

MISSION: A QUIET AND PEACEABLE LIFE?

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1 Timothy 2:1-7 and Isaiah 43:18-19

"May we find a word from God in this reading from scripture."

One Sunday morning when I was a pastor I entered church and saw a 7-year-old named Alex standing in the foyer looking up at a large plaque covered with pictures and small American flags. I said, "Good morning, Alex." Without taking his eyes off the plaque, he asked, "Pastor, what's this?" "Well," I said, "that's a memorial to all our young men who died in the service." A moment later he asked, "Which service, 9:30 or 11:00?" In our church that wouldn't be a question. I hope this sermon of mine won't be quite that deadly.

When I was knee-high to a grasshopper, my mother, child of missionary parents, frequently led mission studies for the women of our church. Since I was too young for school, she took me with her. I remember the displays of maps and pictures, the underlined study books, the endless talk which I couldn't understand, and the intense boredom I felt when I wanted to be home playing with my blocks. That was my introduction to missions--something people did in far-off places that had nothing to do with me.

Later, in junior high, missions took on quite a different meaning. My uncle and a cousin were over in Europe fighting World War II. A blue star hung in my grandmother's window. I kept a scrapbook with war clippings and photos. Our neighbor, a former shoe salesman, was an airforce pilot who flew many "missions" over the Himalayan hump from India to China and back. Missions became daring exploits of heroic figures who risked death for a great cause.

I went to an evangelical college that had frequent missionary speakers. They invariably showed slides that contrasted the unsaved heathen, who lived in remote villages, and were dirty, unkempt, ignorant, and unhappy, with people they had converted who were neatly dressed, sported glowing smiles, and had transformed lives and promising futures. In our missionary band meetings, we sang hymns like "Rescue the Perishing" and "We've a Story to Tell to the Nations." Missions then became a glorious adventure of traveling to heathen lands, proclaiming the gospel, and saving souls from eternal damnation. I dedicated my life to become a missionary.

More recently, in Southern California, I toured a number of Roman Catholic missions where Spanish friars had built walled compounds containing schools, chapels, and monasteries, utilized Indian labor to grow their food, and sought to convert them from paganism to Christianity. There, a "mission" was a bastion of sacred space and holy men, outposts in alien territory, sending out raiding parties to bring in pagans and civilize them.

While teaching church administration in seminary, I did considerable reading on business management and leadership, and found that the term "mission"--formerly the sole province of the church and the military--had been taken over big time by the

corporate world. Every business enterprise must have a "mission statement"--setting forth their vision and purpose, in terms that glossed over the bottom line and made them look like paragons of virtue and altruism. Mission had become an admirable way of serving the community while "incidentally" making money on the side.

I suspect that my journey through this thicket of conflicting and confusing meanings of the word "mission" has struck a few responsive chords in your minds as well. What I propose to do in the next few minutes is not only to rescue "mission" from this thicket, but to position it at the heart of what it means to be "church." Wish me luck.

It was either the Sri Lankan churchman D.T. Niles or the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner who said: "Mission is to the church as fire is to burning." This makes mission the essence of what the church is about. If a fire isn't burning, it isn't a fire. If the church is not in mission, it isn't church. This requires quite a leap from mission as boring irrelevance, military adventure, saving heathens, sacred bastion, or corporate PR. But get out your vaulting poles, we're going to try.

The New Testament projects three basic models of mission--those of Matthew, Paul, and Luke-Acts. Missiologist David Bosch calls these: Mission as Disciple-Making; Mission as Invitation to Join the Eschatological (hope-motivated) Community; and the Mission of Forgiveness and Solidarity with the Poor. The missionary experience of my family over more than a century typifies these three approaches..

First, THE MATTHEW MODEL OF MISSION is epitomized in the "Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-20—

"Jesus said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age'"

The key elements in this missionary mandate are: the authority of Jesus, going to all nations, making disciples, baptizing, teaching, obeying commandments, Jesus' presence, and the urgency of the approaching end of the age. The great Evangelical mission movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries partook of these elements. My maternal grandparents, Charles and Emily Buchanan--during their time in Singapore and Java (1896-1923)--were part of this movement.

Charles was a hunchback, 4 feet 7 inches tall, weighing only 94 pounds. Because of his deformity, he wasn't accepted by the Mission Board, so paid his own passage out to Singapore and was hired as a teacher in a mission school. Feeling a call to win the Muslims to Christ, he moved his family into a Malay fishing village, where he and Emily (who was a nurse) learned the language, adopted their simple lifestyle, ministered to the physical needs of the people, and sought to gain their acceptance and trust.

Emily visited in people's homes; offering basic medical treatment and taking my mother along to sing Sunday school songs. In a letter home she writes, "I have learned to love the Malay people very much, and earnestly pray that I may have the privilege of helping them to the feet of Jesus." Both were motivated by an evangelistic zeal to convert the Malays, grounded in their understanding of the Great Commission. Reflecting the attitudes of the times, Charles called Mohammad the "Prince of Satan" and Islam a "religion of the devil," and expressed a "great burden of soul for the Malay people." In

one of his letters he said: "They are ignorant and thriftless, yet good workers. They have no desire for progress and believe in rigid predestination." He concludes: "If we live with Christ and are Spirit-filled and Spirit-cleansed, Methodism will prove no mean foe of the soul-slavery in this island."

After ten years in Singapore, the Buchanans in 1907--exactly a century ago-- were assigned to pioneer work in Java, and started an English school for sons of Chinese merchants to earn income for his mission. In letters, Charles voiced his dream of establishing a mission compound, with a hospital, a training school for preachers and Bible women, and an agriculture and hygiene institute. He established a hospital in the mountain village of Tjisaroea , which is still in existence. It is now operated by the Indonesian government as a TB sanatorium, which I visited recently. The churches he and others planted coalesced into what today is known as the Gereja Kristus (Church of Christ), still a small but thriving denomination. Some of their young people were my students at Trinity Theological College in Singapore 40 years later..

My grandparents felt the urgency of Christ's Great Commission, and obeyed by going halfway around the world, to seek and save the lost, to make and baptize disciples, to teach Jesus' commandments, and to prepare converts for the end of the age--the Matthew Model: Making Disciples.

Second, PAUL'S MODEL OF MISSION focuses on the church, the eschatological (hope-focused) community. Wherever Paul journeyed he established churches. His letters address the needs and problems of these churches in an effort to build them up, deepen their faith, unify their divisions, and make them strong in the face of conflict and persecution. The platform on which these churches were established is seen in today's lectionary epistle, 1 Timothy 2:1-7.

- Prayers for everyone, including rulers, "so "we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity;"
- Service to a God and Savior "who desires everyone to be saved and come to the knowlege of the truth:"
- Christ, the "mediator between God and humankind;" who gave himself as a ransom for all; and
- Paul himself as "herald and apostle" and "teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth."

Translation: for Paul mission involves:

- A seeking God who covets a relationship with humans.
- A saving Christ who shows us through his life and death just how much God loves us.
- A ransom--a metaphor for God's awesome suffering love.
- Prayers for--and demands of--the powers, that they provide just and equitable conditions so all may lead "a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity."
- And a herald who carries the gospel to the Gentiles--all of us.

IN BRIEF: THE MISSION IS GOD'S. THE MESSAGE IS CHRIST. THE MEANS IS SELF-GIVING LOVE. THE MEASURE IS A LIFE OF PEACE WITH JUSTICE FOR ALL AND THE MESSENGER IS THE MISSIONARY.

However, as the sufferings and persecutions Paul endured make clear, his life as a missionary had very little of the "quiet and peaceable" quality he sought for others--which is the reason for the question mark in today's sermon title.

The churches founded on this platform brought together Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female in a community of equality and unity. As Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:13-21:

"Christ Jesus...preached peace to you who were far off (the Gentiles) and...to those who were near (the Jews)....So you are no longer strangers and aliens, but...members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord...."

In Paul we here see a mission emphasis on unity and harmony amid diversity and tension, building up and strengthening the church, and confirming and extending the legacy of the initial pioneers who had paved the way, laid the foundation, and brought believers into the fold.

My time in Singapore in the 1960s, teaching at Trinity College, is representative of this model of mission. There I was a teacher, but unlike Paul, not an evangelist. My mission was to train leaders for an indigenous church which would become autonomous during my decade with them. Carol and I saw a mission outreach from America become established as a fully independent, self-supporting church. The number of Western missionaries dropped from 60 to a handful. My students became pastors, bishops, seminary teachers, and missionaries themselves. Unlike my grandparents, I was not out winning new converts. Rather, I was training local leadership themselves to go and make disciples among their own people. I was helping to build the church in Southeast Asia. The Methodist Church of Malaysia and Singapore became autonomous in 1968, and gradually assumed responsibility for self-support and to provide its own leadership--Paul's Model of Mission--equipping a Community of Faith and Hope.

Third, THE LUKE-ACTS MODEL OF MISSION IS PRACTICING FORGIVENESS AND SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR--a mission of peace and reconciliation, justice and compassion, liberation and solidarity. This approach is epitomized in Luke 4:18-19, where Jesus announces his ministry: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

This mission of liberation has been the focus of my mission endeavors since retirement 10 years ago. I first encountered this form of mission in the Christian Base Communities of Central America, which led me into six years of violence-prevention work as a reserve member of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT)-- in Hebron (Palestine), Chiapas (Mexico), and Colombia.

In Chiapas with CPT I first participated in a memorial mass for the 47 victims of a massacre by the paramilitary, supported by the Mexican army. These devout Mayan

peasants, members of the nonviolent Las Abejas community (the Bees), were praying in their rude chapel when cut down by automatic rifles made in the USA. In talking with surviving members of a coffee co-op, we learned that the price of coffee had fallen so low on the world market, due to World Bank policies, that they could no longer make a living. Staying in a mountain village to shield Las Abejas farmers from perpetrators of the massacre, we offered to buy their raw coffee beans at a fair price, then try to sell them at that same price to the Nestle plant down in the state capital. When the Nestle manager refused to buy, we conducted a liturgy of song, prayer, and proclamation at the plant gate, then slit the bags, leaving a big pile of coffee beans temporarily blocking their entrance. As we were leaving, the manager came over to glower at me, as group spokesman, saying this was a "violent act". But the real violent act was the meager price they were paying growers for their coffee. In the global scheme of things, this action may have made little impact on Nestle's and the World Bank. But it made a symbolic statement--in the tradition of Jesus and the prophets. It also impacted me, since, as you know, I came back to urge us in this church to use fair trade coffee as an act of solidarity with these and other exploited farmers around the world.

In recent years, while teaching short-term in Third World seminaries, I have sought to understand indigenous cultures, traditions and religions, researched leadership patterns, and related to people in church and community in various ways. These experiences have deepened my appreciation for the richness of other cultures, and the importance of respectful dialogue with other faiths. Back in Singapore on one of these sojourns, I attended meetings of the Interreligious Organization – Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim, Jewish, as well as Catholic and Protestant – and interviewed each of these at their place of worship. Put down and depreciated by Christian theologians and practitioners of the Matthew Model of Mission like my grandparents, these esteemed religious leaders gained my respect and became my dialogue partners.

I'd like to think my motivation in all this has been a cut above that of Bob Hope who once said, "I've done benefits for ALL religions. I'd hate to blow the hereafter on a technicality."

The concluding section of Bosch's book lays out the framework for what he calls an "EMERGING ECUMENICAL MISSIONARY PARADIGM." This model for Christian mission in a post-modern age contains elements like: Mission as God's not ours; Mission as Christian presence; Mission as liberation; Mission as inculturation in local custom; Mission as the quest for justice; Mission as action in hope that God is present and active in the world doing a "new thing" ("Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. Behold, I am doing a new thing, now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"--Isaiah 43:18-19); and Mission as witness to people of other faiths--a witness that is neither exclusivist and arrogant; nor inclusivist but patronizing, nor pluralistic but indifferent, but instead a humble, respectful, honest, accepting dialogue--in short a witness in love.

A third generation in our missionary family--our son Philip, now a professor at Pfeiffer University here in North Carolina--exemplifies this emerging model of mission. For six years in the late 80s and early 90s, as the only missionary allowed into Cuba, Phil became a link between the autonomous Cuban church and a series of short-term U.S. mission teams who came to rebuild dilapidated church buildings, but more importantly, relationships between estranged sister churches long separated by government policies

beyond their control. Phil and his Cuban partner served as bridge between Spanish-speakers and English-speakers, between factions in the Cuban church, between Cuban and North American Christians, between a progressive seminary and a suspicious church, and between an autonomous Cuban church and its visionary bishop and a U.S. Mission Board that sought to micromanage from a remote position of privilege. His was a situation fraught with tension and stress--anything but a "quiet and peaceable life." But his performance in it facilitated a partnership that in many ways incarnated the "emerging ecumenical missionary paradigm."

What this all boils down to for me is a view of mission as – God, through us, empowering persons-in-community to become the persons, communities, and systems that God intends them to be. The church that is to mission what fire is to burning is a church that seeks to participate in God's doing of this new thing--in ways that faithfully and lovingly empower persons-in-community to become who God intends them to be. May God help our church to be this kind of fire that burns, so that all may "lead a quiet and peaceable life in godliness and dignity." Amen.