

## *CHAPTER X*

### **THE CHURCH AND GOD'S MISSION TODAY**

Our discussion on the biblical themes and contextual issues has brought us to a point when we can draw out important implications for God's mission to the world through his Church. The reasons why we emphasise the Church are as follows. First, the Church's centrality in God's mission has been disregarded and that needs to be addressed. Second, much of recent mission activities has been conducted merely by individuals or organizations with no reference to the church and this needs to be corrected. But thirdly and even more importantly, the Church as the people of God has not been faithful to the mission of God's kingdom, and this needs to be challenged. Caught up in activities within itself, there has been a gradual diminishing of its thrust to the world where the church has been called to be God's witness.

Mission is an inescapable reality of the church and this must be recovered. We outline three major concerns. First, the Church must discover its missiological essence, not something from outside, but that which essentially belongs to its very nature. Secondly, the church must underline the uniqueness of its message. Only when we are convinced of the uniqueness of the revelation of Jesus Christ will we be convinced of the necessity of our mission. And thirdly, the church needs to discover the totality of God's mission.

#### **The Church and its Missionary Character**

Having considered the nature and the function of the people called together to display the glory of their God, we should have no doubt that the very essence of the church

has been lost. Right from the Reformation, attempts have been made to understand the Church biblically. Calvin wrote in his *Institutes* “Whenever we see the word of God sincerely preached and heard, wherever we see the sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there we cannot have any doubts that the Church of God has some existence”<sup>1</sup>. Very simply put, the church is the place where the word is preached faithfully and where the sacraments are administered.

Calvin, like Luther, was fighting against the institutionalized understanding of the Roman Church. Luther enumerated other marks of the true church, but went on to reduce the list to just the preaching of the word. The Church is pure, Luther claimed, where the pure Gospel is preached. “The Church does not make the word but it comes into being from the word.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the Reformers tried to get away from the institutional idea of the church, they still spoke primarily of what the church is within itself. Little is said about the church in its mission to the world. Without mission the church lacks life. It is the discovery of the biblical essence of the church that will bring a spontaneity to its mission, restoring that which is embedded in its very heart. The church’s two fold dynamic—worship and witness—needs to be fully recognised so that mission finds an integral place in the life and witness of the church. We make two further comments.

### *Ecclesiology Without Missiology*

The church without mission, ecclesiology without missiology, is a static symbol of what God wants from his living body in witness to the world today. Despite great attempts to establish the true nature of the Church in its Christocentricity and its relationship to the preached word, sadly, the Reformers failed to get to the heart of God’s concern for mission. The Roman Catholic church was far more overtly missionary minded. A Roman Catholic polemicist even challenged the Lutheran Church, “The

Lutherans compare themselves to the apostles and the evangelists, yet they have . . . hardly converted even so much as a handful.”<sup>3</sup> We must be careful not to conclude that the preaching of the Gospel throughout the world is foreign to Luther’s thought, but it is quite obvious that the thrust of mission is not central in the life of the church and hence there was almost no attempt by protestants to propagate the faith outside of Europe.

For the Reformers, the work of missions required a special office—one that either had already been fulfilled by the preaching of the apostles or rested solely with the sovereignty of God acting as was needed for a particular time. For example, Calvin held that the offices of apostle, prophet and evangelist were extraordinary. “They were not instituted in the Church to be perpetual but only to endure so long as Churches were to be formed where none previously existed”.<sup>4</sup> In other words, while God from time to time would raise up men and women to fulfil these functions, the sending forth of missionaries or evangelists was not an essential part of the Church’s functions.

Similarly, Luther, basing his teaching on the doctrine of universal priesthood, stressed the individual responsibility for preaching and teaching of the Gospel to non-Christians. This was not motivated by any missionary mandate, but by brotherly love, with no sense of calling or compulsion. The failure to build a fully biblical missiology into the very fabric of our ecclesiology naturally resulted in an ineffective and an incomplete church, operating only on a partial understanding of its nature and function.

This enigmatic absence of any concept of mission and the missionary obligation of the Church further developed into a theological prejudice that hindered missionary activity in the post-Reformation period. It was a reaction to this attitude that motivated William Carey, and later brought together men and women for Edinburgh 1910. Deeply conscious of the need to renew the Church, they took its missionary role seriously. But, the emerging

foreign missionary societies and boards, supported only by individuals in the church, was beginning to raise problems. The missionary movement was crying out to the Church to accept its essential missionary character. But the Church was still caught up in ecclesiastical politics, preoccupied with sustaining its own existence.

Lessons from history must be heeded and the church today must capture a proper biblical ecclesiology which would restore mission to its rightful place. Our discussion on the biblical insights started from creation has adequately underlined the importance of God's total plan. This plan is now being manifested through the church—God's people in worship and witness. Unless such a dynamic is discovered from within, no challenge from outside will arouse the church to fulfil its role in God's plans for his kingdom.

Churches have always been caught up with issues concerning their own survival and have hardly recognized the priority of reaching out. In fact, such a reaching out could well seem to be a threat to survival. A Chinese delegate to Edinburgh expressed his longing for a "united Christian Church without any denominational distinctions."<sup>5</sup> The Church, caught up in its own denomination survival, stifles the essence of mission. All this points heavily to the need for a proper biblical ecclesiology which would place missiology where it belongs.

### *Missiology Without Ecclesiology*

While an ecclesiology without missiology is a hindrance to mission, an equally grave concern is missiology without a direct relationship to ecclesiology. We have discussed how mission was reconceptualised to show that God's primary relationship was to the world and not through the Church to the world. The traditional God-Church-World sequence was said to be outdated and it was the God-World-Church sequence that was to be seen as the direction of mission today. The Church was being sidelined. An understanding of God's mission without any reference to the Church is missiology without ecclesiology.

The Bible is clear on the central role of the church in mission. The place that God has for Israel in his programme gives us ample evidence that he wants to continue to use his people for his purposes. In electing Israel, God established the fact that he will deal through a particular group of people to reveal his mission for the whole world. Israel anticipated the role of the church, which now carries the responsibility of God's kingdom mission. While there is no church without mission, it is equally true that there is no mission without the Church. The two are inextricably bound together.

Not only the liberal protestant church, but even recent evangelical mission is to be blamed for bypassing the church. The mushrooming missionary organizations are largely operated by individuals and groups that work outside the Church. Merely claiming to be *para* church is no justification for such activities. There must be a willingness to truly get alongside and establish a clear link with the Church.

The corrective can come about from both sides. On the one hand, better understanding of the Church—broad enough to see the role of the people in witness as belonging to the people in worship is needed. The Church has not yet discovered the fullness of the body as depicted in the Bible. On the other hand, mission must be seen as belonging to the body of Christ, rather than merely an external activity.

The Church Growth movement pioneered by Donald MacGavran has played a significant role in linking mission with the church in recent times. Many today are discovering the inseparability of mission and the church. Moving from being evangelistic movements to church planting agencies they have helped forge the link of church and mission much more cohesively. Mission and evangelistic agencies that operate independently, need this biblical foundation to give to their ministries a more fulfilling function in God's mission through his Church today.

## The Uniqueness of the Revelation of Jesus Christ

The undergirding of the Church with its missiological foundation must be accompanied by the affirmation of the uniqueness of the Christian message. Fervour in mission will be directly proportionate to the church's commitment to the uniqueness of the revelation of Jesus Christ and the accompanying conviction that this is the message for the world. The dilution we see in the content of mission on the one hand, and the decline in the commitment to mission on the other, are related to the lack of clear recognition of the unique message of salvation in Jesus Christ.

### The Challenge of Pluralism

*The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*,<sup>6</sup> a provoking book published few years ago helps to bring before us some recent attitudes to uniqueness. The writers express their desire for a new interpretation, claiming that the truth of Christianity does not lie in its literal surface but within its ever-changing historic and personal meaning. Their complaint is that,

in much Christian discourse, the 'uniqueness of Christianity' has been taken on a larger mythological meaning. It has come to signify the unique definitiveness, absoluteness, normativeness and superiority of Christianity in comparison with other religions of the world.<sup>7</sup>

The intention of the writers is to remove this mythological understanding by bringing about a new attitude that they feel is relevant today.

This new understanding seeks to take us even further than the two popular attitudes that have prevailed thus far in relation to other religions—the conservative *exclusivistic* attitude which accepted salvation only in Christ and the liberal *inclusivistic* idea which while recognizing the richness of other faiths viewed this richness as a result of Christ's redemptive work. The proposal now is a *pluralistic* position calling for a recognition of the independent validity of all religions. Three bridges are proposed, which we briefly describe below.

The first is the *historico-cultural* bridge of relativity. The awareness of the limitation of all knowledge and religious beliefs and the difficulty, even impossibility of judging other religions on the basis of one's own. John Hick, one of the most ardent proponents, concludes,

It seems impossible to make the global judgment that any one religious tradition has contributed more good or less evil, than others. As vast complex totalities, the world traditions seem to be more or less on par with each other. None can be singled out as manifestly superior.<sup>8</sup>

The second bridge is the *theologico-mystical* bridge which recognises the authentic religious experience of mystery in all religions. Mystery demands religious pluralism and hence no religion can claim to be the "only" or the "final" word. Raimundo Panikkar and Stanley Samartha are the spokesmen for this position, claiming that all religions can participate and reflect on this mystery but none can own it.<sup>9</sup> There is no one universal system that can be imposed on the others, as there will always be the many systems with their differences and disagreements. We should seek to preserve the uniqueness of all religions.

The third is the *ethico-practical* bridge which advocates the need to promote justice. The proponents of this position expose the exploitative character which upholds Christianity as the bearer of the highest revelation, and the resulting outrageous and absurd religious chauvinism. The religions of this world need to share a concern for justice. The strongest case for a pluralistic attitude is the moral and ethical need we face today, not any salvific, revelational, or rational harmony.

One thing is clear as we read *The Myth*: We are confronted with a totally different mission. If one's mission is defined right from the start to discover religious harmony then that is what one will seek to justify. Hick, Knitter and the others are clear on this aim. However, we have set out to look to the Bible for a wholistic understanding of the Church's mission, and have discovered that anything less than a commitment to the ultimate claims of Jesus

Christ will fall far short of biblical mission for the Church today.

Our commitment to God's mission is valid only if it is based on a conviction of its uniqueness, its finality or decisiveness. The resurgence of religions and their ardent missionary zeal are a direct result of a renewed belief in the finality of *their* claims. Some of these claims are explicitly directed at undermining the Christian influence. The devout Hindu or the committed Muslim is not willing to compromise. Why then, do we need to embrace pluralism? Anyone taking the biblical claims seriously will see that a commitment to biblical mission demands a commitment to the ultimacy of Jesus Christ. It is then we will truly see the Church set on fire in response to God's call.

### *The Finality of Jesus Christ*

Calls to compromise Christ's claims have been around a long time. The forces within the Ecumenical movement began even before Tambaram 1938. However, as we now face the pressure from within as well as without, it is imperative to accentuate the uniqueness of the Christian revelation. We must confront people with the uncompromising claims of Christ. Bishop Stephen Neill states:

We must recognize afresh the immense originality of Jesus Christ. Under the influence of "comparative religion" and similar tendencies we have been too much inclined to find parallels to the works of Jesus here, there and everywhere, and to suppose that he can be fitted into the category of prophet, or genius, or religious leader, or whatever we prefer. But this is simply wrong. Jesus cannot be understood in any dimension other than his own. He has called into being a new world of reality in which only those are at home who call him Lord. When Christians use the word "God", they mean the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ and nothing else. This is a truth that we forget at our peril.<sup>10</sup>

The point is strong, and our biblical theology must be just as strong to effectively confront people of other faiths with the inexorable claims of Christ. A biblical reminder for such a confrontation comes in the word "*elenctic*". It finds its root in the Greek verb *elengchein*, which means

"to rebuke, to convict, to refute, to expose sin".<sup>11</sup> The word occurs some eighteen times in the New Testament. Combining the varying shades of meanings, an elenctic confrontation is "a confrontation with error in which error is exposed for what it is, the one guilty of error feels rebuked and compelled to admit his error, and, one hopes, is led to repentance".<sup>12</sup>

Men and women need to be confronted with the claims of Christ through an encounter with Christ himself. Error needs to be exposed and God's concern for bringing people into repentance must be passionately made known. The primacy for this kind of a proclamation is heavily underlined in the Bible. And this task can only be fulfilled when we ourselves are totally convinced of the uniqueness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's final word to humanity. Any belief less than this would dilute the message and minimize the intensity of the biblical mission.

We must rediscover this kind of a proclamation needed in our context today. But, confrontation does not necessarily imply antagonisation. This kind of a preaching is far too familiar and must be corrected. We need to develop a fresh sensitivity for our context, in fact a new theology of religions that will enable us positively approach men and women with the compassion of Christ. This kind of confrontation will bring people into an encounter with Christ, seeing their need to respond to the claims of Christ.

The early Christians confidently proclaimed the finality of God's revelation, despite all the prevailing philosophies and ideologies. Yet, they showed sensitivity in dealing with other sincere worshippers or God fearing Gentiles. Without relaxing the claims of Christ, we need to see how best to proclaim the message afresh in our context of religious revival. Our proclamation must be based on the uniqueness of the biblical revelation, standing on the full and final revelation of God in the Lord Jesus Christ, but related to our present world.

### An Understanding of the Totality of God's Mission

The one overall stress we have made as we have developed our biblical understanding of God's mission has been the need for a total perspective of the mission of God's kingdom. We could be presumptuous if we categorically claim that we have this perspective before us. What we claim is that a concern for God's total mission allows the Church to express itself in its fullest potential as the vehicle of God's mission in the world today.

#### *The Need for the Entire Biblical Horizon*

As we have looked at the Bible afresh we have been challenged to broaden our horizons to grasp the total picture of God's purposes for people and his world. We have stressed the need for the biblical horizon to enable us to see the limited horizons we have worked within—the individual perspective, the evangelism-alone perspective or missiology purely from the command of Jesus Christ. The value of this total perspective is that it puts every aspect of God's mission in its proper place. The various parts are seen within the integral whole.

We have operated from purely a New Testament perspective without the Old Testament background of the overall plan of Jesus Christ's mission. We do not mean that we have totally confined our studies to the New Testament. Some Old Testament themes have been included, but our studies have missed their true missiological potential.

Even missiology has been only one section of our theology. The challenge is to see theology totally as missiological, rather than to merely attempt to give to missiology a theological touch up. Even our casual glance at the Bible, depicting the outworkings of God in the world, has revealed a missionary God fulfilling missionary purposes. Our missiology will make our theology dynamic and contextual.

This does not imply that all of theology should be taken over by the missiologist. The model of the church, a people in worship and a people in witness, will serve as the best

model for theology. The Church has a being of itself which it has to stabilize and strengthen. The people of God gather to worship the head of the church, God in Christ. The church has to confirm its relationship with its Creator. This is the basis of the life and functioning of the church. Similarly, even theology has a rationale in itself. It has got to establish this and seek to stabilise and strengthen the Church.

On the other hand, the church is called to be a witnessing people. It is a body in action, a people on a mission, a worshipping community on a witnessing commission. Worship is not the end. The church has got to go out in response to the command of Christ. Similarly, theology must motivate people to get involved in God's mission. The church that ends with worship will be an incomplete church. And a theology that ends only with the education of the student with the increasing of one's knowledge of God's word will similarly be an incomplete theology.

Our theology, then, must have two dimensions. The first is the vertical dimension of the Church. This could be *the doxological dimension*, in praise and worship of God. We have operated for so long on an academic approach to theology, when it really ought to be far more dynamic. In the history of the Church we learn of theology in the form of a doxological adoration of God. Our academic emphasis has diminished this goal of worship that was originally intended for theology. Theology with this dimension will be vibrant and life giving.

The other is the horizontal dimension and this we need to see as *"Missiological."* The totality of theology in its doxological and missiological thrust will give to the church its total framework of a people in worship and a people in witness. It is time we recast our seminary learning in keeping with this total perspective, rather than continuing to operate from fixed and lifeless models of theological education.

### *Evangelism and Social Action*

Recent debates discussing the meaning and essence of mission have focussed on the relationship between evangelism and social action. The prolonged discussion has sought to see their relationship within mission. They were looked at as being foreign to one another and hence any relationship appears artificial. When we approach the relationship from the perspective of a whole, we see the importance of each of these elements individually, as well as show that they belong integrally.

It is in search for such a whole, some argue on the basis of a *partnership*. Evangelism and social action are seen as partners within God's mission. On one extreme we have those who argue for evangelism as the sole component in mission, while on the other the wholly social emphasis.<sup>13</sup> In between many genuinely seek to discover a healthy relationship. Few, if any, will object to a concrete demonstration of Christian concern. Whether, they are ready to consider this as God's mission or not, they do not deny a place in God's plan for the Church and for the individuals who make up the Church.

Rather than God's mission we could speak about God's *concern*, God's kingdom concern. And those willing to explore the potential for this whole will open themselves for the fullest possible involvement in all that God would want for his world. In this sense, mission, if that is what we insist on calling it, becomes far more than people-concern and social-concern. It is every possible concern that a caring God, on grounds of his *historicalness* and *personalness*, will express as he continues his redemptive work in his created world.

Proclamation is primary to the witness of the Church. However, this is not the only aspect of our life and witness. God's gifts to the Church will reveal a wider demonstration of the good news of the kingdom. It is not enough to sound out this good news, if it is not somewhere tangibly available. The Church today ought to be living out its total being.

Making known the kingdom is not merely a matter of announcing the kingdom. The time, effort and resources spent in arguing for and against social action, or any other responsibility has subtly helped to keep us away from a clearly biblical concern. Must we not demonstrate what we proclaim? These two aspects are held together powerfully in our Lord's mission. He was ready to be totally available for whatever God wanted him to act upon. This is the spontaneity that comes from his being on the kingdom mission. In the church's life and mission today unjustifiably small horizons have robbed God's people of the spontaneity of the kingdom mission.

Proclamation and demonstration constitute one whole. Mission is then an act of obedience to God's call in terms of *being* rather than *doing*. We are not involved in the mission of the kingdom just by fulfilling a certain job description, nor carefully prioritising elements that are parts of this mission. On grounds of being a citizen of the kingdom we are impelled to be all that the kingdom calls us to be. Again, this is the spontaneity of the people of God. Not merely parts held together, nor even priorities maintained, but the prime concern for a submission to God. Mission will be incomplete without the whole horizon of the kingdom.

### *The Actualisation of the Gospel*

Challenged by biblical insights, we are convinced of the need for a practical demonstration of the Gospel. But, in responding to this challenge we must avoid any artificiality in the form of forced activities. Concretising of the Gospel is integral to the character of the Church and its mission. Incarnational mission is priority. This fleshing out of the Gospel is the *actualizing* of the message—a spontaneous expression of the kingdom character of the Church.

The question will be asked: how can we communicate the Gospel of the kingdom to a world that is alien to God's purpose? For the answer we look at Jesus himself, recognizing the fact that he *actualized* the kingdom in his

life and ministry. Speaking with the authority of God, he reminded his hearers, "The kingdom is near you." We have seen that this meant nothing less than the fact that Jesus himself is the kingdom. His nearness to us signifies the nearness of the kingdom and hence the mission of the kingdom is the mission of Jesus himself. When the Church faithfully seeks to follow its Lord closely, its mission issues forth more effectively. It is then that the message is truly actualized and the Church is true to its call. This is the true dynamic of the Church's mission.

The actualization of the Gospel is a true expression of the relevance of the kingdom message within the Church. Only when the message is first appropriated by the people of God can the Church effectively communicate the Good News to the world. The emphasis is on the obedience of Church as it surrenders to Jesus Christ, available for God to express his kingdom concern.

We give to the world what we have. When the people of God are charged with the power of Jesus Christ their words and their deeds are in consonance with the kingdom. The actualization of the Gospel therefore is not something external to the believers of Jesus Christ, for they are only living out what has already been experienced. Whether to speak or act is not the question.

The message made flesh in the life of the Church gives to it the solid platform from which to proclaim the Gospel of the kingdom. Such an actualization helps to fully restore to the Church its true missionary character and thereby demonstrate the very dynamic of the kingdom. But this will only come when the Church is willing to fully submit to the Lord Jesus Christ—in whom "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell." And in this submission, the Church will discover her part in God's total mission, his kingdom concern "to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven." (Col. 1:19f) This is the mission of God's kingdom.

## Notes

1. John Calvin, *Calvin's Institutes*, MacDonald Publishing Co., Florida, IV.1.9.
2. Quoted in Paul D. L. Avis, *The Church in the Theology of the Reformers*, John Knox Press, 1981, p. 17.
3. Cardinal Robert Bellarmine (1524-1621), quoted in Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Penguin, Hammondsworth, 1964, p. 221.
4. Avis, *op. cit.*, p. 173, quoting *Luther's Works*.
5. Quoted in Philip Potter, *Your Kingdom Come*, p. 19.
6. John Hick and Paul Knitter (Eds.), *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness, Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Orbis, New York, 1988. I develop my arguments in relation to Hick's and Knitter's concern for a pluralistic theology in detail in my book, *The Pluralistic Predicament*, Theological Book Trust, Bangalore, 1992.
7. *Ibid.*, p. vii.
8. *Ibid.*, p. ix.
9. *Ibid.* See articles: Stanley J. Samamrtha, "The Cross and the Rainbow", (pp. 69-88); Raimundo Panikkar, "The Jordan, the Tiber and the Ganges", (pp. 89-116).
10. Stephen Neill, *Salvation Today*, p. 148.
11. J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing House, Philadelphia, 1960.
12. Peter Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment*, IVP, Downer's Grove, 1981, pp. 59ff.
13. I myself had earlier argued for *Mission* to be seen purely as evangelistic in its intention and all else to be seen as *Ministry*.