

CHAPTER IV

GOD AND MISSION

Mission in any context today brings us face to face with varying and contrasting concepts of God, divine beings and divinity. Teachers and teachings confuse millions by their claims. And this makes it important for the Church to get a clearer grasp of the God of the Bible. There are two factors we will constantly encounter. First, the God of the Bible is a personal God. Second, he has revealed himself historically. The task of mission is to present this kind of God as convincingly as possible.

Right from the start we are dealing with contrasting concepts. Hinduism teaches that all the "gods", the *devas* are only names and forms of the One Being (*Ekam Sat*) who himself has no name and no form. When we speak of the biblical God of mission we speak of a God *in* mission who has personality and acts in history. This supreme yet personal God who reveals himself in concrete historic situations stands in marked contrast to all other claims.

The Islamic concept of God, despite the similarities that some claim to the biblical God, is utterly transcendent. In spite of the belief that God is everywhere and in the hearts of the believer, there is the unknowability that restricts personal knowledge in the biblical sense.

In contrast, the biblical doctrine of a personal God stands out as the strong point of Christian mission, as a mission that relates to people. By and large in Asia and Africa, and now even in the West people portray impersonal forces as manifestations of God. Buddhism was a belief with no reference to God. Buddha did not believe in any special revelation of God, and his teachings are basically

a philosophy of life with no teaching of a personal, active God. With the revival of traditional religions some of the gods are portrayed as personal deities.

The “New Age” movement builds similarly on the notion of a spiritual force rather than a personal encounter. Drawing heavily from Hinduism and Buddhism followers speak of “being”, “consciousness”, “essence” etc. without any reference to the historicity or the personalness of God. One of the most powerful “apostles” of the New Age Movement, Hollywood actress Shirley MacLaine, claims she has encountered two spirits who taught that God is only a force or divine energy. Even Jesus, she discovered, is only a highly evolved human being.¹

Facing such challenges, it is imperative to rediscover some attributes of God from the perspective of mission. And as we study, we meet God who in his very essence is the basis for mission today. His personal nature and his historical acts identify God with humans in diverse situations. Mission begins with God himself, not merely because he is the God of mission but because his character is mission.

God is a Holy God

God’s activity in history is essentially a revelation of his holiness (Eze. 20:41; 28:22, 25, Isa. 6:3). God had redeemed Israel from its bondage in Egypt and amid their jubilation, Moses and the “sons of Israel” (Ex. 15) are reminded that he is “majestic in holiness” (v.11). The basic distinction between God and people is holiness. When we consider God’s holiness we are convicted of our unholiness. That is why Isaiah confesses “I am ruined. Because I am a man of unclean lips, and live among a people of unclean lips” (Isa. 6:5).

God who desires his people to be holy, is basically involved in a mission of bringing them back into a holy relationship. Holiness is not a static property which God appropriates for himself. It is something he desires to impart to his people. The dynamic personality of God

based on his holiness, arouses fear, reverence and a consciousness of human unholiness. In his grace he makes Israel holy, separating her for his purposes, and imparting to her a holiness which is a result of her holy relationship to God. That is the motivation for Israel to continue to seek God’s holiness—“You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy ” (Lev. 19:2).

Popularly, holiness is seen as the responsibility of the individual in search of fellowship with God. He spares no effort, even total separation from the material world chastising himself to attain something of a nearness to God. However, God’s holiness is not acquired through self effort but wholly through the grace God bestows on his people. In this sense, “holiness is not so much a relation of the creature to the creator as of the creator to the creature.”²

Holiness is God’s divine prerogative, but he longs to share it with those who trust in him. The mission of God is essentially a mission of imparting his holiness to sinful creatures. In fact, if people can become holy through their own efforts, there is no need for God’s mission or even for God. This ought to be our thrust when we communicate the message to the Hindu. No one can become holy except through the holiness that God imparts through Jesus Christ.

God in his mission to humanity eagerly desires to give his holiness to his creatures. The Old Testament prophets not only cried out against Israel’s unholy rebellion against God’s demands but pointed constantly to God’s holiness. Mission is therefore God wanting to restore his creation to a holy relationship he originally intended. It is a holiness that is entirely God’s, but is freely ours.

In its fullest sense ‘holiness’, refers to far more than moral attitudes; it has an eschatological significance vital to the goal of God’s mission.³ God in his holiness not only desires that all creation become holy, but also convicts the world of its sinfulness and unholiness. Sin will not ulti-

mately prosper. Therefore, God's holiness ensures that his universe will ultimately be restored to perfection. A new heaven and a new earth is the goal of God's mission and God desires that his creatures who will dwell with him in this restored universe should become holy (Rev. 21; 2 Pe. 3:13) Holiness is highly significant to the development of a theology of mission, promising the restoration of a right relationship between creator and creation.

God is an Angry God

There is an integral link between God's holiness and his wrath. Exploring this helps to clarify the biblical understanding of the anger of God. The problem arises when we speak about holiness and wrath as individual and distinct characteristics. Separately they are incompatible, as it is with God's love. However, holding all these aspects of God together we reconcile any apparent conflict. For instance, the question, How can a loving God be an angry God? To this the answer has got to be "Because he is a holy God."

Some suggest that while the God of the Old Testament is a God of wrath, in the New Testament we have a God of love. This dichotomizing of the God of the Old and New Testaments is to be rejected. Both wrath and love are characteristics of a personal God. Wrath "is a personal quality without which God would cease to be fully righteous and his love would degenerate into sentimentality."⁴ If mission is the confronting of human sinfulness, God must be seen to demonstrate his wrath against such sinfulness. It is only when God's love is seen alongside his wrath that the grace of God will be fully appreciated.

Let us consider some terms in the Old Testament. The Hebrew *ap*, intensified to *haron' ap* expresses the fierceness of God's anger. Terms as *hema*, *ebra*, *qesep* and *Za'am* are utilized frequently to characterize the reality of God's wrath. "There is intensity in the terms themselves and in the construction in which they occur to convey the notions of hot displeasure, fiery indignation, and holy vengeance".⁵

The concept of wrath has been questioned. It is pointed out that only pagan gods are depicted in such a vindictive fashion. On the other hand, it is said, the biblical God is not one to punish worshippers. Such irrational passion, it is felt, does not do justice to the God of the Bible. On these grounds the idea of propitiation was rejected by scholars such as C. H. Dodd and B. F. Westcott.⁶

In a masterly treatment of this problem, Leon Morris, agrees with Dodd and Westcott that we should reject the crude depiction of wrath as in the sense of the pagan deities. But, he argues that the idea of God's wrath cannot be eradicated from the Old Testament without irreparable loss. Morris states,

It is not the monopoly of one or two writers, but pervades the entire corpus so that there is no important section of which it could be said, 'Here the wrath of God is unknown!'. . . the concept may need to be understood carefully, but it is so much part and parcel of the Old Testament that, if we ignore it, we cannot possibly enter into a proper appreciation of the Hebrew view of God or of man.⁷

As we must proclaim the righteousness of God and his just demands on people, it is the wrath of God that will underline the seriousness of human condition. Sin is intolerable in the sight of God, and in his longing to save us there is not only love but wrath. As Morris points out,

If we think of an uncontrollable outburst of passion, then we have a pagan conception, completely inapplicable to the God of the Old Testament. But if we think of a wrath which is the reverse side of holy love, a flame which sears but purifies, then we have a conception which is valuable not only for an understanding of the ancient scriptures, but also for any right conception of the nature of God.⁸

The proclamation of the Gospel cannot avoid mention of God's anger over humanity's sinful condition. Popular Gospel messages today will gloss over God's wrath and over-emphasize his love. But God's wrath is his reaction against sin, and preaching the Gospel will necessitate addressing sin. If sin is opposition to God. God must react with his wrath.

Held together with God's holiness and love, there should be no problem in accepting his anger as an integral part of his personality. When the message of the Bible is preached in its entirety, and as the Holy Spirit convicts men and women of their sinful condition, there is an encounter with the totality of God's nature.

God Is A Jealous God

Religious pluralism is bringing the God of the Bible into a direct encounter with the gods of other religions. Dialogue is helpful, but only in making us sensitive to the context. The Old Testament believer was hardly in touch with adherents of other faiths. Any compromise was rejected. We note for instance that in revealing the Decalogue to Moses, God refers to himself as a "Jealous God" (Ex. 20:5) As with the concept of God's wrath, we need to understand the jealousy of God's in its context. This attribute of God causes him to claim the totality of Israel's commitment in a personal and exclusive bond just as in marriage. God will not share his people with any other so-called gods.

Similar to God's wrath, the problem of God's jealousy becomes untenable when considered in isolation to the rest of God's dealings with his people. The concept of jealousy must be seen as the expression of God's intense love for his people, linked directly with God's covenant with Israel. God, as sovereign initiator of the covenant would like to maintain the covenant bond so that the benefits of the covenant for his people may be enjoyed. It is the kind of response of partners within marriage, demanding absolute commitment from each other.

The problem arises when the jealousy of God is understood purely as a personal expression of selfish emotion. However, understood within the covenant of God demanding Israel's exclusive loyalty, jealousy underlines the personal longing of God for an uncompromising and intimate relationship with his people. This is in contrast to the Hindu understanding of the Supreme Being totally uninvolved and unconcerned about his creatures. There are

neither covenantal obligations, nor is there a personality with a compassion that compels a sacrificial relationship with his people.

Within the covenant relationship the people of Israel were under obligation to serve the Lord with all their heart, with all their soul and with all their might. But, God was also under obligation to maintain the bond he had initiated. In this context, His jealousy is integrally linked with this desire for Israel to faithfully fulfil the demands of this bond. Israel in weakness, surrounded by powerful pagan influences, could easily have directed her affection to more attractive "gods". We today can be threatened by the growing influences of other religions. And in such a situation it may be easy to settle for compromises that would ensure security amid a growing antagonism.

God had not settled for any compromise with Israel. It had to be all or nothing! This passionate exclusivism later shows in the conviction of God as sovereign over all the universe.⁹ God's domain although revealed and manifested in Israel, extended over all life, history and to the entire universe. The heart of mission is essentially a revelation of the heart of God—he wants all creation to be exclusively his. And so jealously does God feel about this that he provides for the salvation of all people even though it means parting temporarily with his own Son. Love and compassion become integrally linked with jealousy and exclusiveness. The mission of God becomes a demonstration of this burning passion.

God is a Loving God

Having dealt with wrath and jealousy, we must outline some of the aspects of God's love. The Bible richly depicts the love of God through the covenantal relationship he establishes with his people. The Hebrew word *chesed* is best translated "covenant love"¹⁰ referring primarily to the steadfastness of this unfailing love for Israel. The direct link between God's covenant and his love has to be

underlined as this is the underlying assumption in the Old Testament.

Loyalty and faithfulness implied in this covenant are for both the parties. But the burden in the Old Testament rests wholly on God to continue in his faithfulness despite Israel's unfaithfulness. This is powerfully depicted in Hosea's commitment to an unfaithful wife, Gomer-bath-Diblaim, an allegory of the relationship between God and Israel. Because of his own attitude to an unlovable wife, Hosea can passionately proclaim God's steadfast commitment to Israel, a commitment that God fulfils all the obligations of the covenant he has made with his people. Hosea addressed God's people when their apostasy had reached a climax, after a prolonged period of backsliding and rebellion. At such a time God revealed once again his covenant love, wanting to show as graphically as possible the pathetic condition they had reached.

But, against this background the covenant love of God is even more accentuated as a love that will recoil from punishments, a love that is willing to forgive, a love that would cause the wayward wife to listen once more. Hosea remembers the work of God in the Exodus (12:13), when Israel did not deserve deliverance, yet had experienced God's mercy and love. The same God (13:4) and the same hope (14:4) issues in God's love, desiring ultimately to work out his purposes for his wayward people. Assyria could not save Israel. Only God's unfailing love could restore life and vitality to his covenant people (Hos. 14). Hosea looked beyond Israel's present humiliation to God's wider purposes to be fulfilled through the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

God's mission without God's love would be no mission at all. It is this covenant love that strengthens our mission in the world today. It proclaims a tangible relationship in contrast to experiences offered by "religions" which adapt to the demands of the commercialized world. It is not even some new demonstration of love as an emotional response to the present day longing for love. God's covenant with

Israel, was a picture of his infinite love for the whole world. Jonah clearly depicts the narrowness of the Jewish mind wanting to appropriate God's love for themselves. Since Nineveh rejected God, God must reject Nineveh, was the conclusion. However, God's covenant love, the love that compels us into mission today, powerfully demonstrates his eternal purposes for all who will believe in him.

There is an equally significant Old Testament word for love, *ahab*, translated as "personal-love". This word can be used generally for any kind of love. It is not limited by the conditions of a covenant but expressed in the personal will and nature of the lover. *Ahab*, in fact, expresses the *personalness* of God's love towards the people he made in his own image. There are no conditions. It is not necessarily because love is reciprocated, or even that those receiving this love are lovable.

We have already seen that God chose Israel out of all the people of this earth not because of anything in her but totally because of his sovereign choice. This is clear in Dt. 9:4,5 where Israel is reminded not to think it possesses any righteousness, or as in Dt. 7:7, 8 that their large number made them worthy of such love. He chose them for his own sake, unfaithful and unlovable as they were.

God is not looking for the attractive, the mighty, the educated and the intelligent to be saved, He desires that all people be brought into the relationship they were created to possess. The history of mission is pregnant with accounts of missionaries going to the fiercest of peoples, the 'ugliest' of human species to demonstrate this kind of a love. *Chesed* and the *ahab* gave passion to their mission that originated from the very heart of God. People go, not only because they are convinced that God has chosen to save all who will believe in him, but also because in reflection of God's love they are compelled to sacrifice comfort and familiar surroundings for difficult and even hostile situations. Such is the love that characterized the Western missionary era of the recent past. Many times, people responded to Christ recognising this kind of love.

Mission without love is an empty programme without God's passion.

God is a Righteous God

The Hebrew word for righteousness is derived from a root meaning "*straightness*" and is best understood in the context of a relationship. Straightness or rightness is demanded in maintaining any relationship. In this sense, God's righteousness is a fulfilment of such a relationship with people—he deals with us out of the obligation laid upon himself to act rightly. Hence, the call for righteousness from his people is a call to reflect the righteousness that God himself demonstrates.

Righteousness, then, is the fulfilment of the demands of the relationship that God has initiated. Each person within a multitude of relationships with God or with people, fulfils certain demands. This will vary from relationship to relationship. Righteousness necessitates right relationships, and God as a righteous God, true to his character seeks to establish a right relationship with his people.

However, this does not imply that righteousness is only a state of affairs. It "is an action much more than a state".¹¹ A person acts justly because he or she is righteous. The prophets constantly urge justice be practised. There is no invitation to acquire righteousness merely for the sake of enjoying a right relationship with God, but for the demonstration in concrete acts that reveal right relationships with God and people.

Recent calls to Christians to consider social justice, no matter how one sided, have served to shake us out of our privatised piety into concrete concerns in keeping with the righteousness of God's kingdom. The Old Testament clearly outlines justice within relationships that Israel had to maintain and uphold. The prophets boldly attacked social ills and injustice on grounds that it violated the very righteousness of God on which Israel's just relationships were to be built.

The "Jubilee" principle of Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15 is a good exposition of social justice and was aimed at protecting the rights of victims of injustice. And this becomes the central feature of the ministry of Jesus. It is of utmost importance to our mission, therefore, that we look carefully at the significance of the theme.

There are interconnected implications to the terms "justice" and "righteousness". The thrust of the prophetic challenge is that the people of God wanted all the privileges of the covenant, yet were unwilling to express their responsibilities in actions that reflected this relationship. Despite our attempts to ignore the call to justice in the present day mission context, it is clear that God certainly expects his people to demonstrate just relationships which will bring about just structures in our world today.

The overemphasis on justice as *fairness* and *equality* within social relationships is questionable. On the other hand, it is not to be defined purely in *spiritual* terms. In the context of fervent challenges we ask—How can we consider evangelism as an involvement in struggles for justice? There is no doubt that the prophets were ultimately concerned about Israel's spiritual condition, as it was this condition that led to their perverse social condition. But, mission cannot be wholly preoccupied with the vertical relationship, even though this is the primary relationship. A right vertical relationship is demonstrated in a correspondingly right horizontal relationships.

The Jubilee, seen within this context, becomes a powerful reminder to Israel of ultimate relationships in the Kingdom of God. Deprivation of the rights of the poor and the oppressed, unequal distribution of wealth, consumerism and materialism etc. are social problems which have pervaded the world as a result of sin. Kingdom people must live out Kingdom relationships right now and this is central to Jesus' message.

We must consider the context within which the prophets were crying for justice. Those being challenged to live out

God's righteousness are those who had already entered into a righteous relationship with God. Social righteousness cannot be demanded without first challenging people to a right relationship with God. The one sided stress on social justice without an adequate stress on a prior relationship with God is untenable.

The overemphasis on mission in terms of justice needs to be challenged on biblical grounds. The prophets' cry for justice was to a theocratic people. God's justice and righteousness is understood by the people who accept his kingship, and not those who reject or remain indifferent. The primary thrust of mission is therefore the presenting of the God of justice, rather than the justice of God.

In our great concern for justice and righteousness we may forget that it is God's doing. His Messianic mission will right the wrongs in his world, as righteousness will characterise his Messianic rule. The Messiah is "The Righteous One" (Is. 53:11) who will ultimately demonstrate God's righteousness.

But this does not exempt the Church as God's people from demonstrating messianic justice here and now. The Church must be the model and the agent of God's right relationships in the world today. The Lord of the Church is the Lord of Righteousness.

The Suffering God

We have been reminded that academic theology which is no more than cold formulations about God will not meet the needs of the struggling masses of humanity. Unfortunately, we have been hesitant to relate the cross to the harsh realities of our world. The theological tradition of the early church often reflected the Greek doctrine of impassability. The Latin *impassibilis* meaning 'incapable of suffering' was accepted as best suited to describe a God who was transcendent and hence beyond humiliation and suffering. This was more in keeping with Plato's argument that gods were beyond pleasure and pain, and even Aristotle's "Unmoved Mover". If God was depicted to

feel pain it would contradict his omnipotence and immutability.

Even the Hindu believes that the *Brahman* is absolute bliss and therefore beyond suffering. There is no capacity to share in the sufferings of humanity. Even the idea of *karma* is an obstacle to understanding the suffering. Suffering is seen to be purely the result of previous sins and therefore God does not suffer.

An Asian response to this theology came from the Japanese scholar Kazoh Kitamori.¹² He wrote of the "pain of God" that heals our pains, developing his study from Jeremiah 31:20 where God speaks of his heart yearning for Ephraim. About the same time Dietrich Bonhoeffer had written ". . . Christ helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering."¹³ A caution is required not to overemphasise suffering, as Juergen Moltmann reminds us, "the mysticism of suffering can easily be perverted into a justification of suffering itself."¹⁴

But, we must not retreat into the academic or individualistic interpretations of the cross and suffering. In the world today there is a greater response to the call of a God who is hurt in our sufferings, than one who is untouched, even though ready to forgive sins. Suffering in its varied forms is a common context to which all will respond. The Bible depicts a God who cares for people in their suffering and oppression.

The personal God is not beyond pleasure and pain. The Old Testament utilises anthropomorphisms, and we often dismiss them as pure figures of speech. But to do this is to depict a God who is less than the one the Bible portrays. The biblical God is a God of suffering who not only understands but feels pain and will readily address the world of sin and suffering today.

One recent reminder¹⁵ helpfully draws our attention to the need for a "theocentric" understanding of the Old Testament passages. We have frequently spoken of God in

abstract conceptual notions such as justice, goodness, wisdom, etc. but have failed to recognize God's pathos. For instance, we are told, when we look at passages that record God's concern for human waywardness, we concentrate on what it says to *us* without seeking to understand what it depicts about *God's heart*. Take for instance Ezekiel's allegory of unfaithful Israel. God says to her, You trusted in your beauty and used your fame to become a prostitute. You lavished your favours on anyone who passed by, and your beauty became his (Eze 16:14,15).

When we hear God speak of his people this way, many of us react by examining our own lives to see any ways in which we might be living as a prostitute in God's eyes. We turn inward and become introspective because God sounds angry. We read the passage egocentrically, taking it as a revelation about our sinful lives. This is not entirely wrong But we need to cultivate a God centred consciousness that would take in the full meaning of the passage. Failure to understand the passage theocentrically is to miss half the meaning.¹⁶

We have missed the force of God's reminder. Perhaps, we need to develop a "*theocardic*" viewpoint, one that will look from the perspective of God's heart. It is only when we can truly perceive God's heart of passion that we will capture the force of his real concern for humanity.

Missiology from God's Kingdom concern must restore a holistic theology, where the heart of God is seen not only as love and justice but also as agony and suffering. This theocardic view of the Bible will open up a little more of God's heart for us to recognize the intensity of the pain in God's call to Adam, "Where art thou?" We will see it not merely as an academic inquiry but as a cry of despair, because God's plans have been thwarted by Adam's rebellion. From then on his heart of suffering, like a father pitying his children, continues to seek out men and women in order to save them.

There is a major caution as we conclude. In our enthusiasm to present the personalness of God at work in our historical situation let us not commercialise our presentation to meet the needs of the world. We need to

present the "bigness" of our God. Both Islamic and Hindu ideas of the supreme being challenge us. Our Gospel preaching has many times accommodated God to the whims and fancies of the people to whom we have preached, calling them so easily to accept or reject Jesus Christ. When we truly consider the greatness of the biblical God, we ask: "Who are we to accept or reject God?"

Notes

1. Shirley MacLaine's popular paperbacks *Out on a Limb* and *Dancing in the Light* have been very influential and give some interesting insights into the New Age Movement.
2. R. A. Finlayson, "Holiness" in *New Bible Dictionary*, Second Edition, J. D. Douglas (ed.), IVP, 1982, p. 487.
3. *Ibid*, p. 488.
4. R.V.G. Tasker, "Wrath", *NBD*, p. 1263.
5. B. A. Milne, "Sin", *NBD*. p. 1119.
6. Leon Morris deals thoroughly with the arguments of C.H. Dodd and B. F. Westcott in his discussion on "Propitiation" in *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Tyndale Press, London, 1972.
7. *Ibid*, p. 174.
8. *Ibid*, p. 177.
9. George Arthur Buttrick (ed.), *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Abingdon Press, New York, p. 427. This is a useful study on the Old Testament view of God.
10. N. H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, 1944, pp. 94ff.
11. Edmond Jacob, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1958, p. 95.
12. Kazoh Kitamori, *The Theology of Pain of God*, SCM, London, 1958, pp. 20ff.
13. Juergen Moltmann *The Crucified God*, SCM, London, 1977, p. 47.
14. *Ibid*. p. 48.
15. Charles Ohlrich, *The Suffering God*, Triangle, pp. 54ff.
16. *Ibid*, p. 55.