

## THREE ERAS OF MISSION HISTORY

### Reflections on the Nature of God's Mission for His Church

#### Two Approaches To Mission

Two mission approaches give top priority to expanding the Church among every people group where the Church exists and especially where it doesn't. "*Church Mission*" focuses on expanding the Church, whereas "*Kingdom Mission*" expands the former to include proclaiming and demonstrating God's Kingdom.

*Kingdom Mission* views the Church as God's primary instrument for His larger purpose of extending His Kingdom to destroy the full range of the devil's works (1 John 3:8). It also sees combating the devil's works as an essential component of our *witness* to God's Kingdom, by which the Church is built. While it pursues the eternal salvation of individuals, it also seeks to enlist them in seeking God's Kingdom.

Where variants of *Kingdom Mission* may be tempted to neglect building the Church, *Church Mission* is tempted to view combating the devil's works as a distraction and to focus on building the Church solely by getting individuals "saved and sanctified".

*Kingdom Mission* differs from *social action* in that it actively recognizes evil intelligence behind, for example, at least some diseases and natural disasters, rather than simply encouraging individual good deeds or mopping up consequences without regard to the source, for example, dealing with sickness and not attempting to eradicate the pathogens causing the sickness.

*Church Mission* calls for most disciples to be simply beneficiaries and supporters of ministry within the Church and of gospel proclamation to extend the Church. *Kingdom Mission* abolishes false dichotomies between secular/sacred, clergy/laity, and evangelism/social action, and seeks to actively engage the full resources of all disciples in multifaceted large-scale efforts to proclaim and demonstrate God's Kingdom. As *Kingdom Mission* involves many more disciples *through* their full-time vocations, as well as their prayers, witness, giving, and after-hours service, a much greater release of additional manpower and other resources undergirds the additional breadth of activity involved in *Kingdom Mission*.

#### Kingdom Mission And Church Mission In Three Eras

Dr. Ralph Winter observes that Evangelicals' perception of what God has empowered them to do influences them toward either *Church Mission* or *Kingdom Mission*.

In the First, Coastland Era, from 1800-1910, *William Carey's* "Enquiry" provoked the first broad efforts among Protestants to "go," reaching out to the coastlands of the world. Thus, missionaries of the First Era, during which Evangelicals had influence at all levels of society, complemented their church-planting efforts with sweeping efforts to impact the surrounding society.

In the Second, Inland Era, from 1865-1980, *Hudson Taylor's* appeal for the interior of China brought new emphasis on "all places and countries," sending a fresh wave of outreach to inland areas. With the *Church Mission* of the Second Era, Evangelicals had spread widely among the working classes but lost most of their presence in the leadership of society and thus "tended to de-emphasize, almost to the point of total exclusion, ideals of social reform."

*Kingdom Mission* characterized the First Era as Carey and those he inspired carried the influence of the first Evangelical Awakening with them to fight infanticide and widow burning while establishing universities and hospitals as an integral part of their strategy to extend the Church. The Second Awakening in America, still during the First Era, "fostered the most extensive positive transformation any country has ever experienced in history."

By Hudson Taylor's day, however, the sending base and most Second Era missionaries, including Hudson Taylor himself, had shifted from *Kingdom Mission* to *Church Mission*. Taylor, for example, called for a thousand missionaries to evangelize all of China by each witnessing to 50 people per day for 1,000 days. So as not to be slowed down, Taylor directed these missionaries not to even establish churches.

In place of Jesus' "gospel of the Kingdom" (Matthew 24:14), the *Church Mission* of this Second Era spread a "gospel of salvation" resulting in the shallowness mentioned above. Affected mission fields, such as most of Christian Africa, have a form of Christianity that has been described as "a mile wide and an inch deep."

In the Third, Unreached Peoples Era, which began developing around 1935, *Cameron Townsend* and *Donald McGavran* brought Biblical understanding to "nations" (Greek, *ethne*) as ethnic groupings *rather than* countries, prompting the present focus on *unreached* peoples. In this analysis, the Third (current) Era inherited *Church Mission* amidst a strong polarization that viewed evangelism and social action as competing priorities rather than essential partners. In arguing against such polarization, Dr. Winter asserts that "evangelism in *word*, if supported by demonstration in *deed*, is actually empowered evangelism."

Encouragingly, the growing presence of Evangelicals at leadership levels throughout the world is fueling a recovery of *Kingdom Mission*, thus bringing increasing effectiveness in the missionary task *and* reversing the trend toward mission field shallowness. An increasing number of voices within the Church,

such as Rick Warren with his P.E.A.C.E. plan and Luis Bush through Transform World, are advocating *Kingdom Mission*, although not necessarily by that name.

Does God expect His Church in each generation to glorify him *through and according to the influence and resources He has entrusted to them*? If so, then the dramatic increase of Evangelical *capacities* in recent decades should lift our understanding of God's *Kingdom Mission* for our day. God may be calling various members of His body to again collaborate in combating slavery and oppression in His name and in working toward the eradication of malaria and heart disease.

While advocating *Kingdom Mission* as the most effective path toward completing the missionary task, Dr. Winter continues to emphasize the central priority which *Kingdom Mission* shares with *Church Mission*: "It seems obvious that the highest priority should be to go where the darkness is deepest. That, in turn, means clearly to go to those places where Jesus is not yet known. That, then, means we are still talking about the priority of reaching out to the thousands of remaining 'Unreached Peoples'."

### **Ditches On Both Sides And An Intelligent Opponent**

The path toward discipling all nations runs between variants of two major ditches. Too often, our adversary successfully draws segments of the Church into one of these ditches, often in reaction against an awareness that another segment of the Church has fallen into the opposite ditch.

#### ***Ditch One: Transforming Individuals Alone***

It is sometimes stated that "transformed individuals will transform society," and that we should thus seek only to transform individuals *rather than* also seeking to organize efforts to fight evils in society.

Unfortunately, many "transformed" individuals have assumed, been taught, or learned from the example of others to make false dichotomies between sacred/secular, as if God were concerned for one and not the other, and clergy/laity, as if God wants only to involve one and not the other. Such transformed individuals may thus believe that the only thing God cares about is saving souls, and/or that the only people God wants to use are "professional" Christian workers. As a result, such individuals excuse themselves from working to change this world and instead simply seek their own salvation and, perhaps, the salvation of others.

Such individuals have not properly been taught that all of Jesus' disciples are to obey His command to seek God's Kingdom (Matthew 6:33, Luke 12:31) and to glorify their Father in heaven through their good works done before men (Matthew 5:16). They have not discovered how God is glorified and His Kingdom

extended as we follow Jesus' example of "doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil" (Acts 10:38).

We should certainly seek to transform individuals and, as God blesses our efforts, to engage them in obeying all that Jesus commanded. This will lead them, with the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowerment, into working with others both to declare and to demonstrate God's Kingdom. Meanwhile, those who teach must also seek God's guidance and empowerment to obey all that Jesus commanded; otherwise, our example will contradict their teaching, and their teaching itself will be in error.

### ***Ditch Two: Personal Salvation Alone***

Similarly, an exclusive emphasis on saving souls produces "Christians" who neglect to "seek God's Kingdom" and, instead, simply await their rescue from this life (into heaven). When such individuals do reach outside the Church, it is only to urge others to join them in such withdrawal.

As evangelist Ray Comfort documents in his talk *Hell's Best Kept Secret*, a fundamental change in evangelistic approach in the late 1800's yielded a precipitous drop in evangelistic effectiveness. This corresponds with the shift from *Kingdom Mission* to *Church Mission*. Whereas 80% and more of converts "remained" long-term in the Church under the preaching of Wesley, Whitfield, Spurgeon, Finney, and others, less than 20% of today's converts "remain" in the Church under our modern evangelistic methods.

Comfort relates this change in effectiveness to a change in approach, from that of Jesus, who proclaimed God's Kingdom and the moral demands of God's law *before* offering God's grace and forgiveness (only to the humble and repentant), to an approach that is much more comfortable for *us*, telling people that God loves them and wants to offer them His free gift of eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ so that God can begin blessing them

Unfortunately, this modern evangelistic approach may yield a positive response without deep conviction of sin leading to genuine repentance. As Comfort notes, this has resulted in congregations loaded with unrepentant people seeking God's blessings rather than His Kingdom.

### **The Ditches Of *Kingdom Mission* devoid of *Church Mission***

Dr. Winter's concept of *Kingdom Mission* is centered on *Church Mission*. But, various ditches lie on the side of neglecting the *Church Mission* component of *Kingdom Mission*.

### ***The Ditch Of "Social Activism"***

Congregations loaded with unrepentant people can pour tremendous energies into trying to fix the world. But, such efforts are fruitless without God's power and direction. Individuals *do* need to be transformed before seeking God's will to be done here on earth as it is in heaven.

### ***The Ditch OF "Busyness In Doing Good Things"***

Even *transformed individuals* who are pursuing *Kingdom Mission* are susceptible to variants of this ditch:

- *Task orientation* can lead to ignoring or underestimating the intelligent opposition we face to God's Kingdom. Simply working harder or even smarter will not prevail against "principalities and powers" and the *ruler of this world*. To be effective, we must fix our eyes on Jesus while praying and working together in dependence on the Holy Spirit's guidance and empowering.
- *Dryness* can quickly afflict any who neglect to meditate day and night on God's word (Joshua 1:8; Psalm 1:2-3), or who fail to wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit (Luke 24:49).
- *Individualism* can so limit our vision that we can only see needs that we can solve or contribute to independently. Individualism also undermines our witness and makes us much more vulnerable to the enemy's attacks. God's word calls for us to guard and watch out for each other as well as for ourselves.
- *Pleasing others* can lead to overextending ourselves. We must seek to please God alone (Galatians 1:10), otherwise we may squander the resources which God has entrusted to us on needs He intended *someone else* to address.
- *Busyness* can also render us ineffective and increase our vulnerability and blindness to Satan's schemes. The soldier, athlete, and farmer of 2 Timothy 2:4-6 speak of our need to focus, to build our capacity and resources to do what God created us for. Furthermore, God ordains times of reduced activity during which we can build our capacity for what He has called us to accomplish. If we fill such times with activity that He didn't intend, we limit our full life potential to fulfill what God designed us to do.
- *Misalignment* with God's purposes may occur when our decisions are not rooted in a clear understanding of God's priorities in the battle taking place against His Kingdom. We must continue prayerfully seeking God's guidance for the most important thing that we can do for His Kingdom that others can't or won't do. But, without a clear understanding of God's

Kingdom purposes, we may turn for guidance to circumstances or to subjective indicators, such as what we are best at or what we want to do.

- *Duty* can, especially when we become chronically busy, substitute for or even replace the heart motivation that God requires – faith expressing itself through love (Galatians 5:6). When this happens, all of our labors become useless (1 Corinthians 13:1-3).

## **Conclusion**

God is not just offering salvation; He is enlisting participants in battle. The Church is not called simply to perpetuate itself but also to pursue God's will on earth as it is done in heaven. This involves prayer (Matthew 6:10, Luke 11:2), proclamation (Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15) *and* action/battle (Matthew 6:33, Luke 12:31, 1 John 2:14). To free His people to give themselves to this battle, God has promised eternal and abundant life to all who unite themselves with Him in love and in purpose. With alertness to our adversary, we can avoid the ditches and aggressively and effectively collaborate to advance His Kingdom and His Church and to complete the missionary task in our day.

--Robby Butler in *Mission Frontiers*, Nov-Dec 2008, edited by Patrick J. Hession.  
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