980 have had since it allowed forms of domination by political and economic powers in the name of a free market. Ironically (due to the structural impact of sin Christians would add), the free market has to be regulated in order to remain free. Discerning the implications of that with reference to the emergence of political empires (including the USA, “fortress Europe”, China and, within the African context, also South Africa), military control, economic inequalities, a cultural hegemony and ecological destruction constitutes the core of the above mentioned globalisation project. Here a distinction between the historical process of globalisation and the ideology of “globalism” is required. These challenges are completely overwhelming – so that rich and poor alike feel themselves subjected to forces far beyond their control.

Thirdly, any theological discourse on the triune God and globalisation cannot talk about the world in purely secular terms. The globalised world always already remains God’s world, if you like God’s child, God’s work of art. It is created by God, loved by God, forgiven by God, regarded as something so significant that it is worth dying for (John 3:16). Moreover, as trinitarian theology would insist, the world is God’s own home, dwelling place, resting place – as indicated by the incarnation in Jesus Christ, the Shekinah of God’s Spirit and the eschatological vision of Revelation 21. This vision is especially expressed in the ecumenical root metaphor of the whole household of God which also links ecumenical fellowship with the concerns of the global economy and ecological sustainability since all three terms are derived from the Greek term oikos (household). Humans need to find their specific ecological niche within this household while the church of Jesus Christ has to identify its place and vocation within it. The *theological* question is therefore this: what has changed in God’s household over the last three decades and how is God moved by that?

**2) What difference does a globalised world make to Christian mission?**

An answer to this question would require something like a SWOT analysis in order to identify the strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats to Christian mission. This would best not be done by an individual but within a workshop by a number of perceptive practitioners. Allow me nevertheless to offer a few observations in this regard.

Firstly, the choice of the term “discipleship” in the conference theme suggests, if I am not mistaken, that the challenges (or threats) posed by globalisation are highlighted. These challenges seem well-nigh insurmountable. On the one hand there are the social challenges

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5 See, for example Charles Amjad-Ali’s essay entitled “Christian ethics and witness in the context of globalism, the clash of civilisations and the American Empire” in Alan A. Boesak & Len Hansen (eds): *Globalisation: The politics of empire, justice and the life of faith* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2009), 83-113. He links missiology explicitly to globalism on the basis of the notion of “listening to the marginalised other”.

6 “Globalism” may be defined as “the uncritical and deliberate acceptance of the neo-liberal ideology of profit at all costs, limitless growth and development, and powerful manipulation of finance and trade within a so-called ‘free market’ – without any regard to the consequences to people and to the earth.” See Dreaming a different world, 7.

7 For a discussion of this root metaphor of the whole household of God, see my *Christianity and Earthkeeping: In search of an inspiring vision* (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2011), 115-122.
described above in terms of economic injustices, violence and ecological destruction. What on earth can Christian mission do to address such immense challenges? If the threats are that stark, one may well be called to do what one can do, to accept the humbler task of discipleship. On the other hand, the globalised world also led to a decentralised position of Christianity – as only one religious product available on the market and in principle comparable with any other product.

In response, Christian missionaries may secondly wish to market their particular brand of Christianity. They would sense the opportunities offered by globalisation in terms of communication, audio-visual aids and so forth. They would thus become something like sales agents on behalf of Jesus & company. If so, they would need to recognise that there is indeed a huge market for cheap religious products (a warm spirituality would sell very well indeed, much better than calls for discipleship, or a bloody cross), but only a small niche market for products where the cost of discipleship is high. On the African continent, this alignment between Christianity and globalisation has become extremely popular. Preaching the gospel of prosperity seems to be highly attractive and offers a tangible realised eschatology: If you give your best to the Lord, the Lord will richly bless you! The lifestyle of the pastor should demonstrate the validity of the claim that going to church is good for business, which may well be true as you will meet other aspiring business leaders there on neutral grounds. In this way religion legitimises the upward social mobility of the lower middle class and the consumerist desires of everyone.

In response to such a scenario, some ecumenical activists may want to globalise their alternative product and invite everyone else to join their crusade against the commodification of religion. However, any critique against the system is easily co-opted as yet another product available. The advertisement reads: “Don’t you want to buy this interesting critique of globalisation? You can get it in a cheap paperback, a Kindle version or a leather-bound edition with beautiful graphics for your coffee table.”

Thirdly and fourthly, such comments vividly illustrate both the strengths and the weaknesses of Christian mission. However, what is a strength for some (the numerical popularity of Christianity) is a weakness for others (its alignment with corporate power). What is a weakness for some (the inability of the word of the gospel to compete with the advertising industry’s images) may be a strength for others (God’s Word is living and dynamic, sharper than a two-edged sword).

There is another strength (if you would wish to call it that) of Christian mission that should not be underestimated. Christianity may well be called the most globalised religion. It is a remarkable fact of the history of Christianity that from its roots precisely in between three continents it has spread East and West, North and South. The seed of the gospel has taken root in different continents, different locations, different cultures, different languages, and different ethnic groups, even in the Australian outback. It can become deeply rooted in different soils, becoming truly indigenous with a sense of local identity and the vulnerability that implies, but cannot be restricted to or be claimed for any one context. From the perspective of Christian faith this should not come as a surprise. After all, the confession of the catholicity of the Christianity would allow room for the spread of the gospel, even where

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8 See my survey Christianity and a critique of consumerism: A survey of six points of entry (Wellington: Bible Media, 2009), especially chapter 6.
9 See Miller, Consuming religion, 18.
10 I am drawing here on a notion of catholicity as articulated by Herman Bavinck who stressed not only the catholicity of the church but also of Christianity on the basis that the world remains God’s world. See Bavinck, “The catholicity of Christianity and the church” (translated by John Bolt), Calvin Theological
that coincides with the spread of idolatry and heresy. Such an appreciation for the catholicity of the church is perhaps better understood in the context of missiological discourse than anywhere else. This was famously expressed in the motto of “Mission in six continents” at the conference of CWME held in Mexico City in 1963. While that motto expressed a sense of “bold humility” for missions previously dominated by Western agencies, in the context of globalisation with an underlying emphasis on religious tolerance and religious pluralism (hiding the hegemony of consumerism as a form of “religion”) a sense of humility is required for the very notion of mission. Does the term discipleship suggest an appropriate path forward in this regard?

3) May discipleship be regarded as an appropriate response for Christian mission in a globalised world?

The polemical thrust of an emphasis on missio Dei was to decentralise the church as the subject of mission. Mission is not the work of churches or mission agencies and much less the work of development agencies or colonial front organisations. Mission is the work of the triune God. The church is an instrument in God’s mission. The Dutch theology of the apostolate radicalised this insight to speak of the church of the Mission instead of the mission(s) of the Church. JC Hoekendijk even spoke of the church as a sociological impossibility since any attempt to institutionalise that Mission is to stall its movement. The theological pendulum has swung back, though, so that a new appreciation for the church as a sacrament of God’s presence in the world emerged. On this basis many now speak of missional churches and missional theology.

While the original polemical thrust of the notion of mission Dei is retained in such a missional theology there emerged a tendency to regard God’s mission as almost coinciding with the mission of the church once it is accepted that the church is the primary agent of God’s mission in the world. As a result missio Dei has become in some circles merely a decorative re-description of the mission of the church or a theological relic in secular notions of mission as “holistic development”. In response, it is in my opinion necessary to stress the asymmetry between God’s mission and our mission. God’s mission includes the work of creation, providence and eschatological consummation – which we can only receive in gratitude and not as “created co-creators”. Our task is not to save the world either. That is accomplished in the work of Christ – extra nos. However, we are included in the work of the Holy Spirit as instruments of the appropriation of such salvation.

The implication is that activist attempts to “save the planet” by mustering all our masculine power may well be misplaced. This may be hard to swallow for Anglo-Saxon males (like me),

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11 For an in-depth discussion of the “creative tension” between the church and the reign of God, see the subsection in David Bosch’s Transforming mission: Paradigm shifts in Theology of Mission (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 381-389. Bosch is clearly critical of Hoekendijk’s apparent secularism, yet notes “He chastised the church, but for its own sake. He could say, for instance that ‘the church is (nothing more, but also nothing less) a means in God’s hands to establish shalom in the world’” (p. 386). For Bosch the church is a sign, a sacrament of the coming reign of God.

12 This is the conclusion of my recent article entitled “Creation at the heart of mission?”, Missionalia 38:3, 380-396.

but it is much better understood in indigenous forms of spirituality. This was vividly illustrated to me by Bishop Mark McDonald from the Anglican Church of Canada based in Alaska at the Edinburgh mission conference in 2010. After a long discussion of contemporary global challenges he commented to one breakaway group: You sound as if it is in your power to change things around. Instead, he suggested that indigenous forms of spirituality require an ability to recognise the limitations of one’s power. He likened it to the ability to change the direction of the wind (pneuma) by one’s own breath (pneuma). Instead, it is important to discern the direction and the strength of the wind so as to set one’s sails to the wind in order to get home safely.

This does of course entail an exercise of power and of harnessing wind power. Pneumatically, it becomes an evocative image of discerning where the Wind is blowing, discerning the signs of the time and then judging what an appropriate step would be. Christologically, it may be understood as following someone else’s path rather than finding one’s own. This requires something like a “spirituality of the road” (David Bosch) and may certainly include notions of Christian discipleship, spiritual disciplines and also academic disciplines in the form of sitting at the feet of learned rabbi’s. In more abstract terms such discipleship may be captured in the slogan “act locally” – once one has reflected “globally”. This certainly includes the prophetic, priestly and royal duties that followers of Christ would recognise.

I need to add that discipleship is only one of several appropriate metaphors to guide Christian discernment of our place and role in the whole household of God. Its strength is associated with the connotations of dedication, loyalty, “bold humility”, discipline, obedience, counting the costs of such discipleship, but also the availability of sustenance for the road despite overwhelming odds. There are other similar “ships” available on this ocean – such as “partnership”, “companionship”, “stewardship” and even accepting “ownership”. Each of these is contested, but they could balance one another in order to guide against excesses.

4) Why would a vision be required for such discipleship?

The category of “moral vision” should be understood as complementing classic ethical categories such as commands, codes and goals, the modernist categories of values and obligations and the more recent retrieval of the significance of virtues. In their work entitled Bible & Ethics in the Christian Life (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1989) Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen describe the significance of the emergence of a moral vision as perhaps primary to any of the other categories. Such a vision certainly requires seeing but also seeing deeper, gaining insight through social analysis. It also requires foresight. One needs to see but not with one’s eyes only. In language reminiscent of Patristic Christianity and African spirituality alike: one has to see the visible and the invisible.

In the South African context the significance of such a moral vision is widely recognised. One may argue that the struggle against apartheid focused on two contrasting visions for society, namely the notion of a constellation of ethnically divided independent states and the still elusive vision of a non-racist, non-sexist democracy in a unitary state. Many freedom fighters were willing to die for this latter vision.

In international discourse on climate change this need for a vision is also recognised. One


15 A discussion of the category of moral vision constitutes a significant part of an introductory module on ethical theory offered at the University of the Western Cape. See Ernst M. Conradie et al, Morality as a Way of Life: A first introduction to ethical theory, (Stellenbosch: SUN Press, 2006).
may observe that the primary reason for the current deadlock in negotiations is not due to a lack of information, or technology or even of finance. We already know that we have to do something, what we have to do and even how to do it and what it would cost. The underlying problem is one of political will, moral courage and moral imagination. It remains difficult to dream how a different world may be possible. What could be more attractive than the lure of consumerist bliss? Since we fail to see that, we lack the moral energy to change the world.

In the context of Christian theology this emphasis on a moral vision would of course be welcomed. The imperative of Christian discipleship is based on the indicative of the message of salvation in Christ and the hope for the transformation of the world through the Spirit. At the heart of the Christian vision lies a vision of God, of the One who is, has been and will be. I would suggest that this implies the need for a liturgical vision. The heart of the liturgical vision is Christian worship. Here the body of Christ rediscovers something of the identity and character of the triune God. This cannot but lead to praise and worship. Through the liturgy Christians also learn to see the world through God’s eyes, namely with compassion and mercy, as something so valuable that it is worth dying for.

In the liturgy there is an important dialectic at work between the world and God and between church and society. Worshippers carry with them into the liturgy all their experiences from the past week, all the sorrows and joys, all the burdens of life, their needs, interests and desires, their moods, habits, customs and cultures. They also bring with them their own notions of what makes the world go round, their worldviews, together with their notions and images of God, their natural theologies. We can only talk about God on the basis of our experiences of the world. All talk about what is above comes from below. We inevitably construct God in our own image; we therefore bring all our idolatries with us into the liturgy.

When we then enter the liturgy, we are confronted with and ritually reminded of God’s identity and character. This takes place through worship but also through preaching and teaching and the celebration of the sacraments. We are confronted with the accumulated wisdom of the biblical texts and the slow process in the biblical narratives of gradually coming to an understanding of who God is. Put differently, the liturgy is the place where we learn anew to recognise God, to challenge our images of God in the light of what is recognised to be God’s revelation. When we then think back, we realise that this understanding of God’s identity and character can only come from God’s Spirit – who is not reluctant to get her hands dirty. Through word and sacrament we become grateful recipients of God’s grace.

In focusing on God alone through Christian worship we cannot leave the world completely behind because we carry the world with us in our hearts and minds. However, we also learn to look at the world in the light of the Light of the world. We recognise that the soil on which we are standing is holy ground. When we depart from the liturgy with God’s blessing we therefore look at the world through new eyes, having been trained to see it through God’s

16 For an extended discussion of this insight, see my The church and climate change (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008). See also the introduction by Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grimm to Dieter T Hessel & Rosemary Radford Ruether (eds): Christianity and ecology: Seeking the well-being of earth and humans (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). They say: “It is becoming increasingly evident that abundant scientific knowledge of the crisis is available and numerous political and economic statements have been formulated. Yet we seem to lack the political, economic, and scientific leadership to make necessary changes. Moreover, what is still lacking is the religious commitment, moral imagination, and ethical engagement to transform the environmental crisis from an issue on paper to one of effective policy, from rhetoric in print to realism in action” (p. xix).

17 This is the gist of a document published by the South African Council of Churches, entitled Climate change – a challenge to the churches in South Africa (2009).

18 See Van Ruler, Calvinist Trinitarianism, 86.
eyes, again with compassion and mercy, as something so valuable that it is worth dying for (John 3:16). We return to the world and our daily lives seeing the world as God’s world. We insist that “The Earth is the Lord’s and everything within it (Psalm 24:1).

To claim that this world as we know it is God’s own creation is a counter-intuitive claim. How could that be, one needs to ask, given the many miseries of life? If this world is God’s, God must either be mean, capricious or impotent. To make the claim is therefore to have to tell the whole story of God’s work, the story of creation, human sin, providence, salvation and the expected consummation of all things. This implies that we have to situate the whole Earth within God’s economy (in the sense of the economic trinity), God’s work in God’s household. To tell the story, or better, to re-enact this story with our lives is the “liturgy of life”. Or perhaps singing the story would be more appropriate – in the sense of an opera performance, understood as opera trinitatis – God’s mission in us and through us. To be sent into the world with God’s blessing therefore implies a sense of vocation, responsibility, discipleship, stewardship, mission, development, social transformation. Without an energising vision any call for discipleship will run dry and become authoritarian. It will entail discipline but only the imposed discipline of the disciplinarians.

5) In what sense may such a vision be regarded as new?

Such a liturgical vision is of course in one sense nothing new. An emphasis on discipleship tends to suggest faithfulness to received wisdom rather than innovation. In the same way one may argue that globalisation is nothing new. Christianity emerged in the context of the oppressive pax Romana but nevertheless made expedient use of its road network to spread the gospel across the empire. The peace could only be maintained on the basis of political, economic and cultural oppression (despite some concessions) but could not last as a result of unsustainable practices in the breadbasket of the empire. Indeed, all civilizations start with the feeling of the first tree and collapse with the felling of the last tree.

Nevertheless, the challenges posed by current globalisation are of a different scale. It is not merely the empire, Western civilisation or the standard of living of the consumer class that are at stake. Climate change possibly poses a threat to the survival of the human species as such and perhaps even of life on earth.

In such a context a new vision of Christian discipleship is indeed urgent. It can only be sustained by God’s grace once the asymmetry between our mission and God’s mission is recognised. Only then would we realise that we cannot fabricate the wind, that we only need to learn to set our sails to the wind. We can do that if we can see and read the signs of the time, if we can see the invisible, not with our eyes only. This vision can be sustained, Christian disciples would confess, because there is no scarcity to God’s grace. It is renewable resource and can be renewed. Indeed, it is every morning new. It is noteworthy that this is recognised in the Book of Lamentations (3:22-23):

> The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end,

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19 See my inaugural lecture on this theme, entitled “The earth in God’s economy: Reflections on the narrative of God’s work”, *Scriptura* 97, 13-36.


they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.

Renewal, regeneration, restoration, reformation, resurrection, recapitulation, in short, re-
creation is the work of God’s energising Ruah. The term “re-creation” in my opinion forms
the key to the intriguing problem of doing justice to both God’s work of creation and of
salvation. This is also the kind of theology required to revitalise Christian mission in God’s
globalised household.  

I may conclude by noting that most of my current work in systematic theology entails an
attempt to trace the legacy of the term “re-creation” in the reformed tradition of Swiss, Dutch
and German origin and the disastrous reception of this tradition in the South African context.
That is a long story that need not be told here.

\[\text{\footnotesize 22 In missiological discourse this direction is best associated with JH Bavinck who introduced the notion of “possessio” to explain the relationship between the gospel and indigenous culture. It is also associated with the Dutch theology of the apostolate and the contributions of Hendrik Kraemer, Arnold van Ruler and JC Hoekendijk.}\]