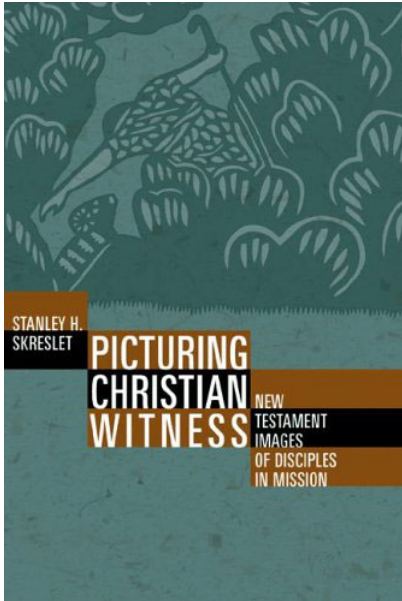


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Skreslet, Stanley H.

Picturing Christian Witness: New Testament Images of Disciples in Mission

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Stanley Skreslet has contributed a superb piece of work to the discipline of missiology. This fine book, *Picturing Christian Witness*, is a feast that stimulates a Christian's imagination, faith, and care for others. Skreslet states explicitly, right at the beginning, that his approach in this book is grounded in his own experience as an interpreter of mission (ix). When reading this book, the reader gets the impression that Skreslet himself wants to sit next to you and say, "Come let us read together and allow me to explain and show you..." just like what Phillip did in Acts with the Ethiopian (Acts 8:26–35).

Skreslet's approach in this book is fresh and unique, with sound exegeses of the New Testament text that approach mission as Christian witness from different perspectives that complement one another. The author's intention with this book was to discover a fresh way, from the perspective of the New Testament, to inform contemporary thinking about mission theology by stimulating the renewal of mission imagery. In both the academy and his ministry he consistently found that image-language often permeated and shaped what we think about evangelization and witness.

He justified this approach by the current crisis felt in the field of missiology. It was in ecumenical circles that hard questions have been raised about past missionary attitudes

toward non-Western cultures and religions. As a result, many of the images used by previous generations to portray Christian missionary action seem, according to him, inadequate today. Skreslet points out how attempts have been made to renew missionary imagery. He briefly reviews several of these studies and points out how a certain kind of methodology has taken hold. This methodology tended to proceed in a negative manner by recommending images and metaphors that correct or compensate for particular errors felt in current mission theology and practice. Therefore, his purpose in this book was to do something quite different.

His initial point of departure is the missionary roles assumed by the apostolic-era disciples of Jesus. His focal enquiry comes from the New Testament, for it is, according to him, the most complete and sometimes the only source for much of what is known about the activities of Jesus' first disciples. He substantiates this with a reference to Mark 1:17, where Jesus handed to his disciples a symbolic task for the future: "I will make you fish for people" (NRSV). The reason why he decided to focus on Jesus' disciples in the New Testament rather than on Jesus himself or the church as a corporate body is that it holds several advantages. For instance, it offers many examples of ordinary people from a variety of ethnic and cultural backgrounds who were involved in mission. They are described as participating in different kinds of communities and social circumstances. While some of these people had been specifically called, and to a certain extent trained, to continue Jesus' mission, many others appear to have been more spontaneously moved to share their faith.

For Skreslet, five different patterns of Christian witness emerged out of his exegetical analyses. These different patterns, which complement one another, are constituted from the different genres in the New Testament. In each case a distinctive kind of action performed by a follower or followers of Jesus defined the image under discussion in that particular pattern.

In the first pattern mission is looked at as an act of announcing good news. In this approach the verbal aspect of Christian outreach predominates. Announcers of good news are proclaimers of a message they consider to be of paramount importance. For Skreslet, the ones most often shown exercising this ministry in the New Testament are the highest-profile members of the emerging Christian community. They were widely acknowledged within the early church to be its most influential leaders.

The second kind of missionary action takes place when Christ is shared with family members and friends. This image pays special attention to more common forms of interpersonal communication. Christian witness here rather takes the form of conversation within families and visits to neighbors. To share Christ with close relatives does not mean primarily to transmit information to others about Christ or the Christian religion.

Instead, it involves introducing his presence where he is not yet known, sometimes by word but just as often by deeds.

The third *pattern* concerns how time and again in the New Testament the good news is shown crossing substantial boundaries of social difference. What is evident here is the universal character of Christian witness. This image of mission pictures the scenario in which the spiritual aspirations of others receive courteous respect and in which invitations to explain the basis of Christian faith are extended to would-be interpreters of the gospel. The interpreter is a facilitating figure who enables communication to take place across the dividing lines of cultural blinkeredness. Once contact has been made and the gospel becomes intelligible to these hearers, the need for cross-cultural interpretation diminishes. Eventually the interpreter is made redundant and then may disappear altogether.

Shepherding is the fourth pattern. In contrast to the three previous approaches, missionary shepherds seek out lost and disoriented sheep. Their attention is not focused on that part of the flock already safely established but on other folds as yet cut off from the experience of Christian community. Missionary shepherding requires one to stretch the traditional limits of pastoral care.

The last pattern concerns the cooperative nature of Christian mission. This pattern emerges clearly in the concepts of planting and building. Both define metaphorically the heart of what Paul understood to be his own missionary identity. He concentrated his efforts on the substructures of evangelism, where critical supports for the future must be laid. Throughout his ministry Paul was committed to a methodology of mission that emphasized the building-up of the Christian community. The first step for him was to act in a positive fashion by laying solid foundations and planting carefully.

In his attempt to discuss mission in the New Testament, Skreslet also effectively portrays what he discovered exegetically. He incorporates illustrations into each of his discussions on the various patterns of mission. As representations of ideas and metaphors, these pictures are meant to exhibit and make more transparent what he considers to be the most crucial theological issues raised by this series of New Testament mission images.

The illustrations included in this study have been drawn from a variety of cultural contexts and, in time, range from the pre-Constantinian period of the church right up to the late twentieth century. Throughout history and across an expanding cluster of cultural matrices, Christians have been persistent in their efforts to reinterpret and reappropriate the New Testament story of mission for themselves. Apart from the few secular scenes displayed, the illustrations show how a global sample of these interpreters

of mission within the church has attempted to portray that story visually in terms that made sense in their own times and places.

Skreslet's study of mission images also considers the manner in which a given image is likely to impact viewers and readers. Some of the images appeal especially to human emotions. The most poignant of these are the ones that move or strongly motivate and so engender a deeper commitment to missionary action. Other images stimulate more rational forms of cognition. This conveys new and compelling insights about the basis, forms, or purposes of Christian mission. As these different stories are allowed to interpret each other, the image at stake begins to acquire new textures and potential meaning. Another stratum of signification is made possible when more than one mission image is considered at a time. A situation of interplay develops among the images, similar to the functioning of single images as narrative intersections, but on a larger scale. In such a case, new aspects of meaning may be produced that lie beyond the capacity of anyone image to capture or convey.

In my opinion, the most important contribution of *Picturing Christian Witness* is that Skreslet has put forward an argument in support of an expansive definition of Christian mission, one that cannot be reduced to a single idea or task. The contours of the big picture that emerge here, when a group of images is viewed as a whole, defines mission fundamentally in terms of several actions: announcing good news, sharing Christ with friends, interpreting, shepherding, and planting/building. The fact that these are multiple actions, not one, that are described serially rather than hierarchically means that no single approach has been allowed to monopolize the discussion of Christian missionary vocation.

The only point of critique is that Skreslet overwhelmingly emphasizes witness and very rarely introduces service. This is, for instance, apparent from the table of contents: "*Announcing the Good News*"; "*Sharing Christ with Friends*"; "*Interpreting the Gospel*" (cf. also "*Shepherding*" and "*Building and Planting*"). Also, his definition of mission on page 27 proves this verdict: "acting in the name of Jesus Christ with the intention of communicating or demonstrating to others something substantive about the Good News that defines the believing fellowship of the church. At the center of this Good News is a *message* about what God has done for all humanity through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and a *commitment to live* in ways that publicly affirm the transforming power of God's love."

This book is well written, logically organized, and copiously illustrated. It is systematic in its presentation and guides the reader continuously in expectation. It is a book that can be used widely in didactic environments such as Bible schools teaching on mission and

theological seminaries. The freshness of this new approach to missiology will stimulate readers to rethink the epistemology of mission and to re-engage in the “great commission” of Jesus Christ. Skreslet certainly succeeded through the multiple images and metaphors used in the book to merge biblical theology, missiology, spirituality, and discipleship.