

THE RELEVANCE OF MISSIONS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

A SENIOR ESSAY

PRESENTED TO

THE FACULTY OF

**THE INTERDENOMINATIONAL THEOLOGICAL CENTER-
ATLANTA, GEORGIA**

**IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE**

BACHELOR OF DIVINITY

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April 15, 1966

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15 April 1966
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PREFACE

The purpose of this essay is not to be a critical research into mission as it relates to the local congregation. Instead, it is written for the laymen in the local congregation to provide a clear-cut idea or interpretation of the mission of the local church. It is also hoped that from this essay, one will be able to see if their local congregation is being relevant in today's world.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world today, thoughtful Christians are re-thinking the mission of the church. They are doing so on international, national, regional, and local levels. They are doing so through study, research conferences, consultations, seminars, institutes, and a steady flow of prolific literature from the press. What accounts for this keen interest in re-thinking the mission of the church? Why all of this deep concern and vigorous activities regarding the Christian mission?¹

There are many possible answers to these questions but the key answer to this situation is the fact that today's church is going through a transitional period and because it is, there are many questions that must be asked; but not only questions to be asked, it must also consider anew its motives, message, methods, and goals.

Therefore, it will be my endeavor to point out in this paper that if the local church does not remain true to its mission (that mission being to make Jesus Christ known to the world and to continue in accomplishing the mission that Jesus himself came to achieve), it will be nothing more than a group of religious societies going

¹Coan, Josephus "Rediscovering the Christian Mission" The Center, Vol. 1, Number 1, Fall, 1964, p. 9.

through certain plastic gymnastics without any real meaning of what it should be doing as the "mission" of the local church.

CHAPTER I

THE NATURE OF THE CHURCH

First of all, the word "ekklesia" translated "church" has as secular and sacred meaning that which is an assembly or a congregation, or those "called out." In the New Testament, this word is used in several ways sometimes referring to one community, sometimes to one church and sometimes to many churches.

Emil Brunner builds his concept of the church on the meaning of "ekklesia," insisting on what seems to be a partial but significant truth. He writes that the ekklesia "is a pure communion of persons and has nothing of the character of an institution about it."² He further states that everything else is secondary, meaning the Lord's Supper and the institutional structure of the church. He also said that the members come to the place at which they now receive the Body of Christ instead of being the Body of Christ.

However, on the other hand, Theodore Wedel writes:

Christians need each other and they need
the communal home of an institutional church.
They need outward and visible sacraments.

² Brunner, Emil. The Misunderstanding of the Church, Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1953, p. 17.

They need an ecumenical church order.³

Brunner and Wedel analyzes what seems to them to be the nature of the church. They are also emphasizing the essentials of the church and the essentials that they are insisting on are found in the New Testament. But the problem is to find the proper balance between these positions.

In finding the proper balance between these men, this writer is inclined to lean more toward Wedel than Brunner for in the first place, one needs the historical data and tradition of the institutional church to give direction to the future. The historical tradition also makes a deep impression upon our "communal" lives. The outward and visible sacraments along with the witness that came from this historical tradition is needed because we do not and cannot live in a vacuum -- we must have action and interaction with others. Of course, this desired goal or idea of fellowship would support Brunner's concept of the church. As people relate to each other they grow toward a concept where the church will be "a pure communion of persons."

The historical tradition has provided what we may call "ministries of the church." It is hoped that the

³ Wedel, Theodore. The Coming Great Church, Macmillan and Company, New York, 1946, p. 7.

mission of the church would be centered around these ministries. The first of these ministries is worship. One of the primary functions of the institutional church is to hold public worship. In worshipping we should praise and give thanks to God for all the love he has bestowed upon us. We can ask forgiveness of our sins, and try and understand how and why he forgives us. We also affirm our faith in God through a historical tradition, for we are challenged to live dedicated, and committed lives for our Lord and Saviour. In the Holy Communion and Sacrament of Baptism, we experience the presence of God's grace. Therefore, without the institutional structure of the church many of these experiences would take other forms.

Preaching is the proclamation of God's word from the scriptures with hope of communicating the Christian faith and pointing out how this gospel still speaks to us in our life situations. It is also hoped that through preaching, people will come to accept Christ as their personal saviour and respond to him with faith and love. Preaching also has the purpose of leading God's people to effective witness of God's grace and action in the world.

Witnessing in the Christian sense involves the calibre of life one lives through thought, word, and deed. Witnessing also requires putting into action the life and

teaching of Jesus Christ. Therefore, the institutional church helps us to witness to those outside the framework of the historical tradition, and to those who are a part of it.

The institutional church has a special service in leading people toward Christian social concerns. One is challenged to help the needy in the world regardless to what or who they are -- whether near or far away. In other words, this ministry of the historical tradition should link us with all people because of the church's concern for making God's grace and will known in the world.

The teaching ministry of the church is another primary function of the institutional church. This ministry is the nurturing of persons in the Christian gospel. It is hoped that all groups and ages will be able to "internalize" the essential teachings of Christianity. Also, it is hoped that the teaching ministry will be able to help persons outside the fellowship learn the true meaning and nature of the church and the Christian life. For as stated in the reception of members in the Methodist Discipline:

The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the promotion of his worship and the due administration of his word and ordinance; the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline; the edification of believers, and the conversion

of the world. All of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.⁴

Finally, "Koinonia" is another word which defines the nature of the church. "Koinonia" means fellowship, participation, sharing, communion, and community. However, it is most commonly defined as a fellowship, but when we use it this way, it means more than the fellowship one experiences at the various social clubs he may belong to. It is greater than the school or sport spirit one may have, for Koinonia is grounded in the Holy Spirit. It is the basis of the church's unity in Christ. The idea of Koinonia is also the concern for a community of believers in the world. Such a concern supports and gives rise to a missionary emphasis in the church. Any time the power of the Holy Spirit causes a member to reach out for another, the church's mission is being proclaimed whether it is next door helping a neighbor or in the far corners of the world proclaiming the gospel to those who do not know Christ.

It is true to admit that when we look at some local congregations, it is hard for us to see them in the words of the Apostle Paul as "The Body of Christ" or in another

⁴Doctrines and Disciplines of the Methodist Church,
The Methodist Publishing House. Nashville, 1964.

New Testament term, "a community of believers." But even though local congregations seem to be parting in their missionary responsibility, the missionary imperative of the church remains the same. It is the church's role to make God's will and work known in the world. This is to be done by those who call Him Lord, Lord.

CHAPTER II

THE NATURE OF MISSIONS

Usually when one thinks of mission, a local congregation which is wholly dependent upon another church or other sources, comes to mind. But when one thinks of "missions" of the church, he considers the agencies through which the whole church brings the whole gospel to the whole world. Further, he believes that by the very nature of his being a Christian, he is to concern himself with the task of the great commission of Christ (Matthew 28: 18-20):

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo I am with you always, to the close of the age.

Historically, missions have been concerned with preaching, worship, education, medicine, economic and social affairs whether within our own local congregation or in a foreign country. However, in the last twenty years, we have been concerned with the unity of all Christians as both the means of missions and the goal of missions.

George B. Webber says that, "missions are not a mere aspect or segment of the life of the church. Although this

is the way they are almost universally conceived today. The church and every local congregation exists for missions. In God's world, Christians are those who know that Jesus Christ is Lord and continue his ministry of service to all mankind." ⁵

This is to say the gift of God's Son on the cross freed us to live as new men in the world. In this new humanity and relationship, we are sustained by our life in the church, and we are nurtured by the sacraments as we work in the world.

We can share in Christ's ministry in the world through our normal commitments whether at home, work, or at play. Or we may work through the churches' own instrument of service.

Each local congregation should be a vehicle through which man may discover and experience the realities of a Christian life. One should also become equipped to live by what he professes as a Christian in the world as well as in the church.

Therefore, if the local congregation is to be our focus on missions, it exists in the world and at the same

⁵ Webber, George B. The Congregation in Mission, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1964. p. 11.

time it must not take on worldly attributes but remain responsive to the will and purposes of God through the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER III

EDUCATION FOR MISSION

A few years ago, the mission of the church was considered an interest of women alone. This could be seen in women's missionary societies where only the women of the church were involved. Most men, except the pastor, kept hands off. But now the church sees that in today's world, the mission of the church would be hampered by such a designation of responsibility.

Today, every congregation should be provided with clear-cut opportunities to understand and undertake the missionary obligation of the church. This in itself points up the need for us to know more missionary education. Some churches form commissions or special committees for this educational endeavor. When this is done, the persons who make up these committees should include representation from all groups that have an interest in or those who are responsible for Christian education in the church. Some of the organizations that should be included in missionary education are the church school, the women's and men's organizations, and the youth groups of the church. It is the responsibility of the committee directly associated with missions to coordinate this endeavor and see that the necessary steps are taken to enlighten others in the church about missions.

After this committee has been set up, it should be cognizant of the different attitudes that the people of the church have about missions. Not only should they be aware of the attitudes, but they should also be interested in what they actually know and how they were orientated and motivated toward missions. Committee members should know the role and nature of missions in the church. This may be done by the use of films, pamphlets, and other materials on the missionary enterprise.

There is not any one way of informing members on the missions of the church; however, many churches have what is called the School of Missions. The sponsorship of such a school should be in conjunction with the Commission on Education, women's and men's organizations, and the youth groups. The reason for this is to involve as many people as possible so that a wide variety of the church's members will attend. It will also help if consideration is given to time and other church activities. Sub-groups could do the publicity, select the literature, plan the worship and meals while others work on other details. For example, goals for excellence in mission study schools or classes of the Methodist church are as follows:

1. The use of a current approved mission study course and text;
2. A capable, responsible committee to make detailed plans;

3. A leader who is prepared and who can give capable group leadership;
4. A minimum of six hours for the class;
5. Attendance at each session by every member of the class;
6. Class member participation; panels, discussions, informal drama, audio visual aid;
7. Preparation between sessions; reading the text and other assignments;
8. Action growing out of study.⁶

The success or failure of the church's mission program may depend on the outcome of this school. Therefore, it is hoped that the best efforts are put forth in this endeavor for this is the foundation from which we build a stronger and better program in missions.

Most people will ask, "Just what can one learn from a school of mission?" Basically, one will learn the nature and role of the church in a mission. One will come to know where mission fields are and what constitutes a mission field. One will come to know what the missionaries have done and are doing at home and in international missions. One can come to appreciate other cultures who worship the same God but through their own customs and mores. One will

⁶ Struchen, Donald E. Manual for the Commission on Missions. Board of Missions of the Methodist Church, Cincinnati, Ohio 1964, p. 17.

also come to see whether or not the church is living up to its mission and learn better ways to help the church realize its missionary imperative.

The above may be done through the school of mission; however, the committee on missions or some other organization may introduce an international day or weekend. This would involve bringing in foreign students from nearby colleges and available missionaries into a real dialogue with the members of the church. An experience of this kind will provide valuable knowledge and heighten interest in missionary programs in the church. This means that students and other guests would provide first hand information on what is going on in other parts of the world and how we can promote mission in the local church.

There are also work camps and tours that are centered around missions. Here again one can come into and have a "live" confrontation with Christian mission in action.

Education for mission should be clear and decisive for mission seeks to develop the involvement of every Christian in the church's mission.

J. Allen Ranck says:

Education for mission should ask and answer questions about the validity of missionary activity by leading one into a deeper understanding of the gospel through knowledge of missionary work.

He also says:

It should dispel indifference through information and involvement; and it should inspire support for missionary work.⁷

Education for mission should move one to pray with faith and hope for the missionary enterprise as we share our talents, gifts, skills, and time to support God's mission at home and abroad.

⁷ Ranck, Allen J. Education for Mission, New York: Friendship Press, 1961, p. 8.

CONCLUSION

The great commission by Jesus summoned us to be actively involved in the world. Christians must address themselves to the task of making God's grace and love known to all creatures. Our concern for people should be more than a cup of water and flowers to those who are sick. Instead, we must seek ways to enter actively into the world seeking to build and encourage a Christian community. There are people in our nation as well as countless other countries who do not know God's message of reconciliation.

If the local church of today is going to be relevant in our society, we must understand clearly the significance of the missionary imperative. However, to understand this imperative is not enough; we as individuals must carry out our mission.

Local churches must become aware of their failure in promoting Christ's mission in the world. The church must realize that if it is not relevant, it must seek ways for renewal and reform. Renewal basically means going beyond the traditional patterns of the structured church and the exploration of other creative forms whereby they can truly carry out the great commission of Jesus.

We need to also consider and explore what Eugene L. Stockwell calls "characteristic of a Christian congregation." The first characteristic of a Christian congregation is that of "comprehensiveness" which means "to affirm a

responsibility for the whole gamut of man's world." Secondly, "a Christian congregation is open to the future". This means an openness on the one hand that has to do with insecurities, and on the other with proper questioning. By insecurities, he implies that the mission comes to the church out of the future, and this means that we are called as individuals and as a congregation we seem quite insecure to deal with the unfamiliar and unknown.

The other aspect of openness to the future is that it obligates a congregation to ask some searching questions. Must the congregation of the future continue the same patterns of today? Are there not other groupings from which congregation life is virtually absent in which new form could be sought such as in professional and labor groups, business communities, and other areas of public life?

Thirdly, "a Christian congregation is to be intentionalistic." It does not allow itself to be the victim of sheer chance or circumstance, and drift along without some sense of intention and direction. A mission congregation takes upon itself, by a conscious decision, the mission God places upon it".⁸

⁸ Stockwell, Eugene L. Claimed by God for Missions, Nashville Parthenon Press 1965, pp. 40-46.

In the gospel of John 17: 15-19, Jesus prayed for the church by saying:

I do not pray that shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in truth, thy word is truth, as thou didst send me into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that also may be consecrated in truth.

Therefore, when the church, like its Lord, gives itself in sacrificial, redemptive love to the world it will have power for transformation and reconciliation. This means that the above thought should help toward making mission relevant for all mankind. We should not be boasting in ourselves but in Jesus Christ whose mission we carry. In the final analysis the future of the Christian mission does not depend on the power of man alone but through faith in God through Jesus Christ. Therefore, let our mission be:

Let the light shine out of darkness who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

- II Cor. 4: 5-6

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