



Mission in Christ's Way: Bible Studies

1987

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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Preface

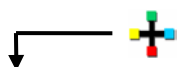
In January 1986 I was given the privilege of giving an address and Bible studies at the meeting of the synod of the Church of South India which had as its theme "Mission in Christ's Way". I am very grateful to the moderator and other officers of the CSI for giving me this privilege and for giving my wife and myself the precious opportunity of revisiting South India as their guests.

The following text reproduces the addresses as they were given in that particular context. The meeting of the synod gave evidence, as did visits to other parts of the church, of the abundant vitality of the Church of South India. That vitality is expressing itself both in vigorous evangelism and also in radical movements for social and political justice. The tension between these two emphases in the practice of Christ's mission was evident in the synod discussions. In these addresses I sought to suggest a framework in which this tension could be creative and not destructive. I cannot judge how far the effort was successful. When the formal motion of thanks for these studies was moved, a young member of synod stood up to oppose it. I could only respect his honesty and courage. It was also evidence of the seriousness with which the young people of that church are taking the issues discussed here.

I am grateful to the World Council of Churches for giving these studies a wider audience and so providing the opportunity for continuing the discussion with, I hope, the same kind of seriousness.

Lesslie Newbigin

Selly Oak, May 1987



Mission In Christ's Way

According to the fourth gospel, Jesus sent his disciples out on their mission with the words: "As the Father sent me, so I send you" (John 20:21). This must determine the way we think about and

carry out the mission; it must be founded and modelled upon his. We are not authorized to do it in any other way.

What was, and is, the way? *How* did the Father send the Son? To begin to answer that question, we turn to "the beginning of the gospel" according to Mark.

Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel." And passing along by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and Andrew... And Jesus said to them: "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men." And immediately they left their nets and followed him (Mark 1:14-18).

Here is where we begin our inquiry about Christ's way in mission. I invite you to notice six points about this record.

1. It is the announcement of a fact. It is not the launching of a programme. It is not the promulgation of a new doctrine. It is not a call to moral or religious reformation. It is, strictly speaking, a news-flash. Something has happened. There is a new fact to be reckoned with. The kingdom, the reign of God, has come near.

2. The announcement is not about what we call "religion". If you read one of the news magazines like *Time* or *Newsweek*, you know how the news is divided, with a big section on "World Affairs" at the beginning and then a number of smaller sections. You will usually find "Religion" in a little slot between "Drama" and "Sport". It is



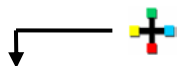
one of a variety of optional spare time activities. This announcement, however, is not about "religion"; it is "world affairs". It is about the sovereign rule of God, and therefore it is about the whole of life and the whole of creation. One might even call it "cosmic affairs".

3. But in what sense is it news? The fact that God reigns, that God is king, was not news to a devout Israelite. It is a fact celebrated in prophecy and psalms throughout the scriptures of Israel. One might say that it was the centre-piece of their faith. What, then, is new? It is just this: the reign of God, the kingship of God, is no longer merely a doctrine in theology; it is no longer something in another world; it is no longer something in the distant future. It has come upon you. It is now a present reality confronting you. You have to come to terms with it, to make a decision about it. It confronts you now. That is what is new.

4. But you don't see it because you are facing the wrong way. You have to turn round, do a U-turn – the literal meaning of the Greek *metanoia*, "repent".

I remember once visiting a village in the Madras diocese. There was no road into the village; you reached it by crossing a river and you could do this either on the south side of the village or on the north. The congregation had decided that I would come by the southern route, and they had prepared a welcome such as only an Indian village can prepare. There was music and fireworks and garlands and fruit and *silubum*¹ – everything that you can imagine. Unfortunately I entered the village at the north end and found only a few goats and chickens. Crisis! I had to disappear while word was sent to the assembled congregation, and the entire village did a sort of U-turn so as to face the other way. Then I duly reappeared. That is what *metanoia* means. The TEV translation gives a misleading impression by translating it: "Turn away from your sins." That might make it look like a traditional call for moral

¹ The performance of a South Indian martial art on ceremonial occasions.



reformation. That is not the point. There is nothing about sins in the text. The point is: "The reign of God has drawn near, but you can't see it because you are looking the wrong way. You are expecting the wrong thing. What you think is 'God' isn't God at all. You have to be, as Paul says,

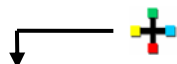
transformed by the renewing of your mind. You have to go through a total mental revolution; otherwise the reign of God will be totally hidden from you."

5. So the call is to turn round and believe the gospel – that is to say, believe the good news that I am telling you, namely that the reign of God has drawn near. You will not *see* it; but it will be possible for you to *believe* it.

6. But this believing is not a simple possibility for everybody. It is not something I can do on my own; it has to be his work. He takes the initiative. He calls whom he will – Peter, Andrew, James, John. It is his choice. As he was to tell them later: "You did not choose me; I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit" (John 15:14). They are chosen and called to come with him, and so to become the means of calling others to faith in God's present reign, hidden from sight but present to faith in Jesus.

Here, then, is "the beginning of the gospel". This is how the Father sent the Son. To begin with we get the impression of great enthusiasm. It is a sort of "people's movement". Great crowds flock to hear him. But they soon begin to be puzzled. The reign of God does not seem to be appearing. The Roman soldiers are still patrolling the streets. The tax collectors, agents of the imperial power, are still exploiting the people. And Jesus even makes friends with them and accepts their hospitality. So where in all this is the kingdom of God, the rule of God? What is the kingdom of God anyway?

Jesus answers with strange sayings that seem like riddles: The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, like a fish-net, like a pearl, like a land-lord with his tenants, like this, like that... The disciples begin to get annoyed. "Why can't you tell us plainly? Why all these riddles?"

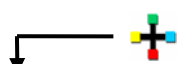


The answer of Jesus is very hard to take.

To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything is in parables (or "riddles"); so that they may indeed see but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; lest they should turn again and be forgiven (Mark 4:10-12).

These words are quoted from the terrible message given to the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 6:9f.), and it is worth noting that this passage is quoted in the New Testament more often than any other text from the Old Testament. It is a very hard saying, but we must face it. The secret of the kingdom is given to those who have been chosen – chosen not for themselves but chosen to be the bearers of the secret for others. But it is still a secret, a mystery. It is not something that is obvious or that comes naturally to the human reason and conscience. On the contrary, it is "nonsense" to the rational and "scandal" to the godly (1 Cor. 1:23). Only God can show to the heart and conscience of a person that the kingly rule of God is present in this humble man from Nazareth. That faith is God's gift and calling.

There are not only the parables; there are also the miracles, what the synoptic gospels call "mighty works" and the fourth gospel calls "signs". Do they not make it plain that the mighty power of God's kingdom is indeed present in the ministry of Jesus? Yes – and no. Yes, for when John the Baptist sends to ask: "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answers (again from the Old Testament, Isa. 35) with a recital of the mighty works that are being wrought; the blind see, the deaf hear, the lepers are cleansed... But then he adds: "And blessed is he who takes no offence at me" (Luke 7:18-23). So – No! These "mighty works" are not an unambiguous proof that the kingdom of God is here. They can be misunderstood. They can be (and in fact were) interpreted as works of the devil, who is also powerful (Mark 3:22).



The fourth gospel underlines the fact that these signs were not understood even by the closest friends of Jesus. This point is developed most fully in chapter six. There is a crowd of

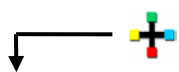
hungry people. Jesus meets their need. He satisfies their hunger. Naturally they are enormously excited. A real "people's movement" begins to develop, looking to Jesus as leader (John 6:15). Jesus immediately withdraws from the scene to pray alone, and the crowd is left leaderless. Next day they are naturally hungry again; and – just as naturally – they pursue Jesus. When they catch up with him, they reproach him for leaving them. Jesus is very tough with them.

You ate the bread, but you did not see the sign. Now you are hungry again. You did not see that the bread by itself does not meet your need. You need something of which bread is the sign, something which alone can finally satisfy human need, the bread that comes down from heaven, the presence of the power of God here and now. I gave you the sign, but you did not see it, and you are hungry again. The secret was offered to you, and you were blind.

It is not surprising that after that many of his disciples left him, and that he even had to ask the twelve: "Do you also wish to go away?" (John 6:67).

So the presence of the reign of God is not as plain as one might wish. It is revealed and yet hidden. So enthusiasm evaporates. Jesus is more and more alone. Even the chosen twelve begin to waver. They will become the nucleus of something new, not because they are spiritual giants but because he has chosen them for this purpose and will keep them faithful. Finally Jesus is alone. Alone in the Garden of Gethsemane he prays the prayer that is our theme: *Your will be done*. There is where we learn what is mission in Christ's way.

And so he goes to the cross, the cross that is both the final parable and the final "mighty work", the place where the kingdom of God, his power and wisdom, is hidden and revealed. To those who are called to be its witnesses it will be revealed by the resurrection; to the rest it is nonsense



and a scandal, a blasphemous caricature of God's kingdom. How can a man crucified as a rebel and a heretic be the embodiment of the wisdom and the power of God?

But it is there, on Calvary, that the kingdom, the kingly rule of God, won its decisive victory over all the powers that contradict it. There, as Jesus said, the ruler of this world was cast out (John 12:32). For the cross is not a defeat reversed by the resurrection; it is a victory proclaimed (to chosen witnesses) by the resurrection. And so the risen Lord gathers together his defeated and despairing disciples and sends them out to be the witnesses of the victory of the kingdom, to embody and to proclaim the rule of God.

There are in fact three versions of the missionary commission: Acts 1, John 20, and Matthew 28. We shall be reflecting on these three passages in our Bible studies. For the present, however, I would like to suggest some reflections on our theme – *Mission in Christ's Way* – that arise immediately from the record as we have traced it.

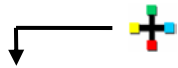
Jesus is the kingdom

Jesus' message was about the kingdom of God. The good news is that this kingdom, this sovereign rule of God, is at hand. That *is* the gospel.

Why, then, is there so little about the kingdom of God in Paul's letters and – for that matter – in contemporary evangelistic preaching? That is a question which cries out for an answer.

In the nineteenth century it was common to accuse Paul of misrepresenting Jesus. "Jesus", it used to be said, "preached the kingdom of God, but Paul preached a message about Jesus. We must go back behind Paul to the original message, which is the message of the kingdom." But this apparently obvious statement conceals a disastrous error. It is, in fact, an invitation to evade the radical U-turn, the *metanoia* that Jesus calls for.

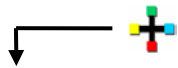
The whole point of the gospel is that the kingdom of God *has* drawn near, but it is quite different from what



people, and especially religious people, expected. It is *Jesus*, this man going his humble way from a stable in Bethlehem to a cross on Calvary, who is the presence of the kingdom. The reign of God is therefore no longer something about which we are free to develop our own ideas. It is no longer a doctrine or a programme which we are free to shape as we will. The kingdom of God, his kingly rule, now has a human face and a human name – the name and the face of Jesus from Nazareth. To go on after this talking about the kingdom rather than about Jesus would simply mean that one had not heard the message. It would mean that one had not done the U-turn.

Nineteenth-century Western liberal Protestantism separated the kingdom of God from the name of Jesus, and thereby turned it into an ideology. It was willing to pray "Your kingdom come", but it was very uncomfortable with the ancient prayer "Maranatha: Come Lord Jesus". And when we look back on the missionary literature of that liberal period, it is easy to identify the ideology that was concealed behind the language about the kingdom. It was the ideology of Western civilization in its heyday, the ideology of progressive capitalism. The name of Jesus was not in the centre. The vision was of the worldwide spread of what was called "modern civilization", or – if it was part of a sermon in church – "more abundant life". The centrepiece was not personal discipleship of Jesus, but the blessings of modern civilization, including its political institutions, its technology and its affluence. Christians talked about building the kingdom of God as though it were our programme and not God's reign, and when one asked what it meant, one found that it was almost indistinguishable from what contemporary Western people called progress and what, since the Second World War, we have called development.

Of course these ideas are now out of date. But there are always new ideologies around. When we separate the kingdom of God from the name of Jesus, it simply means that we have not done the U-turn that the gospel calls for.

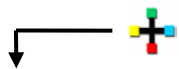


We are still defining God and God's rule on the basis of something other than what is given in the total fact of Jesus – his life, ministry, death and resurrection. And when we do that, we end up not with a gospel, but with an ideology, a programme. Western capitalism has lost its attraction for most of us, though there are still plenty of preachers offering it. We have to reject the ideology of capitalism as incompatible with the gospel.

More attractive to most of us today is the ideology of Marxism, capitalism's rebellious twin-sister. Marxism is a secularized form of the biblical faith about the meaning of history, in which the proletariat is the messianic people, the bearer of meaning and hope for history. The marginalized people whom Jesus took into his company were not, of course, the proletariat in Marx's sense. They included exploiters such as the tax collectors, and the sick, the blind, the lame and the lepers – what Marx called the "lumpen-proletariat" who have no part to play in history. But in our present climate it is easy to translate "Your kingdom come" into "Power to the people". But that is to fall into the same trap as our liberal grandparents. Capitalism and Marxism are the twin products of the apostasy of the European intellectuals of the eighteenth century. They turned their backs on the Christian revolution, except as an option for the private life of the individual, and adopted a radically different faith as the public faith that would control education, government and business. And that faith was more an ideology than a faith. It was one that put human beings at the centre of the universe and exalted the autonomous human reason as the sole measure and motor of human advancement.

Capitalism and Marxism are indeed the twin products of that apostasy. The proposal to understand all human affairs in terms of a classification of human beings as oppressors or oppressed, and the identification of the oppressed as the bearers of meaning and hope for history,

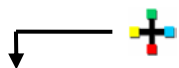
is an obvious carry-over from Marxism. We are all, in some measure, both oppressors and oppressed. The gos-



pel, the good news with which we are charged, is that the reign of God, present in Jesus, has brought us all together under judgment and has in the same act brought us all together under blessing. In the presence of the cross there are no innocent parties. In its presence we know that we are all together guilty and yet all together forgiven, loved, set free. The good news is that we are liberated, and it is out of that actually given liberation that our actions for justice and mercy flow.

When the message of the kingdom of God is separated from the name of Jesus two distortions follow, and these are in fact the source of deep divisions in the life of the church today. On the one hand, there is the preaching of the name of Jesus simply as the one who brings a religious experience of personal salvation without involving one in costly actions at the points in public life where the power of Satan is contradicting the rule of God and bringing men and women under the power of evil. Such preaching of cheap grace, of a supposed personal salvation that does not go the way of the cross, of an inward comfort without commitment to costly action for the doing of God's will in the world – this kind of evangelistic preaching is a distortion of the gospel. It is seductive, and we must be on our guard against it. A preaching of personal salvation that does not lead the hearers to challenge the monstrous injustices of our society is not mission in Christ's way. It is peddling cheap grace.

On the other hand, when the message of the kingdom is separated from the name of Jesus, then the action of the church in respect of the evils in society becomes a mere ideological crusade, inviting men and women to put their trust in that which cannot satisfy. It is to betray people with false expectations. Worse than that, it is to deliver people into the hands of demonic powers, for whenever a particular political or social programme is identified with the kingdom of God, those who follow become the victims of forces that they cannot control. We have seen that in every revolution from the French Revolution two-



hundred years ago to Ayatollah Khomeini's revolution today.

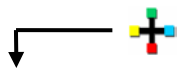
To separate Jesus from the kingdom, to preach Jesus without the kingdom, or to preach the kingdom without Jesus, is to betray our generation and it is to divide and destroy the church. The gospel is this: that in the man Jesus the kingdom has actually come among us in judgment and blessing. It is now the reality with which we have to deal – whether in our most private devotions or in our most public actions in the life of society.

Jesus preaches the kingdom

In the mission of Jesus we see that there is both the *presence* of the kingdom and also the *proclamation* of the kingdom. Jesus himself is the presence of the kingdom; but Jesus also preaches the kingdom. It is present, but it has to be preached. But if it is not present, then the preaching is empty words.

How is it present? Look at the first mission charge of Jesus to his disciples as it is given in Matthew 10. At the outset there is nothing about preaching. Jesus called the twelve and gave them authority to heal and to exorcise (Matt. 10:1). Then follow the names of the twelve. Then Jesus sends them out with the instruction: "Preach as you go, saying, the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (v.7). Clearly the preaching is the explanation of the healing. People are being healed. Why? Is it just that someone with a gift of healing has turned up? This would not be anything new (see Luke 11:19). No! The healing is a sign pointing beyond itself, a sign that the kingdom of God has come upon you. The preaching is the interpretation of the happening. If nothing is happening, then there

is nothing to explain and the preaching is just empty words – as ours often is. But, on the other hand, the happenings do not explain themselves. Even the most wonderful healing, or the most sacrificial act of kindness, or the most splendid programme of action for justice does not by itself tell us that the kingdom of God has come. It does not point

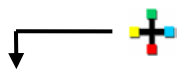


away from itself to something greater of which it is a sign. It is not a substitute for the name of the one in whom the kingdom of God has actually come among us; it is not a substitute for the name of Jesus.

So words without deeds are empty, but deeds without words are dumb. It is stupid to set them against each other. It is, for example, stupid to say: "The one thing that matters is to go everywhere and preach the gospel; all other activities such as schools and hospitals and programmes for social action are at best merely auxiliary and at worst irrelevant." Why should people believe our preaching that the kingdom of God has come near in Jesus if they see so sign that anything is happening as a result, if they can see no evidence that disease and ignorance and cruelty and injustice are being challenged and overcome? Why should they believe our words if there is nothing happening to authenticate them?

On the other hand, it is equally stupid to say: "Preaching is a waste of time. Forget it and get on with tackling the real human problems of poverty, injustice and oppression." That is to repeat the folly of the people who are fed in the desert. It is to confuse the sign with the thing it points to. Our best programmes are not the kingdom of God; they are full of our pride and ambition – as the world easily sees. But apart from these obvious inconsistencies, we surely know that human beings have a greater and more glorious destiny than even the best of our programmes can offer. To a hungry man a good meal looks like heaven; when he has eaten it he knows that it is not. We know that our true life is beyond our grasp, and we are deceived when we invest all our hopes, and encourage others to invest all their hopes, in programmes that do not reach beyond the horizon of this present age.

I know that some will denounce this language as escapist, but in fact it is simply realist. The best of our programmes are still full of the seeds of their own corruption. *We* do not establish God's kingdom. That kingdom, that kingly rule, has been given to us in the form of the

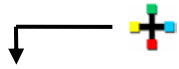


suffering servant, the wounded healer, the crucified liberator. God's kingdom is a given fact, and our actions for justice and compassion are at the very best only signs, pointers to help men and women to turn round so that it becomes possible for them also to believe in the reality of that kingdom, to have a foretaste of its liberating power, to follow in the way of the cross and to find in it life – a life that death cannot threaten.

Our preaching is mere empty words if it does not have behind it a costly engagement with the powers of evil, with all the powers that rob men and women of their humanity, and if it does not call men and women to share in the same costly engagement. But, equally, our programmes for teaching, healing, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and action for justice and freedom are futile if they do not point beyond themselves to a reality greater than they – to the great healer, the great liberator, the one who is himself the living bread. In themselves, as a contribution to solving the problems of the nation and the world, our programmes are a mere drop in the ocean. Quantitatively they are insignificant. But as signs pointing beyond themselves they can be powerful indeed, leading men and women to him who is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

So, for God's sake, let us not fall into this game of setting words and deeds against each other, preaching against action for justice and action for justice against preaching. Do not let us set "kingdom" against "church" and "church" against "kingdom". The church is not an end in

itself. "Church growth" is not an end in itself. The church is only true to its calling when it is a sign, an instrument and a foretaste of the kingdom. But, on the other hand, talk about the kingdom is mere ideology if it is not tied to the name of Jesus in whom the kingdom is present and if it does not invite men and women to recognize that presence, to do the U-turn, to become part of that company that (sinful as it has always been) acknowledges Jesus as the one in whom God's kingdom is



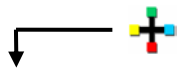
present and so seeks to honour him, to serve him, to follow him.

Mission is not a success story

That leads to the third point, which can be brief. Mission in Christ's way will not be a success story as the world reckons success. There is a kind of ideology of success that fits badly with the gospel.

When I was bishop in Madras I used to get letters about once a month, usually from somewhere in the neighbourhood of Texas, in such terms as the following: "Dear Bishop, if you will kindly arrange for me to hold a series of revival meetings in your diocese I will guarantee to revive your church within a fortnight." Now that I am a pastor of a small congregation in Birmingham I receive literature, beautifully produced on glossy paper, inviting me to write for their course of teaching that will tell me how to double the membership of the congregation within six months. One is tempted to say: "What a pity that Jesus did not have some professionally qualified experts in public relations to help him! He could have avoided crucifixion."

This sort of thing is far away from the mission in Christ's way. Let us never forget that in its first and mightiest conflict against the powers of this world, represented in the imperial might of Rome, the victory of the gospel was won not by the cleverness of its preachers and theologians, and certainly not by its programmes for social justice, but by the blood of the martyrs. And let us not forget that the most notable examples of vital Christian mission today are to be found in places where success in worldly terms has been denied: in the USSR, where one of the most powerful governments in the world has tried for seventy years to destroy the church, yet where the sheer reality and joy of Christian holiness continues to draw men and women to the faith; in China, where the church has come through the agony of the cultural revolution mightily strengthened and renewed; in Latin America,



where the blood of countless martyrs has been shed in witness to the gospel against cruel and unjust dictatorships.

Success in the sense of growth in the number of committed Christians is not in our hands. It is the work of God the Holy Spirit to call men and women to faith in Jesus, and the Spirit does so in ways that are often mysterious and beyond any possibility of manipulation or even of comprehension by us. What is required of us is faithfulness in word and deed, at whatever cost; faithfulness in action for truth, for justice, for mercy, for compassion; faithfulness in speaking the name of Jesus when the time is right, bearing witness, by explicit word as occasion arises, to God whose we are and whom we serve. There are situations where the word is easy and the deed is costly; there are situations where the deed is easy and the word is costly. Whether in word or in deed, what is required in every situation is that we be faithful to him who said to his disciples: "As the Father sent me, so I send you," and showed them his hands and his side.



A Question About The Kingdom: A Promise About The Spirit

When the disciples had come together, they asked Jesus: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" He said to them: "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:6-8).

Here is the Lucan version of the missionary commission. The disciples have at last become convinced that the cross was not a defeat but a victory. After the shattering events of that terrible week, when it had seemed that the message about the kingdom was a colossal mistake and that the old powers that had always dominated the world were still in control, they have come to know and believe that it is not so, that death and all its powers have been met and mastered, that Jesus is king. They have done the U-turn. They believe.

And so they ask the obvious question: Do we now see the kingdom in actual operation? Surely it does not remain a secret any more? Surely now we can expect that it will be made clear for all the world to see that the old promise is fulfilled, that Yahweh is indeed king and lord of all. It is the obvious question.

The answer of Jesus is twofold: a warning and a promise. It is first of all a warning. "It is not for you to know..." Quite simply, the kingdom is God's kingdom: it is not your programme. I have very often been asked: "Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the future of the gospel in India?" When one gets the same question a hundred times one is inclined to develop a standard answer. My standard answer is: "I believe in the resurrec-



tion of Jesus and therefore the question does not arise." The gospel is news of a fact – the presence of the kingdom of God in Jesus. About a fact, the question "optimistic or pessimistic?" does not arise. About a programme one can be optimistic or pessimistic, but about a fact you have to ask a different question: "Do you believe it or do you not believe it?" If you believe, the other question does not arise.

We need this warning. We are constantly tempted to see the cause of the gospel as if it were a programme about which we could be optimistic or pessimistic. In England, where the churches are on the defensive, we are always tempted to fall into the world's way of looking at the church. For the media, Christianity is a "good cause" that requires support and that will collapse if enough people do not rally to its support. Christians are tempted to fall into this absurd way of thinking. In places where the churches are much more "successful", where optimism is more common than pessimism, one finds the same fundamental error. I see literature put out by mission and "church growth" agencies that suggests that the mission of the church is an exercise in marketing such as might well be mounted by Ford or General Motors. If we invest so much money and human power in a certain area, and if we have the right sales technique, we can expect corresponding results. And, of course, a good salesman is always optimistic!

We need the warning. The kingdom of God is, quite simply, God's reign; it is not our programme. The question is not optimism or pessimism; it is belief or unbelief.

But there is also a promise. Please note that it is a promise, not a command. It is not: "You must go and be witnesses"; it is "The Holy Spirit will come, and you will be witnesses." There is a vast difference between these two.

You may ask: "How is the promise related to the question?" The question was about the kingdom; the promise is about the Spirit. How does the promise answer the question? Quite simply, because the Spirit is the

foretaste, the pledge, the *arrabon* of the kingdom. This word *arrabon*, which Paul uses several times to speak of the Spirit, is an interesting one. It does not seem to have been a usual word in classical Greek, but was much used in shop-keepers' accounts to denote the cash that is paid in advance as the pledge of the intention to pay the full amount due at the proper time. I am told that a similar word in Arabic is still used in the Cairo bazaars. A man who wants to buy a suit, after he has agreed about the cloth and the cut, will be expected to make an advance payment as proof of his ability and intention to pay the full bill when the suit is delivered. This *arrabon* is real cash. It is not just a promissory note, an "I.O.U.". The man can go out and spend it, have a meal, a drink. But it is not *just* so much cash. It carries, so to speak, the promise, the assurance of a much larger amount of cash to come. It is both cash now, and the promise of cash to come.

The Holy Spirit is the *arrabon of* the kingdom. It is not just a verbal promise. It is a real gift now, a real foretaste *of* the joy, the freedom, the righteousness, the holiness *of* God's kingdom. It is real now. But its special character is that it carries the promise *of* something much greater to come and makes us look forward and press forward with eager hope towards that greater reality that lies ahead. And it is this that makes the church a witness to the kingdom. The witness is not essentially a task laid upon the church; it is a gift given to the church. It is an overflow *of* Pentecost.

It will immediately be obvious that this accords with much else in the New Testament. In the synoptic gospels Jesus says that his disciples are not to worry about what to say when they are put under interrogation, "for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit" (Mark 13:11). In the same context *of* rejection and persecution, the same promise is given to the disciples in the Johannine record. After Jesus has warned them that they will be rejected as he was rejected, he goes on: "But when the Counsellor (or Advocate; Greek, *Paracletos*) comes, whom I shall send to you

from the Father, even the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness to me; and you are also witnesses because you have been with me from the beginning" (John 15:26f.). In the next chapter we are told that this same Advocate, who is here the advocate for the defence of the harassed church, will also be the advocate for the prosecution of the attacking world; he will confute the world's most fundamental ideas of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16:7-10). Once again, this is not a task laid upon the church, but a promise given to it.

It is important also to recall the background of this language in the Old Testament. According to Isaiah, the prophet of the exile, God addresses the oppressed and down-trodden children of Israel in the following terms:

Bring forth the people who are blind, yet have eyes, who are deaf, yet have ears! Let all the nations gather together, and let the peoples assemble. Who among them can declare this, and show us the former things? Let them bring their witnesses to justify them, and let them hear and say, it is true. "You are my witnesses," says the Lord, "and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am He. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and beside me there is no Saviour (Isa. 43:8-11).

It is clear that God is not calling the oppressed Israelites to undertake some kind of campaign for liberation. It is he, the mighty Lord, who is going to act, and they will be the witnesses, interpreting to the nations what he has done. Here is the background for the assurance "You shall be witnesses." It is not that the church is called upon to undertake a programme. It is that the liberating presence of the Spirit will constitute the church a witness to the mighty acts of the living God who alone is king.

In the influential book *The Missionary Nature of the Church*, the Dutch theologian Johannes Blauw drew a contrast between what he called the "centripetal" missiology of the Old Testament and the "centrifugal" missiology

of the New. He argues, that is to say, that whereas in the Old Testament we have the vision of Yahweh himself drawing all the nations to true worship centred in Zion, the New Testament shows us the Lord sending his disciples out from Zion to disciple the nations. I have come to feel that this contrast is misleading since, although the disciples are indeed sent out, it is still the action of God, God the Holy Spirit, that brings the nations to the worship of the king. The disciples are witnesses; the great actor is God, God the Holy Spirit.

I have come more and more to see the truth of this in my own experience. When I was a young missionary in Kancheepuram, India, I think I was fairly active in preaching and visiting and discussing with Hindu scholars and doing the things that a missionary ought to do. And I did find that people were being drawn to Christ, converted and baptized. But I also soon realized that this did not seem to have any visible connection with my activities. If one enquired how exactly this or that person had come to faith in Christ, there were all sorts of elements in the story of which I knew nothing at all. In the same way I often had the experience of receiving a request from a village for Christian teaching. When I tried, as I usually did, to find out what had happened to prompt this request, I always found that there were many different ways in which the Spirit had touched the hearts of people in the village and led them to seek further.

I remember very specially one occasion when I was taking a confirmation in one of the industrial areas in Madras. As I talked with those to be confirmed, I found that more than half of them had only been baptized in the past few weeks. I learned from the pastor that (in this area of heavy industry) there had been forty adult baptisms in the past eighteen months. I asked him to invite these forty people to give me an account of how each of them had been brought to Christ. In due course I was able to read their stories. What struck me was not only that each story was different, but also that within each story there were

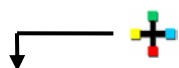
many different experiences spread over many years. It could be a talk with a workmate on the factory floor, a visit from a Christian friend during illness, the reading of a tract or a gospel portion, some quiet act of kindness in a time of trouble, a sermon, a prayer answered, or – very often – a dream or a vision. No one could have "programmed" all this. The strategy (if that is the right word) was not in any human hands.

But one factor was common to all: it was the presence of a believing, worshipping, celebrating congregation of people deeply involved in the ordinary life of their neighbourhood. These many different happenings had their centre there, and drew those whose lives had been touched in so many different ways to ask what was the source from which all this radiated. This was no humanly devised programme for mission. It was the work of the Spirit, present in the life of the congregation, flowing out into the community through the faithful words and deeds of its members.

It is this kind of experience, confirming what the scripture seems to teach, that leads me to say that mission is wrongly understood if it is seen primarily as a task laid upon us. It is primarily a work of the Spirit, a spill-over from Pentecost.

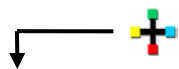
That is confirmed in the record of the Acts of the Apostles. The first Christian sermon was preached not because the apostles decided to have a mission, but because the presence of a new reality was so manifest that people came running to ask what it was. In fact most of the great Christian preachings in Acts are responses to questions, not actions initiated by the church. There is a reality present; people enquire about it; the church has to explain, and the explanation has to

take the form of telling the story of Jesus. It is not that the church has a mission and the Spirit helps us in fulfilling it. It is rather that the Spirit is the active missionary, and the church (where it is faithful) is the place where the Spirit is enabled to complete the Spirit's work.



It is, is it not, a striking fact that in all his letters to the churches Paul never urges on them the duty of evangelism. He can rebuke, remind, exhort his readers about faithfulness to Christ in many matters. But he is never found exhorting them to be active in evangelism. For himself he knows that he cannot keep silent about the gospel. "Woe is me if I do not preach," he says. There is an inner constraint; the love of Christ constrains him. But he does not lay this constraint upon the consciences of his readers. Mission, in other words, is gospel and not law; it is the overflow of a great gift, not the carrying of a great burden. It is the fulfilment of a promise: "You shall be my witness, when the Holy Spirit comes upon you."

I think that a very good and valid symbol of our mission is to be found in an experience with which those of us who have lived in India are familiar. When we have to go to a distant village in our pastoral duty we try to start very early in the morning, so that we do not have to walk in the heat of the day. And it sometimes happens that we have to set off in total darkness; perhaps we are going towards the west so that there is no light in the sky and everything is dark. But as we go, a party of people travelling the opposite way comes to meet us. There will be at least a faint light on their faces. If we stop and ask them: "Where does the light come from?", they will simply ask us to turn round (do the U-turn) and look towards the east. A new day is dawning, and the light we saw was just its faint reflection in the faces of those going that way. They did not possess the light; it was a light given to them. The church is that company which, going the opposite way to the majority, facing not from life towards death, but from death towards life, is given already the first glow of the light of a new day. It is that light that is the witness.



Participating in the Passion: Witnessing to the Resurrection

On the evening of that day, the first day of the week, the doors being shut where the disciples were, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said to them: "Peace be with you." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again: "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." And when he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (John 20:19-23).

Here, secondly, is the Johannine account of the missionary commission. The disciples are frightened, and they have reason to be. They are doing what the church has so often done, withdrawing from the world and seeking protection for itself. But the promise has not been cancelled: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them." And there he is. And his word to them? "Open those doors which you have shut. Go out into that world of which you are afraid. Continue till it is finished, what I came to do. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you."

And that is the launching of the church. It is a movement launched into the public life of the world. It has no life except in this sending. I came to feel vividly the truth of this during my years in the Madurai diocese, when more than half of our congregations had no buildings of their own. I became accustomed to conducting all the services of the church in the open air, in the village street. I have in my mind's eye now those hundreds of occasions when I have ministered the word and sacraments of the



gospel with the Christian congregation sitting around and, beyond them, the wider circle of the whole village standing round, watching, listening, questioning. And how often it happened that, on my next visit, some of those who had been standing at the edge then asked for baptism, coming to join the group in the centre. That scene, repeated hundreds of times, etches in one's mind a picture of the church not as a body drawn out of the world into a secure place, but as a body thrust out into the world to draw all people to Christ. The church's being is in that sending.

We have to remind ourselves again of the significance of the little word "as". It is the manner in which the Father sent the Son that determines the manner in which the church is sent by Jesus. Its mission is governed by the manner of his. We are reminded again of the pattern of his mission as it is outlined for us in the four gospels. And lest the full meaning of that word "as" should be missed, he shows them his hands and his side. It was the scars of the passion in his risen body that assured the frightened disciples that it was really Jesus who stood among them. It will be those same scars in the corporate life of the church that will authenticate it as indeed the body of Christ, the bearer of his mission, the presence of the kingdom. It will not be enough for the church to place a cross on the top of its buildings or in the centre of its altars or on the robes of its clergy. The marks of the cross will have to be recognizable also in the lives of its members if the church is to be the authentic presence of the kingdom.

I find it remarkable that this aspect of the biblical teaching has been so much neglected in the missiology of the past two hundred years, and that missions have been seen – by contrast – in triumphalistic terms. It is remarkable that the consistent teaching of St Paul about the nature of the apostolate has played so little part in missionary thinking. When his claim to be an authentic apostle of Jesus was questioned, as it was especially (it seems) in the congregation at Corinth, Paul's reply is

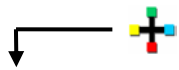


always, in one way or another, to affirm that he has taken his share in the sufferings of Christ. Both of the Corinthian letters are full of this (e.g. 1 Cor. 4:8-13; 2 Cor. 4-5, 12:1-10), and there are many other places where this theme is repeated (e.g. Gal. 6:14-17; Eph. 3:13; Col. 1:26). In particular, the fourth chapter of the second Corinthian letter, which is almost a classic definition of mission, has been (as far as I know) almost completely ignored in missiological writing. The whole chapter is concerned to define what it means to be an authentic messenger of Christ, but listen especially to these central verses:

We have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies. For while we live we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death is at work in us, but life in you (2 Cor. 4:7-12).

Nowhere in the New Testament is the essential character of the church's mission set out more clearly. It ought to be seen as the classic definition of mission. Paul's apostolate, as he here interprets it, is the carrying forward through the ongoing life of the world of the vicarious passion of Jesus. It is as he actually participates in the passion of Jesus, that he can be the bearer of the risen life of Jesus, that deathless life that opens out into a limitless future, for the sake of others. His apostolate is authenticated by the marks of the cross. "Henceforth," he writes to the fractious Galatians, "henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (Gal. 6:17).

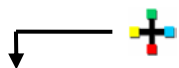
What are these marks? What model of mission was Jesus giving to his apostles when he showed them his hands and his side? Here we must beware of a misunderstanding of the passion that has (it seems to me) been



widely created in Christian minds by the mediaeval crucifix, which shows Jesus as a drooping, defeated, pain-drenched figure – a symbol of abject submission and defeat. This picture of the cross as the defeat of goodness by the powers of evil has been enormously influential in Spanish Christianity and is part of the background of Latin American liberation theology. In English, when we want to express our pity for a helpless victim of circumstances, we are inclined to exclaim: "Poor devil." The Spanish equivalent of this expression is "Poor Christ!" Against this background one can well understand the protest of liberation theology.

But the earliest representations of the crucifixion do not portray it like this. They depict Christ with head erect, the warrior beating down the powers of death and hell, the victorious challenger of all the powers of evil. This is the true understanding of the cross as the New Testament teaches us. The cross is not abject submission to the power of evil; it is the price paid for a victorious challenge to the powers of evil.

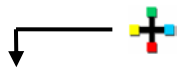
One of the books that influenced me as a student was by a grand old Scottish theologian David Cairns. Its title was *The Faith that Rebels*. Cairns was protesting against an interpretation of the gospel that turned it into an invitation to submit; he saw it as an invitation to rebel. He pointed out that there is no case in the gospels of a man or woman being brought to Jesus for healing, and Jesus saying: "Accept your suffering; it will purify your soul." There is no such case. In every case that is recorded Jesus immediately responds by action to heal the sick, to cast out the evil spirit. His ministry was a ministry of active challenge to all the powers of the devil, whether in the disease that racks the body, the evil spirit that torments the soul, or the corruption and hypocrisy that poisons the body of society. It was a faith that rebelled. And yet, at the very end, there is submission: "Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit"; and – immediately following – the great shout of victory: "It is finished." This, it seems to me, brings us to



the very heart of mission in Christ's way. There is an active and uncompromising challenge to all the powers of evil, yet it is also a totally vulnerable challenge so that (and here is the profound mystery) the final victory is God's and not ours. In what seems like defeat, the victory of God is actually won. There is a new life, one that does not end in death but begins from death. It is therefore a life that death cannot touch.

During the only visit that my wife and I have ever paid to the Holy Land, there was one day that I shall never forget. It was the day when we visited two ancient sites on the shores of the Dead Sea – Massada and Qm'ran. The first, Massada, is the mighty fortress built by Herod on a gigantic outcrop of rock towering two thousand feet above the surrounding desert. There is where the Jewish freedom fighters, the Zealots of Jesus' day, made their last stand against the Roman legions in AD 73 and finally perished in a mass suicide. The other, Qm'ram, is the place to which the Essene community withdrew into the desert to pray for and prepare themselves for the coming of the Messiah. As I reflected on these two visits on the same day, I realized that each of them represented – so to speak – the terminus of one of the roads that Jesus might have taken. When it was clear that Israel had rejected his message of the kingdom, there were – humanly speaking – two ways that he might have taken. He might have taken the road of the Zealots, active armed struggle to end the cruel oppression. That road ends in the tragic grandeur of Massada – the place where the state of Israel now takes its elite armed forces for their final vows of allegiance. Or he might have taken the other road and withdrawn his disciples into the desert to pray for and to prepare for the kingdom that God would bring in his own way.

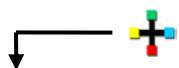
Jesus did neither of these things. He did something different from both. He rode, with his disciples, into the heart of the sacred city at the time when thousands were gathered to celebrate national liberation, the time and the



place of maximum political tension and hope. But he rode on an ass. It was an unmistakable claim to kingship, yet equally unmistakably it was a claim made in total vulnerability. In that last great acted parable of Jesus lies the secret and the paradox of mission in his way. It is the way the church must go. It is neither withdrawal from the world into a religious sanctuary; nor is it engagement with the world on the world's terms. It is something else. It is a totally uncompromising yet totally vulnerable challenge to the powers of evil in the name and in the power of the kingship of God present in the crucified and risen Jesus. The word of the gospel of the kingdom will have power in so far as it is spoken out of the midst of that active challenge, from a position not safely in the rear, but at the frontline where the in-breaking reign of God challenges what Paul calls the "principalities and powers" and what John calls "the ruler of this world". It is in that sense that we must say that the authenticating marks of a missionary church will be the marks of the passion – his hands and his side.

In the context of such an understanding of mission, the futility of the quarrel between evangelism and social action becomes obvious. Preaching that does not challenge the cruelty and greed and wanton lust of our society is not preaching the kingdom; and a verbal challenge is not enough. The world will rightly ask about the preacher's own involvement in the struggle for justice and mercy. But, equally, a merely political programme is on a road that leads nowhere. Even if we could make all the poor coolies into rich farmers, that would not be the kingdom of God. It is the rich who are in more danger of being dehumanized than the poor. I must say that in my own experience I have often found much more human dignity, true mutual caring and accountability, among the poor than among the rich. Our church is, statistically speaking, mainly a church of the poor.

Mission in Christ's way will mean for us neither withdrawal from conflict into a purely religious security; that

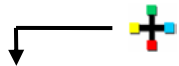


way ends in the crumbling ruins of Qm'ram. Neither will it mean confusing the power of the word of God with political and economic power – the way that ends at Massada. It will mean, I think, that we are deeply identified (not just in cheap words) with all who are oppressed, knowing that we are accountable to them before God, knowing that they have more to give us than we have to give them, sharing with them what God has given us, and – in the name and in the power of Jesus – challenging all the powers that rob men and women of their dignity, and bearing in our life the cost of that challenge. The victory will not be simply that we move people from one religious allegiance to another; nor will it be simply that we displace one group of people from the seats of power and install another. It will rather be that much more mysterious victory that Paul describes in the passage I have quoted.

We must frankly accept the fact that the New Testament teaching about the kingdom of God cannot be converted into a programme for a perfect society at some date in the remote future, whether to be achieved by evolutionary "development" or by revolution. If it were to be so, then all of us now living and all who now suffer under evil powers are for ever excluded from the blessing, for all of us will be dead long before it appears. The kingship of God is not a kingship that treats the men and women now living as mere instruments for a purpose in the fruition of which they will have no share. What is made possible for us by what Christ is and has done is that we can so live and act that there are created signs of the kingdom, signs and foretastes, enabling

people both to enjoy even now a foretaste of the joy and freedom of the kingdom, and also to press forward in confident hope for its full realization.

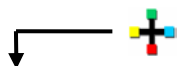
Many of us are rich people in a poor world. It will be well for us to remember that we have all in the end to stand before the judgment seat of God, where we will be judged not by our words but by our deeds, not by the resolutions that we pass about our solidarity with the poor,



but by what our salary is and how we spend it and what style of life we practise. A rich church will be judged not by what it says about the poor, but by what it does.

When Jesus had showed them his hands and his side, he breathed on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit." Once again we are reminded of the role of the Spirit in the mission of the church. We are not sent into battle by a commander who stays behind. The risen Lord shares his risen life with us as we take our share in his passion, his conflict in the world. The Spirit is active not merely in the preaching of the word of the gospel but also in every faithful word and deed that – springing out of this new life in Christ – points to the presence of the reign of God. I have been charged with down-playing the element of command in this matter, the element that is expressed in the phrase "the missionary mandate". There is indeed a command. ("So I send you.") But, as Augustine so well understood, God first gives what God commands. It is the gift of the Spirit that alone constitutes the church as mission, a witness, a sign and foretaste of the kingdom.

Above all, it is the work of the Spirit in the church to continue that which Jesus came to do, to take away the sin of the world, to liberate those who are in the iron grip of unforgiven sin. So there follow immediately the words: "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven. If you retain the sins of any, they are retained." People are not released from the grip of sin by a general theological statement that God is one who forgives. Release from guilt has to be specific and concrete, addressed with authority to each person. Jesus had this authority, and he gives it to those whom he sends in his name. There has been debate about the addressee of this word: is this authority given to the whole church, or only to the ordained ministry? Is the church gathered in that room the ministry in embryo, or the church in embryo? We must answer that it is both. It is the whole church, acting in all its members in the secular life of the world, that is to be the bearer of the reconciling grace of God. It is the



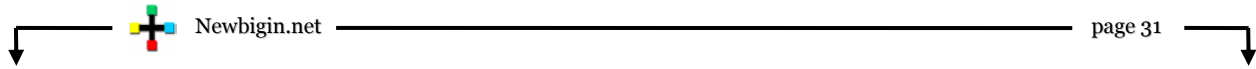
ministry within the church that is charged so to minister reconciliation within the life of the church that the church may be a faithful minister of reconciliation to the world. The priesthood of the ordained ministry is to enable, not to remove, the priesthood of the whole church.

But what are we to make of the double form of the charge? Is our Lord authorizing us to bring forgiveness to some and to refuse forgiveness to others? Surely Karl Barth is right in saying no. Rather, this is a typical example of the Hebrew form of emphatic statement – the emphasis being given by doubling the charge in positive and negative forms. In other words what we have here is the awesome affirmation that upon those who bear the name of Jesus there is firmly laid the responsibility to be, or to fail to be, the bearer to men and women of God's gift of release from guilt, or reconciliation and so of peace with God. And so the word that controls the whole passage is the word "peace" – *shalom*, the fullness of God's blessing. Jesus stood in their midst and said "peace be with you", showed them the scars of that atoning passion by which alone peace is made between sinful men and women and their holy Creator; and then sent them out to be the bearers of that peace into the life of the world – but always in conformity with the way by which peace was made, the way of the cross.

Here, surely, is the place where we must pause to reflect upon the enormity of the contradiction between these words and our actual experience of strife within the church, strife that leads brother to accuse brother in the civil courts and makes a public mockery of the holy name

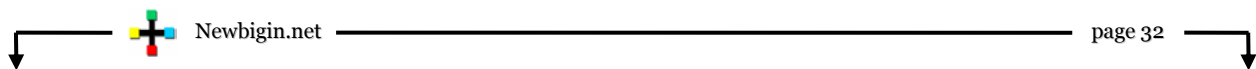
by which we are called. Here is something about which we all need to search our consciences, those who drag the church to court, and those with authority in the church who are not humble enough to recognize that they too are human and may be in the wrong.

Jesus said: "Peace be with you", and showed them his hands and his side. The wounds of Christ plead with us to repent of our pride, to be humble, to be so reconciled with



one another that we can be the bearers of his gift of reconciliation in the life of society.

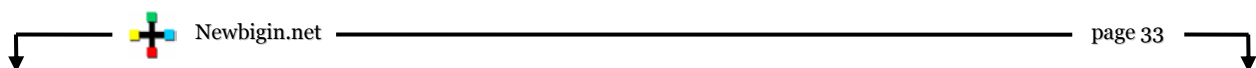
But, thank God! We know that he is not defeated, that in spite of all the sin that strains the life of the church there is a work of grace, of healing, of forgiveness, of release from guilt that is going on all the time, often in hidden ways. I know this. Here is where the true life of the church is to be found, where mission in Christ's way is happening, where the church is indeed recognizable as his body because it bears the scars of his passion.



A Gift, A Command, And An Assurance

Jesus came and said to the disciples: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

When people speak of "the Great Commission", it is usually to this text that they refer. It has, at least in Anglo-Saxon Protestant circles, come to be seen as the essential "mandate for mission" and has often been taken in isolation from the other texts that we have been considering in these studies. Harry Boer, in his valuable book *Pentecost and Mission*, has demonstrated the fact that this text was never used as the basis for missions until the time of William Carey. Certainly it is never appealed to in this way in the New Testament. There are, I think, reasons why it has had such a dominant, almost exclusive role in Protestant thinking about missions in the past two hundred years. Taken in isolation from the other passages that we have been studying it could seem to validate a sort of triumphalist style of mission that accorded all too easily with the political and economic expansion of the European powers during this period, an expansion with which missions were (inevitably) so much connected. It is indeed necessary that we should take it along with the other texts. If we take it alone, and see mission as essentially obedience to a command, then mission becomes part of the law rather than an expression of the gospel; it becomes a burden to be carried rather than a joy to be shared. It becomes essentially our programme, rather than a work of the Spirit in which we are caught up.



Yet when we look carefully at this text we find that, though it gives a distinct emphasis (as the other two do) it does not contradict the others. It begins with a great shout of victory reminiscent of Psalm 93. All the waves and the billows have gone over the head of Jesus, but "mightier than the thunders of many waters, mightier than the waves of the sea, the Lord on high is mighty". Jesus reigns. We may compare this with the closing verse of St Luke's Gospel where we read that the disciples returned to Jerusalem "with great joy". The mission begins with an explosion of joy, triumphant joy. The tomb is empty. Jesus lives. Death and hell are robbed of their victory. Every other authority, all the principalities and powers are disarmed. All authority is given to the crucified and risen Jesus. In him, God reigns.

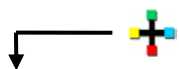
When we know this, we cannot keep silent about it. We can, if we like, treat it as just one of the varieties of religious experience. But then we do not believe it, and it is better to say so frankly. If we believe that it is true, we shall not be able to keep silent about it. It is not that we

speak because someone has ordered us to do so. We would indeed be guilty if we kept silent about something of such tremendous import for every human being. But we do not speak simply because we are ordered to do so. We speak because we must, but the constraint is an inward one, not an external one. "Woe is me if I do not preach the good news."

And the good news can no longer be confined to Israel. Israel has been chosen to be the bearer of it, but not to be the sole beneficiary of it. It is for the nations, those hitherto outside the covenant of Abraham. The promise of prophets and psalmists is now to be fulfilled at last, and the pagan nations will come to walk in the light of God.

But what will this involve? What does it mean to "disciple the nations"? Three dangers have to be recognized here.

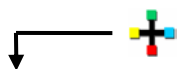
1. The first is that we should take it to mean that "the nations" are to become like us. It is to think: "We are



God's people living under God's law. If the nations are to be disciplined, that must mean that they become like us, keeping the same laws, the same customs, the same appointed feasts, the sabbath and – above all – the fundamental law of circumcision. Is it not written, 'Any uncircumcized male... shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant?'" (Gen. 13:14). The New Testament tells us the story of how the church had to learn that this is not what "disciple the nations" means.

The most vivid example is the story that we often call "the conversion of Cornelius", but that could also be called "the conversion of Peter". Look at Peter before he met Cornelius and listen to the way he talks: "God forbid, Lord, I have never eaten anything unclean." He is *a pukka* Brahmin and the idea of mixing as an equal with pagans is unthinkable. A few hours later, in the house of that pagan Roman soldier, he has to admit with astonishment that this heathen family has become part of the same family of God that he belongs to. And the change doesn't end with Peter. You remember what followed: Peter was brought before the general assembly and charged with conduct forbidden to God's people. Peter simply tells the assembly what happened, and we read that the whole assembly kept silent (quite a miracle in itself) and then said, with evident astonishment: "Then to the gentiles also God has granted repentance unto life" (Acts 11:18). It is not just that Cornelius is changed; it is that the church also is changed.

This means that if we are faithful in mission we must recognize that Christianity is something that is always changing. I would not say, as has been suggested, that we have to "re-invent the gospel" in each new generation, for the gospel is news of what has been done once for all. I would rather say that the Holy Spirit, through the faithful witness of the church to the gospel, teaches the church new things and brings it – through its successive missionary encounters – into the fullness of the truth. That is the promise spelled out so clearly in the fifteenth and six-



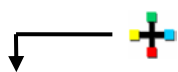
teenth chapters of the Gospel of St John. Here is the real difference between proselytism and evangelism.

I have taken part in many discussions on this, and have often felt at the end that the only conclusion reached was: "Evangelism is what we do; proselytism is what they do." But it is possible to go beyond this. In proselytism I open the door to bring another into my enclosure. In true evangelism we give room for the Holy Spirit, recognizing that it is the Spirit alone who converts, to use both us and those to whom we bear witness to bring about something new, something by which both parties are changed, and something comes into being that is a little more adequate as a sign and foretaste of Christ's universal reign. The acid test is always this: Is the evangelist ready to be changed by the encounter, or does he or she look for change only in the other party?

That is the first danger. We have to affirm, with the Nairobi Assembly of the World Council of Churches, that Christ does not make carbon copies; he makes originals.

2. But we have also to be on guard against the opposite danger, the idea that "discipline does not itself involve any change in behaviour". Dr McGavran and the "Church Growth" school of missiology that he leads affirm that God respects the variety of human cultures (which is surely true) but carry this affirmation to the point where it seems that culture is being absolutized. Human society, Dr McGavran says, is a vast mosaic of distinct cultures, and the gospel must be so proclaimed that it finds its appropriate place within each culture and that accepting Christ does not involve a break with culture.

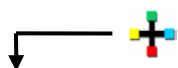
This is, of course, the theological basis for apartheid in South Africa. I do not suggest that Dr McGavran is a defender of this practice, but he insists that the text that we are studying makes a distinction between "discipling" and "teaching"; that the proper business of mission is discipling, and that it is a diversion from this proper task when missions become absorbed in what McGavran calls "perfecting" which – in effect – often means coopting the



new converts into the culture of the missionary through long processes of education, technical training and the teaching of Western theology. There is an important element of truth in this criticism of traditional Western missionary policies, but McGavran's exegesis of the text will not stand scrutiny. It is clear in the original Greek that "disciple the nations" is the main verb, and that "baptizing and teaching" are adverbial clauses defining what "discipling" is. Teaching and discipling are not two separate activities. Discipling is not merely a change of religious allegiance with no ethical implications. And those ethical implications may well involve challenging elements in the traditional culture. Discipling *includes* "teaching them to observe all that I have commended"; that is not an additional extra.

But what is it that Christ has commanded? It is not a new law. It is that which is the end of the law, in both senses of "end": it achieves what law intends but does not achieve and so removes law from its traditional place. It is not something imposed by the missionary. What it is is seen in the ministry of Jesus. When he "discipled" Levi the tax-collector, Levi responded by giving a feast; being a disciple meant sharing his joy with his friends, disreputable as they were. When Zacchaeus became a disciple, he responded by freely and joyfully giving away his ill-gotten gains. It was not, of course, that giving away his money made him fit for the kingdom of God. It was that the utterly free, gracious and astonishing action of Jesus in going as a guest to the home of this much-hated man caused Zacchaeus to want to give his money away. Discipling does not mean the imposition of a new code of law; but it certainly means a new kind of life that is almost certain eventually to call aspects of culture into question.

3. To indicate the third danger of which we must be aware, let me start by asking a question: How seriously are we to take the fact that the object of the verb "disciple" is not individual people, but "nations"? Of course we must recognize that "nations" does not mean "nation states" in



the modern sense. To think so would be anachronistic in the perspective of the Bible it means all the communities outside of Israel, broadly understood as technically and culturally defined groups. It would be a misreading of the text to construe it as referring to "nations" in the modern sense, and not also to tribes, castes, clans. It is also to be noted that while the object of discipling is "the national" (*ta ethne*, neuter), the object of baptizing and teaching is not nations but persons (*autous*).

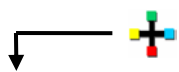
Dr McGavran understands "discipling the nations" to mean that it is the various tribes, clans, castes and other ethnically and culturally defined groups *as such* that are to be discipled.

The gospel is to be communicated to each in its own idiom, and the result will be an ethnically/culturally defined Christian community distinct from other Christian communities and retaining its own distinctive ethnic and cultural characteristics. In this way, says McGavran, the gospel can spread rapidly everywhere, since it will not require a break with family and culture. This is the secret of rapid church growth, for "God accepts human culture".

I do not think this can be accepted. Culture is to be respected but not absolutized.

In no sense of the word "nation" are these ethnic and cultural groupings eternal. They are part of an ever-changing human world. (It is, I think, significant that of all the seventy "nations" into which the ancient Hebrews thought the human family was divided – see Genesis 10 – not one remains to this day except the family of Eber. (However scandalous it may seem to us who are gentiles, the sins of Eber have a unique and abiding place in God's ordering of history.) Human culture is to be acknowledged and respected, but not absolutized. This text will not bear the meaning that Dr McGavran (and others before him) have read into it.

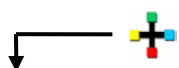
In the context of the Bible as a whole, we must say that "discipling the nations" means bringing those who were outside the family of God into one family, in which unity



does not mean uniformity and diversity does not mean division, in which love and freedom are the only absolutes. It is surely very significant that St Paul, who fought so passionately to ensure that Gentiles should not have to become "carbon copies" of the Jews in order to be part of the family of God, insisted with equal passion that Jews and gentiles must live together as a single family in the church. The transcendent lordship of Christ is made manifest precisely in the fact that our manifold ethnic and cultural diversities, without being destroyed or devalued, are nevertheless transcended in that new reality which is given to us in Christ through the Spirit.

At the end of our text we are reminded again that the fundamental reality is not a command but a promise: "Lo, I am with you always, to the end of the age." It is the presence of a new reality in the life of the world, the presence of the risen Lord himself, that is the dynamic of mission. It is he alone who can draw all people to himself (John 12:32). If we could always remember that, we might spend less time in arguing with each other about missionary methods and be more ready to acknowledge the diversity of gifts through which the Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ. Let me conclude with a story, one of many that I could tell, that vividly illustrated this point for me.

Thirty years ago, when I was bishop in Madurai, I had a visit from a village of which I had never heard, to say that there were twenty-five families wishing to be baptized, and would I come and baptize them? I looked the place up in the map and found that it was actually not in my diocese but a few miles over the border in the Trichy-Tanjore diocese. I wrote to the bishop there, told him of the request, suggested that it must be the result of evangelistic work by members of the church there, and invited him to deal with it. He replied that he had never heard of the place and that he knew of no evangelistic work in that area, and that I had better go there myself. I did so, and after a day in the village was able to piece together the story behind the request. It was a drama in four acts.



Act I saw the visit of a team of development workers who helped them to put down a well, install an electric pump, and get a clean water supply. The leader of the team was a Christian engineer, a good man but not much of a communicator. He told them he was a Christian, and they saw that he was a good man. That was all. End of Act I.

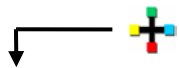
Next, a few months later, one of the villagers went to the neighbouring town to make some purchases and a colporteur sold him a copy of the Gospel of St Mark. He began to read it, became

interested, and started discussing it with his neighbours who gathered round to hear him read. End of Act II, with no visible change.

Some months passed, and an independent evangelist paid a visit to the village. As is the manner of his tribe, he preached a fiery sermon, stayed the night in the village, and left behind a tract that said: "If you die tonight, where will you go?" The villagers decided that the matter was more serious than they had thought and that further investigation was called for. So (and this is Act IV) they sent word to a village five miles away where there was a Christian congregation. "Will you please tell us", they asked, "what is all this about this man Jesus?" It happened that one of the members of the congregation (all of them landless labourers) had had an accident and was unable to do field work. The congregation decided to send him over to the other village, to spend a month with them answering their enquiry.

The result was a group of twenty-five families as ready for and as eager for baptism as any that I have seen.

The point of the story is obvious. If you had assembled the engineer, the colporteur, the evangelist and the coolie for a seminar on missionary methods, they would probably have disagreed with each other – perhaps violently. Unknown to each other, each had done faithfully the work for which the Holy Spirit had given the equipment. The strategy was not in any human hands. And I, as the bishop, was kept right out of the action until the moment came when I was given my duty to do.



I tell this story because it is a good example of what is constantly happening. Perhaps it is unfortunate that the history of mission is so often written by missionaries. They over-estimate their role. It is the Holy Spirit who is the primary missionary; our role is secondary. Mission is not a burden laid upon the church; it is a gift and a promise to the church that is faithful. The command arises from the gift. Jesus reigns and all authority has been given to him in earth and heaven. When we understand that, we shall not need to be told to let it be known. Rather, we shall not be able to keep silent.

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