

## Reformulating the Mission of the Church

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JAMES THOMAS REUTELER

It is time for the church to contextualize its mission in the world, says Professor Reuteler, who uses insights of political and liberation theology to suggest new emphases for the church. He takes the dialectic a step further to ask Third World theologians to question some of their own assumptions.

**I**N THE IMPORTANT collection of essays on missiology edited by Gerald Anderson, *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*, S. Paul Schilling calls for a radical rethinking of missiology in the light of the revolutionary developments taking place all over the world. Schilling, however, does no more than pose the problem. He has valid insights into the church's preoccupation with a dominantly otherworldly conception of the gospel, its indifference to the rightful aspirations of underprivileged people, and its identification with an unjust status quo, but he does little more than open up the issues (1967:242-257).

The critical problem in missiology is that the classical positions developed by William Ernest Hocking and Hendrik Kraemer were formulated prior to the revolutionary developments now taking place all over the world. As a result, they offer little guidance for the church's task of rethinking the nature of mission today. Political and liberation theology have been more influential in giving the contemporary church guidance in reformulating both its nature and its mission by addressing the central issues in a fresh way.

Political and liberation theology has contributed fresh insights

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as to how the church ought to view the religious negatives of sin and death. In the past sin has been perceived as an impediment to salvation, with the primary emphasis on the sin of commission. Traditionally defined in terms of pride or selfishness, sin, according to Gustavo Gutiérrez, is not only to be regarded as an impediment to salvation in the afterlife, it is also an impediment in this life (1973:152). "To sin against the Spirit," agrees Juan Segundo, "is precisely to refuse to accompany Jesus in his work of liberation" (1978a:45).

### **Emphasis on Sins of Omission**

A new emphasis must be made without losing the sense of sin as pride and selfishness. Clearly the loss of hope in God is also a very serious sin. However the sin which really threatens a person is not the evil done but the good one fails to do, not the misdeeds but the omissions (Moltmann 1969:153). Political and liberation theology point more to the sin of omission than commission, and it is this concept of sin that the church must begin to take seriously if it is to be of any relevance in the Third World.

The other religious negative that prevents us from achieving social justice is that of death. Jan Milic Lochman draws attention to the importance of dealing with this negative when he writes:

If death remains unconquered, or is left out of consideration when the future is envisioned, then the life of [the person] is hardly more than a time of transition leading to ultimate nothingness. It is true that life can be lived courageously in the shadow. The biblical hope does not ignore death. On the contrary, it identifies death as the ultimate enemy, the enemy absolutely superior to [the person]. Yet it refuses to capitulate. The ultimate enemy in the world of [persons] is the first to be conquered in the City of God: "and death shall be no more" (1973:422).

Without such a hope, death remains the victor; and the oppressor wins over the oppressed. James Cone says,

If death is the ultimate power and life has no future beyond this world then the rulers of the State who control the police . . . and military are indeed our masters (1973:23).

The hope for resurrection has been the traditional answer to this negative, but the answer does not lie in simply dreaming about a future life. Our concept of the resurrection needs reformulation. Our belief in a resurrection should not simply cause us to dream about the future Kingdom of God. Rather, it should take away our fear of death and thrust us into the midst



of history, motivating us to work for the liberation and transformation of persons and conditions. Liberation from sin and death ought to enable us to give ourselves more fully to the task of overcoming the political, economic, and social injustices present in our world. It is quite true that only God can forgive sin and overcome death, but in doing this, he transforms and liberates persons, empowering them to cooperate with him in building a better society.

### **Faith with an Economic and Political Ideology**

Political and liberation theology also contributes to the reformulation of the church's mission in its economic and political ideology. Míguez Bonino has stressed that the New Testament does not support any particular economic or political system, which means that we must use the most appropriate systems at our disposal (1975:149). As faith without works is dead, so is faith without an economic and political ideology.

Political and liberation theology shifts the church's support from capitalism to socialism, which results in a radical reformulation of the church's mission. The main purpose for choosing socialism is to make possible a more just distribution of the world's goods and to narrow the dehumanizing gap between the rich and the poor.

In the past it was too easily assumed that this gap could be narrowed by helping the poor catch up with the rich. Ivan Illich has pointed to the fallacy of such thinking when he claims:

No breakthrough in science or technology could provide every[one] in the world with the commodities and services which are now available to the poor of the rich countries (1972:162).

There might be enough goods to satisfy everyone's basic needs, but there are hardly enough goods to satisfy everyone's greed (Goulet:1973).

The presence of human greed tempts political and liberation theology to support ideologies which would disastrously affect political freedom. Succumbing to this temptation, they exchange one demon for another. In its support of socialism, the church must be careful not to yield to this temptation. If socialism is the best way to achieve economic justice, then democracy is the best path to political freedom (Moltmann 1974:426). Even though this kind of a political ideology cannot be derived from the New Testament, the church must support

an ideology which aims at political freedom based on both personal and social human rights.

The church does not have the option of being apolitical. The affirmation of democracy, insists Jürgen Moltmann, is a logical consequence of the church's being true to its mission throughout the centuries. Through the years, political structures have been going through a constant process of alteration, and it has been the task of the church to encourage those structures which best serve human rights, dignity, and fellowship.

For centuries the political task of the church has not been simply to live in an existing political order but actually to take part in shaping it. The early church desacralized the emperor cult by placing limits on it, although it was willing to intercede on behalf of the emperor. The Reformation secularized political rule by relativizing the political order and placing it in the service of the welfare of all. Puritanism abolished the divine right of kings by replacing it with the political contract, the covenant or constitution of free citizens. The demand for freedom of religion was followed by the demands for freedom of assembly, freedom of the press, and civil liberties.

Christianity must remain on this path of desacralization, secularization, and democratization of political rule if it wants to be true to its faith and hope. Today's orientation towards democracy based on human rights and responsibility is a continuation of that same movement (Moltmann 1977a:179). Political and liberation theology is concerned that nations become subjects rather than objects of their own histories. Socialism needs democracy and democracy needs socialism to accomplish this task. Socialism is a necessary corrective to democracy and offers direction to help prevent certain abuses that majorities might otherwise exercise, consciously or unconsciously, over minorities. Linking democracy to socialism calls for a reformulation of the church's mission, for the church has not traditionally supported democracies so linked.

#### **Mission as Influencing Political Action**

Political and liberation theology also contributes to the reformulation of the mission of the church in its relationship to the various social institutions which are considered the state's responsibility. Since the church cannot exist outside of the political arena, the liberationists say it must take an interest in



political affairs by attempting to influence and shape political action. Unfortunately they often do not go far enough with the implications of their own suggestions in reformulating the church's mission.

Segundo points out that the church in Latin America is politically influential but that it has come down on the side of the elite rather than on the side of the poor and the oppressed. He believes that the church's own social institutions should be turned around to serve the interests of the poor and the oppressed, but he does not question whether or not they should even exist. The closest he comes to such a question is when he discusses who should be responsible for the distribution of development aid. He concludes that the political and social institutions should normally be responsible and that the church should assume responsibility only when the former fail in this regard.

Segundo admits that the church usually assumes this task too eagerly and is then unwilling to let go as the political authorities are able to assume the responsibility. The church always seems to rationalize why it should stay in the business. Segundo does suggest, however, that the reason why the church wants control over such services is that it is fearful that the gospel does not have the power it once had to attract people on its own and therefore stands in need of these political and social alliances to carry on its evangelistic task (1978b:92-106). Segundo presents a strong case, but he does not go far enough with it.

### **The Church and Social Institutions**

There is a great deal of criticism by the political and liberation theologians of the church's use of institutions for evangelistic purposes and of the fact that the church frequently supports the wrong side — the elite and those in power who are oppressing others. Few of them, however, ask whether the church should even possess such institutions themselves. The question has been raised by Wolfhart Pannenberg:

The Church's devotion is to the impact of the future of God's Kingdom on present life in all its dimensions. The specifically social activities of the Church (its establishments, schools, etc.) are subsidiary and temporary. The Church engages in these activities as a substitute for the political community. The Church's effort should be directed toward making the state ready and able to assume these responsibilities which are appropriate to the political structures of society. It is a strange twisting of its sense of mission when the Church

becomes jealous of the state and wants to monopolize certain welfare activities. The church's satisfaction is in stimulating the political community to accept its responsibilities. The only irreplaceable social contribution of the Church is the personal integration of human life by confronting [people] with the ultimate mystery of life, with the eternal God and his purposes in history (1969:78).

Most political and liberation theologians do not ask the church to give up their social institutions. Rather, they demand that the church place them in the service of the poor and the oppressed.

Political and liberation theology would be more consistent to liberate the churches from institutions which make churches more conservative due to self-interest and prevent them from becoming prophetic within their own societies. The practice of possessing such institutions is even more visible in missions where it has been part of an evangelistic strategy to draw non-Christians into the church. Missions operate schools, do medical work, and have agricultural programs. Although done with good intentions, when the time came to turn these over to government, the church hesitated.

The church ought to divest itself of these institutions for three reasons: 1). The newer autonomous churches cannot afford them. 2). So-called "Christian" institutions are competing for the leadership that is badly needed within the autonomous churches. 3). These institutions tend to relieve pressure that needs to be concentrated on the political community to do its job better by improving services.

The political community is also subject to God and must be made aware of its responsibility. When the church builds up its own social institutions, this fact is much easier to forget. The church should encourage the use of the public institutions that everyone else has to use. Only after the church demonstrates its support of these institutions does it have the right to pressure and influence them. In doing this the church will find it much easier to become prophetic and true to its own mission.

#### **A Reformulated Mission**

Political and liberation theologians say little about the role of missionaries and how they might relate to a reformulated mission. Many Third World theologians who are interested in these newer theologies favor some form of moratorium on Western missions. Jürgen Moltmann agrees:

The talk of a "moratorium on Western missions" for the purpose of allowing



the indigenous churches to become independent has, despite all misunderstandings, a kernel of truth: The indigenous, national churches should become the subject of their own history and therefore should become independent from other churches. The "world mission" should begin (1977b:110).

Although missionaries certainly should not be in control of the future of national churches, to move towards a moratorium would be a mistake. We do not need less communication between Western and Third World churches, and a moratorium would lead to that, plus a good deal more misunderstanding. Such a move might lead to more self-control on the part of national churches, but it might also lead to a loss of morale and a feeling of having been abandoned. Although communication and support can continue by means of correspondence and occasional visits, this can never lead to the same kind of understanding and support that is found where persons of different backgrounds struggle together over a longer period of time.

Instead of retrenching and bringing all our missionaries home, we need to send more out for shorter periods of time than has been the usual practice. More Westerners need to gain a better understanding of the Third World, and if they do not make it a lifetime career, then they will not be as tempted to become entrenched in leadership positions.

Career missionaries could be encouraged to transfer occasionally to other fields of service. At the same time, more missionaries from the Third World churches could be received by the Western churches, not to simply itinerate and raise money for mission projects back home, but to help evangelize and socialize the non-Christian areas of Western life and culture. Such increased missionary activity might be difficult to finance. While Western churches could do this, the financial support of Third World missionaries by their own church, though a problem, would not be impossible.

Our churches would be enriched by a larger number of missionaries moving in both directions, becoming involved in the never-ending task of reformulating the mission of the church and carrying it out in the whole world. With the religious negatives of sin and death reformulated and overcome, we should feel free and empowered by God to work at negating the other negatives of life, particularly the economic and political

ones. This does not mean that our missionaries should meddle in the economic and political affairs of foreign nations, but through a better understanding they can help the church understand its responsibility to influence and shape the economic and political institutions of our time.

More than just replacing capitalism with socialism, the church must begin inside the household of God itself, not in the center of political power. If the church cannot work justice within its own community, then not much point exists in forcing it on the world. One place to begin with democratic socialism is with pastors' salaries and salaries of those lay persons working within church-related institutions. Churches also need to develop some form of international missionary-sending agency if we are to accept the West as a mission field in the same sense as we have traditionally viewed the Third World. The World Council of Churches could be the proper setting from which such an agency might emerge.

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