Mission, Church and World

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This article will be primarily a biblical study of the church's mission,
with reference to contemporary issues faced by the church in its
mission in and for the world. It will seek to point out varieties of
approaches in the early church as a way of understanding how the
nature of mission is frequently contextually determined. It will also
discuss the inclusiveness of the call to mission, involving the whole
church in various aspects of the church's one mission, and will treat
the difficult question of the relationship of church and world.

Though a discussion of the church's mission may become very
complex, in essence it is simple. When one examines the Pauline image
of "the body of Christ" and the Johannine description of Christians
being sent by Christ as Christ was sent by the Father, it becomes
clear that the church's primary purpose is to be in the world as
Christ was in the world. Zinzendorf well expressed this when he
described the nature of the church as "mission", but not its own
mission. Christ is Lord of the church's mission and the Spirit which
flowed from his side wound is his agent in mission, his "chief preacher".
It was then the responsibility of the church to serve what Christ through
the Spirit was doing in the world, to interpret it to others, and to
manifest his reality within community and individual life (1).

The forms and shapes of the mission of the early church were varied,
according to the New Testament literature. They were determined by
several factors. First there was the radical encounter with God
represented in the person of Jesus, his proclamation of the Kingdom
of God, and the Gospel preached about him which was accompanied by
the Spirit (the manifestation of God's presence). This encounter was
not with the institutional forms of religion but with God himself, thus
making secondary all historical and institutional forms. It is only in
this way that one can understand Jesus' refusal to live within
institutional forms of religion (Law, Synagogue and Temple), though
he seems to have respected them in a secondary role. The encounter
with God cut through traditional ways of doing things and allowed,
for example, the inclusion of women in the church's mission and the
extension of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Secondly, there was the interaction with the church's environment/
society/world. In Galatians 2:6ff Paul discussed his mission to the
Gentile world with Jerusalem Christians who because of their context
and background determined to minister primarily to Jews. The Gospel
of Matthew recasts the tradition of Jesus' life and Sayings in a form
derived from Pharisaic Judaism but also hostile to Pharisaic Judaism,
giving birth to a particular understanding ot the Christian mission and
message. Paul in I Corinthians 9:19-23 explains how in different
environments he casts the Gospel in different forms, all for the sake

of the Gospel. In Galatians Paul describes the Gospel largely in terms of Jewish tradition while in Colossians he utilizes Hellenistic terminology. This results not only in various forms of the Gospel, but in various attitudes to the environment/society/world.

Thirdly, there were the developing institutional needs of the early church wherein there was a tendency for new forms of ministry to develop (e.g., the "deacons" of Acts 6 and the "widows" of I Timothy 5), and standards of character were asked of elders/bishops and deacons that the early apostles would not have passed (e.g. I Timothy 3). Forms of ministry also tended to become "regularized" by appointment rather than arising out of a recognition of gifts. This latter would mean that the church would be in control of those involved in its mission through appointment.

The variety in the description of mission in the New Testament can largely be accounted for by the interplay of these three factors: various appropriations and perceptions of the Gospel, various environments, and various needs and self-understandings of different early Christian communities.

A good illustration of this is the summons to mission contained in each of the four Gospels. The one most familiar to us is the "Great Commission" in Matthew 28:18-20. Here Jesus gives the disciples his authority, an authority especially represented in Peter (Matt. 16:17-19), to "make disciples of all nations, baptizing them..., teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you...". Interpreting Mark 16:7 in the light of Mark 14:27-28, the angel reminds the women, who were to remind the disciples, that Jesus would again "go before" them as a shepherd went before his sheep, leading them to new mission. In Luke 24:48 the disciples are appointed to be witnesses of what has happened in the life of Jesus, a mission expanded upon in Acts 1:8. In John 20:22-23 Jesus breathes upon the disciples the Holy Spirit, saying, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." The story of Thomas, which concludes John's Gospel, ends with Jesus' words, "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe," to which the evangelist adds his own understanding of the commission as expressed in his Gospel: "That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:31).

Each understanding of the "commission" from Jesus is bound up with the way a particular Christian community has appropriated the Gospel, its reaction to its environment, and its institutional needs. Thus the statements of Jesus, as the early church preserves them for us, represent situational perceptions of mission rather than any one of them representing an absolute form of mission that must be repeated by the church today. An interesting example is the inclusion of baptism in the Matthaean form. In Matthew baptism is a necessary part of the church's mission. For Paul, although he assumes that everyone at sometime would be baptized, baptism was not an essential part of his mission (I Cor. 1:17). When one reads the Gospel of John, there is no account of Jesus' baptism, in John 4:2 it is said that Jesus did not baptize, and there is no command to baptize. Since there is also no Lord's Supper in John, it is possible that the Johannine community was something like the modern Quakers, highly sacramental in theology but practicing no sacraments. Therefore, baptism had no role in their understanding of mission.

All of these "commissions" are concerned with sharing the news and reality of God as discovered in Christ, and with doing this in a way appropriate to the environment in which a particular Christian community and tradition found itself. This is the unity of their diversity. The diversity of the early church can be both freeing and envigorating to the contemporary church which seeks to be responsible to Christ as Lord, God as "Father", and to the particular context in which its mission is to be carried out. As with spiritual gifts (I Cor. 12:4-11), there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, but beyond that there is variety.

The question of inclusiveness is no longer so much a question of who shall be included in the church, but who shall be included in the mission of the church. Pietism and the development of the Moravian Church and missions were partially the expression of the claim of the laity to be included. Mission did not only belong to the clergy and the intellectuals. One of the great religious movements in the United States today is the inclusion of laity in the church's ministry and mission--- under such titles as "shared ministry", "mutual ministry". It lays claim to the biblical concept that ministry and mission belong to the whole people of God, though various functions are given by God or assigned by the institutional church. The claim is that there must be a "mutual" sharing of clergy and laity in the church's ministry to its members and mission to the world. The latter is especially important as the laity are in the world in a way most clergy are not. In some situations the value of biblical insights about the inclusion of all God's people in ministry has been forced upon congregations no longer able to afford adequate staff in today's economy. For some pastors it has been threatening to rethink their role as the enabler of the ministry and mission of others. In the United States there is also a strong interest on the part of some laity to become "paraprofessionals", persons who develop special expertise to facilitate the church's ministry without seeking full ordination. This includes a revival of interest in an order of Deacons in Protestant and Catholic churches and the development by lay persons of special professional capabilities in such areas as pastoral counseling.

The most disenfranchised group within the church is the children and youth. There has been a tradition within much of Protestantism to regard a child as becoming a member of the church at the time of understanding and confession of faith, marked by Confirmation, and only then entitled to receive Communion and to some participation in the church of the adults. This might not have created so many difficulties in past years when the family sense of unity was strong and the child felt him/herself to be a member as part of the familiy unit. However, today when individualism is stressed and the child is prepared for a participatory role in society, one needs an individual feeling of belonging and opportunity to participate. The failure to provide for some appropriate participation makes children and youth "outsiders", excluded on both the levels of feeling and activity. When they come to Confirmation, there is little prior experience of what it means to be a member of the church to "confirm". In experiments involving children and youth in some responsible role in the church and its ministry/mission, feelings about the church and the act of Confirmation were quite different than where participation was limited to children's programs.

It would seem very important to build into the lives of children within the congregation some participation and responsibility according to age, ability and understanding. Children from baptism on should be regarded as fully members, admitted to Communion when they can understand its meaning, and Confirmed as a way of preparing for Christian responsibility in adulthood. Such a practice of Baptism cannot really be argued from the New Testament since the Baptism of infants had not yet developed during the period of the New Testament Church, but such an understanding of Baptism can. Baptism was the covenantal sign of being in relationship with God. In the early church children were a part of this relationship through their parents (I Cor. 7:14), but without baptism. The later application of Baptism to children only recognized this. Zinzendorf recognized that the disenfranchisement of children is a result of a wrong understanding of religion. Religion is not a matter of the amount of understanding we develop, but a matter of relationship with the Saviour, otherwise not even "a child could have the religion which is necessary for his holiness." "Children can, from their mother's womb on, become aware of his nearness and its affect upon them..." (2).

One serious impediment to inclusiveness is the common understanding of a call to ministry or mission which drives a wedge between the self-understanding of clergy and laity. The call of professional clergy is felt to be different in kind and experience from any calling experienced by laity. When one examines the New Testament one finds that although certain persons had special roles and functions, it was the whole church that was called. In I Peter 2:5, the whole church is the living temple and a holy priesthood. To be called is then to be a Christian. One does not decide on whether one is called, but how one is to exercise one's call. The limited understanding of "calling" as belonging to the professionals not only undermines the laity's opportunity and responsibility for mission, but makes the step from laity to clergy the leaping of a wide ditch. The decision of a young person to enter professional ministry is only a decision of how to exercise the call implied in Baptism and Confirmation.

With an appropriate understanding of the "call of all", the church could strategize: think through its own needs for leadership, the mission responsibilities before it, the need to provide responsible Christian leadership for the society in which it is located, and then begin a long-range program of recruitment and encouragement of potential leaders. Some would be encouraged to become pastors, some educators within and outside the church, some missionaries or evangelists, some business leaders, some politicians and labor leaders, and some those who could provide the financial base for the operations of the church. The particular nature of one's call would be influenced by: the concerns and advice of the Christian community, the guidance of God, one's talents and gifts, the particular needs manifested by the society and historical period in which one lived. The concerns and advice of the Christian community would be important, amounting to calling Christians to various types of responsibility and validating callings that were experienced. An illustration of this is Paul who, though having experienced a "call" from Christ on the Damascus Road, always had each of his missions validated by the Christian communities to which he was responsible: Antioch and Jerusalem.

Inclusiveness releases the power of the whole church, as God intends. Anything less diminishes the possibilities of mission.

What has already been said implies a mission of the church in and for the world. This is more than the saving of souls from the world. It takes seriously biblical themes which describe humankind as placed in the world with responsibility for it (Gen. 1-2). Such themes Paul picks up on in Galatians 3-4 where the history of humankind is described as a maturing process which in Christ reaches the point where humans no longer need to be under custodians (the Law and the elemental spirits or structures of the universe), but receive their inheritance and function in responsible freedom. A similar theme is to be found in Philippians 2:5-11 where Christ reverses the process initiated by original Adam who sought to be like God. Because he emptied himself of his self interest and was obedient to God, God subjected the whole cosmos to him. Christ as true and second Adam then reveals the pattern for assuming responsibility over the world.

Without inclusiveness participation in mission is diminished. Without the world as part of mission's horizon, mission's scope is inadequate. To reject the world as the context for Christian responsibility is to assume Gnostic or extreme Apocalyptic views, denying that the world is God's or that it matters. Recent historical experience has also shown that to assign responsibility for the world to the state as the state's "realm" has not always worked well. Somehow Christian values and obedience to God must be injected into the social/economic/cultural/political stream while recognizing the dangers of trying to force particular Christian values upon a pluralistic society and the difficulties of determining Christian answers to complex issues.

In the New Testament one can find various approaches to the society in which the early church lived. Several factors seem to be at work. One was whether the societal context allowed any prophetic address to its issues. The second was the particular views held by an individual or Christian community about world and society. The approach to society was then influenced by external or societal/political factors and internal or theological factors.

Jesus' society provided the tradition of the prophet and was small enough to address. He spoke like a prophet to his society's issues, problems and aspirations. The Lukan form of the Beatitudes (blessed are the poor and hungry, woe to the rich and satisfied) are probably original and are "spiritualized" in the Matthaean form. Jesus clearly addressed the issues of the Roman occupation and the revolutionary movements of his time (the issue of paying taxes. Mark 12:13ff; the Temple as "a house of prayer for all nations", Mark 11:15ff etc.). However, as the church moved out of Palestine into the vast Greco-Roman world, that world and its problems could no longer be addressed by this church exiled (I Peter 1:1) within its society. Paul's (Romans 13) and Luke's (Acts) understanding of the Roman state was essentially favorable. Little persecution had yet been experienced at the hands of the state. Yet there was little that the church could do to change one's condition in society. If one were a slave one should accept freedom if given, but if it is not possible one should know that a Christian is a freedman of the Lord (I Cor. 9:17-24). Where one has a chance to treat the slave-master relationship according to Christian values, it should be done (Philemon). Within the church the slave-free distinction passes away (Gal. 3:28). What cannot be changed within society will ultimately be changed by the coming end of the world, for the world is like a woman in childbirth waiting to give birth to a new age (Rom. 8).

When one turns to I Peter one finds the beginnings of a different historical experience of the society and state. Written in the mid 60s A.D., after Acts and the authentic Pauline letters, it sees suffering at the hands of the state as a real possibility. In I Peter 2:13-17 the state is seen as a human creation and one is obedient to it not for its own sake, but for the Lord's sake. One is ontologically freed from the state (vs. 16), but must use freedom responsibly as a servant of God. The Christian then is to function redemtively towards the world as Christ did. The ethical section in chapters 2-3 is the only such ethical section in the New Testament dealing specifically with the responsibility of the Christian to the non-Christian: to the non-Christian state, the slave to a non-Christian master, and a wife to a non-Christian husband. I Peter deserves very careful consideration in formulating a Christian approach to a pluralistic world. Here one also finds the assumption that the conditions of this world will remain only a short while and the end is near (I Peter 1:3-9).

While Paul is positive towards the state and I Peter is neutral, the Johannine tradition is negative about the state and world. One has only to read such passages as I John 2:15-17, where love for the world is set over against love for the Father, and Revelation 13, where the state is portrayed as the beast (representative of the Dragon, Satan), to understand the feelings of the Johannine traditions for the world. It is interesting that when I John 1:1-4 comments on the Prologue to the Gospel (John 1:1-18), the Prologue's affirmation of the relationship of the Word to creation is completely neglected. Revelation takes the position of Apocalyptic tradition: the world is beyond redemption; it must be destroyed and a new earth and heavens created. The Johannine traditions were probably affected not only by the deteriorating attitude of the state towards Christians, but also by their theological presuppositions. One has only to read the letters to the seven churches (Rev. 2-3) to discover that not much of the suffering that Revelation expected had yet occurred. But that it would, was to be expected of the world's darkness. Also, it was a standard feature of Jewish Apocalyptic that the end would be preceded by a period of "Great Tribulation", mentioned in Revelation several times. What the world would do to Christians was partially thelogically presupposed.

The variety of approaches of the early church legitimizes our own contextual determination of how Christians can be responsible for the world where they find themselves. This too must be an interplay of external (societal, political) and internal (theological) factors. In each situation one must find what one can do and is obligated to do in obedience to Christ. There are, however, principles within the biblical tradition that one must keep in mind. One is the suffering servant as a way of being towards the world. If I Peter is by Peter through Silvanus, as this author believes, then it is interesting to see Peter's development of the servant theme into an ethical system, an idea which he rejected at his confession of Jesus (Mark 8:31-33). Contrary to the position of the Johannine traditions where the Christian stands over against society as antagonist, the Christian, like Christ, becomes the bearer of the society's sins and its redeemer. The ethical section of chapters 2-3, which deals primarily with the responsibility of the Christian to the non-Christian world, is summarized in 3:18 which should read, "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God...". Though this end of chapter 3 has many textual problems, it expresses

the theme developed earlier (especially in the slave-master section), that Christians like Christ may have to bear the sins of others or of their society to bring them to God. Christians then as exiles within their society (1:1) are not of their world (4:1-6), but they are certainly in and for their world for the sake of their Lord.

The servant theme carries with it also a refusal to dehumanize the state or the "opponents" within one's society, the responsibility of the "offended" to the "offender" (an important element of Jesus' ethic), a respect for the complexities of understanding and communication, a recognition that human values are primary (as over against institutions and movements' ideologies), and that ultimately all is done in responsibility to the Lord whose servant one is.

One of the disturbing things about mission is that it continually has to be redone. Even some in the early church hoped that all would be accomplished within their generation. Evangelists still speak of winning the world to Christ within this century. Historical realism, and a glance at two thousand years of Christian history, helps us to realize that it is not this simple. The shifting sands of history present new opportunities and pose new obstacles. What has been accomplished in one generation may slip away in another. And yet the basic reason that Christians carry on mission is not because all that is done will succeed and forever change the face of the world: they do it because what they have to share is necessary and true to human existence. God is our "Abba, Father". Christ is our Lord. God does love the world and calls it to himself. Humans, in their finiteness, do have available to their living the resources of God's Spirit. The human community can look beyond its self-interest to the establishment of relationships patterned after God's self-giving. Life does have a dimension called "transcendent", the realm of God's life and love. It is the Christian's responsibility to make life more possible and responsible to its Creator.

End Notes

1) Erich Beyreuther: Mission und Kirche, Studien zur Theologie Zinzendorfs, Neukirchener Verlag 1962, pp. 140-171.
2) N. von Zinzendorf: Gedancken vor gelehrte und doch gutwillige Schüler der Wahrheit, Der Teutsche Sokrates, Leipzig, Samuel B. Walthern 1732, pp. 280-90.
   N. von Zinzendorf: Auszüge aus...Reden uber die vier Evangelisten, IV, edited by Gottfried Clemens, Barby, Christian Laur, 1773, p. 131.