

A Critique Of “Discipleship And Mission”

*William J. Danker
Concordia Theological Seminary
St. Louis, Missouri*

This is a good paper. The measure of its worth lies in the manner in which it stimulates us who hear it to our own thoughts and conclusions. However, one must confess to a certain impression of ambivalence conveyed by its basic structure and pattern. This treatise on missionary discipleship starts out centered around the Risen Christ and winds up in an imitation of the Crucified Christ. This seems to be indicative of a fundamental uncertainty as to the focus of the essayist's own theology of missions. One cannot help wishing that he had woven throughout his presentation the motif of the Resurrection which he so grandly began. It is true, of course, that while a missiologist like Hoekendijk puts the apostolate in the central place, Willhelm Andersen also makes the Cross of pivotal importance. But, Mr. Pyke might have gone on to say after his brave sounding of the Resurrection trumpets that the Cross has meaning only in the light of the Open Tomb. Without the Resurrection the Cross would be forgotten today. This obviously does not mean that we can dispense with the Cross. Without it there would be no reconciliation and no resurrection.

The excessive preoccupation with the Cross at the expense of the empty grave makes many missionaries, as one Japanese Christian complained, “a little too grim.” Easter makes the disciple a new creature in the Risen Christ and gives his message the note of new life and joy that it deserves.

Pyke rightly contrasts the basic self-righteousness of mysticism with the Gospel way of salvation by the strength and love of another. He has this excellent sentence: “For him (Paul) the whole direction of missionary discipleship is the descent of Christ, who came down to empty Himself, taking the form of a servant and being obedient unto death (Phil.

2:7), Man in the Pauline Gospel is a bankrupt criminal and cannot ever know God; he can only be ‘known by God’ (Gal. 4:9).”

Yet one cannot help but feel that this kerygmatic theme of Christ’s activity in making man a disciple deserves to be carried out as one discusses the making of a disciple into a missionary. There is a clear-cut difference between the Roman Catholic medieval discipleship of a Thomas a Kempis and genuine Biblical discipleship. The one is an *imitatio Christi*, the other a *conformitas Christi*, The first is the believer’s activity for Christ, the second is Christ’s activity in the believer. As Regin Prenter has abundantly demonstrated in his excellent *Spiritus Creator*,¹ through the Holy Spirit Christ is at work, conforming the believer to His own image. We are laborers together with God. This knowledge delivers us from frantic hysteria over our own shortcomings in personal sanctification as well as over the failure of many a well-laid scheme in the Church’s missionary outreach and will instead fill us with new poise and confidence in our Divine Partner, setting us free to place our best powers in His great service, unhampered by anxiety and its inevitable paralysis of productivity. All of which is to say that, as the locus of missions is not in the Church, as both Wilhelm Andersen and Hoekendijk each in his own way have emphasized, but in God, so the locus of discipleship is not in the disciple but, likewise, in God.

This brings us to the concept of the *Missio Dei* as developed by Georg F. Vizedom in his recent book by that title which is an *Einfuehrung in eine Theologie der Mission*.² Since this slender volume was published in Munich only this year, it may be helpful to insert at this point my own translation of its central burden:

Missio Dei declares that the mission is God’s work. He is the Lord, the one who assigns the task, the possessor, the agent. He is the acting subject of missions. If we in this way ascribe the mission to God, it is withdrawn from all human whims. We must therefore demonstrate whether God wills the mission and how He Himself carries it out. Therewith all necessary limits are laid down. We cannot speak of the ‘Mission of the Church.’ Still less may we speak of ‘our mission.’ Since both the Church and the Mission have their origin in the loving will of God, we may speak of both Church and Mission only in so far as

¹ Regin Prenter, *Spiritus Creator*, trans. John M. Jensen.

² Georg F. Vizedom, *Missio Dei: Einfuehrung in eine Theologie der Mission*.

these are not understood as independent quantities. Both are only tools of God, instruments through which God carries out His mission. Only if the Church obediently fulfills His mission purpose, can she speak of His mission, because her mission is then contained in the *Missio Dei*.³

With less Teutonic systematics, if with more Scottish eloquence, the same idea is found in James Stewart's *Thine Is The Kingdom*.⁴ Christ is the basis for missions. Christ is the motive for missions.

All of this is as Scriptural and Pauline as it can be. He preaches the *Missio Dei* when he says, "It is God who worketh in us both to will and to do of his good pleasure." Or, "He which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ." The fact that Christ is the agent of missions is averred by the greatest missionary of them all when he says, "Not I, but Christ liveth in me." (Phil. 1) In a sense Christ is also the final object of missions, for Paul says that he labors and travaills "until Christ be formed in you." In Aristotelian terms, then, we could say that Christ is the material, the formal, the efficient, and the final cause in missions.

Another point at which one could wish that the essayist had followed through on his swing is in the instance of lay missions. He makes a ceremonial bow in the direction of the subject with this impeccable sentence: "... the call of God is a missionary call to everyone to the kind of work for which he is best fitted in the place where he can best do it." It would seem that the importance and relevance of the matter deserves far more than a summary sentence and a few allusions. The essayist's own statistics on the startling population increase now in progress require this. The concept of the unsalaried lay missionary cannot well be divorced from a study of the salaried professional and his activities. As the Niebuhr Commission studies have shown, one's image of the pastor can be formed only after one has structured the role of all the people of God. And if one accepts the Niebuhr picture of the clergyman as one of the people of God who trains and builds up other people of God for their ministry, as a minister to ministers, a caller of callers, a missionary to missionaries, this will vitally affect any discussion of the salaried missionary's discipleship. We are reminded here of one sentence from Bishop Krummacher's essay before the Lutheran World Federation Assembly at Minneapolis in 1957, a sentence which unfortunately did not get over into the English

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 13.

⁴ James S. Stewart, *Thine Is the Kingdom*. ADDRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

translation: “Die Welt evangelisieren heisst nicht die Welt klerikalisieren.” -- “To evangelize the world does not mean to clericalize the world,” This sentence which comes out of the Bishop’s living experience in Pomerania behind the Iron Curtain in East Germany where many a pulpit is manned by a layman, where thousands of lay people have jumped into the breach to carry out confirmation instruction of the young in Christian principles, has its profound implications for the manner in which the Church sets about the mission task today.

The essayist’s excellent sentence to the effect that every Christian should witness in the way he is best fitted in the place where he can best do it was, by the way, anticipated in the otherwise hostile reply given by Johann Heinrich Ursinus in the age of rigid Lutheran orthodoxy to the mission call issued by Justinianus von Weltz. Anyone who has ever read Gustav Warneck will quickly recall that German Christendom in the 17th century roundly condemned the sending out of professional missionaries, notably in the “Gutachten” or “Faculty Opinion” of the University of Wittenberg in 1651. It is perhaps not so well known that a man like Ursinus in his “Erinnerung an Justinianus,” however awry his central position, emphasized the duty of those Christians who lived among the heathen to witness to their faith by word and deed.⁵

Another volume that deserves a reference in this connection is *The Art of Overseasmanship* by Cleveland and Mangone.⁶ This study of a new concept will provide useful statistics and helpful background materials for the planners of missionary strategy who see the importance of enlisting the growing number of Christian men and women and families going overseas for increasingly diversified purposes.

While the above are the chief observations that occur to your critic, there are also a number of miscellaneous points which elicit various reactions.

The essayist declares that the missionary is distinguished from his brother disciple in that he devotes his life to those in society who are considered the lowest in the human scale, the barbarian, the heathen, the down-trodden. Is this really true? Is this “concern in depth” only or primarily for the professional missionary? Is it not for all Christians as the Parable of the Last Judgment also powerfully preaches?

⁵ Gustav Warneck, *Geschichte der Protestantischen Mission*, p. 37.

⁶ Harlan Cleveland and Gerard J. Mangone (ed.) *The Art of Overseasmanship*.

Again, while we agree with the caution that missionary service should not be pressed upon anyone, there is, however, more that can be said. If mission and Church are coextensive, if missions is of the *esse* of the Church rather than the *bene esse*, why should not every seminarian be regarded as potentially available for service anywhere in the Church and anywhere in the mission? Can we be satisfied until we have created a climate favorable to this proposition at every Christian seminary and training school?

In speaking of the uniqueness of Christianity, the essayist declares, "If all religions have equally satisfactory roads to the divine, the Christian mission would *ipso facto* be invalidated." One seeks in vain for a clear reference to the extraordinary invasion of God into history that characterizes the Christian kerygma, an invasion that reaches its climax not only in the Cross but also in the open tomb. It is in the historic event that is Jesus Christ that we must unabashedly assert the uniqueness of Christianity. Charles W. Forman of Yale properly avers:

The exclusiveness of Christian faith, then, should not necessarily be taken as evidence of pride or self-centeredness, as Toynbee claims, and as many others certainly believe. It is rather an exclusiveness that is implicit in the very nature of history itself. Once God's redemptive self-sacrifice is regarded as historical rather than mythological, then its exclusiveness is inevitable.⁷

He goes on to demonstrate in telling fashion that any historical event, be it the Russian revolution or the resurrection of Christ, is by its very nature unrepeatable. And it is in this unrepeatability of the historical events of God's redemption in Christ--certainly not in any intrinsic superiority of the Christian himself--that the uniqueness of Christianity inescapably lies.

In his section on "Accommodating the Gospel" the essayist declares:

Paul's so-called 'philosophical approach' in the Athens speech is sometimes referred to as an attempt by the apostle to eliminate the scandal of the Cross and to accommodate his message to the pagan mind. Critics inform us, however, that the Acts sermons are in all

⁷ Charles W. Forman, "The Challenge to Christian Exclusiveness," *Religion in Life*, Summer, 1958. THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY

probability the compositions of Luke and therefore are not an entirely accurate representation of the Pauline gospel.

Again, there is more that needs to be said. We return to the Easter theme to point out that it was not the Cross but the open tomb that was a scandal to the Athenians. “And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked.” (Acts 17:32). As to the manner of accommodation exhibited in the Areopagus sermon, it would be helpful to have a look at a book like Bertil Gaertner’s *The Areopagus Speech and Natural Revelation*, where the point is made that while Paul uses the language of Greek philosophy he presents the content of the Hebraic Old Testament.

In the discussion of mysticism, the essayist makes the statement that “Paul often speaks of being ‘in Christ,’ but never of being ‘in God.’” This claim should be made with cautious qualifications, for in Acts 17:28 Paul quotes with approval the lines of the poet, “In him we live, and move, and have our being.” Farther on in the same paragraph, there is a reference to something from Emil Brunner: “Man in the Pauline Gospel is a bankrupt criminal and cannot ever know God; he can only be ‘known by God’ (Gal. 4:9).” The essayist goes on to say, “This is the negation of all religions that depend upon any kind of legalism or enlightenment, because they all rest upon some form of self-redemption”. However, this allows no room for the concept of general revelation to which even salty old Hendrik Kraemer has made a concession of sorts in his recent *Religion and the Christian Faith*.⁸

Under the heading of “Pauline Responsibility” the essayist says, “The imperative needs of the Younger Church in Asia and Africa are the modern counterpart of the request from the Jerusalem authorities, and the Church of the West would be less than Christian, if she failed fully to respond.” While your critic has a personal preference for “Newer Church” rather than “Younger Church,” a term that does not wholly avoid a patronizing after-taste, this is not the main focus of his critique. Paul was soliciting financial aid for the personal physical needs of the saints at Jerusalem in time of famine, not for the needs of an institution or organization. Further, this instance was the reverse of modern mission practice. The “Younger Church” was helping the old mother church in Jerusalem. In Pauline practice, every local church was dependent upon the Holy Spirit and the gifts He accorded diversely to the saints in that place for its spiritual and institutional needs, save for such encouragement

⁸ Hendrik Kraemer, *Religion and the Christian Faith*.

as was brought by letters and visits from him or from other Christian travelers. Therefore, we cannot quite acknowledge the parallel drawn by the essayist. We are led, rather, to ask the question whether a local church as the spiritual Body of Christ in that place really needs financial help as distinguished from full spiritual *koinonia*? Would Paul have given such financial help for brick and mortar and the support of an institutional table of organization, as distinguished from help for physical needs? Do we strengthen a local church in another land, or do we weaken it when we do that for it which Paul evidently expected each local church to do for itself? Does not this weakening process occur even more easily where financial help for organizational purposes crosses cultural lines?

In his conclusion the essayist has well said, “The apostle believed that unless the Church is under condemnation of the world, the Cross is no longer central, and to that extent has erred from her missionary calling.” Perhaps while some of us look at the Church in China and Russia, wondering why there are not more martyrs there, the churches behind the Iron and Bamboo curtains are looking at us and wondering why, in the face of racial and social injustice, there are no martyrs here. Finally, if the Cross is no longer central among us, we return once more to the regrettably truncated motif of the Resurrection which the essayist sounded at the beginning, to ask, “Has this happened because in the terror and uncertainty of our time the Cross is no longer clearly seen in the light of the open tomb?”



First Fruits
THE ACADEMIC OPEN PRESS OF ASBURY SEMINARY