

THE FULLNESS OF MISSION

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The following paper, somewhat abridged, is my evaluation of the World Council of Churches' Conference on World Mission and Evangelism, May 12-24, 1980

Introduction

God doesn't deal in half measures. The whole earth is full of his glory. In his presence, the psalmist declares, is fullness of joy. When Jesus came to earth all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell in him. St. John assures us that from Jesus' fullness we all have received grace piled upon grace. Jesus himself testified, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (cf. Isaiah 6:3, Psalm 16:11, Colossians 1:19, John 1:16 and 10:10).

Why is it, then, that down through history Christians have tended to dilute this rich, full mission of God – to domesticate it, dichotomize it, enfeeble it, reduce it to "manageable" proportions, color it gray, make of it no more than one of its parts?

The earliest believers thought to limit God's mission to Jews only. Roman regents attempted to harness it to imperial interests. Hermits interiorized it. Mystics etherealized it. Crusaders reduced it to barbarity. Reformers circumscribed it. "The parish is my world," they insisted. In the 19th century missionaries linked it uncritically to colonial concerns. In the 20th century a few have even placed it in the service of the CIA.

Thank God that others, even in our own time, have seen more clearly the multidimensional nature of mission. The apostle Paul understood, in a way his contemporaries did not, that the gospel was for all the nations. St. Francis of Assisi saw that there was *work* to be done among the poor. Not only humanity but nature is redeemable in God's great plan of salvation. Ignatius Loyola reached out to all nations, while John Wesley turned the Reformers' dictum on its head, boldly asserting, "The world is my parish!" More recent history is replete with missionaries who courageously opposed mercantilist crimes and political perversions.

Throughout the 20th century, nevertheless, we have struggled to apprehend the fullness of mission – or allow it to apprehend us. Our grapplings have not been altogether futile. We have discovered deeper meanings of salvation. We have come to appreciate the complexities of mission. We have pioneered new frontiers of joint action.

Yet by and large, we have proved ourselves unequal to the challenge. Great areas of geography and culture are still unreached by the gospel. We have allowed the pendulum to oscillate from evangelism to social action and back again. We have polarized the body of Christ to an unnecessary and even self-defeating degree.

The 1980 Conference on World Mission and Evangelism in Melbourne, Australia contributed a great deal to our understanding of the fullness of mission. The Melbourne meeting focused on the kingdom of God – probably the most fruitful symbol of mission in Scripture. Melbourne directed our attention to the poor and their struggles for justice. It emphasized the biblical demand for authenticity in the churches' witness. It introduced some of us to unexpected dimensions of mission in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Above all, it challenged the church to a new *style* of mission in the power encounters of our time.

Yet Melbourne did not escape the bias to reduce mission to something less than the sum of its parts. While Melbourne had much to say about how we are to witness to the kingdom in areas where the church *exists*, it was virtually silent on how we are to carry out mission where the church is *not yet*.

And in truth there are hundreds of thousands of towns and villages, in Asia especially, where the church is not present in any form. There are unreached peoples, hidden peoples, numbering two-thirds of the world's population, for whom cross-cultural missions (evangelistic, church-planting, disciple-making missions) are still prerequisite. Melbourne wrongly downplayed missions in these traditional terms, thereby depleting the fullness of mission.

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to discuss cross-cultural missionary activity in the positive light of what was given to us at Melbourne.

Good News to the Poor

Missionary vocation during the past two centuries has expressed itself in terms of masses of individuals, dark continents, inscrutable religions or, more recently, hidden peoples. Each of these approaches is legitimate in its own way. Yet Melbourne reminded us that the Lord Jesus announced at the beginning of his own mission that God had anointed him especially to preach good news to *the poor* (Luke 4:18).

The poor are still the largest unreached people group in the world. Emilio Castro, director of the WCC Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, affirms that "the fact that so many poor people in the world do not have anyi

access to this knowledge of God's grace in Jesus Christ is a challenge to our Christian conscience."

Some missiologists today argue against the poor constituting a people group (with the attendant obligation to develop a specific strategy for reaching them). They suggest that there really isn't enough homogeneity within "the culture of poverty" to include the poor in general as a people group. But why then is "the poor" such a prominent category in Scripture? Is it not precisely because of the homogeneity of the needy?

Important distinctions can be made between the relatively poor and the absolutely poor, and between the rural poor and the urban poor. Yet the poor everywhere are alike in that they lack money; they are underemployed (or employed not at all); they have inadequate nutrition, housing, health and educational opportunities; and they experience chronic feelings of powerlessness, insignificance, frustration and despair. If this is not homogeneity, what is?

It will not do to contrast "the poor" of Luke 6:20 with the poor in spirit of Matthew 5:3 too sharply. Still less may we apply the gospel to the one and not the other. The Rev. Canaan Banana, president of Zimbabwe, rightly notes that to be poor is both a state of being and an attitude to life. Lack of food, shelter and clothing produces spiritual anguish as well as physical misery. Lack of love can make even the most affluent circumstances unbearable.

Poverty is a pervasive feature of our world today – perhaps its most pervasive feature. A Guatemala *campesino* (peasant) in a rural Bible study group commented on Isaiah 40:3-5 this way: "The Lord is already near. He comes, but not even the poor are able to recognize him because they are at the bottom of a pit (*barancos*=deep canyons), the pit of hunger, exploitation, sickness, poverty and injustice.

Responding to the commission to preach the gospel to the poor opens up demanding new dimensions of mission. It casts new light on our missionary *statistics*. It forces us to rethink our missionary *message*. It challenges our mission *style*.

The Statistics of Mission

We know that one-seventh of the world's population is Muslim; one-sixth is Indian; one-fifth is Chinese. Together these three groups constitute most of the "unreached peoples" of the world, as that phrase is being used currently. An even more important statistic, however is this: four-fifths of the world's population is impoverished – materially, culturally, spiritually. As we seek to reach the unreached, we dare

not ignore this reality. In the global context, the poor are not small minorities clustered here and there. The poor are the *vast majority*.

This is difficult for many American Christians to grasp, so cocooned are we from the desperate plight of our fellow human beings: an island of affluence in a sea of poverty. But grasp it we must. As James, our Lord's brother, tells us pointedly, God has chosen the marginalized of the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him (James 2:5).

God knows the poor are uniquely responsive to the gospel. They are the natural citizens of the kingdom. Thus Section I at Melbourne declared, "The churches cannot neglect this evangelistic task. Most of the world's people are poor and they are waiting for a witness to the gospel that will really be 'good news'."

Moreover, in many parts of the world today the poor and powerless are in the vanguard of those proclaiming the kingdom. They are not mere objects of mission so much as subjects – active participants. This is so in Hong Kong factories, in African independent churches, in Brazilian base communities, and in countless other situations. For the gospel to remain strong in a country, it must be rooted among the weak.

In India a worker from one of the indigenous missionary societies has been living among palm-tree tappers. He finds that they are being charged huge interest rates on small loans from moneylenders. They know nothing about assistance programs the government has set up. The Indian missionary therefore sets about making the tappers aware of their exploitation and the availability of help. The tappers become conscious of new, alternative patterns of human relationships. When the question arises of how these new patterns can be achieved, the story of Christ and the reconciliation he provides between God and humans and between person and persons moves to the top of the agenda.

The apostle Paul informs us that God desires all human beings to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth (I Timothy 2:4). St. Peter confirms this, noting that God does not wish that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Most of the "all" and "any" referred to in these passages are poor people. Yet many of our modern missionaries focus their attention on the rich.

Modern missionaries speak of reaching university students or middle class professionals in Third world countries, overlooking the fact that in these countries university students are the future rich; and professionals

form a tiny, highly privileged sector of society. The middle class, where it exists in developing countries, almost always is allied with the rich and powerful.

Missionaries focusing on students, professionals, and well to do businessmen defend their strategy, of course. They suggest that by reaching the highly educated, the leaders of society, the pacesetters, they will more quickly reach the masses of poor people. This highly dubious proposition has little warrant in history and less in Scripture. It is simply another application of the long-since discredited “trickle down” theory in economics.

I suspect that in many instances, missionaries working among the miniscule middle classes in non-Western societies do so because they themselves come from middle class backgrounds or perceive themselves to be upwardly mobile. They just feel more comfortable among middle class people than among the poor.

On the other hand, missionaries who do work among the poor must not be content to dole out charity. Nor can they indulge in the kind of “development” that allows only a limited number of the poor to join the middle class elite without working to overcome societal injustice for the many.

The Missionary’s Message

If, as Melbourne suggested, an essential part of missionary activity is proclaiming the kingdom of God, many of us will have to rethink our message. We are likely to discover that the gospel we preach is one-dimensional. It does injustice to the fullness of mission expressed by the kingdom. In contemporary jargon, it needs to be “contextualized” – made relevant to a specific situation and a specific moment in history.

What is the good news we have to share with the poor and oppressed in their context? As an initial announcement, it can be expressed in the familiar words of Campus Crusade’s first spiritual law: God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life! Such an announcement is certainly *news* to the poor. All the experiences they have accumulated in a lifetime of oppression seem to point in the opposite direction. Most are convinced from what they see around them that God loves the rich and has a marvelous plan for *their* lives.

The Bible clearly teaches otherwise. We have already noted James’ conviction that God has chosen poor people to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom. This is good news. St. Paul reminds the Corinthian believers, most of whom were from the poorer classes (cf. I Corinthians 1;26-29) of

the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ who, “though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). God is not only *for* the poor, but *with* them in Jesus Christ.

God first revealed his preferential option for the poor in the history of his dealings with Israel. When they were slaves, he heard their cry and came to deliver them (Exodus 3:7-8). He led them out of oppression into the promised land where dignity, self-determination, and equity would characterize their national and interpersonal relationships. Through his prophets God never allowed Israel to forget that his kingdom was for the poor. The first sentence of our missionary message, then, is that the Ruler of the universe, the Creator of all things, is the Friends and Redeemer of the weak and powerless. In Raymond Fung’s memorable phrase, God sides with “the sinned-against.”

The second sentence is that the Friend is also the Judge. This is no small thing. God not only loves the poor; he hates evildoers (cf. Psalm 34:16). Evildoers (Hebrew: *reshaim*) are those who oppress the poor and the needy (Psalm 73:1-14). In the great struggles of our day, God actively sides with the poor and oppressed. As Mary the mother of our Lord saw clearly, in his kingdom the mighty fall and the lowly are lifted up (Luke 1:52).

We can be more specific. God is on the side of those who struggle for liberation and self-determination in the political context. God supports those who wrestle for basic human rights. Any socioeconomic system that denies basic needs is unjust and inevitably opposed by God. God stands against the economic principalities and powers of our age, those great multinational corporations, the pride of American enterprise, wherever they exploit the poor.

God opposes our democratic parliaments and congresses whenever they perpetrate legal injustice by “stacking the deck” in favor of the haves against the have-nots. According to the psalmist, this is framing mischief by decree (Psalms 94:20). The poor eke out their existence in a world created by evil people and condoned by good people. Thus the mission of the Lord Jesus himself is said to be a mission of rectification, of establishing justice (cf. Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew 12:18-21).

In all honest, though, there is a third sentence. The sinned-against are also sinners. A laborer toils all week long at a monotonous, demeaning task, exploited by the rich and powerful. Devoid of meaning and purpose in life, despairing of hope for the future, he squanders his meager wages on alcohol, then returns home to beat his wife. She in turn,

cooped up in crowded tenement flat, with no mobility or cultural outlet, vents her frustration on her children – who kick the cat!

All of us, therefore, rich and poor alike, need forgiveness. We all sin against our fellow human beings, and such sin is sin against God. We are thereby alienated not only from our fellow human beings, but from God. We need to be reconciled to God. This reconciliation was effected at Calvary. There God's Son, the only sinless person who ever lived, became the supremely sinned-against one. On the cross he bore the sins of all humankind – not just the petty misdemeanors religious people so often preoccupy themselves with, but the horrendous, outrageous sins of society's institutions as well.

Moreover, all of us, rich and poor alike, face the ultimate enemy, death. In death hopes are haunted, dreams demolished, loved ones torn apart. By his resurrection Jesus conquered death and invested our individual efforts and relationships with eternal significance. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God's kingdom of peace, freedom, joy, justice, and eternal life is offered to all. By a personal, individual faith-commitment to Jesus as Lord and Savior, we enter the kingdom. All of the promises of the kingdom – both in the present and beyond death – are ours in Christ (2 Corinthians 1:20).

Section III at Melbourne declared that “the story of God in Christ is the heart of all evangelism, and this story has to be told...The telling of the story is an inescapable mandate for the whole church; word accompanies deed as the kingdom throws its light ahead of its arrival, and men and women seek to live in that light.”

At the same time, to enter the kingdom is to enlist in the service of the King. The risen King, as we have seen, is engaged in a continuing battle with the principalities and powers of darkness. His arena, in the words of Albert Camus, is the blood-stained face of history. To this end he has called into existence a community, the community of the King, to work with him to establish justice on the earth. Within this new community the power of the Holy Spirit is released. Spiritual gifts are discovered, developed, and deployed in the ministry of reconciliation. Those who struggle alongside the poor are empowered by the Spirit to persevere, even in the face of persecution, imprisonment, and death. They overcome by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony (Revelation 12:11).

The good news we proclaim to the poor and dispossessed, in summary, consists of the announcement that God is

both Friend and Judge, that in righteous love he assists the lowly and opposes the mighty, and that in the Calvary event he provides a definitive reconciliation –vertical and horizontal – for all who will respond. He therefore calls individuals to repentance and faith, and offers forgiveness, spiritual power, and eternal life. He further calls men and women to a community committed to the pursuit of wholeness here and now. This is the life of discipleship. This what Jesus had in mind when he commissioned us to “make disciples” (Matthew 28:19).

Such a message requires a special style. It calls for radical changes in the direction of the contemporary missionary movement, in our missionary institutions, in the kind of missionary required, and in our approach to training and preparation.

The Style of Mission

Direction

American Christians still have not abandoned the image of missionary activities as being one-way traffic. From us to them, from West to East, from North to South, from Christendom to the heathen, from developed countries to underdeveloped countries. This image falsifies the reality of our time. It fails to recognize that the churches of Asia, Africa, and Latin America have matured. They are increasingly disenchanted with the quality of “Christian” life in Europe and North America.

In their maturity, Third World Christians quite naturally identify more directly with the socioeconomic aspirations of their fellow citizens. They are becoming aware of the cause-effect relationship between the policies of the Christian West (or North) and their own desperate situations. In their maturity they are discovering the Great Commission for themselves and creating their own mission agencies. Theodore Williams, himself an Indian missionary executive, calls these “the emerging missions.”

So it is no longer us to them, but with them and, significantly, between them and them! This new form of missionary movement is still embryonic. But who can doubt that it is the wave of the future? Section IV at Melbourne reported, “We believe that we can discern a development whereby mission in the eighties may increasingly take place within these zones...between Asia, Africa and Latin America.”

At Melbourne the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama drew attention to still another vector in the

missionary movement. Jesus was crucified “outside the gate” (Hebrews 13:12) – that is, at the periphery of society. He who is the center of the whole universe, he who is at the center of all human life, is constantly in movement from the center toward the periphery – toward those who are marginalized, victims of demonic powers, whether they be political, economic, cultural, or even religious.

If we take this direction seriously, missionaries must be with Jesus at the periphery. Thus the author of the letter to the Hebrews exhorts, “Let us go forth to him outside the camp, bearing abuse for him. For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Hebrews 13:13-14). Since the countries of the South, their poverty-stricken masses, and their churches are themselves at the periphery of our contemporary world order, Koyama’s model and Melbourne’s response are consistent with what we have discussed to this point.

Institutions

Where Western missionary agencies are concerned, the changes of which we are speaking point in the direction of more effectual partnerships with Third World churches. Some agencies, such as the century-old Sudan Interior Mission (SIM), have demonstrated great sensitivity in developing such relations. Their partnership with the Evangelical Churches of West Africa (ECWA) is a case in point. SIM has quietly assisted ECWA to create its own missionary society, the Evangelical Missionary Society (EMS). It may surprise some to learn that EMS now supports over 200 African missionary couples. They work entirely under African supervision, evangelizing across numerous cultural frontiers in West Africa.

If most of the unreached peoples live in China, India and Muslim lands (these areas contain 60% of the world’s population), and if these lands are closed to large-scale Western missionary enterprise, why are we talking, in some quarters, about the multiplication of Western missionaries? Such missionaries will necessarily have to be deployed where the church has already been established. This is likely to “swamp the boat” and lead to renewed calls for a moratorium on Western missionaries.

While so many millions still wait for the good news of the kingdom, non-Western missionaries may be ever more essential. If so, the phenomenon of “emerging missions” I noted earlier takes on fresh import, while the demand for genuine partnership between non-Western and Western agencies acquires new force.

Missionaries

In this transitional period of mission, a new breed of missionary is called for. Recently I received a newsletter from a young Western missionary-to-be. He laid out his financial needs: \$20,000 cash to transport himself and his family to the field; \$30,000 a year thereafter to provide for his family and a modest ministry. This raises serious questions. Can a \$30,000 a year lifestyle truly mirror the kingdom of God in a developing country? Can rich people really communicate with poor people? Is it possible to avoid condescension and power plays in the relationship between a \$30,000 a year youthful missionary and his \$3,000 a year national partner?

In contrast to the affluent Western missionary, most Third World missionaries conduct "mission out of poverty." It can truly be said of her or him, "as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything" (2 Corinthians 6:10). Being have-nots themselves, Asian, African and Latin American missionaries identify easily with other have-nots.

Theodore Williams, the Indian leader I mentioned earlier, contends that most Western missionaries are success-oriented and number-conscious; they are given over to a missiological triumphalism. But mission, he says, ought to be carried out "in the servant image...It is not the fulfillment of programmes but the fulfilling of human relationships that matter." Are we listening?

Third World missionaries often bring a renewed emphasis on suffering. In many countries Christians are small minorities, persecuted and oppressed. Suffering is part of their mission. The cross is an ever present reality. Knowing this, it seems imperative that missionaries we sent out from the West be committed to the kind of lifestyle and ministry that will enable them to be true partners with their fellow Christians in the Third World.

Training

The poor are the world's majority. In the United States and Canada, however, they are a minority. Therefore prospective North American missionaries will benefit most by that kind of training that immerses them in minority groups in American society. Here they may experience in microcosm the special problems and aspirations of the vast majority of the world's peoples. A summer in Harlem, or with migrant workers in California, or on a reservation in the Dakotas will bring to life the lessons of the seminary classroom.

Ultimately, however, any discussion of missionary preparation will focus on congregational life. Most Western missionaries are nurtured for considerable lengths of time within a local congregation. The attitudes, convictions, and lifestyle of the missionary are likely to mirror those of his or her home church. Are our churches in solidarity with the weak and powerless? Or are we part and parcel of the very forces in society that exploit and oppress? It is reasonable to expect that a congregations that evaluates its contextual role critically and moves united toward the poor who live on the underside of history will provide an environment in which Western missionaries of tomorrow might flourish.