

CAN WE PREACH ON INTERNATIONAL MISSION IN THE 1980s?

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The title question perplexes us. As long as I can remember, I have been a part of a church where IM has claimed much attention. Every fifth year the missionary who had gone from our small town church to China would return to report on her work and teach the children to sing "Jesus Loves Me" in Chinese. Between her visits other missionaries would come to help observe the "Week of Prayer and Self-Denial for Foreign Missions." Through my teen years our Sunday night programs would touch the mission theme, and through college and seminary the quadrennial youth conventions would keep the call for overseas mission ringing. On one occasion I even wrote for an application and discussed with the enlistment secretary the possibility of serving in Japan, which was then suffering from the ravages of World War II.

Bringing in new members and building new churches in the suburbs claimed special attention in the fifties, civil rights in the sixties, human rights in the seventies, but recognition was still being given to the need for an overseas ministry. In pious tones we kept affirming the mandate of the gospel for the whole world, but I could not help but notice that in the courts of the church, especially sessions and presbyteries, the strongest leaders were seldom given responsibility for this concern. During these three decades "foreign" changed to "world" and then to "international." Missions dropped the final "s." Denominational headquarters moved from Nashville to Atlanta. The word "missionary" became taboo in some settings. In spite of many changes the asking of this question still perplexes us: Can we preach on IM in the 1980s? It becomes more perplexing when a prominent church historian says that IM may be the key issue for the Church in the eighties. Perhaps then it will help to recognize certain factors that provoke this question.(1)

I.

The declining influence of the West raises the question for some. For the past 500 years, and especially the past 200 for Protestants, the missionary enterprise has been closely linked with the military, economic, political, and cultural expansion of the Western world. The nations of the West exported their languages, political ideas, economic systems, forms of organization, cultural patterns, and technological advances. At the same time the churches were active in exporting their message, usually shaped in the creedal, organizational, and liturgical forms of the West. Through most of this period the West was the dominant force in much of the world, and for many the acceptance of one dimension of Western life meant the acceptance of other dimensions. Thus for many to become a Christian meant to be Westernized, or to become Westernized meant to become Christian.

With the declining influence of Western ways, the non-Westerner raises the question as to the appropriateness of receiving representatives of a religion associated with the West. No longer do nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America uncritically accept the maxim, "If it's from the West, it's good." Some in the Third World resent the dependency they have felt toward the First World (even the

numbering of "worlds" gives cause for resentment) and resist certain imports--just because they are from the West. "Yank, go home" is accompanied by "Missionary, go home," so the missionary enterprise, which historically has flowed primarily from the West, is challenged by some hard questions.

Closely related to the decline of the West is the spread of a revolutionary spirit around the world. What happened in the French and American Revolutions has been happening in large and small nations of the Third World. People have become aware that they and their children do not always have to be poor or ignorant or hungry or sick. They have been exposed to television and transistor radios too much. "The most revolutionary statement I ever heard," said E. Stanley Jones, "was spoken by an Indian peasant--'I do not always have to be poor.' " Expectations are rising and people everywhere are demanding and governments are promising the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." By force or by persuasion many peoples have thrown off the shackles of political domination and have claimed the freedom to determine their own destiny. Today few peoples live as colonies of other nations, but many who have gained freedom from political domination are now seeking freedom from economic domination, with an especially sharp accusation pointed toward multinational corporations.

The development of the universal Church also provokes the question before us. The missionary enterprise has been so effective that at least in part it has worked itself out of a job. In practically every nation a Christian church lives today. Thus the Church has become a global Christian fellowship, called by William Temple, "the great new fact of our time" and has continually grown in the consciousness of its universal character.

We rejoice in this fruit of the missionary movement and in the signs of vitality among the younger churches where missionaries have labored. However we are not sure how to respond when word comes from some of these churches that they no longer need or desire help from the older churches. Early in the 1970s John Gatu, then general secretary of the Presbyterian Church in East Africa, called for what has become widely known as a "moratorium":

(Our) present problems can only be solved if all missionaries can be withdrawn in order to allow a period of not less than five years for each side to rethink and formulate what is going to be their future relationships. . . . The churches of the Third World must be allowed to find their own identity, and the continuation of the present missionary movement is a hindrance to this selfhood of the Church.(2)

A similar message came in 1976 in the form of "An Open Letter to North American Christians." A group of Protestant leaders in Latin America wrote: "If in the past you felt it to be your apostolic duty to send us missionaries and economic resources, today the frontier of your witness and Christian solidarity is within your own country."(3)

During the seventies other church leaders from the Third World have spoken out in support of or in opposition to the moratorium. The issue was addressed at international church gatherings in Bangkok ('73), Lausanne ('74), Rome ('74), and Nairobi ('75), as well as by mission agencies in the First World. Proponents of liberation theologies add their insights to the debate as they emphasize self-reliance and freedom from domination. So we who have been a part of the sending church are called to listen carefully to what is intended by both those who say, "Go home,"

and by those who say, "Come over."

Another factor in the world provokes the question about preaching on IM: the revival of non-Christian religions. We have always known that many converts to the Christian faith came from Hinduism or Buddhism or Islam or traditional religions of the locality. The Christian missionary has been recognized as being the first to question the adequacy of these religions, and such criticisms naturally put adherents and especially leaders of these religions on the defensive. However, as nations gain their independence and revive appreciation of national culture, they encourage participation in the religion of their tradition. Thus to be a good Iranian is to be a good Muslim; to be a good Indian is to be a good Hindu. Patriotic and religious fervor flow together, as they have in the United States where, in spite of our professed pluralism, some politicians especially in the South, still convey the notion that to be a good American is to be a good Christian.

The resurgence of non-Christian religions has stimulated discussion of the relation of the Christian faith to other faiths: Do adherents of one meet adherents of another in dialogue for the benefit of the community or in an effort to win them as converts? Or perhaps there is another option. The old "history of religions" question has been raised in a new way, and various answers are crowding and pressed.⁽⁴⁾ The choice we make affects the way we respond to the question before us.

Increasingly this issue has moved to our own doorsteps. Muslims now live around the corner, own the nearby office building, sit at the next desk in school, and determine the price of gas. Buddhist and Hindu missionaries walk our streets. So the way we talk about other religions and relate to their adherents is no longer just related to our work overseas but to the life of the church at home. Preaching on IM now overlaps with preaching on local mission.

II.

Our response to the title question must take into account what is happening in the world, but an adequate response calls for light from the Christian faith. The question may have to do with knowledge or understanding or sensitivity, but at its center is the question of authority: "Can we?" or "Can we not?"

Early in their ministry the apostles were confronted by a similar question: "By what power or by what name did you do this." They could only refer to "the name of Jesus," and by that name they referred to an ultimate authority and to their own final commitment to that authority. It was their way of confessing the primal Christian creed, "Jesus is Lord," which covered personal needs but also reached out to all persons and all areas of life. If this new movement had been only a cult of the private, Roman authorities would have ignored it. Only as it moved into public life and began to affect the larger community, which included other faiths, did the opposition come.

This creed, around which all Christian creeds have grown, did not affirm only a "Jesus religion." As the early followers experienced "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ," they were able to affirm "the love of God" and "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." The Lordship of Christ was linked with the sovereign love and power of the Creator God and the continuing presence of the life-giving Spirit. "Jesus is Lord" became the basis for affirming faith in the Triune God as well as for shaping the movement that would bear his name.

That affirmation continues as the basis for shaping the Christian movement

and giving authority for its direction. The primary motivation for mission is the Lordship of Christ, not the needs of people or the advancement of a particular way of life or the satisfying feelings (including pride) that result. Since Jesus is Lord, we do not make him Lord; he is! We do not take him to people; he is already there, so we meet him and bear witness to him. Since Jesus is Lord, we have a message which cannot be reserved for any one class or group or nation but must be shared with all in the orbit of our concern. In spite of the emphasis given to the relativity of worldviews in the modern disciplines of history and social sciences, this message is unique, as the New Testament concept ephapax ("once for all") underscores. The Lordship of Christ means that the mission is God's, not ours, and we go because we are missioned or sent--under obligation (Rom. 1:14)--under compulsion (II Cor. 5:14)--as trustees (I Cor. 4:1)--in gratitude (II Cor. 8:9). And we go, not to be successful, but to be faithful.

Thus IM, the mission involving other nations, is rooted in God's mission in Jesus Christ, but also in God's mission through the Church. It has been so from the beginning. The Old Testament tells the story of God's people in tension between the exclusive and the inclusive dimensions of the faith, remembering that they were called as a special people but often forgetting why they were called. Prophets tried to stir their memory about "all the lands," reaching back even to that earliest call to Abraham to be a blessing to "all families of the earth." The same direction was given the people of the new covenant as they stood under the shadow of the cross and in light of the open tomb. They were promised the Spirit whose activity was not so much to draw people toward Jerusalem but to move disciples from home base to "the end of the earth." The picture is not that of a fortress to which people come for protection and safety, but of a people in pilgrimage--on the march, blown by the Wind of God from Jerusalem to Rome, and even to far away Spain.

At some periods in its history the Church has expressed this sense of mission by caring for others and permeating society close by, but at other times the outreach has been to other peoples and to distant places. But always when the Church has been responsive to its primal calling, its life has been characterized by those penetrating and expanding images--salt, light, leaven. In Brunner's familiar words, "The Church exists by mission, just as a fire exists by burning."⁽⁵⁾ Or to use Hans Kung's images, the Church "exists for the world," in terms of

pro-existence rather than co-existence, involvement rather than disengagement . . . with windows open to the street. . . , not simply staring at the windows. However profound a sermon, however solemn an act of worship, however well-organized a system of pastoral care, however methodical an instruction, however ingenious a theology, however effective a charity--there is no value in all of this if it is done in the isolation of a self-congratulating community, of a Church which only lives for itself.⁽⁶⁾

According to A Declaration of Faith, "God sends the church into the world . . . to proclaim the gospel, . . . to strive for justice, . . . to exercise compassion, . . . to work for peace." The oneness of our mission is affirmed, but the need to express mission in a variety of patterns is also affirmed. Attention to unity need not obscure diversity. And this Declaration knows no limits to the extent of this mission--"all humankind," "in behalf of all people," "all nations."

A much older creed affirms that the Church is "one, holy, catholic, and

apostolic." In terms of mission in today's world, especially IM, we look for a more authentic way to express and to experience the catholicity of the Church. Over the past century our IM strategy has moved through several stages:

sending church to mission field
sending church to missionary church
sending church to the mission of the national church
church to/from church as partners in mission(7)

New models are emerging, and the 1977 Mission Consultation at Montreat was one effort in the search for a more meaningful and effective way to do mission in light of the catholicity of the Church. Debates over models and strategy, however, need not obscure our obligation for mission between the nations. Neither should uncertainties as to method free us from the obligation to preach on IM. Indeed the uncertainties call for more creative efforts and an attempt to broaden the perspective of what preaching on IM means. We can move beyond, though not eliminate, the reporting on the work of the Church overseas and the encouraging of support by praying, giving, and going. To enlarge our understanding of IM can thus help us to enlarge our sermonic treatment of the subject.

III.

At the time of this writing our nation is being confronted by the capture of its embassy and personnel in Iran. The Security Council of the United Nations has appealed for the release of property and hostages. Our embassies in Pakistan and Libya have been damaged. The President's wife has returned from Cambodia to report extremes of suffering and famine. The deposed shah of Iran is transferred from New York to Texas because Mexico refuses to readmit him. With the assassination of its President, South Korea moves toward the choice of a new regime. London peace talks between conflicting groups in Zimbabwe-Rhodesia point toward constructive ends. So the news reports keep coming, and so much from the Third World. Even barber shop conversation has become internationalized, not by intentional choice but by the way distant happenings meet us on television and at the gas pump--two key symbols of our culture.

Since one function of preaching is to enable us to see "our life in God's light," these critical events can be occasions for giving theological perspective to our history, both personal and public. Happenings between nations can be viewed from the perspective of faith as well as power politics and personal comfort and security. Preaching can link us with people of faith who are distanced in space and outlook. As we begin where people are in conversation and understanding, we can seek to broaden horizons and stretch imaginations and give vision of the church's moving from a posture of maintenance to a posture of mission. Preaching can focus on the interplay between mission across the street and mission across the globe, the connection between voting at the polls and voting with the offering plate, and the interconnectedness of a world in which the God of John 3:16 is "the center, the object of loyalty, the subject of truth, the source of security." In short such preaching can give a congregation more of a global vision of the gospel, leading toward faithfulness as part of the Church catholic under the Lordship of Christ. For the achievement of this end four possibilities are suggested:

1. Preaching on IM can recognize the holistic perspective, with a both/and rather than an either/or approach. Whereas the subject of mission was once considered safe, it now provokes major controversy in the Church. Is our mission to make disciples or to humanize society? To bring about the extension of the Church or to fulfill societal needs? And if the latter, are we to do so by exercising compassion or by empowering the powerless? Evangelization or humanization, which will it be? Love or justice, which? Or can you have one without the other? The Church has been polarized in regard to mission at home and increasingly in the arena of IM. The debate deals with ends but also with means. Few question the sending of a medical missionary to improve the health of children in Africa, but a boycott of Nestle's products to achieve a similar purpose stirs controversy.

From the Third World comes a voice reminding us about spending endless energies in useless and senseless debates over missional programs.

The fundamental missiological question before the Christian Church today is not whether mission should be conceived as vertical or horizontal, or both; not whether it should be thought of either as spiritual and personal or material and social. It is rather whether we can recover its wholeness and see it as a whole. . . . (Only then is there) hope of generating a wider vision and stimulating a more effective missional involvement.(8)

Since returning in 1976 from a year of ministry in Ghana, I have been involved in mission presentations across the denomination where I have been impressed with the extreme to which missionaries are viewed--idolized or ignored. Another impression is the wide variety of views toward IM:

We've taken care of the world long enough.
Let's start at home.
Their religion is good enough.
Those heathen must be saved from hell.
People usually get what they deserve.
They don't seem grateful for what we've done.
Mission has nothing to do with the Panama Canal.

As in all preaching, the attitudes of the congregation must be taken into account, so preaching on IM can free persons from such limited and distorted vision and offer a perspective which includes the mission of talking and acting, at home and overseas, with flexibility of method in a variety of ministries. This can extend the action frontiers of IM from the Capitol in Washington to a board room on Wall Street to a Mother Teresa type service in Calcutta to a Frank Laubach style of "each one teach one" in an African village, but "sooner or later," as Martin Marty reminds us, "the story has to be told."(9)

And such preaching makes its impact on the fight for dollars in our inflation economy. With budget squeezes at all levels of the church, we are tempted to look after ourselves before we look after others, to cut program and personnel at a distance before cutting close by, to reflect an isolationism and a self-centeredness which keeps us within the doors of our carpeted, air-conditioned sanctuaries. Preaching on IM can contribute toward moving us beyond our own doorstep and to recognize the oneness of our mission under God.

2. In preaching on IM we also note the importance of receiving as well as giving. For years I had heard sermons from the text, "Come over into Macedonia and help us," and I had always identified with Paul and Silas. I was the helper and the Macedonians needed my help. My year in Ghana taught me that I could also identify with the Macedonians. I went to help, but I was helped. And Paul's letter to the Philippians demonstrates that he too was the receiver as well as the giver. In a similar way the story of those strange happenings in Joppa and Caesarea is usually labeled "the conversion of Cornelius," but its location in the chronicles of the early church suggests as a more appropriate label "the conversion of Peter." Missionary service is a two-way street. Indeed, the catholicity of the Church calls for each part of the Church to be open to receiving as well as to giving.

Though it is more blessed to give than to receive, it is often more difficult to receive than to give. To be on the receiving end turns our community into a "mission field," which does not sound quite right. When Dora Owusu came from Ghana to Georgia the year I was in Ghana, some could make little sense out of an African's coming as a missionary to Atlanta Presbytery. It delights us to hear that over 3000 missionaries have gone out from Third World countries, but for them to come to the First World seems out of place. For to receive means that we do not control, as was observed when Christians of other nations, as well as our own, supported the Mississippi Delta Project and aroused strong opposition from the local communities. The difficulty of receiving is also seen in the presence of Christian students from abroad in practically every city. We have thought of those from the Third World as "objects of mission" for so long that we do not know how to treat them when they appear as peers in the faith or as doers of mission themselves. We entertain students at Christmas International Houses, but more in hopes of giving witness than receiving witness. This same difficulty in receiving was experienced at the 1977 Mission Consultation at Montreat. Church leaders from overseas were invited to help shape the direction for mission in the next decade. We said we wanted to listen, but when they spoke words that disturbed us, such as a need for a "new international economic order," (the same need expressed by Kissinger before the United Nations) it sent shock waves through the church.

Receiving is difficult for one so accustomed to giving. So we sometimes ask, what are we to receive? Are not the strong to help the weak, and are we not the strong in relation to the younger churches of the Third World? Strong in certain ways, certainly, but weaker in others. For example, we can gain new insights in biblical interpretation from people who are powerless in this world's competition. Much of the Bible was first addressed to the powerless, but we who are among the powerful naturally have blind spots in the way we interpret the scriptures. How would our preaching change if we listened more carefully to the biblical interpreters from the Third World who read the Bible from "the underside of history," or how would our educational programs be enriched if we claimed the gifts of overseas Christians who reside among us?(10) In addition we can gain insight and encouragement for Christian discipleship as we learn from "the strong" in the younger churches how to live as a faithful minority in an alien environment, to endure open as well as subtle persecution, to sacrifice status and salary in behalf of the servant people of God. Where we are strong, we can help the weak; but where we are weak, we can be open to receive and become more linked in solidarity with members of the Holy Catholic Church. We can become truly partners in mission.

3. A concern for IM can permeate our sermons generally as well as on special

occasions. In some congregations IM gets the nod once a year during the Witness Season. A missionary comes, a mission sermon is preached, a special offering is taken, and this cause is checked off the list. Just as the quality of stewardship is low when it gets once-a-year attention, so also the level of concern for IM. A time for special attention is appropriate, but rescuing IM from the ghetto of the Witness Season may also edify the Church. IM can be a continual dimension of all our preaching, helping people make connections between international events and the Christian faith, giving them a sense of kinship with believers in other parts of the Holy Catholic Church, opening windows for receiving from them as well as giving to them. A special word can be addressed to members serving in government and business overseas and to the multitude going abroad as tourists to encourage them to get beyond the "Hilton circuit" and get close to people and to churches for the purpose of giving and receiving. The Christian pulpit can have at least as much international flavor as the daily newspaper. The preacher, for example, can survey the references and examples used over a period of time and evaluate how close the sermons come to reflecting the epitaph on the crypt of John and Charles Wesley at Westminster Abbey: "The world is my parish."

Traditionally Epiphany has been the season of the Christian year for stressing God's gift of himself to all persons. The Gospel lesson of the Wise Men opens the season, and many readings of this four to eight week period convey a concern for mission, some with strongly international flavor. The event of Pentecost occurred in the midst of a gathering from many nations, and power was given to get the message out of Judea "to the end of the earth." Thus Epiphany may be viewed as the season to emphasize that God's action at Christmas reaches out to the whole world, as Pentecost emphasized that God's action at Easter reaches out to all of life and to all people.

4. Preaching on IM can sound the celebrative as well as the imperative in mission. After all, we are preaching, and preaching needs to move beyond the imperative, to see that any imperative is rooted in the indicative, and that a strong indicative is the ground for any significant imperative. Only then can preaching become celebrative.

The missionary imperative is not to be turned into a law, a heavy burden laid on the conscience of Christians. If this article in any way points in that direction, it needs correcting. Witness is a gift of the Spirit--"a spin-off from Pentecost"--promised to the church which seeks to be faithful to the gospel of the cross. Concern for IM grows under the Lordship of Christ as we seek to be faithful participants of the Holy Catholic Church.

Some results of that "spin-off" are set forth in the last book of the Bible, featured by Orlando Costas as a key book for preaching on IM.⁽¹¹⁾ The Revelation is "a celebration and an interpretation of God's mission in the crossroads of history," rising "from a profound worshiping experience and missionary situation," and giving "a global picture of the history of God's mission." The symbols are international: a throne above all nations, a rainbow of promise to the nations, a community from every tongue and race and nation, and trees whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Worship is integrated with mission, a mission that reaches out to the whole world. This mission is God's gift, and thus a cause for celebration.

So from the call to Abraham near the beginning of the Bible to the visions of John at the end, the imperative of mission is heard, but even stronger is the sound of

God's great indicative, giving cause for celebration. In that hope we have no choice but to preach on international mission in every decade.

- (1) In this survey I am indebted to Leslie Newbigin, especially in The Open Secret, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1978).
- (2) Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky, ed., Mission Trends No. 1, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1974), p. 134.
- (3) Mission Trends No. 4, (1979), p. 74.
- (4) A variety of approaches: Peter L. Berger, The Heretical Imperative, (New York, Doubleday, 1979); John B. Cobb, Jr., Christ in a Pluralistic Age, (Philadelphia, Westminster, 1975); Donald G. Dawe and John B. Carman, ed., Christian Faith in a Religiously Plural World, (Maryknoll, Orbis, 1978); J. D. Douglas, ed., Let the Earth Hear His Voice, (Minneapolis, World Wide Publications, 1975); John Hick, God and the Universe of Faiths, (New York, St. Martin's, 1973); Leslie Newbigin, The Open Secret, op. cit.
- (5) Emil Brunner, The Word and the World, (Lexington, KY, American Theological Library Association, 1965), p. 108.
- (6) Hans Kung, The Church, (London, Burns and Oates, 1976), pp. 485-487.
- (7) Unpublished paper by G. Thompson Brown on "Possible Directions for the International Mission of the Church in the Next Decade," 1977.
- (8) Unpublished addresses on "Mission and Wholeness" by Orlando Costas at Global Mission Conference at Montreat, 1977.
- (9) Mission Trends, No. 2, (1975), p. 80.
- (10) Though not written by representatives of the Third World but by persons sensitive and responsive to the Third World, 3rd World Sermon Notes contains fresh perspectives on the lectionary readings for one Sunday a month. A program of the United Presbyterian Church, these worship resources are prepared by Inter-American Designs for Economic Awareness, 1121 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53715.
- (11) Orlando Costas, op. cit.