Prophetic Dialogue: 
Reflections on Christian Mission Today

Bevans Stephen


This short and deceptively simple book follows on from where Bevans and Schroeder left off in the final chapter of their major work *Constants in Context*. They are responding to the question: How can a prophetic articulation of one’s beliefs and a prophetic stance against injustice also involve sincere dialogue? Or, to put it in another way: How to interact respectfully and effectively with members of other cultures and traditions around the globe and remain prophetic? I find the book stimulating and at times provocative. One can sense their enthusiasm for mission.

The first chapter draws on Scripture, theology and history. We hear that God might best be described as a verb – as an embrace, a movement, and a dance. The church is the community that consciously participates in that Godly movement. Then follow chapters focusing on dialogue and prophecy, and another bringing the two together in the context of mission. The fifth chapter reflects on the six elements of mission from the last chapter of their *Constants in Context*. The remaining essays look at prophetic dialogue through images of: entering into someone else’s garden, "letting go" and "speaking out", and table fellowship. The penultimate chapter takes the reader on a "short" history of two thousand years of the global mission that I found fascinating, and it left me feeling almost breathless. The final chapter provides a summary of the teaching of the Catholic Church on mission in the last half century – from the official Roman viewpoint. That final chapter is interesting, yet I wonder if it really fits at the end of a book that in other ways takes a global perspective.

Dialogue is presented, not so much as a specific practice, but as a basic attitude or spirituality. It requires sensitivity to the social, cultural, religious and political aspects of a situation, because God is about relationship and communion. Mission cannot be about imposition or conquest because it is about the love of God for all peoples and all of creation. However, mission simply as dialogue is not enough. It requires a prophetic dimension, which could involve boldness in proclamation, or actions that are confrontational and countercultural. The two together, dialogue and prophecy provide spirituality for mission.

Many of the chapters were written specifically for the book and are published for the first time. Some were written initially for other projects, so there is some repetition, but mostly points that are worth repeating. The book is written primarily from a Catholic perspective, which limits the viewpoint but does provide a focus.
Overall I am left with the feeling that there is more to say. Bevans and Schroeder call prophetic dialogue a "synthetic theological and missiological concept" (p.3). Is it a creative tension or a synthesis? After reading the book I am still not sure, but I am all the more intrigued, and convinced that it is project worthy of on-going consideration.

Reviewer: Philip Gibbs is a Divine Word Missionary priest, from New Zealand. He is serving in Papua New Guinea as research advisor for Caritas Australia, and as Secretary for the Commission for Social Concerns for the Catholic Bishops' Conference of PNG/SI. Philip has a doctorate in Theology from the Gregorian University, Rome.

Email: gibbs199@gmail.com