

BOOK REVIEW

Spijker, J. van 't. 2021. *To Participate: Looking for an ecclesial structure to be a witnessing church today*

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Missionary fruitfulness in the form of new ecclesial communities in a Western context is liable to generate uncomfortable scenarios for traditional church denominations. After all, new missionary communities do not always take existing ecclesial cultures into account and often deviate from well-trodden paths. Not surprisingly, God's mission often puts pressure on ecclesial cultures. In this light, the pursuit of fruitful cross-fertilization between traditional denominations and new missionary communities is of utmost importance.

Ecclesial Discomfort

It is this very tension that led Van 't Spijker to conduct his study of a small Reformed denomination in the Netherlands: the *Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* (CGKN). This denomination is characterized by Van 't Spijker as having a pietistic slant, thereby placing an important emphasis on the believer's personal relationship with God. At the turn of this century, a joyful development occurred within the CGKN with missionary communities of new believers emerging in major cities. Initially these developments were greeted with joy, but as the years passed, discomfort increased. This discomfort was already painfully visible in the naming: the new congregations were called "missionary congregations", thereby implying that the traditional congregations were not characterized by the same adjective. But it went beyond the naming, which in itself could be dismissed as a being a matter of mere semantics. The practices within these communities deviated from what was standard in the culture of the CGKN, straining the relationship between the new ecclesial communities and the denomination. At one point, the synod of the CGKN even proposed that the new communities form a separate denomination. It did not come to that, but the

mere suggestion indicates that missionary fruit was seen as a possible danger to the own ecclesial culture. So, which would take precedence: the missionary calling or church culture?

Missiological Conferences and Missiologists

In his research, Van 't Spijker is looking for a fruitful interaction between traditional denominations and new ecclesial communities. How can existing denominations learn from missionary fruitfulness? To do so, he first turns to the missionary discussion of the last century. An overview of ecumenical conferences shows that the church is called to participate in the mission of God, not as an activity alongside its "ordinary" life, but as an expression of its very nature. The church should not be primarily focused on its own growth, but on its service to the kingdom of God.

Next, to look for starting points for the *missio Dei* within Reformed ecclesiology, Van 't Spijker puts his ear to the ground of some Reformed missiologists who have been decisive for the situation in the Netherlands. He discusses successively J. H. Bavink, Kraemer, Verkuyl and Newbiggin. Remarkably, the name of Hoekendijk, who after all had an enormous influence in the Netherlands, is missing here. This is unfortunate, because a balanced treatment of Hoekendijk's radical critique of ecclesiocentrism could have helped to bring Reformed vulnerabilities into focus.

Practical Theological Research

With both overviews in mind, Van 't Spijker focuses on the CGKN. Using the Theological Action Research method, he listens to the normative, formal and espoused voices within this denomination. The conclusions that Van 't Spijker then draws on this basis are perhaps not as surprising as they are painful. The pietistic slant of the CGKN results in a vision of salvation "in mainly individual, spiritual (non-physical), post-mortem categories: It is about justification of sin and entering into eternal glory with God. Related to this, the physical and communal aspects of salvation that are taking shape in today's world are only secondary"¹ (190). Within the CGKN, therefore, there has always remained a certain reluctance toward the concept of *Missio Dei*, prompted by the fear that in this way the gospel threatened to become very horizontal. After all, the gospel is about the justification of sinners and not about the betterment of the world. Van 't Spijker therefore argues that within the CGKN there

1 Van 't Spijker realizes that a pietistic slant need not necessarily result in an inward focus – examples from the past show that pietistic communities can be very much committed to work in the world – but he sees the main problem of the CGKN's pietism lying in a lack of theology of God's kingdom.

has hardly been an eye for God's action in the totality of reality. In such a setting, mission risks narrowing into a form of proselytism.

Conclusions

Van 't Spijker draws to a close with a chapter in which he gives impulses for a church structure that does justice to the concept of *missio Dei*. As far as he is concerned, this begins with the fact that the whole of church life must be rethought from the *missio Dei*. This means, for example, that the church order must be re-examined to see if all canon law arrangements are serving the growth of God's kingdom in this world. It also means that the CGKN must take a critical look at the agenda of church meetings: Are the things the CGKN puts on the agenda actually on God's agenda? In addition, the CGKN must rethink how ecclesial ministry is designed. In the current situation, ecclesial ministries are particularly internally focused, but an open eye to God's kingdom means that a shift is to occur here as well.

Assessment

Van 't Spijker's research is a welcome addition to the missionary discourse in the Netherlands and Western Europe. Based on practical theological research, he convincingly shows how an existing denomination is primarily focused on its own ecclesial culture and therefore has insufficient regard for the work of the Spirit outside the walls of its own church. It is to be feared that the CGKN are not an exception in Western Europe in this regard. Van 't Spijker's study is therefore useful for existing churches that want to live up to their missionary nature while facing a highly secularized culture.

Van 't Spijker takes a comprehensive approach in which he provides an overview of discussions and states of affairs with a birds-eye view. Instead of zooming in on one aspect of ecclesiology or a particular church practice, Van 't Spijker observes – from a distance, as it were – an entire denomination. This helps to get the big picture in view without getting bogged down in details. But there is also a downside: the consequence of a birds-eye view is that the vulnerabilities and possible solutions are only drawn sketchily. The final chapter of the study remains therefore slightly unsatisfying: the general areas of concern are localized and loosely characterized, without serious in-depth reflection. Positively stated: Van 't Spijker's research calls for a follow-up in which the sketchy drawings are further developed.

About the Author

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