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MISSIO DEI

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In the past the problems that have faced the church in the fulfillment of its vocation have resulted from two misconceptions. First, it has envisioned mission as the fulfillment of a command rather than a response to God's action. As a result the key text has been "Go ye, make disciples, baptizing them!" rather than "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you." Second, triumphalism rather than servanthood has characterized its posture before the world. As Dr. Kaj Baago has said in his article on the "Post-Colonial Crisis of Missions" (I.R.M., July, 1966, p. 331):

The Church in the West, however, has always been so sure that God is with it and supports it in its spiritual crusades. 'Gott mit uns' was written on the belt-buckles of the German soldiers during the last war. This might also serve as a fitting slogan for most of the Christian mission since the Middle Ages.

To say this is to recognize that mission has usually been approached from the wrong point. It has depended on a determination of geographical relationships (crossing frontiers), on those who go and those who are the objects of the going (missionaries and heathens), on the "ins" and the "outs" (converts and potential converts). As a missionary document, however, the New Testament knows only one valid point of reference for the church's mission: the action of God in Christ. As Bonhoeffer has written: "In the Incarnation God makes himself known as He who wishes to exist not for himself but 'for us'. This is the foundation of the concept of "Missio Dei".

It is not solely a fad of modern missiology to speak of the God-World-Church order as the proper orientation for theological thought on mission. Such an order is basic to the Scriptures and is manifested in the Apostolic church's response to the Incarnation. The Christ event bore witness to the object of God's action toward men: being for them. Thus, "Missio Dei" is an authentic theological concept. It speaks first of God. (And what else should theology do?) But it does not then go on to become an ecclesiology. The dynamic of the Gospel message is to be found in its recognition of God's initiative and continuing activity on behalf of all men and not solely the church. Its focal point is event - incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection - to which all of the world's history is related. And at the center of the event is the Man-Jesus-the paradoxical Lord of History and One for others.

Acceptance of the concept of the "Missio Dei" as a starting point and basis for a theology of mission has great significance for the church. From this vantage point the church cannot claim to have any mission of its own, nor any element in its life that can be isolated and called mission. There is only the "Missio Dei" and the church is

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called upon to participate in that. The only authentic pattern of life is to be found in the servanthood and suffering of Jesus. When the Church is distinguished by its servanthood and willingly accepts the suffering that this entails, it manifests the continuity of the messianic vocation, and is a sign in the world of the nature of God's love. The Convocation of the Anglican Church of North Ireland presented this dramatically in a statement of commitment prepared in 1963. It declared:

The torment and perplexity of our time has done at least this much for our theology, that it has shaken us loose from any feeling that God is our possession or our captive, or that He who reigns needs our patronage or our protection. We have recovered a greater understanding of God's action which we had for the moment perhaps forgotten -- that God does not wait for His church -- that He leads; and it is our privilege only to follow Him. It is God who is at work in the tumult of our time. It is God who is at work in the tormented societies and the eager and searching nations of the world -- God leading, God teaching, God revealing, God judging, God calling us to follow Him to where He is, that we may make Him known, and serve Him better with our brothers.

It is to be expected that "Missio Dei" will not commend itself to the diehard exponent of the "Corpus Christianum", to the triumphalist, or to the establishment determined to maintain a statistical demonstration of the effectiveness of its mission. The truth that makes men free is not to be found in dogmatism, biblicism, ecclesiasticism, or any of the other "isms" that have developed as part of the superstructure of institutional self-perpetuation. It is to be found in Jesus Christ, who continues to be a "stumbling-block" and "foolishness", and whose mission is perverted as soon as we attempt to mitigate the scandal.

What are the implications of the "Missio Dei?" A significant factor is the undermining of the traditional dichotomies that have been assumed in the development of theology: i.e. the sacred and profane, church over against world, etc.. In this regard Bonhoeffer has written:

So long as Christ and the world are conceived as two opposing and mutually repellent spheres, man will be left in the following dilemma: he abandons reality as a whole, and places himself in one or the other of two spheres. He seeks Christ without the world, or he seeks the world without Christ. In either case he is deceiving himself. ...There are not two realities, but only one reality, and that is the reality of God, which has become manifest in Christ in the reality of the world. The reality of Christ comprises the reality of the world within itself...One is denying the revelation of God in Jesus Christ if one tries to be Christian without seeing and recognizing the world in Christ. There are, therefore, not two spheres, but only the one sphere of the realization of Christ, in which the reality of God

and the reality of the world are united.

A world-affirming posture such as this acknowledges the activity of God extra muros ecclesiae. Recognition that God is at work outside the church, embracing the world in His mission, commits the church to seeking Him "out there" in order to join Him where He has chosen to be, and to proclaim His presence. It is God who reconciles the world to Himself, whether it be through the elected nation, the Incarnate Lord, the mystical Body, the Holy Spirit, or a channel that He chooses at a particular moment in history. And, therefore, it is God who defines and determines the mission - for it is His - always changing the old into the new, transforming the world, establishing the Kingdom.

If Christians are to be true to their calling to participate in the "Missio Dei" they must nurture a unique quality of life in response to God's action. That quality is faith. It is not that which has been so often defined in the past: assent to propositional formulations, established authority, or cultic observances. Rather it is trust in God's promise manifested in the event of Jesus Christ and the continuing activity of God in the world. And it is faith that is constantly informed by the dimension of hope, that it is God's will that will ultimately be done on earth. It is this quality of faith and hope that bears fruit in evangelical freedom: freedom to participate in actual history, freedom to change the world and the church when their structures rob man of humanity, personhood, dignity, and all the other attributes that are claimed to have been won for him by Christ; freedom to "suffer persecution for righteousness sake". It is only through the use of this freedom that the church can bear witness to the Lordship of Christ.

Scripture refers to the goal of the "Missio Dei" in a number of ways. In the Old Testament reference is made to the establishment of the "Shalom" of God and the realization of righteousness, faithfulness, justice, love, etc.. In Romans 12 it is spoken of as the renewal of human existence; in II Cor. 5, as the flowering of true existence for others; in Ephesians I it is to be the unity of all things in Christ. In every case, however the goal is envisioned, it is meant to be for all men. It is this universality of the mission that gives rise to Scriptural realism in the presentation of the two dimensions of the "already" and the "not yet". For the church, that segment of the world that recognizes the Lordship of Christ, reconciliation and the new life are known already, however imperfectly. Diakonia, koinonia, leitourgia, the elements of the life of the community of faith are signs of the quality of life that is meant for the whole world. At the same time there must be a realistic acceptance of the "not yet" and a sensitivity on the part of the church to the disunity that still exists in the world. Participation in the "Missio Dei" calls the church to make itself available at the points of disjuncture among men, willingly to serve as an instrument of reconciliation if God will use it.

To speak of the "Missio Dei" in these terms does not imply an ecclesiastical anarchy. "Missio Dei" demands historical forms, but of such a nature that they never become absolutes. They must be forms that

can face the testing of history and be altered or abolished when they no longer serve. And "Missio Dei" does not deny the need for men to make a decision for Christ. The church still bears the responsibility of inviting men to become part of the mission. But as Colin Williams has written in Faith in a Secular Age, (p. 122):

Evangelism needs to be placed in the midst of the struggle to discover the new shapes of Christian obedience within the human communities of our time--in inner cities, in town and country; in the decision making structures; in the worlds of international affairs, of politics, mass communications, leisure and the rest. In this way it is affirmed that the call to decision for Christ should be related to the ways of obedience that now must be fashioned in order that the church may be present with Christ in the communities of the world, raising the signs of the coming kingdom.

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