

Preaching on the International Mission of the Church

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Preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ is not an exercise in geography. Preaching is the communication of good news which is universally valid. It cannot be divided, like Gaul, into geographic components. There is no particular religious significance in the crossing of salt water.

And yet there are certain clear and compelling reasons why the preacher should, indeed must, preach on the international or world mission of the church if the whole counsel of God is to be proclaimed. Readers of the *Journal for Preachers* will remember Wade P. Huie, Jr.'s article, "Can we Preach on International Mission in the 1980s?" (Lent, 1980) for a number of convincing reasons.

From among many that could be mentioned, three reasons come readily to mind as to why the preacher must not neglect the theme of international mission.

The Lordship of Jesus Christ demands it. To quote from Huie's article:

The primary motivation for mission is the Lordship of Jesus 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 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.

"Jesus is Lord!" This is the starting point for personal Christian faith. It is the simplest, the earliest, the most ecumenical creed of Christendom. He is Lord of all the continents and nations, of all cultures and races, of all tribes and peoples, of all principalities and powers. Accept just this—and we are compelled then to preach the worldwide implications of the Christian gospel. We look forward to the day when "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil. 2:10).

All this must be preached with sensitivity. It is not our own culture, our own church, or our own version of Christianity that is triumphant. But arrogance can be avoided. When Jesus is preached as Lord, we also preach "ourselves your servants for Jesus sake" (1 Cor. 4:5).

International mission can so easily be neglected. It is certainly true that preaching on the issues of main street or suburbia are equally as important. But the fact is that no preacher if he/she is to survive long in the local parish can avoid these issues. But the worldwide dimensions of the Christian faith can be avoided because they are far away and not visible every day. It is true that our mission is "on six continents." It is also true that one continent, the one on

which we reside, will displace all others in our thinking unless the preacher consciously and deliberately holds up before the congregation the other five. To equate mission in suburbia U.S.A. and mission to Bangladesh is to miss the point. The heart of the problem is *the disparity between the continents*. Much has been said about the growing gap between the rich and poor countries of the world. The same is true of the Christian churches of the world. Some are getting richer and spending more on themselves. Some have proportionately a smaller and smaller percentage of the worldwide Christian community to use for mission.

The urgent needs of our day are most clearly seen in their world context. Preach for example on compassion. Where will you find more compelling illustrations for the critical needs of humankind in areas of health, poverty, and hunger than, say, in Bangladesh? Preach on justice. Where are the issues of economic or political or racial justice more clearly drawn than in South Africa? Preach on evangelism. Where would you find this appeal stronger than from illustrations in those areas of Africa or Asia where the name of Jesus has yet to be known? What more positive word can you find for the effectiveness of the gospel to change lives and to bring peace and joy and victory than through the story of those in other lands whose experience has been in a culture and environment so different from our own?

I.

So much for *reasons*. What then should be *the purpose of the sermon*?

First and foremost its purpose, as in all preaching, should be to *bear witness to the gospel*. The "mission sermon" should *not* be simply a promotional device to raise money for one of the church's programs. Unless the hearers are led to more clearly affirm the Good News and to respond to its liberating challenge in their daily lives, the sermon has failed. The great themes of the Christian gospel can all be confirmed, amplified, strengthened, clarified, and illustrated in their worldwide context. Consider the following themes and texts: *reconciliation*—"God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19); *discipleship*—"Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14); *the love of God*—"For God so loved the world" (John 3:16); *the unity of Christ's church*—" . . . that they may all be one . . . that the world may believe" (John 17:21); *the person of Christ*—"I am the Light of the world" (John 9:5); *prayer*—"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations" (Mark 11:17); *race*—" . . . he made from one every nation of men to live on the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26). It is hard to think of any theme that cannot be strengthened by reference to its worldwide dimension.

A second purpose for the sermon which might be overlooked is that of *celebration*. Again to quote from Huie's article:

Preaching on International Mission 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 signif-

icant imperative. Only then can preaching become celebrative.

The worldwide nature of the Christian fellowship is certainly something we can celebrate. The great themes of the Book of Revelation come to mind. Preaching on international mission drives us to join with that "great multitude which no one can number from every nation, from all tribes, and peoples, and tongues standing before the throne and before the lamb" (Rev. 7:9). This year Korean Protestants are observing the centennial year of the founding of the church in their land. What a cause for celebration! How much good it would do our people to be caught up in their enthusiasm and joy and thanksgiving as they commemorate years of persecution, of deliverance, and of victory! African Christians have much to teach us about celebration: their joyful abandonment in music, their spontaneous yet reverent ways of worship, their deep sense of the presence of God's Spirit.

Another purpose of the sermon must be to sound a *prophetic note*. William W. Watty writes in his article for this journal, "Preaching on International Missions: A Third World View" (Advent, 1981):

Prophecy is mission. Indeed, it is the indispensable prerequisite to preaching about mission today and it is urgent that the prophetic ministry be recovered in the Churches. It is this alone which will offer to those engaged in the Church's mission of witness and service a respite from the over-preoccupation with institutional demands.

Issues such as economic justice, human rights, war and peace, race, and poverty can hardly be avoided if we are to deal realistically and honestly with the world today. The integrity of our message demands it. We must clearly understand that in dealing with such issues we will be challenging our own self-interests. Yet overwhelming our listeners with guilt is hardly the place to stop. When we speak as prophets we need to make clear what we expect our people to do about what they have heard. Some simple, realistic, positive steps need to be proposed for action.

A final purpose of the sermon will be an *appeal to support the worldwide mission of our church*. We must remember that it is the *church* that is sent into the world in mission. And it is through the *church* both in this country and abroad that lasting results will take place. So it is through the denominational and ecumenical program of the *church* that our individual members will become involved. They will need specific handles through which they can participate. They will need specific goals which they are asked to meet. They will need to be challenged to give their money, to volunteer their time, to take sides in the issues of justice and human rights, and to consider the call for missionary service.

II.

Next, we might consider the nature of the target audience. *To whom shall we preach?*

Certainly we must preach to the *unbeliever*. Perhaps too often our mis-

sionary sermons are addressed to our faithful supporters of mission who will stand in line after the sermon to greet the preacher and applaud all that has been said. All well and good. But the purpose of preaching is to make a difference. There will be some who consciously or unconsciously simply do not believe that the church has a mission in the world. Such folk need to be taken seriously. Their questions need to be answered. This needs to be done primarily not for the sake of the program but for the unbeliever! Something there is missing—something that can add meaning and purpose and fulfillment to their lives.

Then there are *those who believe but for the wrong reasons*. Some “believe” because Aunt Susie was a missionary years ago in China. Some may support missions because “Christianity is the best bulwark against communism.” Some may still even believe that the “savages need to be civilized.” Perhaps more than we like to think, some believe in mission “over there” because it is less threatening than mission down the street. Such people need to be dealt with gently. After all, the motives of most of us are mixed. But sensitively and patiently, through a program of preaching on international mission, their support can be shifted to a more biblical basis.

There are also *those who believe and who must be enlisted in the service*. Five-talent men and women must be persuaded to put to use their leadership ability. The rich need guidance as to how to spend, give, and invest their money. Laymen and women engaged in international business must be shown ways in which they can serve in ways impossible for professional church workers. And, yes, young people must be confronted with the possibility of missionary service. Missions boards are still in the business of recruiting people with the right skills and sending them to the ends of the earth. In fact, there are more missionaries in service today than at any time in the church’s history.

III.

As one engages in this missionary preaching, it is well to remember that there are *risks*. There are some pitfalls to be avoided. Perhaps this list of “don’ts” will help avoid them.

Don’t be apologetic. Some mission preaching sounds like it is a subject which is engaged in with great reluctance and only because the church year calls for a “Witness Season.” It will do no harm and must be endured. Some in the church may even find it something of interest. But we must avoid being carried away with the enthusiasm of special appeals!

On the other hand, *don’t be arrogant*. In preaching on the issues of life and death, we do so “in fear and trembling.” We speak in humility confessing that we do not know all the answers. But speak we must. “For the love of Christ has left us no choice” (2 Cor. 5:14 NEV).

Don’t perpetuate the myths of the past. Mission executives grow weary with trying to tell the church that mission today is *not* the same as it was in the nineteenth century. David Livingstone was perhaps the greatest missionary of his day, but no missionary today engages in the task in quite the same way—leading a procession of half-dressed savages through the elephant grass

carrying the White Man's Burden. The myth that the missionary enterprise is still irrevocably connected with the colonial system and that missionaries are no longer needed or welcomed has been exploded many times, and yet from time to time it resurfaces from behind the pulpit on Sunday morning. Missionaries of our church serve in team ministries with national co-workers and under the direction of the national church, and yet still the missionary is denounced (and idolized) for being a lone pioneer and doing it alone.

Don't be an escapist. Don't give any aid or comfort to those who support the overseas mission thinking it will let them "off the hook" here at home. Rather, use the missionary motive to reinforce the urgent and perhaps controversial task nearer at hand. What better way to deal with racial discrimination here at home than to show how this can utterly discredit and destroy an evangelistic mission in any other part of the earth.

Don't equate mission with the missionary. On the other hand, *don't ignore the connection either.* Some in our church fall into one or the other of these two traps. It is God's mission and his Kingdom. And this is certainly broader and wider than the little institutions and programs we support through the work of our missionaries. And yet what better expression of our own commitment to the Kingdom than the sending of human lives to the ends of the earth? The number of missionaries under appointment isn't the sole criteria of a church's faithfulness in mission. Yet neither can numbers be disregarded. In many churches the single most effective bond between the congregation and the worldwide mission is the missionary they have supported down through the years. The mission sermon can build on this relationship.

Don't become captive to any one facet or emphasis of the missionary message. It is certainly broader than evangelism. It cannot be reduced to social activism. Yet some in the church seek to claim the international mission cause exclusively for just one of these two emphases. We simply must not permit this to happen. International mission belongs to the whole church and to the whole gospel! In preaching on mission, appeals will be made to many motives and many themes addressed. Such preaching will bring wholeness and unity to the congregation's understanding of its mission.

Don't be out of date. What is heard from the pulpit must bear some resemblance to what is heard on the NBC Evening News. The timeliness of the sermon will depend, at least in part, on how it relates to the critical issues being discussed in *Time* and *Newsweek*. World travelers in our congregations will quickly spot what is inaccurate, and out of date, or unrealistic in our descriptions of the world in which mission takes place. In short, that Good News must be related to the World News.

Don't limit international mission preaching to one season of the year. The seasons of Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and Advent all call for missionary preaching. What better way to celebrate Worldwide Communion Sunday than in a meditation on the worldwide mission and fellowship of churches? Race relations, peace, stewardship, baptism, discipleship, evangelism, all are "fair game" for the mission sermon.

Don't restrict the missionary message to what we can give. There is much for us to receive. This may be the hardest part of our task—convincing our

kind of people that there is something they can learn from the Christians of the Third World about our gospel. It is easier for Americans to play the role of the benefactor than of one who stands in need of spiritual nourishment. Three learnings—but there are many more—come to mind: simpler life styles, a deeper spirituality, and a healthy emphasis on community, to counterbalance our excessive individualism.

IV.

There are abundant resources which are available or which the preacher of international mission can develop:

Keep a file on mission related illustrations. Timely and up to date illustrations are essential. A mission sermon without illustrations is like a pecan pie without the nuts! A good source of illustrations are the missionary correspondence letters available free of charge at the Mission Board.

Make use of your own personal experiences. Some of the best missionary preaching is done, not by missionaries, but by those who have traveled abroad and have come back with stories of their encounter with the church in action. Sometimes it is the simplest kind of incident which is told vividly and with imagination that is most effective.

The daily paper and the newsweeklies are a source of background material that can be invaluable. What better way to lead into the mission of the church in Africa than to begin with the *Time* edition which featured the African continent of "coups, conflict and corruption."

Some books should be required reading. There is James Stewart's classic, *Thine is the Kingdom*, on the theme of missionary motivation, and Albert Winn's study of the Gospel of John, *A Sense of Mission*. One of the best recent discussions of the theology of mission is Lesslie Newbigin's *The Open Secret*. Third World theologians need to be included, such as Orlando Costas' *Christ Outside the Gate*, and Koyama's *The Cross has no Handle*. The series, *Mission Trends*, edited by Gerald Anderson and Thomas Stransky gives short, significant articles by a variety of authors on a variety of mission-related issues. The most comprehensive and up to date source of information concerning the present condition of Christianity in each of the countries of the world is the *World Christian Encyclopedia* edited by David Barrett and just published in 1983. Two of the best journals dealing with the worldwide mission of the church published in the United States are *Missiology* and the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*.

Not to be overlooked is the annual ecumenical theme for mission study. Each year both a geographic and topical emphasis are chosen. There are some advantages in preaching on a theme which will be the subject for study by many churches at a particular time. Timely books, film strips, and other resources will be prepared. One of the best and newest mission resources published by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is the annual *Mission Yearbook for Prayer and Study*. It contains a wealth of material about all areas of mission, both at home and abroad, in which our church is involved.