



2020 VISION

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WHAT FUTURE FOR MISSION?

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I want to suggest that any semblance of a humble response to the question of “what future for mission?” will necessarily have to grapple with the narrative nature of Christian Faith in and of itself: That is...does the biblical narrative proffer Christian Faith as Therapy...or does the biblical narrative proffer Christian Faith as inherently Missional? Over-confidence in the Edinburgh Missionary Conference cry of 1910 for the “evangelization of the world in this generation” was met by the devastation of Two World Wars, such that Jacques Ellul was acclaimed by many as wholly accurate when he said that, “With World War One Europe lost its heart; With World War Two Europe lost its soul.”

The postmodern critique of this suspect history blessedly forces the challenge of David Bosch to the foreground once again...when he urges the differentiation between “a missiological agenda for theology”...rather than the pedantic “theological validation of mission.” It is the difference between a Missional Theology and a Theology of Mission. And I suggest that that difference is hugely significant.

Princeton theologian David Tracy’s emphasis upon the “infinite translatability” of the gospel of Jesus Christ is, then, all the more crucial. The good news is a story (a narrative you see) that appreciates its rendition from different cultural perspectives precisely because they illumine the limitations of our culturally bound hermeneutic as new questions are brought to the Bible. Thus both urbanization and globalization can be lauded (at least in this respect) as they promote a mode of World Christianity in which the goal of a true catholicity of faith is realizable. It is none other than St. Paul’s standard for the missionary church that we attain “the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph.4:13).

And yet, how are we to rely upon the infinite translatability of the Gospel when my German student reminds us of the youths in eastern Germany who say: “We have forgotten that we have forgotten God”? And other missional practitioners (turned authorial and academic) ask such shattering questions as, “Can the West be Saved?” (Lesslie Newbigin) And so it is not unreasonable that Max Warren (perhaps prophetic, way back in the 1950’s) is bold enough

to voice the white elephant question bursting up through our clenched throats: "Have we reached the end of the missionary age in any shape recognizably continuous with the past?"

My friend and colleague David Smith suggests that in the face of the "lengthy charge-sheet of postmodern and secular accusations" (particularly given the harrowing speed of and onslaught of world-wide conurbation) the future of mission demands a reliance upon the narrative unfolding of the Bible rather than propositional apologetics...and..."a regular and deep dialogue between missionary practitioners and Christian theologians." The infinite translatability of the gospel must be rendered as good news in such a manner that it approximates what Gordon Fee calls marketplace theology, wherein all of its dazzling colors are unfurled, not solely for personal therapy, but for the public good.

The glory of the Lord is in all the earth (Is.6:3), and so in this very cultural context we can expect to unearth what the secular sociologist, Jürgen Habermas, describes as "intuitions of religious musicality." Karl Barth similarly urges us to pay attention to the "secular parables of the Kingdom" already present...in cinema...on stage...in stories at the nursery...in jazz cafés...in radio interviews...in lyrics coming you over your ipod...in poetry in the pubs...and, yes, within academia. Even within academia! They bespeak intuitions that are ubiquitous. These are, admittedly, small rays of light, but they might also be prevenient gifts that serve to awaken a yearning for the Light of the World.

And they are inimical toward perverted notions of progress and growth that bear all the earmarks of graceless free market competition...which is so deeply embedded in the wider Western culture...and is shaped by economic expediency and business for profit methodology. It has little to do with Spirit-inspired imagination, nor relational authenticity. These ventures are excused as the science of missiometrics, but they mislead us when they convince us that the goal of mission is simply the quantitative increase in the number of people who profess conversion. Bonhoeffer boldly suggested that, "It may be that the times of collapse are for Christ the great times of building. It may be that the times that [seem] great times for the church are times when it is pulled down."

David Smith reminded me that he had been looking, once again, at the Peter and Cornelius narrative in Acts. "It strikes me," David said, "that Luke's description of Peter's confusion, resistance and surprise in this story suggests that the image which best represents missionaries trying to catch up with the Spirit is that of the clown! It is not possible to read this text, I suggest, without laughing, but then the realisation dawns that the laugh is actually on us! We imagine that the Kingdom depends upon our vision and creativity, only to discover God far out ahead of us and at work in ways and places where we never expected to discover Him. Which is, of course, why the future of mission remains uncertain...because it involves God's glorious surprises and wonderful newness."

Shahbaz Bhatti, the minister for minorities in Pakistan who was brutally murdered by the Taliban earlier this year, had left a message to be read in the event of his death. "When I'm leading the campaign against Sharia or abolition of the blasphemy laws, the Taliban threaten me. But I want to share that I believe in Jesus Christ...I know the meaning of the Cross...and I am ready to die for the cause." This brave man, whose mission was political engagement on behalf of the poor and marginalised, challenges me deeply: Do I really know the meaning of the Cross as he did?

Any semblance of a humble response to the question of “what future for mission?” will necessarily have to grapple with the narrative nature of Christian Faith in and of itself. NOT...Christian Faith as THERAPY. BUT...Christian Faith as INHERENTLY MISSIONAL.

For it addresses what we see...(looking around this very room where we meet to consider the future)...to be lacking: Youth and a broad array (much broader) of Socio-Economic and Ethnic Diversity...for whom...Christian Faith...when it is advocated as simply therapy...is clearly allied with dominant and hegemonic cultural power...and thus understandably suspect.

BUT there is an intuitive hunger for...an earnest admiration for...Christian Faith as Sacrificial Mission...that pursues Gospel (Good News) Transformation...that is both personally and socially transformative...seeking justice...in the name of...and authority of...Jesus Christ.

(Global Connections, 29/11/11) (Wesley White)

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