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ARTICLE

On the Gifting God: A Eucharistic Intervention in Missional Theology

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Abstract

This article aims to offer an intervention in missional theology by considering how God is not only the one who sends us into the world, but also the one who welcomes us home at the Lord's Table, from where mission unfolds. It begins by turning to Athol Fugard's important 1969 play *Boesman and Lena*, which – amid the harrowing experience of exiled people on the move – includes a eucharistic scene in which the characters find solace in the sharing of dry bread and bitter tea. From here, the theme of alienation and not-at-homeness, not only evident in the play but pervasive across the world today, is examined in light of Augustine's insights into the human condition and the church's calling as a company of pilgrims and strangers. This leads to a consideration of missional theology and certain misunderstandings it can foster, which risk contributing to exhaustion and burnout. As a response, and returning to the motifs in *Boesman and Lena*, the article reflects on Gospel narratives and the witness of the early Church, showing how the God who sends is also the God who gifts, feeds, and shelters – meeting weary travellers on the road and equipping them for mission. To conclude, reference is made to how these insights have informed recent initiatives in ministerial formation among theological students in the Dutch Reformed Church.

Keywords: Missional theology, Eucharist, Athol Fugard, South Africa, Dutch Reformed Church

Boesman and Lena

Last year (2025) saw the passing of one of South Africa's most eminent writers and playwrights, Athol Fugard. Often hailed as the most-performed English-language playwright in the world after Shakespeare (see Manim 2019), Fugard had a long and deeply significant career that was marked by socially and politically engaged plays that continually challenged the status quo, while offering glimpses of a different future.

In this article – which will ultimately, within a larger conversation on hospitality, centre on the notion of the gifting God[1] – I will begin by revisiting one of Athol Fugard's most prominent plays from the years he lived and worked in what was then called Port Elizabeth, South Africa, during the 1960s. During this time, Fugard collaborated closely with fellow playwrights and actors such as John Kani and Winston Ntshona, who together organized themselves under the name of the *Serpent Players* (so called because they workshopped, rehearsed, and performed their plays in an old, abandoned reptile park just outside the city). The play I turn to is *Boesman and Lena*, a work conceptualized and first staged in 1969.

Performed, like much of Fugard's other work, on a bare stage with minimal props and theatrical trappings, the play presents the audience – and the reader of the play's script – with a couple, Boesman and Lena, from the so-called Coloured community, who are drifting across the Swartkops mudflats outside the city, with only a few torn possessions. Boesman and Lena, we come to learn, have been evicted, or rather forcibly removed, from their previous home and are now searching for a new place to stay. We thus find them on the road, in limbo.

Amidst this harrowing and deeply vulnerable situation – one that speaks of, and protests against, the inhumanity of the apartheid regime – another character appears: an old, nameless Xhosa man who also, like Boesman and Lena, seems to be aimlessly drifting around the mudflats. Despite Boesman's resistance, Lena calls him over to sit by the fire they have made, and in what follows, we are presented with the tense and fragile interactions between these three roving strangers.

The play – structured, like Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, in two mirroring acts – is ultimately marked by a sense of hopelessness. It speaks of entrapment within a brutal, unjust system, of lives suspended in suffering. And, as with *Waiting for Godot*, it ends without a clear resolution. Yet, this is not to say that the audience is not presented with brief moments of consolation, hope, and even beauty that unfold on stage. Amidst the desolation, there are at least two clear moments in which the characters – especially Lena and their guest – experience a momentary transfiguration of their current reality. In these instances, one could argue, a sort of homecoming[2] takes place that nourishes them both in the present and for the future. The first of these moments occurs when Lena begins to rhythmically clap, sing, and dance by the fire. The second – significant for what follows – comes toward the very end of Act 1, when Lena and their Xhosa guest share, as two wandering strangers, a mug of bitter tea made on the fire and pieces of dry bread that have lain on the stage untouched until now. While sharing the tea and bread, Lena says: 'As long as it doesn't rain, it won't be so bad. The blanket will help. Nights are long, but they don't last forever. This wind will also get tired … Look at this mug … an old mug, hey. Bitter tea, a piece of bread … There, don't waste time. It's still warm [they drink and eat]' (Fugard 1999: 224–5).

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[1] For this notion on the gifting God, I am indebted to Robert Vosloo and an early, unpublished response he offered in 2013 to the Dutch Reformed Church's "Framework document on the missional nature and calling of the Dutch Reformed Church".

[2] To reference words by Paul Celan, which served as inspiration for the opening track of U2's 1984 album, The Unforgettable Fire. See Aykroyd 2013.

While Fugard largely moved away from the Christian faith of his upbringing and at times identified as a Tibetan Buddhist, it is often noted how his plays remained saturated with Christian and biblical imagery. In a review of one of his later works, *Playland* (1994), a theatre critic once remarked: "[Given the play's] obsessive biblical references … you'd think the author was a devout churchgoer" (Herman 1994). This is arguably also true of a play such as *Boesman and Lena*. A wide array of biblical imagery is employed throughout the play, and the scene just described, in particular, carries unmistakable Christian – especially eucharistic – resonances. The way the tea and bread are offered and shared evokes the image of Holy Communion – the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist – through which two wandering strangers are not only physically nourished, but also, even if only for a moment, find inner hope and strength for the night and the road ahead (McDonald 2012: 75). According to Fugard himself this scene – with its ingredients of "the fire, the mug of tea, the bread" – could be regarded as "Lena's Mass", offering us a vignette of the "sacramental", amidst the ruggedness and restlessness of the road (quoted in Wertheim 2000: 62).

Aliens and Exiles

Considering the introductory remarks on Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, I would like to explore in what follows the Eucharist as a site of shelter, nourishment, belonging, embrace, and perhaps even homecoming for weary strangers on the road. I especially want to do this as part of the conversation on missional theology and the missional church, which – while arguably being prominent in various parts of the world – has become central to the church I belong to and serve in, namely the Dutch Reformed Church of South Africa (see Marais 2017). Before turning, however, to missional theology and the Eucharist, I want to make a few comments on the reality Boesman and Lena find themselves in, that of wandering migrants, neither here nor there.

It is crucial to say, at this point, that the particularity of what is depicted in Fugard's play – tied to the specific realities of South Africa's horrendous past, a past which continues, of course, to have real and horrendous consequences in the present – cannot be overstated. Fugard is describing, and – through the mode of protest theatre – speaking out against a very specific and concrete situation in South Africa's history that left, and continues to leave, many people in this country desolate, without refuge or hope. Yet, those who study Fugard's work note that, while the particularity of his writing must be acknowledged and honoured, what he depicts on stage often transcends its historical and geographic specificity, speaking into our broader human experience. As Temple Hauptfleisch would say, Fugard's plays address 'universal themes through localized stories' (Hauptfleisch 1982: 10). This, perhaps, helps explain why, for decades, his works have been performed all over the world with a frequency close to Shakespeare's, as mentioned before.

It can accordingly be said that in witnessing the events surrounding Boesman, Lena, and their unnamed Xhosa companion on stage, we are confronted not only with experiences tied to specific historical and political realities (important as these are), but also with larger, more universal themes of dislocation, estrangement, and alienation. Much like in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the audience of *Boesman and Lena* is drawn into an experience of profound *not-at-homeness*, which arguably reaches beyond the immediate circumstances of *homelessness*. The characters in *Boesman and Lena* do not merely lack a place to sleep; they are vagrants, exiles, refugees, who are cut off from any enduring sense of belonging. This is a state of being many people around the world can arguably recognize today.

In their recent book *The Home of God*, Miroslav Volf and Ryan McAnnally-Linz observe that we are currently – in our late-modern world – living through a profound 'crisis of home'. On a concrete level, this is evident in the millions of people around the globe who are migrants – people willingly or forcibly displaced from the places they once called home. Such displacement often leads, in the words of John Berger, to an experience where the "centres" of people's worlds are dismantled and transformed "into a lost, disorientated one of fragments" (Berger 1984: 57). Volf and McAnnally-Linz note that this sense of dislocation and alienation also extends beyond physical displacement. Across the world, even when people are at their so-called "homes", there seems in our time to be a general feeling of *not-at-homeness*, an estrangement from our environment, from others, from ourselves, and – perhaps – of any stable sense of meaning, identity and belonging (Volf and McAnnally-Linz 2022: 13). Ours is a world seemingly longing to belong but failing to do so.

Volf and McAnnally-Linz go on to note that while this heightened sense of alienation and dislocation – both physical and existential – is a defining feature of our present moment and calls for urgent responses, including theological ones (which their book seeks to offer), we should not overlook the fact that these feelings have, in many ways, always been part of the human condition. There seems to be, they write, an "abiding out-of-jointness to things, witnessed (but not exhausted) by the abiding disquietude of the human heart" (Volf and McAnnally-Linz 2022: 13). Some would even argue that the emotions conjured by a play such as Fugard's *Boesman and Lena* are intrinsic to human existence itself. One such voice – as hinted at by Volf and McAnnally-Linz's reference to the "disquietude of the human heart" – is, of course, the fourth/fifth-century African bishop, Augustine of Hippo, the theologian of the *cor inquietum*, *par excellence*.

In *On the Road with Saint Augustine* (2019), James K. A. Smith observes that, for Augustine, human existence – at its very core – is marked by a sense of estrangement. We are, he believed, strangers to ourselves and to one another, wandering from the moment we are born until the day we die through a strange and estranging world in which we continually feel adrift. According to Augustine, Smith writes, "migration", and the restlessness that accompanies it, are "encoded" in our DNA – both spatially and existentially (2019: 3). This is not a reality from which the Christian or the Church is exempt. We too, living East of Eden – what could be called, in the words of Heather Walton, *Not Eden* (Walton 2015) – must journey through the "sea of this world" (*mare huius saeculi*) as Augustine notes in multiple places (see e.g. Augustine 1988: 62), on the way to the *civitas Dei*, where we will find our final homecoming: a homecoming in which, as *The City of God* ends (in John Healey's translation), "we shall rest and see", and "we shall see and love", and "we shall love and we shall praise" (Augustine 1968: 408). The Church, for Augustine, is therefore a *societas peregrina* – a society of pilgrims, a company of "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet. 2.11) under way (Claussen 1991: 48; Smith 2019: 51).

It is important to note that Augustine does not view the condition just described as one to be mourned. For it is precisely in the wilderness of this world – or, to borrow the imagery of *Boesman and Lena*, in the maze of the mudflats through which we, and all humanity with us, are moving – that the triune God is present and at work, bringing about God's redemptive purposes. Augustine believed that *salus* – salvation, healing, restoration – is being wrought by God all around us, and part of the calling of the *societas peregrina* is to perceive and to share in this unfolding work of divine grace (Harrison 2006: 238–64).

Missional Misconceptions

It is, then, precisely this insight – that the triune God is not absent from the world but actively at work within it, that God's rhythms of providential grace reverberate throughout creation and invite our participation, as Augustine suggests in Book 6 of *De Musica* (2002) – that the missional church movement has helped bring to the fore again, especially here in South Africa. While in other parts of the world the missional conversation has, perhaps, responded to perceived processes of secularization (see Guder 2017: 223), here in South Africa – and particularly in the Dutch Reformed Church – the focus has very much been on overcoming the church's former and present isolation (Niemandt 2017; Schoeman 2020). The call has indeed been for the church to open itself up – not only to its place in the mudflats it is surrounded by – but to the realisation that the *missio Dei*, which someone like Augustine gestures toward in a work such as *De Trinitate* (with its focus on the *processio Dei*; Baik 2011: 50) – is present in these mudflats, further and deeper than we can begin to imagine.

I think we cannot be thankful enough for the role the missional conversation has played in the Dutch Reformed Church in helping it break out of the enclaves that once marked its existence. Today, it is arguably rare to walk into a congregation that is not – in one way or another – asking: Where is God active in the community and the world around us? What is God up to out there? And how can we join in that action? This posture, I believe, has become central to the identity of many congregations in the Dutch Reformed Church. Yet, reflecting on the tea and bread scene in *Boesman and Lena* and the eucharistic images it evokes, I want to draw attention to a misconception that could potentially, in my view, take hold in congregations when these essential missional questions are asked.

For some, the emphasis on the *missio Dei* as something happening "out there" in the world, with us called to join in, can inadvertently lead to an externalization or displacement of God, as if God is not firstly *here* but *there*, with the church then having to figure out how to get to *there* so as to join-in what God is doing. In Reggie McNeal's book *Missional Renaissance*, he writes that the church always lags behind what the Spirit is doing in the world; "not wanting to be left behind," he writes, "missional followers of Jesus are running" trying to "catch up" (2009: 36).

At a basic level, this is of course true – as one of the missionaries in the acclaimed South African novelist Elsa Joubert's *Missionaris* realizes: the church does not take God to the world; God is already there and active, and we are called to join where God is (Joubert 1988: 310). But where this can become problematic, I think, especially when this displacement takes place, is the following: firstly, when it begins to seem as though it depends on our ingenuity and dexterity to find out and join in on what God is doing. Here, the conversation very quickly moves from the *missio Dei* to *our* mission of trying to join the *missio Dei* – ironically making it less about God and more about us. Secondly, and especially important for my contribution here, this idea of constantly trying to catch up to where God is and what God is doing (lest – to quote McNeal – we "find [ourselves] on the other side of a divide that renders [us] irrelevant to the movement of God in the world" [McNeal 2009: 17]) can become utterly exhausting – especially in what Byung-Chul Han, the German-Korean philosopher, calls our 'burnout society', where everyone is called, in Han's words, to be "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Han 2015: 8).

In synodical meetings of the Dutch Reformed Church, it is repeatedly noted how many ministers are currently booked off due to burnout. This, I think, should raise the question of whether – even if only lingering in the back of ministers' minds – the pressure to constantly see and join in where God is and what God is doing "out there" might be contributing to ministers feeling worn out and depleted. After all, who among us can – by our own ability – keep pace with God? Constantly feeling the pressure to build towers to get to where God is, may not only be problematic (as we see in Gen. 11.1-9) but also utterly tiring.

The God Who Encounters Us

Here, it might be helpful to turn to Scripture and how it speaks about God's activity in and toward the world. What can, of course, be affirmed is that the picture Scripture paints is indeed one of a God who is active everywhere – as Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the whole cosmos. The triune God, in whom, through whom, and for whom all things exist (Rom. 11.36), is indeed constantly bringing about redemption and new life throughout creation. The story of the Bible *is* the story of the *missio Dei*, of God's mission in and towards all that is.

That being said, what we also find in Scripture is not necessarily a picture of people frantically running after God, trying to play catch-up with Christ and the Spirit – to borrow McNeal's words. Rather, again and again, we see the triune God as the one who sees, seeks out, and meets people where they are – ever since that first question to Adam, "Where are you?" (Gen. 3.9).

While space does not allow for a full exploration of this theme across the whole of Scripture, I want to focus briefly here on Christ, the Incarnate Word who came to his own, and his encounters with people – especially after the resurrection, as the Church begins to take shape. In the captivating vignettes from John 20 onwards, for example, we indeed witness the risen Christ constantly *encountering* his followers, not the other way around (Balthasar 1990: 252): joining them, welcoming them, embracing them, breathing the Spirit onto them, speaking peace over them and, all-importantly, sharing meals with them, as they are trying to make sense of the resurrection and its implications for their lives and for the world. We can think of Mary at the tomb, or the disciples in the locked upper room, or of Thomas in his doubt – and especially of the disciples and Peter at the Sea of Tiberias.

In this vignette written down in John 21.1-14, we find the disciples who have seen and spent time with the resurrected Christ, yet who seem – almost like Boesman and Lena – caught in a moment of limbo, not knowing what to do or where to go. Instead of being out there, going where Christ is and fishing for people as they were called to do (Mt. 4.19), they are somewhat aimlessly fishing for actual fish, as they did in their previous lives. But then Christ *appears to them* on the shore (as is emphasized in the text; see Ford 2021: 530), with a fire already burning, cooking fish for breakfast to be served with bread. In this moment, we meet – once again, as so many times in the Gospels – Christ as the hospitable "host", "cook", and "server" who welcomes and feeds them, and does so with abundance (Ford 2021: 532). And it is precisely out of this tender moment of hospitality, where Christ meets them and not the other way around, that the church's mission is born: as the disciples are fed by Christ, Peter is commissioned not only to tend to others, but also, importantly, to feed them – that is, to embody the loving care and hospitality of Christ in the church and in the world.

I've often been fascinated, when reading the narratives in John 20 and 21, by their temporal dimension – specifically, the suggestion that each new encounter occurs after a set sequence of days. One could posit that this timing reflects something of the rhythm of the early Johannine community, a community very much defined as a "community of practice" (Ong 2016: 101–23), in which these texts emerged and were read. The Johannine community would have gathered at least weekly for worship and the celebration of the Eucharist. As the Didache, for example, instructed early Christians: "Come together on the Lord's Day, break bread and give thanks" (Deiss 1967: 77). In this light, one can imagine a continuity between the risen Christ who, after a rhythmic sequence of days, encounters, welcomes and feeds his disciples in the biblical text, and the risen Christ who, after a rhythmic sequence of days, encounters, welcomes and feeds the early church community in the weekly worship service – not with fish and bread, but with bread and wine, his body (cf. Aune 1972: 113).

Contrary to what is sometimes suggested, we know that worship – and especially the celebration of the Lord's Supper, which was highly liturgical from the earliest days – was absolutely central to the lives and ministry of early Christians (Cullmann 1976: 86–7). The key practices of the early church, as recorded in Acts 2.42, were that they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and to prayer". Especially the celebration of the Lord's Supper, Winfield Bevins writes, was an ongoing "celebration of God's holy presence in, with, and among them as they came together" (Bevins 2019: 62). It was a moment not to do, but to receive – to wait for and be welcomed by Christ at the table, to be fed, and, as strangers and exiles on the road, to experience anew, as Graham Ward (2009: 187) writes, "life, nourishment, and nurture". As people *of the Way*, they – as the early church – were also constantly *on the way*, a *societas peregrina*, a company of pilgrims and strangers – who needed to hear, see and taste that God, in Christ and through the Spirit, was not only "there", somewhere active in the world, which they knew, but also "here". And that – as Andrew Murray notes in his reflections on the Lord's Supper – Christ eagerly desired to eat with them, to share their company and that of the world (Murray 1897: 25). Indeed, in and through the Eucharist, they could know that the "gifts of God" were given to the "people of God".

It was then also – just as with Peter – out of this encounter with Christ, an encounter marked by hospitality, care, and nourishment, that the church was sent into the world: to be and to give what had been received. As Hans Urs von Balthasar (1988: 105) writes, in the early church, it was out of the drama of the celebration of the Eucharist that the drama of Christian life and mission emerged. Or, as Alexander Schmemann puts it, "the liturgy of mission" is made possible by the Eucharist (Schmemann 1973: 46). Or, to use the words of Rowan Williams, the "sacrament of the bread and the wine", where people encounter – or rather are encountered by – "God the giver", points back to what he calls "the sacrament of the brother/sister", thereby enabling and equipping people to serve the other (Williams 2021: 12). This is why, from early on, the Eucharistic gathering would end with the words *Ite, missa est* – "Go, you are sent". I think it is deeply significant that the word used in many traditions for a Eucharistic service – *mass* (*mis* in Afrikaans) – comes from *missa*, one of the final words in the eucharistic liturgy, which means to be sent. For – it could be said – it is from the *mass* that mission begins, where God meets us, feeds us, and sends us back into the world.

In Fugard's *Boesman and Lena*, we find strangers, exiles, and vagrants drifting around the Swartkops mudflats; and – at least in the play – their tired sense of displacement, of not-at-homeness, remains unresolved. Yet, first through singing and dancing, and later through seeing, taking, and eating the dry bread and bitter tea, the wilderness they find themselves in momentarily becomes a haven, a home – making survival through the night and what lies ahead, including the hopeful visions Lena holds onto, possible. In our church – which I believe is committed to following the triune God wherever we are sent – I think it is, at the moment, essential to focus not only on the God who sends but also on the gifting God who feeds: the God who first welcomes and feeds Abraham through Melchizedek before Abraham welcomes the strangers at Mamre; the God who gives manna in the wilderness, who turns water into wine, who waits on the beach with fish and bread, who gives his own body as food for the hungry and thirsty. To recognize where God is present and active in the world – and to join in this action – we also need to recognize where God is present and active in our midst. We need, together with others – any strangers or pilgrims who are also tired and weary – to taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps. 34.8), so that this goodness can be identified and shared in the world. In a time when not only we, but everyone, seems to be burned out, this is perhaps the task of the moment: to share God's goodness, God's beauty, God's rest with the world, all things we receive with open hands when sitting at the Lord's Table.

Ministerial Formation

To conclude, it can be said that – on a practical level – this is something that can, and perhaps should, already be communicated to, and above all experienced by, students preparing for the ministry. For many years, the missional impetus – closely tied to so-called missional capacities that need to be acquired – has been at the heart of ministerial formation in the Dutch Reformed Church. Alongside their academic training, students have been encouraged to engage in missional activities, culminating in a fully-fledged missional project in their final year before ordination. The message was simple: go out, find somewhere God is at work where the church is not, and then design and undertake something to address this reality. This has, to be sure, led to wonderful initiatives, and – as a church – we are thankful for how God has called and inspired students to discern where they can join God's mission, often in very unexpected places.

At the same time, this invitation to initiate something missional has sometimes brought with it a measure of uncertainty and even stress for students who – especially when younger – are very much part of what Jonathan Haidt (2024) has described as the anxious generation. Over the past few years, I have often heard questions such as: What would qualify as a missional project? Is what I am doing missional enough (or – perhaps even more pointedly – missional to begin with)? I have been trying to do something, but it does not seem to be working – what now? Am I poorly discerning where God is at work? At times, it has seemed that students who should be energized to enter congregations and help mobilise often-tired congregants were themselves already weary, even before they had properly begun.

It is precisely in response to this that, while – importantly – keeping the training's missional focus and continuing to encourage missional initiatives, we have sought to anchor our ministerial formation programme in the four basic Christian practices Rowan Williams discusses in his small booklet, *Being Christian* (2014) – a booklet our group of facilitators worked through with students, also in preparation for Williams' visit to South Africa at the end of 2024. The four practices are: baptism (where we learn, and continue to be reminded, who we are in Christ), the reading of Scripture (where we listen for and to the voice of the living God who speaks), prayer (where we place our lives and that of the world in God's hands), and – significant for this contribution – the Eucharist (where we are invited to sit at God's table and, as those who have been fed, are sent back into the world).

After about two years, we now look back, astonished by the way these practices – particularly the focus on the Eucharist – have shaped students' pastoral imagination, and engagement with ministry and one another. By not only meeting at God's table but – especially in the weeks focusing on the Eucharist – orienting all discussion and practice around it, students have expressed a renewed sense of belonging, of being embraced and seen, and of grounding for the work ahead. Interestingly, this has not produced an insular community focused only on itself. As each session concludes with the reminder that "from this table we are sent", students have also clearly embraced the missional calling to step into the world where God is at work, carrying with them the care, attention, and nourishment they have experienced at God's table. What the effect of this will be once these students settle in ministry is still to be seen, but our hope – shaped by what we have observed – is that the Dutch Reformed Church may increasingly live as eucharistic communities, embodying God's care, presence, and solace in a country and world desperately in need thereof.

About the Author

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