

The Missionary Calling of the Church

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In the last decade the question of the Church's missionary calling has probably received more theological attention than in any other recent period of church history. Both before and after Willingen (1952) numerous studies and reports have given articulate expression to a widespread concern to formulate the concept of the Church's missionary calling more precisely. These studies were worked out with great care and detail and it would be presumptuous to say that their results had been adequately digested. On the contrary, the Willingen Conference produced only brief statements on "The Missionary Calling of the Church" and "The Calling of the Church to Mission and Unity."¹ A proposed statement on "The Missionary Obligation of the Church" was received as a basis for further study, but not formally adopted.² Meanwhile, the voluminous documents and supporting papers which constitute the North American Report on Aim I - to restate the universal missionary obligation of the Church (1) as grounded in the eternal Gospel and (2) in relation to the present historical situation - remain almost wholly unpublished and are available only in mimeographed form from the Committee on Research in Foreign Missions of the Division of Foreign Missions of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.³ There has been remarkably little discussion of these studies since Willingen, though it would seem that any further discussion would regard the work done in preparation for Willingen as a requisite starting point.

¹ *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*. Report of the Enlarged Meeting of the Committee of the I.M.C. meeting at Willingen, 1952. London. 46 pp.

² *Missions Under the Cross*, ed. Norman Goodall. Published by I.M.C., London, 1953. 264; pp. Contains addresses delivered at Willingen as well as the Report. Statement referred to is entitled "The Theological Basis of the Missionary Obligation" (An Interim Report) and is found on pp. 238-245.

³ Available through the Missionary Research Library, 3041 Broadway, N.Y. 27, N.Y.

Lack of a lively debate in the interim means that the present may not be greatly propitious for a restudy of the missionary calling of the Church, nor are we to await results that go much beyond the findings of Willigen. Too little time has elapsed, and in this time there has been little progress in missionary theology. At the same time, the missionary situation in the world has not radically changed in the last few years, as it did, for example, between Madras (1938) and Whitby (1947). Willigen gave rise to slogans such as “The Church is the Mission” and proclaimed that “there is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world.” It is not clear however that there has been any significant quickening of the missionary impulse in the churches during the interval. The actual situation remains far removed from the high sounding theological phrasing of Willigen, for the battle of translating the new formula of church-mission relationship into meaningful terms at the grass roots level still remains to be fought. In this respect, the situation in the West has scarcely changed. Missions continue to be the concern and prerogative of independent missionary societies and denominational mission boards which discharge the missionary obligation “by proxy” for the churches at large. Perhaps the real break-through and the true follow-up of Willigen will come from the lands of the younger churches.

The East Asia Christian Conference on “The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in East Asia” held at Prapat, Indonesia in 1957 may be the forerunner of a wider implementation of the Willigen formula as a fuller acceptance of missionary responsibility on the part of churches as churches.⁴ This will not be the first occasion for the churches of the West to learn from those of the East.

Despite the somewhat inauspicious character of the circumstances, however, the unremitting search for a more adequate statement of the Church’s missionary calling must go on. The unfinished task remains unfinished. Scarcely one percent of the population of Asia can be considered even nominally Christian. The world population “explosion” continues to add more non-Christians annually to the lands of Asia than there are Protestant Christians in those areas. Only in Africa and Latin America does it appear that some headway is being made. Meanwhile, reprimed pagan religious rivals grow stronger in some areas, and demonic anti-Christian ideologies threaten to engulf new territory and hinder the course of the Christian mission. In the Christian world, the

⁴ *The Common Evangelistic Task of the Churches in East Asia*. Papers and Minutes of the East Asia Christian Conference, Prapat, Indonesia, 1957. 167 pp. Printed in Rangoon and available from I.M.C.N.A.R.Y.

younger churches continue to advance in the direction of greater maturity, and the movement toward Christian unity, both locally and ecumenically, continues apace. At such a time the Church, faithful to its calling and intent upon hearing the Word of God in the present situation, cannot fail to ask herself the question about her own purpose and destiny, and to seek to recover her true nature and calling in the world. Does the picture of the Church's missionary calling painted at Willingen offer a true description of the Christian mission and its relationship to the Church? If true, is it adequate by Biblical standards and does it give full expression to the missionary mandate of the Gospel? Or is it possible that Willingen was on the wrong track, and that further pursuit of the course set there can lead only to barren and sterile results? Inadequate though they may be, the Willingen statements represent the best guideposts that we have been given to date. The tentative character of the results of Willingen is already indicated in the report, where the editor speaks of Willingen as "a milestone, not a terminus." There it was recognized that the search for theological clarity must go on, though missionary obedience need not wait on theological understanding. Moreover, and even more important, it was a concern at Willingen that "in this present desperate world situation, the evangelization of the world might be more speedily accomplished through the power of the Holy Spirit." Such a result could not be achieved by human planning but "waits on those movements in which the obedience of man is taken up into the quickening power of the Spirit." In this spirit the event called "Willingen, 1952" was commended "to the prayers and the local missionary obedience of all who in their membership of the Church are members of "a 'worshipping, witnessing, suffering and expectant community.'"⁵

ANTECEDENTS OF WILLINGEN

The development of missionary thinking up to Willingen, and particularly through the course of the great twentieth century missionary conferences, has been sufficiently traced elsewhere and need not long occupy us here.⁶ In their origins, Protestant missions have largely sprung up

⁵ *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, p. vi.

⁶ See the following: Wilhelm Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission, a Study of the Encounter between the Missionary Enterprise and the Church & Its Theology*. I.M.C. Research Pamphlet #2. London, 1955. 64 pp. Eng. tr. By S. C. Neill; *Jahrbuch Evangelischer Mission 1957*. Verlag der deutschen Evang. Missionshilfe, Hamburg, 1957. Heinz Renkewitz, "Die Missionsverantwortung der Kirche," pp. 3-25; C. Stanley Smith, "An Exploratory Attempt to Define the Theological Basis of the Church's Missionary Obligation," Parts I & II.

in Pietistic circles, and retained a strongly individualistic flavor. Missionary activities were carried on by private societies parallel to, or frequently in opposition to, the organized church. Whereas Willingen could speak of mission as the function of the Church, the first half of the twentieth century might grudgingly concede that it was at least a function of the Church, while in the centuries preceding it was scarcely conceded to be a legitimate function of the Church at all. Wilhelm Andersen in *Towards a Theology of Mission* states:

Apart from certain exceptions, Pietism has been, up till the present century, the soil in which missionary activity has grown. The missionary enterprise regarded itself as a separate institution concerned with Christian operations overseas within, on the fringe of, in certain cases even outside, the existing Christian bodies; and in accordance with this understanding of its nature, it developed its own independent organizational structure within or alongside of the organized churches.⁷

Even allowing for wide differences in forms of organization and types of relationship between church and mission, it will be seen that the vast majority of cases -- the only likely exception being the Herrnhut (Moravian) Brethren -- fall in the "within," "on the fringe of," or "outside" categories. It is true that the American Protestant missionary enterprise stands in a somewhat more favorable relationship toward the Church than do the majority of its missionary society counterparts in Europe. Here the major church bodies have institutionalized or domesticated missions within their own houses by setting up specialized mission boards for the discharge of the Church's missionary obligation. Mission and church are regarded as belonging in some sense together, and missionary activity, instead of being the exclusive preoccupation of a few select individuals, becomes at least an institutional concern of the whole Church, albeit only one concern among many. For historical reasons missionary activity has acquired a church centered character in America rather different from the largely extra ecclesiastical status of missions in most European societies.

Unpublished mimeographed material included in supporting papers of the North American Report on Aim I; R. Pierce Beaver in *Church History* vol. XXI, pp. 345-364, "North American Thought on the Fundamental Principles of Missions during the Twentieth Century" (a survey article covering the 20th century up to, but not including, Willingen).

⁷ Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission*, p. 15.

⁸This ought not however to obscure the fact that missionary concern remains marginal and peripheral in the life of the American churches, much the same as it does in the churches of Europe.

Two twentieth century phenomena have in a particular way prepared the ground for the rapprochement between church and mission that was to take place at Willingen. The first is the rise of the younger churches as independent entities, no longer regarded as mission dependents. This became increasingly evident in the interim between the Jerusalem (1928) and Madras (1938) conferences, where a growing proportion of the delegates came from the younger churches. World War II acted as a further catalyst to this development and Whitby (1947) dramatically signaled the emancipation of the young churches and their elevation to full equality and responsibility by coining the slogan, "Partners in Obedience." The post-Whitby era in the life of the young churches corresponds to the post-Bandung era in the life of some twenty-five new nation-states which have achieved political independence from colonial powers since 1946. The other phenomenon, borne of two world wars and the growing secularization of the West, is the breakdown of the "Christendom" concept, which has been normative for western civilization since Constantine. The abrupt breakdown of this concept through a sharp decline in church participation and institutional loyalty, particularly in Europe, has paved the way for a new recognition that the whole world, including the supposedly Christian West, is a mission field. In a fashionable phrase, the West has become "post-Christian". Distinctions between the religious situation in East and West are regarded as illusory, except that the one is characterized as "post-Christian" while the other remains largely "pre-Christian". In the West this recognition has been accompanied by a renascent interest in "evangelism," both as regards its theology, general approach, and new techniques. In accepting this new evangelistic situation the churches of the West have profited in no small degree by the accumulated experience of the missionary enterprise.

WILLINGEN -- THE ECCLESIASTICAL DIMENSION

When the Willingen meeting took place the time was thus particularly ripe for a new statement of the missionary calling of the Church. The Church not only had a mission but was a mission and must understand her nature and calling in terms of mission -- a mission that is one and the same throughout the world. A kind of inner logic had led to

⁸ The new relationship between church and mission in the Netherlands Reformed Church is an exception.

the selection of “The Missionary Obligation of the Church” as the principal theme for discussion at Willingen. As Andersen put it:

Mission and church had discovered one another and through the gravest of crises had approved themselves as an inseparable unity... The mutual discovery of Church and mission had led each of the partners to a basic theological reconsideration of its own nature. Church and mission were now alike called to submit themselves to the service which theology can render, and to permit themselves to be challenged to become that which, in their dependence on God they are, and that which they are called to be in the world.⁹

For the first time the objects of the missionary enterprise came to be taken seriously by the theologians. Missions began cautiously to edge away from the sphere of practical theology and to invade the hallowed precincts of systematic theology, where it had previously found no home. A new body of theological literature under the heading of “Missionary Theology” or “The Theology of Mission” slowly came into existence and the missionary enterprise appeared to be on the way to finding a theological rationale and a new respectability. Everyone seemed satisfied that church and mission, having at last found one another through the service of theology, would never again be separated.

But the marriage gave indications of being premature. There were some who believed that the two partners were not sufficiently compatible. A dispute arose at Willingen over the interpretation of the major theme, “The Missionary Obligation of the Church,” In essence the argument was between those who would have derived the missionary obligation from the nature of the Church -- i.e. as inherent in its very being and existence -- and those who insisted that the missionary obligation must be derived from something anterior to the Church, vis. the Gospel. The fact of the Gospel and of missionary obligation were not under dispute; the question raised at Willingen was whether the Church should form a middle term between Gospel and missionary obligation. The point in question may seem too infinitesimal to deserve the attention it received, for the outcome in either case is the same. Both sides to the dispute were interested only in strengthening and intensifying the sense of missionary obligation. Nevertheless, a theological impasse developed and the original statement on the missionary obligation of the Church failed to be adopted.

⁹ Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission*, p. 36.

The statement on the missionary calling of the Church as adopted by the enlarged meeting proves upon examination to be a re-write of the unacceptable original, with significant departures in the content of one section, and abbreviations elsewhere. The first four sections of the two statements correspond to one another. Section I, "The Missionary Situation and the Rule of God," affirms the triumph of the cross over all forms of pessimism. Section II, entitled "The Missionary Obligation of the Church," is the disputed section, to which we shall return. Section III, "The Total Missionary Task," states that God sends forth the Church to carry out His work to the ends of the earth, to all nations, and to the end of time. It likens the Church to an army living in tents, whom God calls to strike their tents and go forward. Section IV, entitled "Solidarity With the World," speaks of the Church as being in the world and wholly identified with it, both in sorrow and in love, thereby establishing the possibility of communicating the gospel. Section V of the approved report, "Discerning the Signs of the Times," has no precise parallel in the earlier statement. It concludes with a ringing summons to all Christians "to come forth from the securities which are no more secure and from boundaries of accepted duty too narrow for the Lord of all the earth, and to go forth with fresh assurance to the task of bringing all things into captivity to Him, and of preparing the whole earth for the day of his coming."¹⁰

The matter under dispute can now be indicated by a comparison of the original but disapproved version of Section II with the wording of the approved version:

Proposed but not adopted :

The missionary obligation of the Church comes from the love of God in His active relationship with men. For God sent forth His Son, Jesus Christ, to seek out, and gather together, and transform, all men... By the Holy Spirit the Church, experiencing God's active love, is assured that God will complete what He has set His hand to in the sending of His Son. This is the hope with which the Church looks forward to the goal of its existence, which in fact sets the Church marching onwards. In this sense 'mission' belongs to the purpose of the Church...

Whatever else ought to be said about the structure, life and purpose of the Church, this one thing must be said: that

¹⁰ *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, p. 5.

'mission' is woven into all three and cannot be separated out from any one without destroying it. When God says to the Church: 'Go forth and be my witnesses,' He is not giving the Church a commission that is added to its other duties; but a commission that belongs to its royal charter (covenant) to be the Church.¹¹

Adopted:

The missionary movement of which we are a part has its source in the Triune God Himself. Out of the depths of His love for us, the Father has sent forth His own beloved Son to reconcile all things to Himself, that we and all men might, through the Spirit, be made one in Him with the Father in that perfect love which is the very nature of God...

1. God has created all things and all men that in them the Glory of His love might be reflected; nothing therefore is excluded from the reach of his redeeming love.

2. All men are involved in a common alienation from God, from which none can escape by his own efforts.

3. God has sent forth one Savior, one Shepherd to seek and save all the lost, one Redeemer who by His death, resurrection and ascension has broken down the barrier between man and God, accomplished a full and perfect atonement, and created in Himself one new humanity, the Body of which Christ is the exalted and regnant head.

4. On the foundation of this accomplished work God has sent forth His Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to gather us together in one Body in Him, to guide us into all the truth, to enable us to worship the Father in spirit and in truth, to empower us for the continuance of His mission as His witnesses and ambassadors, the first fruits and earnest of its completion.

5. By the Spirit we are enabled both to press forward as ambassadors of Christ, beseeching all men to be reconciled to God, and also to wait with sure confidence for the final victory of His love, of which he has given us most sure promises.

¹¹ *Missions Under the Cross*, p. 241.

“We who have been chosen in Christ, reconciled to God through Him, made members of His Body, sharers in His Spirit, and heirs through hope of His Kingdom, are by these very facts committed to full participation in His redeeming mission. There is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world. That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its world-mission. “As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you.”¹²

A comparison of the two statements will show that the earlier Church centered view of missionary obligation has been displaced by a thorough going Trinitarian statement. In the Church-centered view, missionary obligation is derived from the nature of the Church and becomes the means for attaining its goal. Mission is predicated on the pre-existence of the Church. A logical corollary of this is that missionary policy is largely concerned with church extension, *plantatio ecclesiae*, and missionary activity is limited to the road from church to church, as it was in the theory of G. Wernock. It was a reaction against this view that prompted J. C. Hoekendijk to propound his now famous thesis:

Church-centric missionary thinking is bound to go astray, because it revolves around an illegitimate center ... It may well be that we are so wrapped up in our church-centrism that we hardly realize any longer how much our ideas are open to controversy. Would it not be a good thing to start all over again in trying to understand what it really means when we repeat again and again our favorite missionary text, “the Gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the *oikoumene*” (Matt. 24:14) and attempt to rethink our ecclesiology within this framework of kingdom-gospel-apostolate-world?¹³

Hoekendijk’s penetrating critique disclosed the hidden presupposition of the proposed Church-centered formulation. At Willingen the delegates were unwilling to accept an uncritical Church-centered interpretation as adequate. In the light of Biblical theology it came to be regarded as theologically questionable. Thus ecclesiology, which initially had rendered to the theology of mission the service of providing a temporary refuge for the homeless newcomer, discovered that it could not

¹² *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, p. 2-3.

¹³ J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *International Review of Missions*, vol. 41 (1952), pp. 332-333.

comfortably accommodate the newcomer without having its own house upset. As Andersen put it, “The missionary enterprise can regard itself as an activity of the Church, only on condition that the nature of the Church itself is defined in terms of the missionary enterprise.”¹⁴ One of the chief negative services of Willingen was to show the tentative and unsatisfactory character of our ecclesiological thinking. Arising as a by-product of the discussion on the missionary obligation of the Church, the problem of the Church -- rather than that of mission -- loomed as the principal unsolved problem. To this we shall return later.

We examine now the significance of the Trinitarian statement on missionary calling. Willingen, which had convened with a Church-centered orientation toward mission as its stated presupposition, found itself compelled to renounce this presupposition for something more ultimate. This ultimate bedrock on which the missionary obligation rests is the Gospel itself, including the Biblical description of the Kingdom of God and its breaking in upon this world. This is the same as to assert that the locus of missionary obligation is found in the nature of the Triune God, revealed in the work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This formulation has considerable merit, both positive and negative. On the positive side, it delineates the missionary situation which exists in the world by speaking of a universal human predicament and a universal hope for humanity in Jesus Christ. It opens with a statement of a common creation (God has created all men -- nothing is excluded from the reach of His love), continues with a common fall (all men are involved in a common alienation from God, from which none can escape by his own efforts), and a common redemption (God has sent forth one Savior, one Shepherd to seek and save all the lost, one Redeemer who accomplished a full and perfect atonement). It concludes with a reference to the Common Body of Christ (God has sent forth His Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus, to gather us together in one Body in Him), a common mission (by the Spirit we are enabled to press forward as ambassadors of Christ) and a common expectation (we are to wait with sure confidence for the final victory of His love).

The section which begins with the assertion that “the missionary movement . . . has its source in the Triune God Himself” closes with the observation that “there is no participation in Christ without participation in His mission to the world.” The Church has a missionary calling and an obligation, to be sure; nowhere does the Trinitarian formula deny or minimize this obligation. But that calling and obligation does not arise out of the Church’s self-existence, nor can it be derived self-evidently from the

¹⁴ Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission*, p. 38.

Church's thinking about itself. It points back to the self-revealing activity of God, who is the Author of both Church and mission. Thus Willingen stated, "That by which the Church receives its existence is that by which it is also given its World-mission," Mission can never be deduced from the pre-existence of the Church.

The negative significance of the Trinitarian formula is no less important, though it is not clearly articulated in the Willingen statement. This significance attaches to the value of the Trinitarian formula as an implied critique of traditional Church-centered missionary practice.¹⁵ As a critique it brings a heavy judgment to bear upon our traditional arguments in justification of the continuation of Christian missions, as well as viewpoints underlying our attempts to stimulate missionary motivation. The arguments having to do with the "justification" of missions are directed primarily to the detractors of the missionary enterprise, while those having to do with "motivation" are primarily for the benefit of its potential supporters. The common presupposition of both is that the validity of the Church is self-evident, being equated with Christendom, Western civilization, and the Kingdom of God. The self-evident validity of the Church is thought to provide a sufficient foundation on which to ground missionary activity. This forms, as it were, the unspoken presupposition of every argument. On the side of justification such arguments include the demonstration of the alleged "superiority" of Christianity over the claims of non-Christian religions; the vindication of the supposed "absoluteness" of Christian revelation against the criticisms of religious relativists; the reassertion of the fundamental "spirituality" of Western civilization against the onslaughts of secularism; and the defense of the "humanity and good-will" of Western democracy against the cries of imperialism. None of these defenses has the power to convince us any longer for the spiritual foundations of Western civilization are crumbling. The Church does not possess the self-certainty it once had. The task called for is not one of mere apologetics for missions, or the justification of the right to carry on missionary activities against detractors of the enterprise. The Church's very life and existence in the world are imperiled and the facile assumptions of fifty years ago are no longer acceptable. It will therefore no longer suffice to direct the question of the Church's missionary calling back to the self-evident validity of the Church. For the question concerning the Church, like that concerning mission, must in common be redirected to the prior question concerning the meaning of the Gospel and the nature of the Triune God. Thereby the empirical Church in the world, more conscious than ever of its frailty, is relieved of a great deal of unnecessary embarrassment. But this is not mere

¹⁵ This is brought out clearly in the North American Reports on Aim I and II.

escapism, it is a return to the true foundation of Church and mission. For God, not the Church, is the true Author of mission, and Jesus Christ is the true Evangelist. God in Jesus Christ can and must be witnessed to; He does not need to have His ways justified before men.

So far as the arguments used to stimulate “motivation” and develop missionary support in the home constituency are concerned, it can be asserted that a serious uneasiness about the too cozy relationship between Church and mission arises when that relationship is viewed against the backdrop of the Trinitarian formula and of Biblical theology. Many of the arguments used are fraught with danger for the Christian mission lest its true nature be corrupted and perverted by recourse to motives that are manifestly un-Christian. The American missionary enterprise, at first shocked and scandalized by the cry of “religious imperialism” emanating from Christian sources in China, has been compelled to pass through a period in inner purification and self-study, as a result of which a healthy refinement in the area of motivation has taken place. “The judgment of God” as discerned in the expulsion of missionaries by a hostile Chinese Communist regime has at least had the merit of redirecting missionary thought back to ultimate theological issues. The critique of traditional missionary motivation as raised by the Willingen Trinitarian formula can be conveniently stated in terms of the “three imperialisms,” as someone has put it: that mission is in danger of being politicized, of being culturalized, and of being ecclesiasticized. Political imperialism in missionary practice is easiest to recognize. Its current appeal is seen in the fact that missions are viewed as a valuable adjunct to the government in the power struggle with Communism for the allegiance of the non-Christian neutral powers. In the minds of some they are an auxiliary weapon, in the same category with I.C.A. and U.S. I. A., in support of the major offensive, which is fought in the military sphere. Missions are viewed as “useful” or “useless” to government according to the degree that they engage in the struggle against Communism. The Kingdom of God is viewed as an irrelevance in the present power struggle.

The second variety, cultural imperialism, is much older and more deeply entrenched. It dates back to the very origins of the American Protestant missionary enterprise, and is inextricably linked with the rise of a liberal Protestant theological tradition in America. In such circles an unconscious identification between the Gospel and the American way of life has frequently led to a type of missionary motivation based on a program of exporting Western democratic culture, together with its humanitarianism and, to some extent, its standard of living. An example of this would be the instructions given by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign

Missions to the Hawaii missionaries of that board in the early nineteenth century. Their task was,

to aim at nothing less than covering those islands with fruitful fields and pleasant dwellings and schools and churches, and of raising the whole people to an elevated state of Christian civilization.¹⁶

The theological problems involved in the relationship between Gospel and culture have been increasingly brought to our attention through studies such as Prof. H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*. But whereas the dangers have been sufficiently discerned in the theological realm, the implications of a false identification between Gospel and culture for missionary practice still require extensive attention. The question has to do with the correct norms and proper limits of what we call the "indigenization" of the Gospel. In what cases and to what extent is it necessary and desirable that the Gospel should receive a cultural expression? On the other hand, when does such a cultural expression involve distortions and become hazardous? The missionary effort cannot fairly be stigmatized with the name of "cultural imperialism" unless a constant effort in the realm of both theory and practice is made to determine the proper relationship between Gospel and culture.

The Trinitarian critique of the Church-centered missionary orientation applies most pointedly to what has been called *ecclesiastical imperialism*. It points the finger of judgment at all ecclesiastical pride, vain glory and self-sufficiency, and declares that missionary activity designed to further the worldly self-aggrandizement or satisfy the secular ambitions of a church body is false in the eyes of God. If cultural imperialism has been the bugaboo of liberal Protestant church bodies, then ecclesiastical imperialism has been the particular nemesis of conservative, tradition ridden churches. The Gospel-culture equation there is paralleled by the Gospel-church equation here. A particular doctrine, a particular form of order, a particular liturgy or some other aspect of church life is regarded as sacrosanct and shrouded with absolute significance. Missionary activity is conceived as church-extension, or *plantatio ecclesiae*. The goal of missionary effort is not simply a church, any church, but rather a church possessing a point-for-point correspondence to the features of the mother church, an exact replica in miniature of its parent. In the case of ecclesiastical imperialism, as with cultural imperialism, a modicum of truth obscures the falsity of the equation between the Gospel and something secular

¹⁶ Quoted in Deyerhaus, *Die Selbständigkeit der jungen Kirchen als missionarisches Problem*, Wuppertal-Barmen, 1956, p. 53.

that has nothing to do with the Gospel. Just as the Gospel cannot be communicated without culture, so it cannot be proclaimed without the ministry of the Church. But so also, just as culture in the name of Gospel can displace Gospel -- while wearing the semblance thereof -- so can the Church in the name of the Gospel displace the Gospel -- while retaining the semblance thereof. The Trinitarian formula, makes the Church aware of the dangers of ecclesiastical imperialism by redirecting its gaze toward a reality beyond itself: the redemptive work of the Triune God. God, not the Church, is the Author of mission.

MISSION UNDER THE CROSS

In an otherwise evenly-proportioned Trinitarian statement regarding missionary calling, one term in the series of God's revelatory acts stood out in sharp relief and served as the focus of spiritual attention at Willingen. That single term was the Cross of Christ, which was accorded a place of prominence in missionary thinking at Willingen unlike any previous conference. For as Christology formed the key term in the new Trinitarian orientation, so the Cross played the key role in the interpretation of Christology. It was precisely at the point of the Cross, as the structural arch of the whole Trinitarian formula, that the missionary enterprise discovered its most piercing judgment and critique. But at the foot of the Cross the Christian mission also discovered its mercy seat and source of renewal. The two addresses by Canon Max Warren and Reinold von Thadden elaborated the core of spiritual meaning which the conference sought to convey to the world in issuing its addresses under the title, *Missions Under the Cross*:

The Cross is the illuminating center of the mystery of God's redemptive purpose. It is there that we begin to look into the heart of God, begin to believe that some understanding is possible, even for us, of the mystery of redemption. And it is by way of the Cross that we are compelled to see both the necessity for showing forth that redemption and also the manner of the showing. Out of the many facets of this jewel of our redemption there are just three which I would offer to you as affording us a way of discovering some of the searching implications of this mystery of God's loving purpose as that is related to our missionary task ... (1) the cross as bearing witness to God's solidarity with man and ... to the church's solidarity with the world ... (2) the cross as a place of judgment and

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mercy, where both the world and the Church receive judgment and forgiveness ... (3) the darkness of the cross, its hiddenness, its abiding summons to faith, through which we are tested and disciplined to the point where we are possessed of a hope that cannot be ashamed. The cross is the crisis of missions. There is no other crisis. ¹⁷

Reinhold von Thadden, leader of the Kirchenteg movement, spoke as follows:

What we say of the cross primarily concerns the form of the Church; secondly, its life and, thirdly, its mission ... A church under the cross cannot present itself other than in the form of a servant ... A church under the cross is also a church of Brotherhood ... a church under the cross is an obedient church, for its Master was the One who “became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross”... In the end, such a church will also be a suffering church. It cannot be otherwise ... That the church stands under the cross of Jesus Christ is, finally, of consequence for the mission of the church ... A church under the cross should be a vicarious church ... What Jesus accomplished on His way to the cross was vicarious action. He made His own the situation of the world ... The world is waiting for the vicarious service of a church under the cross ... A church under the cross should be the exact opposite of an introverted and contemplative company. It should be a church for the world ... It must become manifest that the Church exists for the world and in the world, but is not like the world.¹⁸

The Cross then becomes the ultimate expression of God’s redemptive purpose for the world because it is the most concrete expression. All that happens between Creation and Parousia is guaranteed by the Cross, an historic event which anchors the Christian faith to something outside the realm of speculation or hearsay.¹⁹ Willigen could say, “We who take our stand here can never be cast down by any disaster, for we

¹⁷ M.A.C. Warren, “The Christian Mission and the Cross,” in *Missions Under the Cross*, pp. 25-26.

¹⁸ Reinhold von Thadden, “The Church Under the Cross,” in *Missions Under the Cross*, pp. 52-63 et passim.

¹⁹ See Andersen, *Towards a Theology of Mission*, p. 43.

know that God rules the revolutionary forces of history and works out His purpose by the hidden power of the cross.”²⁰ if the Cross is the crisis of missions, and there is no other crisis, then it is at the foot of the Cross and nowhere else that the believer can look for dependable freedom and security, “He has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24b)

The Cross thus becomes the Biblical symbol, par excellence, for the Church’s missionary calling. For the Cross represents not only the content of the Christian proclamation but also the manner of its life. As Christ became obedient unto death, even the death of the Cross, the Church which is the body of Christ will always appear before the world, if it is faithful and obedient, in the form of a servant. As He came not to be ministered to but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many, so the Church which bears His name has no alternative, “whosoever would come after me...” is a call to true discipleship, to be sure, but it is also a call to mission.

For mission concentrates not on the sacrifice made but on the goal and object: a life given on behalf of the world, the ransoming of many souls, the accomplishment of God’s redemptive purpose. The two images of the Body of Christ and the Cross of Christ stand in the most intimate relationship possible, What the Body of Christ is to the nature of the Church, so the Cross of Christ is to the nature of its mission. As Christ could not accomplish His mission without the Cross, so the Church will not participate in Christ’s redemptive mission without itself accepting the Cross. The Cross is the teleological expression of the significance of the Body of Christ. The corollary of “No participation in Christ without participation in His mission” is “No participation in Christ’s mission without participation in His Cross.”

EVANSTON--THE ESCHATOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The second world assembly of the World Council of Churches held at Evanston in 1954 introduced a new factor into the missionary discussion: the rise of eschatological concern. Willingen had closed with a number of unanswered questions, among them the relationship between mission and eschatology:

What is the meaning of the Christian hope in relation to the message and practice of missions? What is there in the mystery of the Last Things which must affect the character

²⁰ *The Missionary Obligation of the Church*, p. 2.

and urgency of the Church's mission? The Gospel must first be preached among all nations. Then shall the end come... How can every fulfillment by the Church of its missionary obligation become a preparing of the way of the Lord and an expression of the proclamation, "Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh?"²¹

The growing articulation of missionary concern within the ecumenical movement is seen in the records of the two world assemblies of the World Council of Churches. At the first assembly at Amsterdam (1948) the report of Section II was issued under the heading, "The Church's Witness to God's Design." Included was a sub-heading entitled "Missionary and Evangelistic Strategy." At the second assembly at Evanston (1954) the report of Section II received the name, "Evangelism: The Mission of the Church to Those Outside Her Life," indicating a disposition to assimilate evangelism and the Church's missionary calling under a single heading. Part I, "The Evangelizing Church," states that "Jesus Christ is the gospel we proclaim. He is also Himself the Evangelist. He is the Apostle of God sent to the world to redeem it. As the Father sent Him so He sends us," Part II, "The Evangelistic Dimension," notes that "everything the Church does is of evangelizing significance. Through all the aspects of its life the Church participates in Christ's mission to the world," Part III, "Communicating the Gospel," expressly recognizes that "evangelism is God's work in which we are His agents. It is not our work, and therefore we must wait upon Him in prayer... that we may learn what he would have us do." The influence of the Willingen discussion is seen in the foregoing. Part IV deals with "Exploring Frontiers" and Part V with "Non-Christian Faiths."²² It is in Part VI, however, that the eschatological dimension of the Christian mission breaks through most clearly. The concluding part of the section on Evangelism bears the indicative title, "Come, Lord Jesus" (Part VI):

The church partaking through the Holy Spirit in the life of its Head is assured of the fulfillment of His work. The messenger of the unlimited grace of Christ looks towards the consummation of the Kingdom in which His redeeming love shall have achieved its full intention. . . The time of expectation is the time of evangelism, even as the



²¹ N. Goodall, *Missions Under the Cross*, p. 21.

²² Found in *The Evanston Report*, New York, 1955, Report of Section II, pp. 98-112.

time of evangelism is the time of expectation. For He who comes as our Judge is also our Redeemer.

And again:

The time of evangelism will not last forever; it will be succeeded by the time of the Kingdom fulfilled. The good news will not remain forever a promise made; it will become a promise kept. The gospel will not be the knowledge of the privileged few: it will be revealed to all. . . Therefore are Christians under constraint to declare this hope to the world until the consummation of the Kingdom and the coming of the King.²³

In this statement Evanston reaffirms the displacement of the church-centered approach to mission and evangelism which we noted at Willingen, but Evanston also moves significantly beyond Willingen. For Willingen had included eschatology in a rather unaccented way in its Trinitarian statement, to be sure, but major attention was focused upon the event of the Cross and its significance for the missionary enterprise. Whereas Willingen had looked at the Christian mission from the mid-point of the history of Revelation, the Cross, Evanston now looks at it from its end-point, the *Parousia*. An important shift in terminology also takes place. For Willingen displaced the Church-centered emphasis, to be sure, but displaced it with a traditional dogmatic statement regarding the Revelation of the Triune God. Evanston seemingly reduces traditional dogmatic terminology to a minimum and reverts to a first century Biblical language in speaking about the Christian mission. This is precisely what Hoekendijk had in mind when he advocated the adoption of the “Kingdom--Gospel--Apostolate--World” framework of Matt. 24:24.²⁴ In this new constellation of terms used to describe the Christian mission, the Church does not play an important part; it has all but disappeared. Only the Gospel remains a familiar term; everything else changes, and the nature of the Gospel itself changes because of its dynamic relationship to the other new (to the twentieth century) elements. For Jesus is not the herald of a Church which already belongs to past history, but of a Kingdom which is to come and is already coming. He comes not to a select portion of humanity known as Christendom but to the world as a whole, for the world is His Father’s creation. His purpose in coming is not to call church members, in the traditional sense, but to create an *Apostolate*, a body of

²³ *The Evanston Report*, pp. 107-108.

²⁴ Hoekendijk, “The Church in Missionary Thinking,” *I.R.M.*, vol. 41 (1952), p. 333.

witnesses who participate in His mission. The Christian mission moves in the direction of the twin *eschata*, or ends, of time and space. The gospel of the Kingdom must be preached throughout the whole world, i.e., to the end of space; and the mission must continue until the end of time. The present is a grace period bestowed by God for the accomplishment of the mission. “The time of evangelism will not last forever ... Therefore are Christians under constraint to declare this hope to the world until the consummation of the Kingdom and the coming of the King,” Evanston concluded.

Evanston was concerned to emphasize the urgency of the Church’s evangelistic mission and tried to do so by introducing into the discussion radical first-century eschatological terminology from the synoptic Gospels. To us this seems like an artificial, illegitimate, and unsuccessful attempt. Artificial, because a true eschatological sense cannot be induced by a new form of speech. Illegitimate, because in the twentieth century we are compelled to do justice to the whole sweep of Trinitarian revelation, not to mention centuries of church history, and not merely to certain apocalyptic sections of the Gospels. Unsuccessful, because while a fruitful academic discussion about eschatology was staged, no practical results for the missionary enterprise followed in terms of greater urgency or deepened conviction. Had eschatology issued in increased zeal and a greater sense of urgency, the result would have been welcome indeed. There was no apparent spiritual after-effect arising from the study of the theme at Evanston as there had been at Willingen when the Cross occupied the center of attention. In approaching the relationship between mission and eschatology Evanston raised an important question but failed to give a theologically satisfying answer.

SOME REMAINING PROBLEMS

The most elusive of the remaining problems is the need for a proper understanding of the relationship between Church and mission. Church has been displaced as the center of gravity in missionary thinking, and ecclesiology must now be re-defined in terms of its missionary concern. We have been offered two antithetical ecclesiological statements, one by the right wing and the other by the left wing, with no satisfactory middle ground. The right wing, or traditional view, finds it possible to give a complete statement of what constitutes the essence of the Church—Gospel and sacraments—without so much as a single reference to the Church’s mission in the world. According to this view, mission may be regarded as a function of the Church, but it does not constitute its essence. The left wing

view, as represented by Hoekendijk, asserts that “the nature of the church can be sufficiently defined by its function, i.e. its participation in Christ’s apostolic ministry.”²⁵ According to this view the Church is a mission and nothing but a mission; it arises as an epi-phenomenon of the apostolic function. It would appear that the first view is too traditionalist in failing to take into account, for historical reasons dating back to the origin of our denominations, the apostolic and missionary dimension of the Church. It does not do justice to the missionary genius of apostolic Christianity. The second view, on the other hand, is too radically reductionist in that it fails to do justice to the New Testament testimony regarding the Church, “which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”

What is indicated here is the need for a continuing dialogue between missionary theology, on the one hand, and Faith and Order studies, on the other. Faith and Order, for its part, must grant greater recognition to the question of the Church’s missionary calling in its deliberations; and the missionary movement must somehow accommodate its new insights to the empirical situation in the churches. Perhaps one solution is the recognition that ecclesiological discussion can move on two levels: the one, functional level, related to problems of mission and evangelism; the other, a formal level, arising out of church history and a faithfulness to particular traditions of the past. For too long a period formal ecclesiology has dominated the field, to the exclusion of any other. Recent developments indicate that the time may be ripe for the admission of functional ecclesiology into theological discussion. Such developments as the Evangelical Academies, the theology of the laity and the newer evangelistic approaches pose far-reaching questions concerning the nature of the Church which cannot be contained within the framework of the traditional formal ecclesiology.

Another unsolved question, theologically, is the relationship between Christian missions and the activity of the Holy Spirit. The question cannot be answered simply by reference to frequent liturgical invocations of the Spirit in prayer or praise, nor can it be disposed of by a kind of attitude which reverently assigns all good effects to the prompting of the Spirit. In the Acts of the Apostles the Holy Spirit is manifestly and without a doubt the dynamic agent in the missionary out-reach of the apostolic Church. Not merely in a general way, but in many specific cases, He prompts acts of witness, inspires decisions, comforts, and up builds the Church. In the apostolic Church the Spirit is never conceived spiritualistically, as a mystically pervasive essence; He is rather the living

²⁵ Hoekendijk, *op. cit.*, p. 334.

presence of the Crucified and Risen One, constantly in communication with His Church. The trinity of Resurrection, Spirit (Pentecost), Apostolate (Witness) would appear to form a constellation of entities related to the missionary situation of the early church. A proper understanding of this trinity, and a participation in its fullest depths of meaning, would release a new kind of spiritual dynamic and imbue the Church of the twentieth century with the faith and zeal of the Apostles.



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