Christian International Mission at the End of a Millennium

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The International Character of Christian Mission

We have the sense of approaching a decisive turning point as we reach the end of a millennium. This sense seems to be particularly acute among those who reflect on Christian, international mission. Leading journals in missiology are devoting many articles and even entire issues to the subject of the future. The American Society of Missiology has placed the future on the agenda of its meetings. Grand strategies for world evangelization by 2001 A.D. are being set forth. It is clear that we are at a turning point, a changing of generations, a movement into a new era in Christian witness.

The very title of this article, "Christian International Mission . . . " is an indicator. A century ago, "foreign missions" signified the Western countries as the "home base" for mission in the distant, foreign lands where Christ was not known. After World War II, "world mission" pointed up the unity of God's mission on all six continents. It indicated that the work of mission was ecumenical in nature, with churches working in concert. It played down national boundaries and differences as Christians sought to overcome old structures of colonialism and racism. "International mission" takes more seriously not only national boundaries, but also the contributions to the Christian faith which "autonomous" churches [with their great variety of languages and cultures] are making within their own [lands] and through cross-cultural, international mission.

The international character of Christian witness became fully apparent in 1989 at the conferences of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches (WCC) and at the Lausanne II conference in Manila. In each case more than 70 percent of the participants were from Third World countries. The representation at the conferences served to reflect the changing Christian demographic map. It is estimated that by 2000 A.D. 58 percent of the world's Christian population will be in Third World countries. The Christian population of Africa may have already surpassed that of North America. Depending on how one estimates the Christian population in China, the numbers in East and South Asia combined may now almost equal those of North America.

Moreover, non-Western churches are zealously establishing mission agencies of their own. One study concludes that there are more than 20,000 non-Western missionaries today, and that the total could reach 100,000 by the
year 2000. This compares with 39,309 North American, Protestant [missionaries], of whom 19,905 were independent or unaffiliated in 1985. The age when one could be tempted to believe that the spread of the gospel depended ultimately on the presence and zeal of Western [foreign] missionaries is clearly over.

Missiological leadership is arising precisely in those regions which were previously the objects of mission. As churches there become the subjects of mission, the cultural, political, and religious sensitivities of Christians in Asia, Africa, and Latin America are providing new resources for Christian witness in emerging post-colonial, post-enlightenment and post-Christendom world cultures.

Tracy K. Jones has noted that old centers of influence in mission are becoming new peripheries, while the areas of greatest church growth and theological creativity are found in the Third World. He has observed that the Christian mission today is in "colossal confusion." Rather than a reason for despair, however, he sees this as a sign of vitality and hope because "untidiness and confusion have characterized the great periods of missionary expansion."

**International Debate about the Nature of Effective Witness**

The nature of effective witness and the necessity of conversion are presently crucial matters of debate in defining the strategy and goals for international mission. On the one hand, "Evangelicals" emphasize the importance of concentrating on traditional methods of Protestant, missionary evangelism, with the goal of leading people to personal conversion and loyalty to Christ. Church growth in terms of numbers is a high priority in the development of mission strategy. In their conferences, one discovers many opportunities to attend workshops on techniques for communicating the evangelistic messages by means of radio, television, and the printed word, as well as means for participating in programs to reach every person in the world with the basic, gospel message in this generation. The theme for Lausanne II, "Proclaim Christ until He Comes: A Call to the Whole Church to Take the Whole Gospel to the Whole World," indicates a focus on the evangelistic thrust in continuity with the Edinburgh conference of 1910.

In contrast to the emphasis on the necessity for individual conversions, ecumenical circles related to the WCC, as well as many Roman Catholics, tend to emphasize the social/political aspects of evangelization. The Jesuit, Michael Amaladoss, for example, maintains that evangelization today must take into account the poverty of the majority of humanity. "But today we are realizing that the poor are not merely poor, but are made poor by unjust economic and political structures." He continues:
Proclaiming the gospel in this situation is to proclaim liberation—not merely economic and political, but also cultural and religious . . . . This would mean today conscientizing the people and helping them to organize themselves to struggle for their own liberation—for the kingdom of peace, freedom, fellowship and justice that God has promised for all people. Evangelization that takes such an approach cannot but have a political dimension. 3

During the 1980s there have been many attempts to move beyond the two poles outlined in the previous paragraphs. Evangelicals have applauded the statements on conversion in Mission and Evangelism: An Ecumenical Affirmation, produced by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the WCC.

The proclamation of the Gospel includes an invitation to recognize and accept in a personal decision the saving lordship of Jesus Christ . . . . Each person is entitled to hear the Good News.

Conversion happens in the midst of our historical reality and incorporates the totality of our life, because God's love is concerned with that totality.

The call to conversion, as a call to repentance and obedience, should also be addressed to nations, groups and families. 4

The General Program Council of the Reformed Church in America has also sought to move beyond polarization and in 1980 reaffirmed the three goals for mission of Gijsbertus Voetius, a 17th century Reformed theologian: the manifestation of God's glory in his kingdom; the planting of churches; and the conversion of individuals. The following is a selection from that report:

In every land and people there are persons who are ready to hear and to believe, and the gospel must not be withheld from them. There are individuals waiting to be converted and come to the Lord in repentance.

One of the goals of Reformed Church international missions today remains that there should be a church in every village in the world and in every section of every city.

Although the evangelization of people and individuals cannot wait until the justice of God is established throughout the world, one cannot offer a truncated Jesus to the world. Justification by faith cannot be separated from justice on earth. Jesus in his own lifetime
manifested the unity of purpose and action of God who both heals the sick and forgives the repentant, who converts the woman at the well, and calls for justice in the temple. The gospel today as always is caught up in the great movements of events in the world and the church ignores these at its peril. Ultimately, there is no non-political Christian.

Behind the issues concerning conversion lie the theological issue whether it is crucial for salvation that there be a consciously articulated personal confession of Jesus Christ. If those who do not make such a confession are understood to be eternally lost and destined for hell, then it is essential that evangelism at all times and above all else aim at bringing persons to a personal confession of Jesus as Savior. All strategies for mission must be developed with this end in view. Issues of political oppression, economic and social injustice, racial tensions, as well as war and peace, important as they may be, are always secondary to the urgency of personal evangelism.

In the report of The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, three positions were delineated as held by various Evangelicals on the matter of the eternal destiny of those who have never heard of Christ:

(1) Most Evangelicals believe that, because they reject the light they have received, they condemn themselves to hell. (2) Many are more reluctant to pronounce on their destiny, have no wish to limit the sovereignty of God, and prefer to leave this issue open to him. (3) Others go further in expressing their openness to the possibility that God may save some who have not heard of Christ, but immediately add that, if he does so, it will not be because of their religion, sincerity, or actions (there is no possibility of salvation of good works), but only because of his own grace freely given on the ground of the atoning death of Christ. All Evangelicals recognize the urgent need to proclaim the gospel of salvation to all humankind.

While the Reformed Church’s Ad Hoc Report on World Mission does not commit itself to a specific position on the eternal destiny of those who have not heard the gospel, the total impact of the report does lead one to conclude that the third option above is the basis for many of its recommendations. For example, the report in its emphasis upon the total task refuses to give final priority to some primary task.

The desire of the Reformed Church to continue mission emphasis on pioneer evangelism should not be viewed as an exclusive focus at the expense of this total task. The history of our church’s mission does not exhibit such exclusivity, even though evangelism has been the
consistent emphasis. Physical healing of the sick, educational service in the schools, and leadership training among indigenous churches are just a few of the many facets which the Reformed Church has displayed in its missions. 7

Development and Liberation at the End of a Millennium

Deaconal service has from the earliest times been a central element in God's mission through the church. Protestant and Roman Catholic missions alike have been in the forefront of deaconal ministries during the past two centuries. Christian hospitals, schools, agricultural institutes, nutrition programs, orphanages, boarding homes, homes for abused women, and a host of other forms of Christian charitable services are in place on every continent as a result of Christian missions.

Since World War II, Christian world service and relief agencies have grown to become large benevolent international aid agencies and have developed considerable sophistication as leaders in international development. They have been instrumental in calling the attention of governments as well as the United Nations and other international agencies to the need for economic and social development in poverty-stricken nations of the world. They have cooperated in providing resettlement to refugees, emergency assistance in the face of catastrophes, and health, food, and technological assistance to the poor. Their programs are appreciated by many outside the churches even while they are thankfully affirmed and supported by members of the churches.

At the end of our millennium, however, Christian mission benevolence is under heavy criticism from those who insist that the emphasis on development must be replaced by support for liberation. Development assistance which does not empower poor people politically and economically tends to leave the poor deeper in the poverty. Thus in India during the first decade of the "Green Revolution," a typical result was that the number of households beneath the poverty line increased from 38 percent to 53 percent. 8 On a wider scale, after three decades of emphasis upon economic development of Third World countries, the gap between the rich and the poor has been widening at an alarming rate. The poorest sections of the population are suffering the most from deforestation, creation of deserts, depletion of fish stocks, and loss of their land. 9

Recognition of the failure of the developmentalism of the Alliance for Progress of the 1960s in Latin America, which had been at first enthusiastically supported by the Roman Catholic Church, led their bishops' meeting in Medellin, Colombia, in 1968 to speak of God's "option for the poor" and the need for "liberation." They pointed out that poverty in Latin America was the result of institutionalized violence upon great masses of people. The church not only had to denounce from the outside the situation of poverty caused by
injustice and sin; the church itself had to be in "solidarity with the poor." In such solidarity, the church had to make itself vulnerable as it took actions which would enable the poor to organize themselves, awaken (conscientize) them to the root causes of their poverty, and stand with them in the search for justice and true peace. The bishops recognized that their stand could in some cases legitimate revolutionary insurrection, but they warned that revolution can lead to worse evils.\(^\text{10}\)

Since 1968, mission agencies in every continent have had to struggle to define their policies and programs with regard to issues of liberation as well as development. Confusion in the debates in the churches often arises because analysis is often in terms of the disparity between the rich and poor while churches and mission agencies are usually dominated by the middle-class. Development models of mission are immensely satisfying to believers and missionaries of the middle-class. In providing hospitals, schools, technical assistance, and modern methods of management and small business enterprises, Christians are able to act generously and enable others to enjoy some of the blessings of life, without threatening the basic order and structures of society.\(^\text{11}\) Middle class developmentalists love the saying, "Give a person a fish and there is food for a day; teach a person to fish and there is food for a lifetime." The poor ask, however, "What good does it do to teach a person to fish when someone else owns the pond?"

The General Program Council of the Reformed Church in America has found itself in agreement with statements coming out of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism which recognize the need for international Christian mission "in solidarity with the poor" rather than simply doing things "for the poor." Development programs must be done in full awareness of the priority of the struggle for justice and liberation of the poor.

Christians are challenged to follow him (Jesus), surrendering all they are and have to the kingdom, to a struggle that commits us against all injustice, against all want. The preferential option for the poor, instead of discriminating against all other human beings, is, on the contrary, a guideline for the priorities and behavior of all Christians everywhere, pointing to the values around which we should organize our lives and the struggle in which we should put our energy.\(^\text{12}\)

Within the Reformed Church in America, as within many other churches, there is a continual debate about the relationship of development and liberation activity in relation to the basic evangelistic thrust of mission. In contrast to ecumenical statements which relate concern for social justice to the kingdom of God, the Lausanne Covenant places such action within the realm of providence or common grace:
We affirm that God is both the Creator and Judge of all men. We therefore should share his concern for justice and reconciliation throughout all society, and for liberation of men from all kinds of oppression. Because man is made in the image of God, every person...has an intrinsic dignity, because of which he should be respected and served, not exploited. 13

According to this statement, God the creator is active in the world in providence, common grace, and judgment quite apart from the purposes for which he has sent his Son and the Holy Spirit. The redemptive work of Christ is limited to the church and the believers. Within the Evangelical community, Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden criticize this stance, stating: "This means that any true change towards God's purpose for man in society, arising out of the death and resurrection of Christ, can take place only within the confines of the church. This is the root of the tension; since the acknowledgement of Christ is always required for any true social change, evangelism always has priority." 14

The theological controversy whether the search for social, political, and economic justice is rooted in the coming of God's kingdom in Jesus Christ or whether it is a matter of God's common grace and providence is of central importance in Christian international mission understanding among North American churches. Because of their emphasis on the kingdom of God, churches in the ecumenical tradition today constantly refer to Luke 4:18-19:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. 15

Those in the Lausanne tradition, on the other hand, insist upon the absolute priority of evangelism. They accuse those who deviate from that goal to be guilty of compromise and lack of zeal in mission.

Raymond Fung, secretary for Evangelism in the WCC, has pointed out that there are many signs that it is the poor of the earth who are flowing into the church while the church continues to be under the domination of the middle class. He believes that if this turning of the poor to Jesus Christ is to continue, the dominance of the middle class must be broken.

There is nothing wrong with being middle class. The problem begins when the middle class, which constitutes only one part of the total sociological make-up of the world church, claims and exercises total power over the church and deprives all others of the openness to
participate. Then everybody suffers, especially the church's understanding of the gospel and hence its credibility as an evangelist. 16

Neither the Evangelicals nor the ecumenicals in North America and Europe have to date adequately resolved the dilemma pointed out by Raymond Fung. The Evangelicals continue to have confidence in developmentalism in the social and economic realm, while they are beginning to struggle with strategies for "contextualizing" the message preached among the poor. They have not as yet taken up the emphasis of ecumenical statements that "the call to conversion should begin with the repentance of those who do the calling . . . ." 17

Within the ecumenical movement, one encounters anxiety about how to move beyond the dilemma. The phrase, "solidarity with the poor," has become a shibboleth. The Base Ecclesial Communities of Latin America have become objects of intense admiration and study. The evangelization of the "sinned-against" is as crucial as the evangelism of the "sinners."

We should recognize that human beings are the sinned-against. From such recognition, as in the case of Jesus, compassion for people and for the world becomes real. Sinned-againstness is the common ground for Christians and others. Christians too are the sinned-against. This provides the basis for solidarity. This defines our relationship. Given this relationship, Christians are partners with the world. Christians are not Santa Claus. We are not the Messiah . . . . The salvation and liberation of persons and peoples are matters between them and their God . . . . Our role is to build up persons and peoples so that they can freely say yes or no. 18

The controversy about how churches dominated by the middle class are now being called into God's mission to the sinned-against as well as to the sinners will continue to be crucial to the formation of mission policy in the next decade, especially because predictions are now increasing that the "North-South" world tensions are likely to supersede present "East-West" tensions. 19 In a world church where the numbers of Christians in the "South" is likely soon to exceed those in the "North," middle class mission agencies and churches of the North are being called to new humility in obedience. "We realize that the poor to whom Jesus promised the kingdom of God are blessed in their longing for justice and in their hope for liberation. They are both subjects and bearers of the Good News; they have the right and the duty to announce the Gospel not only among themselves, but also to all other sectors of the human family." 20
Mission in a Deteriorating Environment

Theological perspectives about the relationship of redemption, providence, common grace, and creation play a crucial role in defining how Christian international mission will engage the emerging global ecological and environmental issues. Throughout most of the past two centuries, the Protestant missionary movement has promoted the assumption that human beings created in the image of God have a responsibility to "subdue" the earth. Missionaries have taught generations of people in the Third World how to solve the mysteries of nature through science and technology and how to master disease through the wonders of modern medicine. Now we are beginning to recognize the negative side of this doctrine of human mastery of the earth, with its resulting overpopulation, chemical and nuclear pollution, deforestation and desertification, and destruction of the land. 21

Within the WCC, the issue of the "integrity of creation" has been linked with that of justice and peace, and has become a major theme. It is certain to take a high place on the agenda of the churches. Therefore, as we approach the end of the millennium, we are just at the beginning of what could become the next major debate about the nature, content, and strategy of evangelism in a world in need of justice, love, and compassion especially among the poor. 22 In the Reformed Church in America, ecological mission has scarcely begun, but it is likely to grow in importance in the next decade.

Dialogue with People of Other Faiths or No Faith

At the end of the millennium, leaders in international missions are increasingly occupied with their relationship to people of other faiths or to people of no faith. International migration patterns and the ease of modern communication and transportation have made next-door neighbors of people once separated by oceans and continents. Believers' children are marrying persons of other faiths. While thousands of Christian churches are being erected, mosques, temples, and holy shrines are becoming common in Western cities.

In spite of this evidence of religious vitality, all religions are threatened by the growing materialism, secularism, and official or practical atheism of a post-Enlightenment world. Thus one hears calls for the religions of the world to unite in the defense of spiritual values, world justice, and peace and to collaborate for the victory of love and reconciliation over violence, hatred, and self-aggrandizement.

In this context of religious pluralism and encroaching ecularism, the question of how persons who hold the Christian faith should relate to people of other faiths and to secularists threatens to become increasingly divisive. The issue often crystalizes around two words: "proclamation" which calls for...
conversion, and "dialogue" which has the goal of furthering understanding and positive relationships for peace and justice without calling for a change of religious community.

One must note that almost all of the Christian participants in the controversy agree that there is a place for dialogue as well as proclamation in Christian international mission, although the relative priority of each activity is subject to considerable dispute. It is generally agreed today that there are in every major religion many admirable religious and moral teachings, as well as aspects of spiritual truth. The issue is whether the truths found in other religions are (a) vestiges of a general revelation which falls short of salvation, or (b) vestiges of a general revelation which is in some sense "salvific," or (c) the work of the Holy Spirit on the basis of God's special revelation in Jesus Christ.

Evangelical mission agencies usually hold to (a). They recognize vestiges of the general revelation of God in nature and other religions. These vestiges make it possible to engage in elenthics (apologetics), to "contextualize" the gospel message, and to accept many of the cultural patterns of people being evangelized. What is vehemently denied is that these vestiges are in any way sufficient for salvation and that the Christian faith and non-Christian faiths are alternative and equally valid roads to God. Therefore, dialogue as well as proclamation must always look toward conversion to Christ.23

Within the WCC's Dialogue Sub-unit voices are being raised which call for dialogue on the basis that "the whole of the Bible relates to only one mission--the mission of God. All other missions have to find their place within it. The Christian witness to Christ, the Christian service to humanity and Christian acts of worship are all only a part of--and participation in--the overall mission of God, which knows no boundaries." 24

This position, which seems to vacillate theologically between (b) and (c), is taken by persons who are profoundly impressed by the need to overcome the terrible violence and suffering caused or furthered by religious antagonisms in places such as the Middle East and Southern Asia as well as the discrimination and atrocities carried out elsewhere in the name of religion. They are also very much aware of the imperialistic nature manifested by Western Christendom for more than a millennium and therefore believe that dialogue without demand for conversion is now required. "But to the majority of people of other faiths, the church and its mission continue to be a threat, for however loving that mission is, it is seen to have the aim of overpowering and replacing the faiths of others. 'Two thousand years of Christian love,' said a person of another faith, 'is enough to make anybody nervous.'" 25

At its most recent conference in May, 1989, held in San Antonio, Texas, the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, WCC, essentially reaffirmed the uniqueness of Christ in God's work of salvation and continued to hold position (c).
The Word is at work in every human life. In Jesus of Nazareth, the Word became a human being. The wonder of his ministry of love persuades Christians to testify to people of every religious and non-religious persuasion of this decisive presence of God in Christ. In him is our salvation. Among Christians there are still differences of understanding as to how this salvation in Christ is available to people of diverse religious persuasions. But all agree that witness should be rendered to all.  

While acknowledging the importance of the issue of dialogue with people of other faiths, missionary statesman Lesslie Newbigin at the San Antonio conference once again stated his conviction that the most important missiological question today is, "Can the West be Converted?" "The most important dialogue," he said, "is that between the biblical understanding of the human story and the one dominating Western culture." Ironically, Christian missionaries have been "the great agents of secularization," helping Western culture permeate the rest of the world.  

In asking whether the West can be converted, Newbigin challenges both ecumenical thinkers and Evangelical missiologists to take issue with the Enlightenment philosophy which divides the world into the public and the private realms, with religion confined to the second. Newbigin has little confidence in the Western churches and mission agencies adequately to confront the missionary challenge in the West. He affirms that the world church must now engage in wrestling with the principalities and powers which now dominate the Western and "coming world civilization." "The great new asset which we have for our missionary task is the presence among us of communities of Christians nourished in the cultures of Asia, Africa, and the West Indies. We need their eyes to see our culture afresh."  

Mission at the End of a Millennium  

At the beginning of the modern missionary era, "foreign missionaries" went to lands far away. Today, Christian international mission has come home. It is now we ourselves who are called to live obediently to Jesus Christ, to bear witness to the gospel in dialogue with people of other faiths and among those who would live by reason rather than by faith. We are called into mission in order that sinners may be forgiven by the atoning work of Jesus Christ, the oppressed may be set free, the poor may be empowered, and God's will may be done in Christ's way. Ultimately, in the emerging context at the turning of the millennium, the task of international mission remains the same as it has always been—in unity with the church on every continent, to bear witness to Jesus Christ, so "that the world may believe" (John 17:21). 'The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come.' And let him who hears say, 'Come.' And let him who is thirsty come, let him who desires take the water of life without price" (Rev. 22:17).
ENDNOTES


2 Ibid., 114.


13 Lausanne Covenant, paragraph 3 on Social Responsibility.

14 Samuel and Sugden, 51.


17 Mission and Evangelism, paragraph 13.

18 Fung, 23.
19 See, for example, Ivan L. Head, "South-North Dangers," in *Foreign Affairs*, 68 (Summer 1989), 71-86.

20 *Mission and Evangelism*, paragraph 36.

21 For a sober appraisal of the situation, see Jessica Tuchman Matthews, "Redefining Security," *Foreign Affairs*, 68 (Spring 1989), 162-177.

22 For a brief introduction to the issues, see Wesley Granberg-Michaelson, *Tending the Garden* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987).


25 Ibid.

26 *Mission and Evangelism*, paragraph 42.
