

What on Earth Are We Here For? A Common Purpose¹

Danut Manastireanu

ABSTRACT

Is the biblical purpose of missions, as rooted in the Great Commission, that of saving souls from the flames of hell, or that of discipling nations for Christ and his Kingdom. Who is the initiator of missions – us or God?

Our mission should be rooted in God's (Trinitarian) mission, as expressed in the ministry of Christ. His incarnation, in obedience to the Father and in the power of the Spirit, should be our supreme model for missions. The divine-human nature of the incarnated Christ also leads us to conceive of missions in terms of partnership. This approach, if fully assumed and not just affirmed verbally, will have major concrete implications.

We will evaluate three possible models for missions in Romania. We will finish our time together by exploring a number of practical implications of the models proposed.

CONTENT

Introduction

What do I owe to missionaries – my meeting with the Navigators on August 21st 1977 has changed my life forever.

1. The Purpose of Missions – discipling individuals and nations

The Great Commission of Christ (Mat. 28:19–20) is the mandate of discipleship given to the Church. The text can be legitimately read both as a call to 'make disciples from every nation' (with an emphasis on individual human beings) and as a call to 'disciple all nations' (with an emphasis on communities and structures). The two readings are not exclusive, but in fact complement each other.

1.1 God's mission vs. our mission

When we talk about mission, we tend often to define it in *anthropological, sociological* and *cultural* terms, rather than in *theological* terms. Thus, we tend to view it in terms of human effort, rather than as the work of the Triune God. As a result, we concentrate on *strategies* and *tools* (financial and otherwise), rather than the *power of God* for missions (Mat. 28:19).

In addition, we tend sometimes to talk in Christomonistic terms (reducing the triune reality of God to the person of Christ). Indeed, every person of the Trinity has a specific work to do in the economy of salvation (this is what theologians call 'appropriations'). Thus, the mission of God is 'universal and cosmic in extent', the Father being the *creator*, the Son the *agent of creation* and *preserver* of all things (providence), while the Spirit is the *vivifier* ('life giver', as the Creed says) and *sanctifier* of all things. Nevertheless, 'it is wrong to separate these, since each is involved in the work of the other' (this is what patristic authors call *perichoresis*, meaning interpenetration).²

When we view mission as primarily God-initiated, we do not intend to exclude in any way human participation and responsibility in it. Yet, this *taxis* (order) is necessary in order to avoid any anthropocentric misbalance. Thus, if we start with God's mission, we will view the mission of the Church as dependent on and participating in *missio dei* (Lat. mission of God). As such, it is the natural extension of Christ's work of reconciliation, accomplished in the power of the

¹ Seminar prepared for the Cultural Awareness Weekend organised in 30 April 2004 by Areopagus Centre for Christian Studies and Contemporary Culture in Timisoara, Romania.

² See J. Thompson, *Modern Trinitarian Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) 68–72.

Spirit (Acts 1:8). According to P. T Forsyth, ‘ the fourth missionary [besides the persons of the Trinity] is the Church and these four missionaries are all involved in the one divine redemption to which we owe ourselves utterly’.³ As we have already said in our introduction, the way in which missionaries and the Church as a whole participates in this redemptive mission is by fulfilling the discipleship mandate.

Missions have as their object the *human person as a whole* (body and spirit, individual and corporate), not just the individual soul (whatever that means). A *holistic view of missions* involves at least three components: (1) *witness* (including proclamation, but not being reduced to it);⁴ (2) spirituality (growth in intimacy with God, in Christ and through the Spirit); and (3) social action (the outward communitarian expression of faith in Christ, as the ‘good works which God prepared in advance for us to do’ – Eph. 2:10, NIV).

According to Karl Barth, there are six conditions for genuine legitimate missionary activity: (1) it starts from the premise that *everything necessary for the reconciliation of humankind to God has been done already in the person of Christ*; (2) it is not optional, nor the responsibility of a few chosen ones or that of missionary societies, but *the mandate of the church as a whole*; (3) its exclusive purpose is the proclamation of the gospel and the salvation of human beings, not the extension of a certain culture or civilisation; (4) it should be carried out with the greatest respect for those holding different religious beliefs and values than ours; (5) it should involve the whole human being, not just her soul – this is why health, education and social justice are legitimate components of missions, even if not its main goals; (6) its final goal should be to give birth to a missionary church, witnessing to the nations of the glory to God, so that they also become his witnesses and missionaries, ‘to the ends of the earth’.⁵

1.2 The incarnation as model for missions

Christ is the missionary *par excellence*. He left his world, became like us (but without committing any sin), he did for us what we could not do for ourselves (made salvation possible, though his sacrifice, and was resurrected, as proof that his sacrifice was received by God), and then returned to his world, leaving us with the continuation of his mission. In his incarnation and life, we have the supreme model for missions. If this assertion is correct, from it we may derive a number of implications: (1) *cultural adaptation (contextualisation)* – 1 Cor. 9:19–22 – mission is not possible unless you establish a *point of contact* with those you want to serve – you have to become, in a way or another, like those you came to save (see); (2) *moral and spiritual difference* – Heb. 4:15–16 – one cannot be a true missionary if he/she has become like *in everything* those one came to save; there is a limit to cultural adaptation – for Christ this limit was ‘without sin’; it should not be different to us; moreover, if we do not bring a *difference*, a special extra, we will have nothing to offer; the best way to kill your missionary effectiveness is to let people, so to say, to ‘label you and close you in a box’; (3) *humble servanthood* – Phil. 2:5–11 – you cannot save people by keeping a superior attitude and position; the missionary is not primarily a leader, but a servant; (4) *costly love* – John 3:16 – if you do not come to love and respect those you intend to save, in such a way that *they* feel loved and respected by you, just go home or somewhere else; you are not called to be a missionary to them.

1.3 Partnership in missions: Really?

If we accept the decisions of the Fourth Ecumenical Council at Chalcedon, then we believe that Christ was fully divine and fully human. This means that both the human and the divine

³ P. T. Forsyth, *Missions in State and Church. Sermons and Addresses* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1908) 270.

⁴ World Vision International, in its Mission Statement, defines ‘witness to Jesus Christ’ in a holistic manner, as being done through ‘life, deed, word and sign’.

⁵ K. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3, 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975) 874–876.

characteristics are manifested in a unhindered manner in the one person of Christ. Certainly, how this is possible is a mystery hard to grasp for the limited (and sinful) human mind, like everything that has to do with the nature of our perfect and eternal God.

From this reality, we may be able to draw an analogy for missions.⁶ For the mission of God to be accomplished within a certain culture, where the church has already taken roots, it is absolutely essential for the missionaries to work in harmonious partnership with the indigenous churches. Since there is only one true Church of Christ, neglecting the already existing body of Christ in a certain missionary field may very well fall under the apostle's indictment for not 'discerning the body of Christ' and thus to bring judgement upon ourselves (1 Cor. 11:29–31).

A true partnership involves true equality, respect and genuine cooperation. If we are members of the same body of Christ, then we absolutely need each others; otherwise, the body will be poorer, less mature and less beautiful.

Ex. AEP and VUSH in Albania.

2. Models for contemporary missions

The way we relate as foreign missionaries and indigenous Christians depends on many factors, but it is affected in a major way by the mental metaphors or models that define our interactions. These models help us imagine our roles and inform our behaviour.

2.1 The 'postmodern' model – fragmentation as missionary strategy

In spite of the strong belief that the reformers themselves had in the unity of the Church, the Reformation has opened the 'Pandora box' of church fragmentation. Since then many hundred and thousands of denominations have been started. Some people see this as a scandal for the gospel, while others consider it as God's way of spreading the good news.

Q – Which one of these positions appears to you to be closer to the spirit of the Gospel and why?

2.2 The 'imperialistic' model – 'we' and 'they';

In spite of the undeniable good intentions of its promoters, the classic nineteenth century model of missions started from the premise of the obvious superiority of the west in relation to the mission fields. As a result, the missionary is viewed as a civiliser of the indigenous people that did not have access yet to the benefits of the west. A softer version of this attitude is still manifested on the mission field, even in this part of the world (ex. the ten eastern European Christian leaders at Wheaton in 1996).

Q – Where do you think is this attitude coming from and what does it create on the mission field?

2.3 The 'perichoretic' model – we cannot do it without you; you cannot do it without us

In spite of the unprecedented multiplication of financial means and methodological gimmicks on the present day missionary fields, there is a keen awareness that not everything is great in contemporary missions. The weight centre of the Evangelical world is moving from the west to the east and from the north in the south. In this context, more and more missiologists are opting for a model of true partnership in missions that we call 'perichoretic', because it involves ideally the interpenetration of all segments of the church in fulfilling the missionary mandate.

Q – How do you imagine this model working in Romania, after all you have learned in this cultural seminar?

⁶ Like all analogies, this one has certain limits. Thus, it would be outrageous to identify the missionary with the divine nature and the indigenous person with the human nature. WE try to analogate the relationship, not the components.

2.4 Optional – Role-play (the ‘native’, the ‘postmodern’, the ‘imperialist’ and the ‘perichorist’)

3. Miscellanea

We intend to use the following items simply as openings for further discussions.

3.1 Money and missions – an uneasy partnership

Ex. My tragic experience at Wurmbrand College.

Q – How can we avoid letting money dictate our behaviour and decisions in missions?

Q – Can we really avoid converts head-counting and false reporting as a means to stimulate financial giving for missions?

3.2 Context and missions – ‘do you love me as I am?’

Ex. The missionary in Lebanon stating openly to a Lebanese colleague: ‘I don’t trust Arabs’.

Q – How did you choose your field for missions?

Q – Do you think you can really serve someone you don’t like, love and appreciate?

3.3 Earning the right to serve – who do you think you are?

Ex. Christ’s saying: ‘If you want to be leaders, you should be the servants of all’.

Q – Do you think you have the inherent right to decide whom, where and how to serve as a missionary?

Q – What if I am not willing to accept your service because I feel you do not deserve (or, indeed you do not mean) to serve me?

3.4 Empowering vs. dependence – working yourself out of the job

Ex. World Vision and transformational development.

Q – How long do you think that a field should need foreign missionaries?

Q – Are you willing and able to empower indigenous believers in such a way that they will not be dependent on you when you leave?

3.5 Double missionary accountability – to your home base and to the local believers

Ex. My son’s experience at a missionary church plant.

Q – You certainly should be accountable to your church and missionary agency/supporters base. Yet, did it ever occur to you that you should also be accountable to the indigenous church? (The is in fact their country, not yours, isn’t it?)

3.6 The Church and the churches – working for the unity of the body of Christ

Ex. Western missionaries in Kosovo.

Q – What role do you think that competition could legitimately play in missions?

Q – Are we building ‘little missionary kingdoms’ rather than contributing together to God building his Kingdom?

3.7 The field is larger than you think – the social responsibility of the missionary

Ex. Fundamentalism and ‘new evangelicalism’.

Q – Do you consider conversion the key goal of missions?

Q – Does discipleship play any role in your missionary activity?

Q – Do you see social justice and transformation as a legitimate component of missions? How do you intend to accomplish it?

3.8 Missionary responsibility – what will you leave behind?

Ex. The Navigators in Romania (no mention of them in my secret police files).

Q – Have you ever asked yourself if the church in the land will be stronger when you leave?

Q – What can you do to make sure this will be the case at the end of your missionary term?

3.9 Missionary humility – don't take yourself too seriously; He could do it (maybe even better) without you

Q – Do you think you are indispensable to God accomplishing his purpose for missions? Why or why not?

3.10 Missionary dignity – He has chosen to make you his partner

Q – Why do you think that God chose to share with us the missionary mandate?

May God bless your missionary service in a way that it will enrich the Church in Romania and bring glory to the Triune God of missions!