The Message and the Ministry

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Michael A. Rynkiewich¹

Isaiah 43:15-19 (NRSV) “I am the LORD, your Holy One, the Creator of Israel, your King. Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.”

All the Prophets and the Psalms invite us to remember the mighty acts of salvation that God has performed. Here in Isaiah 43, God invites the people to remember the Exodus event when God made a way in the sea and destroyed the oppressor’s army. But, then, God suddenly shifts directions and commands instead: “Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old.” Shocking, really, in its contrast with the prophetic mantra of “remember, remember, remember.” But, God says, do not remember, if you think I am limited to “We’ve always done it that way.” Do not remember if you think that my greatest acts are in the past. God says: “I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” This is a paradigm shift from how to live through the Exodus to how to live through the Exile.

Shifting our thinking to something that is not based on the past is difficult. One of the most important books that I read in the 1960s was Thomas Kuhn’s The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, a seminal book that got everyone talking about “paradigms” and “paradigm shifts.” Instead of a smooth...

¹ Please do not quote without asking permission.
build-up of knowledge that just piles up fact upon fact and continues in the same direction forever, Kuhn showed that the history of science consists of years of slow growth, followed by periods of revolution in thinking, followed by years of slow growth, and so on. Kuhn demonstrated that science is always based on a paradigm, a set of assumptions and models that defines reality and generates the questions that would be profitable to ask about reality. These paradigms do not easily give way to new ways of thinking because of the investment that scientists have made in the previous paradigm. It’s not that the new paradigm has all the answers, because it doesn’t. Rather, the new paradigm generates a new set of questions that the old paradigm could not imagine.

Paradigm shifts are also difficult in the theological realm as people become invested in one way of seeing the world, usually in a way that benefits them. God had to shake Israel out of their paradigm and show them the place of suffering in the way of God’s salvation. Paul also talks about a paradigm shift.

**II Corinthians 5:16-21.** (NRSV) “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; See, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made
him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

“From now on,” that is, after Christ has died for all (II Corinthians 5:14-15), “we regard no one from a human point of view.” Interesting. People usually skip over that and move on to “though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” But, that is not what he said first. First he said, “we regard no one from a human point of view,” and let me finish it off the same way, “though we once knew people from a human point of view, we know them no longer in that way.” How might Paul “regard no one from a human point” of view anymore? No prejudices. No racism. No ethnocentrism. No nationalism.

The reason that we “regard no one from a human point of view” is that, if someone is “in Christ,” “there is a new creation.” Not: “he is a new creation,” but instead “everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!” There is both an internal paradigm shift and an external change. We have changed, and the world has changed. “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?”

Indeed, it is God who is calling for a paradigm shift among God’s people. God says: “I will make a way.” God has reconciled the world to himself through Christ. The work may be finished, but the mission is not complete because “God has given us the ministry of reconciliation,” and “God entrusts the message of reconciliation to us.” Hmmmmm. The ministry of reconciliation and the message of reconciliation. I wonder, why don’t we separate them and just do one of them? This half of you go out and do evangelism but no justice ministries, and the other half of
you go out of do justice ministries but keep it a secret why they are doing it. Why don’t we do that? Because it’s stupid! That’s why! More importantly, because God never, not in the OT, not in the NT, never gave a hint that we could separate the message of reconciliation from the ministry of reconciliation. God lays the groundwork, then God sends reconciled people out as ambassadors, as redeemed people who embody the mission of God to proclaim God’s redemption as well as to demonstrate God’s salvation.

We still tend to see Mission and Evangelism through the lens of particular paradigms, and paradigm shifts are just as difficult for us. But, we cannot avoid it: The world is changing; the church is changing; and, Christian mission is changing.

**THE COLONIAL MISSION**

There was a time, all the way up to World War II, when Western mission was embedded in the context of colonial expansion and conquest. We can call it: The Colonial Mission. I do not think that I have to spend much time convincing you of that, or telling you about the consequences. Listen to what the Native Americans and International Students have to say in class. International students know that someone brought the gospel message, but they wonder why it came clothed in cultural and political domination. Had the church never heard Jesus talk about the eternal separation of wealth and power, on the one hand, and suffering and service, on the other?

Native Americans wonder why their parents were sent off to boarding schools in order to eliminate their language and culture so that, as the argument went: They would be “fit
receptacles for the gospel.” Had the church never read Acts 15?

While some faithful people spread the gospel during this era, the Colonial Mission carried the seeds of its own destruction. It was embedded in a worldly project that eventually collapsed. Collusion with colonial regimes muffled the gospel work of proclaiming release to the captives and letting the oppressed go free. No wonder the Fundamentalist / Modernist split spread out of the denominations and seminaries into the mission community. It’s alright to evangelize and save souls, but do not try to change the regime that oppresses the colonized.

THE COLD WAR MISSION

World War II was a watershed for colonialism and the colonial mission. The struggle for freedom and democracy was taken up by the colonies such that Indonesia refused to submit to the Dutch again, Vietnam refused to submit to the French again, and India refused to submit to the British. American soldiers and sailors came home with stories of “natives” in various countries who seemed to them quite uncivilized and in need of the gospel. Evangelicals and Pentecostals mobilized missions in new places and sometimes tried to re-evangelize old mission fields. For example, Papua New Guinea, where I served as a missionary, seemed to be a new field for Americans, but in fact, Anglicans, Australian Methodists, German Catholics, and English Presbyterians had been at work there since the 1870s and 1880s.

2 From Terry LeBlanc’s doctoral dissertation: “Chrestien Le Clercq, the Recollet who wrote in his New Relations of Gaspesia, concerning the Mi’kmaq, ‘these heathen must first be civilized before they can then become fit receptacles of the gospel of Jesus Christ’.” Le Clercq, Chrestien. 1691. New Relations of Gaspesia. Transl. and edited by W.F Ganong, 1910. 2nd ed.
A number of paradigm shifts in mission characterize this era. First, there was the shift from denominational to independent faith-based mission organizations. Second, there was the shift from doing mission in your own colony to doing missions anywhere. Third, there was the shift toward sending out more anthropologically-trained missionaries. Eugene Nida, with his book, *Customs and Cultures*, led the way for training missionaries in the importance of understanding language and culture. I remember Nida speaking in chapel 50 years ago at Bethel College in Minnesota, doing his “monolingual demonstration” where he began to figure out a language that he did not know in just an hour.

But, if the Colonial Mission was phasing out, as the expulsion of missionaries from China and the Mission Moratorium showed, another mission was emerging: The Cold War Mission. As the Cold War developed, and proxy wars were fought in Korea, Vietnam, the Middle East, and Afghanistan, so mission groups often took sides. It seems simplistic now, but in the context of the Cold War and its impact on places like the Congo and Central America, missions were polarized and stigmatized as either Conservative and Capitalist or Liberal and Communist. The Evangelism vs. Social Justice split took new shape.

(Video clip)

By the 1970s, people could see that something was wrong with mission. In 1973 some evangelicals met and began a process of reflection with the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern. In 1974, those interests moved on to the stage of the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization. Led by Rene Padilla and Samuel Escobar, this group produced *The Lausanne Covenant* which challenged Evangelicals to develop a holistic approach to missions that would include social involvement and radical
The inclusion of relief and development work as a part of mission was not immediate nor was it easily accomplished. There were practical questions, such as: “Who is trained for this work and where will they be trained?” There were theological questions, such as, “What did we miss in the Biblical mandate the first time around?”

In 1983, a Consultation on the Church in Response to Human Need took place at Wheaton College. Papers were presented by Tite Tienou, David Bosch, Wayne Bragg, Tito Paredes, Robert Moffit, and someone you will hear from tomorrow and the next day: Miriam Adeney. At that conference, Vishal Mangalwadi claimed that “Neither the Jews nor the Romans killed Jesus in order to make him a sin-offering. The historical cause of his death was that he was a serious trouble-maker as far as the establishment was concerned. Their charge against him was that he had claimed to be the legitimate king of the Jews, which meant that their rule was illegitimate.”

Critiquing missions, he said: “Our service today lacks power, either because it is marked by self-love or because the compassion behind it does not include understanding of the social roots of human misery and gives no answer to them.”

As an example, he cites Christian mission in India: “The battles against sati, caste, child marriage, female infanticide, bonded agricultural labor, drunkenness, opium addiction, and other social evils were generally initiated and led by the missionaries and only taken up by Hindu reformers later. However, we must admit with shame that when the reform began to touch the most serious evil of colonialism itself, the church backed out of the reform, leaving the leadership in non-Christian hands.”

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4 Samuel and Sugden, page 201.
5 Ibid., page 202.
At Asbury, we can say with some sense of relief, that E. Stanley Jones did carry on the fight against British colonialism in India, and for that the British denied him a visa during World War II.

In this context of a paradigm shift away from the Cold War Mission, the Asbury Seminary Kingdom Conference was born. The first Conference was held November 7-10 in 1989, and the main speakers were Eugene Nida and an ex-con who founded “Concern for the Poor, Inc.” in San Jose, CA, Rev. Gerry Phelps. Twenty-eight mission groups set up exhibits, including Wycliffe Bible Translators, Evangelicals for Social Action, and World Relief. The second Kingdom Conference featured Samuel Escobar and John Michael Talbot, and even more exhibitors.

**THE CRITICAL MISSION**

We have had the Colonial Mission, and then the Cold War Mission. Where are we now? To satisfy the rules of homiletics, I will call it the Critical Mission. It is The Critical Mission because it questions and then discards some of the previous assumptions and ways of looking at the world. We do not approach the world with triumphalism, but with a bold humility. We do not approach the world with set categories, but rather with new questions.

The time of the Cold War Mission did see the application of Anthropology and other Social Sciences to mission, but sometimes a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing. Just when mission studies began to take advantage of the perspective of anthropology, anthropology changed. Just when the world began to make sense as a collection of different but discrete cultures and languages, the world changed. When missions declared that a billion people had become Christians, the population boomed and the percentage dropped. When missions began to push on the
boundaries of the Muslim world, Radical Islam broke out. When mission began to focus on unreached villages, the villagers moved to the city. When missions tried to follow them, they could not get them to sit still long enough to hear the gospel and start a church. When missionaries translated the Bible, the people chose instead the national language and music and rejected their own traditions.

What’s going on? Doesn’t anybody stay in one place anymore? The answer is: “No.” The world is no longer, if it ever was, made up of discrete groups of people who speak one language and share one culture. Call them tribes, castes, ethnic groups, or nations; people do not congregate according to our categories any more. “The world is changed, I feel it in the water. I feel it in the earth. I smell it in the air.” “Do you not perceive it? Everything old has passed away. There is a new creation. Everything has become new.” “From now on, then, we regard no one from a human point of view.”

A. **The world is changing.** We live in an Urbanizing, Globalizing, Migrating World. Things change so fast that we need verbs to describe it; nouns need not apply.

a. **Urban Mission:** The biggest migration over the last 50 years has been from country to city. Over 50% of the world’s people now live in cities, and that is projected to continue to rise rapidly so that in 20 years nearly 75% will live in cities. What should your mission strategy be? Go where the people are!

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6 Apologies to 4 Non Blondes.
7 Apologies to Carol King.
8 Galadriel.
b. **Diaspora Mission:** Unprecedented numbers of people are now on the move, leaving home and finding their compatriots in diaspora communities around the world, connected to the old but living in the new. We can either wait back at the village to see if they return, or go with the global flow and find a way to be in mission in diaspora. For example, Filipino migrants to Asia and the Middle East, who go as workers, also consider their migration to be opportunity to serve as laborers for the Lord. At the same time, Chinese churches in diaspora in the Philippines are trying to figure out how to be in mission there.

B. *The church is changing.* We live in a world turned upsidedown by de-colonization, the emergence of nations out of colonies, and the rise of independent, indigenous churches in the Global South and the Global East.

   a. **Reverse mission:** The population center of the church has shifted South and East. The “daughter” churches now refuse to become “perpetual mission fields.” Africa now sends out a great number of missionaries, particularly Kenya and Nigeria. The biggest church in the Ukraine was founded and is led by a Nigerian. There are Nigeria founded Pentecostal churches in Atlanta, New York, and Houston. The mission headquarters is in Lagos, and people, products, and ideas fly back and forth daily between Lagos and Atlanta.

   b. **Mission outside the boundaries.** House churches in China have developed...
plan called: “Back to Jerusalem.” The western churches have nothing to do with this. The house churches hope to be in mission and evangelism back along the Old Silk Road through central Asia to the un reached peoples there. That research was done here at Asbury.

C. **Christian Mission is changing.** Contextualization is good, but it is old news. The concept of ‘worldview’ is past its ‘useby’ date. There is something fundamentally wrong with the way we conceive of mission. We want people to change their mind, reshape their worldview, and then we assume people will become spiritual. But, the picture that is emerging is that indigenous peoples experience the world with their whole self; body, mind, and spirit, and not just in cognitive categories. It is not worldview that must change, it is all life itself that must be touched by the love of God in Christ Jesus. As Jesus and Paul understood, people are already spiritual, the question is their orientation. Let us leave behind any notion that we have to cobble together evangelism and social justice; it is only in the recent western tradition that they have been torn asunder.

a. **Submission Mission:** Not just partnership because, as many have experienced, the partner who has the money has the power. I am talking about going out in submission to the local Christians on the “mission field.”

b. **Mission On the Way.** Black Gospel Music is diffusing throughout Denmark revitalizing the church. Can you image, stolid and staid Danes swaying and clapping to **Gospel Music?** Nearly 100 Gospel Choirs have
formed in the country. Some people are interested in the music, but others hear the message which, strangely enough, resonates with Danes. Finally, business as mission. Not only to establish a business to pay for the mission, or to gain access to a limited access country, but to establish a business to lift the local economy through jobs and investment. As Jeremiah says: 9 “seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:7 NRSV) There are many different examples of how this works in Changmai, Thailand.

Do not remember the things of the past, if you think that is the only way God acts, or if you think that past solutions will solve present problems. Look around you; the world has changed, the church has changed, and mission is changing. And, it’s happening right here at Asbury Seminary.

9 “Thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.” (Jeremiah 29:4-7, NRSV)