



Mission in three metaphors: A response to Dave Close

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In this seminar Dave Close offers three metaphors to help us understand various aspects of Christian mission: a slave ship, a beached whale, and a circle. It is clear that Dave has an intuitive feel both for metaphor, on the one hand, and the reality to which that metaphor points, on the other. As Paul Ricoeur argued, while metaphor involves two closely related activities – interpretation and explanation – it also works in open interaction with other semantic fields. We see this in the following three metaphors, which interact with particular aspects of Christian mission *and* community.

First, the slave ship: here the metaphor is that of a slave ship of the early nineteenth century. The classic slave ship was a vessel continually remodelled by the carpenters on board for each stage of the voyage. The ship itself was transformed at each stage for a new cargo, and a different purpose. This metaphor is, then, about stages of transformation. Dave uses this to reflect on the way in which the youth work of Hot Chocolate in Dundee has gone through successive transformations over the years. Changes in approach have taken place in order to adapt to new contexts. This in itself is a helpful insight. The original metaphor raises other interesting questions and perspectives, however. For example: what is the precise nature of those particular points at which change can take place? and – what new resources, available at those points, have change as their consequence?

Second, the whale: Dave uses the metaphor of the skeleton of a whale from Melville's epic novel *Moby Dick* to insist on the priority of the living actuality of gospel community over structures which may, in fact, be lifeless. Interestingly, by way of counterpoint to the whale metaphor, Ezekiel's vision of the desert valley demonstrates that the power of the Spirit is able to create new life in, and out of, dry bones, a reminder that that even lifeless structures may be redeemed.

Third: the circle – or *mission as going round in circles* – involves a description of two different individuals and, coincidentally, two types of circle. First, there is an account of a young man who fled from a meeting, an illustration of the fact that a community can sometimes be a *closed* circle. In the case of the young man, through grace this incident led to a much deeper engagement with faith. Secondly, there follows an account of a woman who has worked in lowly Christian service in many different *open* circles. Circles, for example, of those needing help, those needing someone to talk to and those seeking a place to call home. Such biblical faithfulness, such profound care and hospitality, in the grace and mercy of God, turn out to be profoundly missional.