

# A THEOLOGY OF MISSION FOR THE CHURCH OF THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY: Mission as Prophetic Dialogue

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April 19, 2009

## *Introduction*

In my correspondence with Katalina Tahaafe-Williams in the months before this conference I asked for a suggestion for the topic or theme for my second talk at our conference. I presumed that, of course, the first talk would address the theme of the conference: “What Has Contextual Theology To Offer to the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century?”, but I was not sure what would be the best follow up to it. Katalina suggested the topic of *Mission*, and the understanding of it as my colleague Roger Schroeder and I developed in our 2004 book *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*. In this work we spoke of Mission as “prophetic dialogue.”

Relying on Katalina’s wisdom, therefore, what I want to share with you this afternoon are some reflections under the title (to conform to the theme of our conference): “A Theology of Mission for the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Mission as Prophetic Dialogue.” To do this I’d like to proceed in three steps. First, I will speak about the importance of mission for the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Then I’d like to speak about mission as “prophetic dialogue.” Third, I’d like to speak about how a contextual theology contributes to the prophetic dialogue by which mission must be carried out today.

## *I. Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

In a talk given at Catholic Theological Union, Chicago (where I lecture) several years ago, eminent Vietnamese-American theologian Peter C. Phan (and Diana Hayes’s colleague at Georgetown University in Washington, DC) suggested that “mission” is “not an innocent word.” There is no doubt that, in the name of mission, very much harm has been done to peoples and cultures throughout the world. “Mission Island” as depicted in the film *Australia* may have had some redeeming factors, but we also know that it was probably very much like the horrible school for Aboriginal children that we read in novels like *The Rabbit-proof Fence*. In his powerful doctoral dissertation on reconciliation in Australia, my friend Gerard Goldman speaks about the well-meaning but stifling structures in mission “dormitories” for Aboriginal boys and “convents” for Aboriginal girls. Peter Matthiesson’s *At Play in the Fields of the Lord* and Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* certainly strengthen the stereotype that, at least from the perspective of contextual theology, Mission has *nothing* to offer the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

But for all the truth in these portraits, they are indeed a *stereotype* nevertheless.

Mission is something that is certainly not unambiguously good, but neither have the efforts of mission been totally evil or destructive. Careful studies by Gambian historian Lamin Sanneh—professor of history at Yale University in the U. S.—have concluded that missionary efforts in West Africa to translate the Bible into local languages have actually served to preserve African languages and cultures today in the face of encroaching Westernization and globalization. Scots church historian Andrew Walls—of Aberdeen and Edinburgh in Scotland and Princeton in the United States—writes of the various missionary societies of the nineteenth century acting as the “fortunate subversion of the Church.” What missionary work accomplished—despite its ambiguity—has nevertheless resulted in the rich world Christianity that we have today, with its resulting wealth of contextual theologies to provide what I have called new agendas, new methods, new voices, and a new dialogue. Had there been no mission, there would be no contextual theologies to offer the church the new look at itself that I spoke of in my presentation yesterday. Just a week ago—on Holy Saturday—I met the leading elder of the Northern Territory town of Yuendumu. He had been taken from his land at an early age to Darwin, where he was educated by the Marist Brothers. And yet today, it is that education that enables him to be a powerful spokesperson for government efforts to take away his land for uranium mining.

Over and above these historical considerations, however—and we have only indicated a few—Mission’s lack of innocence and clear ambiguity should not keep us from recognizing its enduring value in Christian theology and practice. An earlier theology of mission—based often on a Western Enlightenment idea of Western superiority and a disdain for local cultures and ancient religious traditions—has been in need of radical revision, and it has found such revision in the last half century or so. Such revision has been carried out in two different directions.

The first direction of revision and renewal reaches back to the work of Karl Barth and Karl Hartenstein in the first half of the twentieth century and emphasizes mission’s *trinitarian roots*. As the Willingen Conference in 1952 intimated, the church engages in mission not because it *has* a mission itself, but because *God* has a mission—or rather, because *God is* mission. From this theological perspective, being a Christian means being baptized into God’s very life, which is a life of radical communion, spilling forth in the world, drawing humanity and even creation itself into that communion. As is common to say today, it is not so much that the *church* has a mission. Rather *the mission has a church*. The church is the particular, concrete, sacramental—and imperfect—way that God works in the world to call all people into communion with God’s self. As we read in 2Corinthians: “...God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself . . . and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making appeal through us” (see 2Cor5:19-20). Or, as Emil Brunner has written famously: “The Church exists by mission as a fire exists by burning.” We share in God’s mission because of God’s amazing grace.

The second direction of revision and renewal of mission theology also has older roots, but we might trace these back to movements within the World Council of Churches and Roman Catholicism in the 1960s and ‘70s. To trace the Catholic side, which I know better, we see the notion of mission expanded in 1971 when the bishops of the world spoke of working for justice

in the world as a “constitutive element of the preaching of the gospel.” Pope Paul VI, in his marvelous document on Evangelization in the Modern World (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*) in 1975, emphasized that although the witness to and proclamation of the gospel and the invitation to conversion is central to evangelization, evangelization includes other elements like efforts of inculturation (contextualization) and liberation. John Paul II, in his lengthy encyclical *The Mission of the Redeemer* added the element of interreligious dialogue. Mission, in other words, cannot be reduced to one element, particularly to conversion efforts. It needs to include committing oneself to issues of justice, peace and the integrity of creation; it needs to proceed with cultural and contextual sensitivity; it needs to proclaim Christian convictions within the context of an honest dialogue with the world’s religions.

If mission *is* about a call to conversion—and it is—that conversation has to be understood not so much a call to abandon one’s culture and deepest values but to imagine the world differently, to begin to see its possibilities with God’s eyes. Canadian novelist Rudy Wiebe says it marvelously: “you repent, not by feeling bad, but by *thinking different*.” Helping people “think different” is the mission of the church: to call people to work with God in creating a world of justice, peace, reconciliation, harmony among religions, ecological integrity, cultural pride.

In the global, multicultural, minority status, poor, vulnerable, ecologically threatened church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the church exists by mission. But it is a very different kind of mission than was conceived by Anglicans, Baptists, Marists, Ursulines and Josephites a century ago. It is a mission that needs to be lived out in “prophetic dialogue.” It is to this theme that we turn next.

## ***II. Mission as Prophetic Dialogue***

I mentioned earlier that my colleague Roger Schroeder and I used the term “prophetic dialogue” to describe mission in our 2004 book *Constants in Context*. Actually, that is not quite accurate. In fact, the term prophetic dialogue was how our own missionary congregation, The Society of the Divine Word, decided to describe the way we engaged in mission. The phrase was coined at our General Chapter in 2000, and I was there when the phrase was proposed. The Asians in our congregation had proposed that we speak of doing mission simply as “dialogue,” but the Latin Americans strenuously objected. For them, in the context of their commitment to liberation in the midst of Latin American poverty and political and cultural oppression, doing mission was closer to engaging in *prophecy*. As we argued about this, one of our Indonesian members suggested that, as a compromise, we speak of “prophetic dialogue.” Everyone seemed satisfied, and so we adopted the notion.

### **Mission as Dialogue**

Roger and I have developed the idea of prophetic dialogue in our own way, however.

For us, mission is first and foremost *dialogue*. One enters into mission with a profound openness to the place and to the people in which and among whom one works. Max Warren's famous dictum, "when you come to another land, another people, take off your shoes, because the ground on which you are standing is holy. God was there before our arrival" (approximate quote) should function as a basic text for missionary work. In previous General Chapters as well, we had developed a spirituality of "passing over" into other cultures and peoples. We first of all need to *leave* our homelands or our places of comfort (*leaving* is necessary; many missionaries really never *leave*), and *pass over* into people's cultures, languages, economic standards. Another text that needs to be emphasized is one I heard once from the great South African Catholic theologian Albert Nolan: "Listen, listen, listen. Ask questions. Listen!" My colleague Claude-Marie Barbour has coined the term "mission-in-reverse": we need to be evangelized by the people before we can evangelize them; we need to allow the people among whom we work to be our teachers before we presume to teach them.

Mission as dialogue is the ministry of presence, of respect. It is a witness, at base, to the God who moves among us in dialogue, the Word become flesh, and to the communion in Godself who calls us to communion with our universe and with one another. Some of its great exemplars are women and men like Francis of Assisi, Pandita Ramabai in India, Charles de Foucauld, a French hermit and contemplative in Algeria, a C. W. Andrews or a Bede Griffiths. Among several scripture passages that I might offer as a foundation, one that particularly strikes me is Paul's description of himself and his work in 1Thessalonians: "...we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us (1Thes 2:7-8).

## **Prophecy**

But authentic mission also involves prophecy and this in several senses. First, the basic motivation for mission must be to share the astounding, challenging, self-convicting, amazing, *good* news about the God of Jesus Christ and God's vision for the world. I love the way the term "gospel" is translated in Pilipino or Tagalog as *magandang balita*—literally *beautiful* news. Prophecy is first of all a "telling forth," not on our own authority but on God's authority. This is why, in the powerful words of Pope Paul VI, there is no evangelization worthy of the name unless "the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God are not proclaimed" (EN 22). Engaging mission is not simply for the physical betterment of humanity, the increase of communications among Christians, or the development of one's own personal depth—even though all these things are worthwhile. Mission is about the respectful, gentle, dialogical, and yet faithful speaking forth—in word and deed—of God's love revealed in Jesus of Nazareth.

The second way that mission is prophecy is, in the spirit of Old Testament prophets like Amos, Hosea and Isaiah, its clear critique and exposure of any kind of injustice in the world. Dr. Camilo Álvarez spoke of this eloquently yesterday. To allude again to that 1971 episcopal

document, working for justice is a *constitutive part* of the prophetic preaching of the gospel. The gospel which Christians proclaim is a gospel of justice. It is the proclamation of a world of equality and participation, a world in which the greatest is the servant of all, a world of peace and opportunity. There is a long list of prophets in the history of the church's mission, among whom one might number Bartolome de las Casas, Pedro Claver, Martin Luther King, Jr., Dorothy Day, and even perhaps Sam Watson and the Dodson brothers.

Third, we might speak of the witness of the church community as prophetic. Gerhard Lohfink writes powerfully of the need for the Christian Community to form a "contrast community," to be a demonstration to the world around it what the Reign of God might look like. In Lesslie Newbigin's words, the church needs to be a "sign and foretaste" of the coming Reign of God. Even if one would not fully espouse the "countercultural model" of contextual theology, there is indeed something in the Christian life and message that deeply challenges the status quo. The way Christians care for one another, their hospitality, their involvement in the world of politics and the arts, their moral stances—all these can be gentle or not-so-gentle challenges to the world around them.

Prophecy does not have to be something serious or angry—although sometimes it may very well be. The new sense of liberation theology that Dr. Álvarez spoke about yesterday is testimony to that. Certainly the well-known exclamation of people of the Roman Empire in the early centuries of Christianity—"see how they love one another"—was a recognition of prophecy. Today we might want people to say: "see how they celebrate with one another!" But even when prophecy is angry—like the anger of the Old Testament prophets against Israel, or the anger of Jesus toward the Pharisees—is an anger born out of love. It is only because the prophets and Jesus *loved* Israel that they could fulminate so strongly against it. Christians "tell it like it is" in the world not because the world is ultimately evil, but because of what it is and can be in God's sight.

## **Prophetic Dialogue**

Mission needs to be done both as dialogue and as prophecy: in "prophetic dialogue." This idea is expressed as well in South African missiologist David Bosch's wonderful phrase of "bold humility." We need boldly to proclaim the "beautiful news" of God's story in Jesus and God's vision for our world, but we need to do it in the way *God* does it: with patience, with respect, in dialogue.

I quoted from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians as an example of Paul doing mission in dialogue. In its full context, however, the text reflects much more an attitude of the bold humility or prophetic dialogue that I am advocating here.

For you yourselves know, sisters and brothers, that our visit to you was not in vain; but though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the face of opposition. For our appeal does not spring from error or uncleanness,

nor is it made with guile; but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please people, but to please God who tests our hearts. We never used either words of flattery, as you know, or a cloak for greed, as God is witness; nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse taking care of her children. . . . (1Thes 2:1-7).

Paul certainly becomes “all things to all people,” a slave to all,” but this is because “woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (see 1Cor 9:16-23).

When one does mission in prophetic dialogue, one needs to be contextual, one needs to do theology contextually. This is what we will take up in our third and final section in this presentation.

### ***III. Prophetic Dialogue and Contextual Theology***

When does one need to be prophetic in participating in God’s mission? When does one need to be dialogical? It is in discerning the answers to these questions that one needs to think contextually. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century global, multicultural, minority, poor and vulnerable church, the way we live our Christian lives and witness to the gospel in mission will very much depend on the situation in which we find ourselves.

I would like to take the term “contextual theology” here as broadly as I can. Contextual theology will thus include not only a dialogue with local, particular cultures, and with women and men in various social locations. It will also include dialogue with other Christians in mission, and, indeed, with people of other religions. Taking this contextual theological approach to mission will also involve the reflection on and practice of reconciliation between various factions and enemies in the situation in which one lives. Finally, it will be in dialogical and prophetic conversation with situations of injustice and ecological danger.

As Christians engage in mission, their first attitude should be one of listening, respect, learning and discernment. But as they listen and discern carefully they will experience the need, even the duty, to speak out. They will find creative ways to present the Christian message, and will be impelled to oppose injustice or advocate reform. All of this will depend on a way of reflecting theologically that will guide and support them in their missional task.

It will be here that the various models that I have proposed—or other ones that people engaged in mission will discover—will come into play. Will the best way of presenting Christianity be a translation, a “putting the gospel into” a particular cultural value or in terms of a particular situation? Will one’s prophetic dialogue lead to amazing new discoveries in one’s culture, or in another religion? Will reflecting on one’s practice of the gospel reveal even more effective ways of acting—more faithful to the gospel, more effective in the context? Will the experience of outsiders challenge or illumine the way one does mission in new ways? Or will an alternate way—the way of the gospel—witness to the power of the gospel in a situation of secularity,

consumerism, or over reliance on individual choice?

### ***Conclusion***

When I first wrote my book *Models of Contextual Theology*, I used to stress that the book was not one about *missiology* but *systematic theology*—or theological method. This is certainly true. However, as I have developed my own thinking about contextual theology on the one hand and mission on the other, I have come to realize that my book is very much a missiological work. In the same way that Christians cannot do theology that is not contextual, so Christians cannot engage in mission that is not contextual. The way we live as Christians—which is to live in mission—is constantly to live in dialogue with and discerning our context, and correlating that context with the broader and older Christian tradition. As I concluded in my talk yesterday, what contextual theology can offer to the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a new look at itself. What the church will discover as it looks at itself in the context in which it exists is that it is a missionary church—missionary, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, by its very nature.

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