



Reflections on Christian Mission

Introduction

The following reflections do not pretend to be a contribution by an expert of Christian missiology; the author does not have intentions of writing an academic paper on the subject of missiology. He is a mere missionary of a new type, a radio minister proclaiming the *Word of the World*. He is convinced though, that the radio ministry he is exercising in the French-speaking part of the world (Europe, Canada, Africa, Islands of the Indian Ocean, the French Antilles) is as genuine and as urgent as any other classical type missions. No particulars of a given missionary activity or denomination will be dealt with. Some general reflections will be offered as the expression of a Biblical and Reformed mission concept.

Motive for Mission

Several points which are essential to this Biblical Reformed understanding of the missionary activity of the Christian Church will be treated here, though not thoroughly. Our purpose will be to recall a few fundamental guidelines, and refresh memories wherever necessary. It seems obvious, at least to the author of these lines, that not all new insights in this field are helping to reach correct understanding of the missionary "mandate." Basic to such an understanding remains the saying of the old prophet Isaiah: *Back to the Law and to the Testimony* (Isaiah 8:13).

We are aware with Jaroslav Pelican, that *"if tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living."* Therefore, we are not advocating any traditionalistic approach to Reformed missions, the one which was prevalent some fifty years ago, but rather a Biblical and Reformed understanding and practice.

One of the fundamentals in this respect has to be stated and recalled from the outset. Like in other Biblical loci, in mission too there is, and there must be, a rule (in Greek CANON APOSTOLES). Let us summarize it in the following terms:

The unique foundation of all missionary thinking and enterprise, the only point of its departure, the exclusive and all sufficient motivation is not to be found in any personal (romantic) enthusiasm, nor even in collective ecclesiocentric missionary activity(ies). The foundation and the motive, the starting point and its mainspring, are of a supremely theological nature.

If it were not so, if our motivations and concerns were merely of a pragmatistic-utilitarian social, cultural or ethnic type, then there would never be any Christian mission at all. Such a theological foundation is all-sufficient, clear, necessary, and the only *authorized one*. As such, it is the only unshakeable foundation upon which we may build. We always need to come back to it for a dynamic reformation of all missionary thinking and acting. We will not fail. All our inspiration will spring from this motive. The whole of our strength will be drawn from such a source. If we are reluctant to start at this point and come back towards it, we may be certain of one result: We will never experience any renewal. That may become a very disastrous certainty. Instead of the expected renewal, we will merely present to the world the **concave** (hollow side) of the Christian mission, not the **convex** one. In radical departure from the Spirit and the Word, who once and for all has established in the church the rule of the Christian mission, our missions will be devoid of life. A non-theological understanding of the Christian mission reminds us of the Sahara Desert which is growing and expanding every year, though never flourishing. Or, to use another illustration, it may remind us of a knife which has no handle and no blade. Unfortunately, there are some such modern concepts of mission.

The fundamental principle, or rule, that we have stated above naturally applies to the Church organizing the mission, to the boards who supervise it, to reports which evaluate missionary activities, and to each humble Christian who sustains, by his or her faith, prayer, time, and gifts, the mission work which has the primary task of rendering witness to the mighty works and gracious dealings of our God and Savior.

Such a rule excludes ipso-facto all sociological and cultural explanations or justifications of missions. Mission is not an aspect of a social evolution, or the development of cultural progress in the name of a so-called Christendom, or Western civilization as such.

The world around us already has such socio-cultural agendas and policies. It uses diplomacy and operates by many and various manipulations. In order to achieve its goals and establish its hegemony, it does not hesitate to use brain washing. Generally speaking, it attempts to destroy whatever is pure, holy and true.

Distortion of Mission

According to some of our observations, modern concepts of mission prove to be meta-mission, due to a post-mission mentality. Very easily perceivable in this are the exaggerated interest and inclination towards mathematical statistics, the juggling with figures and data. A sample of such an interest has caused us particular amazement. According to some estimates, if the total number of Christian converts in Africa at the beginning of the present century was three million, there will be four hundred million of them at the end of this century. Two very simple questions arise in connection with this highly questionable optimistic evaluation of "church-growth" specialists. We wonder how it is possible to ascertain that by midnight December 31, 1999 (or 2000), there will be four hundred million Christians in Africa. We are not systematically opposed to statistics. They may, if intelligently and honestly established and utilized, prove to be helpful in some cases. But there are more serious factors to be considered in missions than statistics. What may such statistics mean to one who is familiar with the tremendous religious and spiritual upheavals of this continent and all the mixtures of "religions" that can be observed. Rastafarism, Kimbanguism, Black Theology, and the wildest type pentecostal-animistic syncretism are making thousands and hundreds of thousands of converts. Will those 400 million "Christians" be regenerated and reformed by the Spirit and the Word? We have reason to be afraid that the decisive elements for a correct evaluation of mission and results have been sacrificed to very secondary concerns which take precedence over the most vital points.

Calculation has replaced sound thinking!

Another sample of the mathematically-minded modern missionary manias is the following. The population of Mexico City is estimated to be 33 million by 2025 A.D. We ask the following question: How can one dare say after having witnessed during 1985 the huge catastrophe that occurred in this most favored megalopolis, that indeed there will be such a demographic explosion? What if, God forbid, before 2025 A.D. the City of Mexico is totally wiped out from the geographical map after another huge-scale earthquake? We see again that the decisive element in mission has disappeared in order to leave the place to the almost obsessive hobby of "urban-missionary" development. The targets are futuristic and always defined as megacities, super-cities, super-giants! For our part we do not see any biblically founded theory providing grounds to be immersed into such an oversimplified missionary formula. If we were to follow such an exaggerated concern for one exclusive target of the mission field, we would place the cart before the oxen, stressing and emphasizing the human predicament instead of placing the accent on the Divine Mandate which is entirely independent from our dreams, aspirations and predictions. We then replace divine election with human perspective, social and demographical planning.

Some advocates of this type of urban mission have argued that Paul also was very urban minded in his missionary journeys. They assure us that almost without exception he chose to preach to churches exclusively in cities. In a sense we will agree. But we will do well to remember that he had a *theological motivation* for applying such a strategy, not any demographical concern. For instance, he visited Jewish synagogues and preached to Jewish colonies or proselytes. Synagogues were found in big cities of the Mediterranean area. Even in Rome his first listeners were Jews. This point

needs to be more thoroughly investigated; yet the main idea is a legitimate one. So, contrary to the supremely theological motivation, Christian mission has been reduced by some moderns to simply some contingent geographical and demographic preoccupation.

This remark poses again another obligation; a thorough investigation has to be undertaken in order to see how detrimental to the entire ecclesiastical organization, the modern obsession with **expertise** has become. To such an extent that we will speak of the **Egyptianization of Christianity**, of the **momification of the Gospel** and of the **columbarium** in which **missionary concepts** are burnt and extinguished. Sad to say, this type of missionary functions with principles like those of old alchemy. Or to use an example from the past (contrary to king Midas) modern ecclesiastical technocrats transform whatever they touch into plastic! At least the unfortunate king of mythology had proved to have more refined taste; he would transform things into gold. This is radical **derealization**. *It reminds us again that while the Lord God created reality out of nothingness, modern experts create nothingness out of reality. Indeed we may speak about an inverted creation!*

Pastoral Concern

We defined mission according to its theological rule, which is its basic nature. Let us add a complement to it; according to Biblical philosophy, whatever is theological must first of all express a *pastoral concern*. Pastoral concerns must also deal with areas where people live – those in their lonely cottages, or those who cling to their soil on a distant farm. Shall we neglect them in order to attain a hypothetically easy target, the urban "masses"? This is an enormous misunderstanding and a totally deformed conception of all evangelistic enterprise. Is it legitimate for the Christian to speak in terms of anonymous and impersonal masses? Even such a modern missionary activity as the radio ministry is a *highly personal evangelism*, in spite of the use and abuse of the term Mass-Media evangelization and the concept of the "Electronic church." Despite the fact that the radio ministry presents advantages for reaching those whom a classical type of mission cannot reach, we nevertheless bear in mind that it is the most efficient way of reaching the "one," though *there are millions of ones* listening to the saving Gospel.

Our call is an urgent one. We are entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel, here and now. *"To each day sufficeth its pains,"* and so also with the Gospel. To each day its Gospel, if we may put it this way, without probability calculations, hypothetical formulations and highly imaginative constructions. Let us leave futurology in the hands of those who enjoy abstract games, and who entertain modern man with sensationalism. Human planning and "marketing" strategies will never become the foundational motives of our mission, nor stimulate our zeal for missionary expansion. Human planning will certainly not become a substitute for divine election.

Finally, and again briefly, another point. Recently a promoter of the "contextualization of mission" complained that theology, with its "ivory tower" has not helped much in the formulation of a dynamic missiology (a criticism addressed to a prominent European New Testament scholar). It is questionable whether the alternative lies between a *theological* "ivory tower" and a *missiological* "cardboard castle"! We are not forced to choose between a sedimentary, sclerotic and sterile theology, and the sand-castles of modern missiology. There are better things to be done. By the way, the term contextualization has given us another occasion to raise eyebrows. Linguistically speaking, if not theologically, it is an improper term. Any contextualization has necessarily to do with a ... text. To formulate more clearly and more accurately our missionary thinking and activity, some of the European languages of Latin origin might have provided better terms (like the French **acculturation**).

These are some of our concerns about modern development in the field of missiology. We did not treat them thoroughly for that was not our aim. Our purpose remains to inquire into the biblical nature of mission, to recall its theological rule, and to rediscover the MYSTERY OF THE MISSION.

