

What next in mission? From the end of the earth to Jerusalem

M Masango
(University of Pretoria)

ABSTRACT

What next in mission? From the end of the earth to Jerusalem

This article sketches the impact of technology and globalisation on culture, and the results appear to be devastating. An appeal is made to churches to encourage missionary endeavours that reach out to the world. The challenge that African Churches face is, how they will take mission work, from the ends of the earth back to Jerusalem (Missionary Churches). A plea is made to pay respect to the creation of God, and to restore broken relationships. “Let thy Kingdom come”, is the final prayer.

1 INTRODUCTION

Franklin (1998:410) shares a story that is worth sharing especially as we analyse the future of mission. Mission and its future is extremely important, especially since Africa is living within a new mode of commercialism, media and technology. A story is shared of a child who was taken for the first time to church. On his return home, his father asked him about his impression of the church. The child replied by saying:

“The music was great but the commercial was too long”.

The above mentioned quotation make us evaluate how the African churches are engaged in mission and evangelism in a culture that is deformed and distorted by the market and media which confuses people (Christian). Television, Radio, DVD etcetera is challenging the message and ministry of the church in different ways.

The challenge, when handled well will help us share our ministry of God who was, who is and who will be in the new world. The quotation is a clear indication that the continent is going through change. It is a continent plagued by many problems; some are caused by developed countries while others are of our own making. Several of our leaders are leading Africa in a down spiral through corrupt governance. In order to understand the future of missions, one needs to understand theology and its role in this day an age. This

kind of understanding will help us to address the issue of missions and problems we are facing.

Kirk (2000:9) shares an interesting understanding of theology which will help us to challenge problems we are facing. He says:

“Any adequate theology has to be ‘self-involving; world-willing and God-involving’”.

God is ultimately the author of theology. This theology comprises nature, culture, and all forms of existence. This theology concerns itself with transformation. It reflects the reality of God and God’s relation to the world. God’s purpose and actions are clarified, and in this light, we evaluate the faith and practice of those who claim to know God. This area challenges us to get involved in mission, our theology should therefore be clear so that we are able to share who God is with those who do not know God. This is important because mission must avoid embarking on mission to people who already know God. The result will force us into a sheep-stealing ministry, which destroys the proper concept of mission. Some of you will ask why theology is a challenge to mission.

Today in the continent of Africa, different kinds of churches are emerging out of nowhere. In South Africa, Pentecostal churches are growing in leaps and bounds. Many people are leaving the so called “traditional churches” (main line churches) for charismatic churches. There are churches called “Stop Suffering”, “Church with Tears”, “Deliverances”, “Universal Church” and “The Church full of the Holy Spirit”.

Their theology is not Reformed and they promise people a pie in the sky. We are therefore challenged to address this kind of theology which damages believers. If theology has to do with reflections of self understanding of faith, then we are challenged to critically reflect on this type of theology. What is disturbing with these churches is that they are embarking on business strategies in their faith, while the focus should be upon Jesus Christ-the Saviour of the world. Ogden (1998:255) reminds us that:

“Theology is by its nature, about fundamental concerns which affect life at all levels”.

The above quotation reminds us that we should be concerned by these emerging Pentecostal churches, their theology, and their proselytising method of sheep-stealing. Some of these churches do

not collaborate with local churches that have served the people through difficult times in the life of the country. They come in and undermine local work of churches and their councils. The author needs to share that people engaging in theological reflection invariably take up positions on a whole host of important matters, even if they do so from vastly different stances with conflicting results, and sometimes without being aware of what they are doing. It is at this point that our mission is to challenge and be challenged as well by other theological reflections. As we are searching for the truth, we will be engaged in reflections that will critically open up some dialogue. This can only be done when the church (its theology and mission strategies) are challenged by new emerging theologies. This occurred in olden days, arising from Gnosticism, clericalism, colonialism, racism (South Africa) and new secularism. Of course we should be joining other churches in dialogue with open reflections because the church ideally is “*reformata semper reformada*” (reformed and always reforming). If we do not follow the above methods, we would have no grounds for fulfilling our calling (Mt 28, Lk 4 etc.) unless we have settled views on our own central beliefs. There can be no theology without mission. In short, there is no theology which is not missionary minded. Hence, we are challenged to provide a critical assessment of the beliefs and actions of Christians as well as their communities or societies. Finally I conclude this thought by saying:

“Theology in its proper sense, is used to refer to either the process or product of a certain kind of critical reflection – namely, the kind that is required to validate the claims that Christians either make or imply in expressing their experience” (Schreier 1985:18).

The above can only be one part of what theology is about. In other words, theology is an educational process that liberates consciousness and finally it incites or leads towards action. The time has come in South Africa and the rest of the continent to challenge this western Pentecostal theology which is infiltrating the continent.

As we address this issue, we will be opening a new page that will help us to challenge issues such as killer diseases, malaria, HIV/AIDS, poverty, corruption, bad governance, pornography etcetera. In other words the future of mission becomes brighter when we become prophets, prophesying (speaking) against to structures that oppress the people.

2 MISSION CENTRED UPON THE KINGDOM

At the very heart of the churches' vocation (theology) in the world is the proclamation of the Kingdom of God - centred upon Jesus Christ who is the Lord of the universe. The above fact ought to unite churches more than divide them. It also has to unite them across confessional and geographical borders. The problem arises when we embark our methods of evangelism and mission. Our aims and purpose of witnessing, the theological and Eucharistic foundation of proclamation, always create tension which divides us into various confessional families and theological traditions. As a result, we spend time arguing and isolating each other. This is another tension that will not help us when we address Pentecostal strategies and problems of missions that they create in Africa. The main question to address is how Eastern Orthodox churches, as well as Reformed churches articulate and exercise their own understanding of mission and evangelism? How could they live their faith while living in different contexts, let alone learn from each other and then help or assist each other in engaging in mission work? In order to work for Christ as our Lord, we then need to address ecumenical work, which will open up new ways of engaging in mission. One way of addressing this issue is through dialogue. We need to learn that evangelism and mission belong to God, and we can only be helped by the power of the Holy Spirit in order to engage in the ministry.

3 LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Evangelism and mission are greatly challenged by rapid social changes that have taken place in the global village. Mass media and technology are constantly part of our lives through television, radio, DVD and other commercial instruments used by the media. The market continues distributing the stuff that clutter and confuse our mind daily. We are even called to buy things we do not need. Hard working people are underpaid but they buy cell phones instead of necessities that will sustain their lives. We are a continent that is growing in Christianity but we continue to be poor. We worship at the market altars located in every shopping centre in our cities. As theologians, have we ever stopped to analyse how the marketplace deals with the poor who are struggling to buy meat? Even churches are joining in squeezing out the little money that remains with the poor people. What is our mission in the state of poor African countries? The author believes that we still have a message in the midst of these problems. People are searching to quench their deep

spiritual hunger with commodities that do not help. How many times have you gone to a shopping mall and you find yourself holding a commodity that you do not need? This process reminds us that we are challenged by the culture that encourages us to buy. McFadyson noted that our world is governed by leaders who follow through principles of self-love, ego and greed.

He believes that our culture and people need to encounter the Bible afresh. How do we do that? We need to return to the basics - proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the liberator, who reminds us that we are created in the image and likeness of God. One of the Middle Eastern theologians, Riad Jarjour speaking from a war torn country, facing a number of challenges of brokenness said:

“In our divided and shaken world, amidst all intellectual sophistry in which we live, and in the face of the madness of violence and war, the only unshakable truth remains for us the gospel of Jesus Christ. This process will only liberate us from the midst of madness” (McFadyson 1990:100).

In other words, we are called to address the issues of this shattered world, but not to run away from it, to live in the way of the gospel, that is liberating those who are trapped and caught up in this kind of world. The author calls the above a way of empowering the poor. Moltmann (1990:XIII-XIV) had this to say about that kind of liberation which he calls Christology in a messianic dimension. He said:

“What I wanted was.... a Christology for men and women who are on the way in the conflict of history, and are looking for bearings on that way in men and women who are living in the exile of history, and who are searching for life, need a Christology for pilgrims... That means a Christology of the way, which points beyond itself and draws people towards the future of God, so that they remain on Christ’s path, and move forward along the path”.

Focusing on Christ will set the mission of the church to discern what our Lord did, and then follow that pattern. That is what liberation is all about. Under the influence of liberation theology, it is now common place to identify one’s own theology and its task as empowering the poor. In short, mission is challenged to be designed

in such a way that it becomes the voice of the voiceless. Theology that is connected to mission and evangelism cannot just be pleased with converting people to accept Jesus as their saviour and never address the situation of poverty they live in. Its aim should be centred around affirming the worth and dignity of those people who are excluded (isolated, rejected and oppressed) from what is called normal (if ever there is such a thing called normal) society or community and to use its resources of liberating both the oppressed and the oppressor, thus releasing them from captivity of exclusion and isolation from each other (Brino and Ellacuria 1996:9ff). This is one of our challenges that will help to address the issues faced by the poor. The aim of mission through liberation theology is to play a subversive role in transforming the nations. Latin America saw it as “turning something over from below” (Gutierrez 1974). In this sense, theology helps us to articulate in the language of faith the aspirations of those who are at the bottom of the community. The church in Africa cannot continue celebrating the growth of Christianity in the continent while failing to address the brokenness experienced by poor people. Theology especially liberation theology has a responsibility to promote in its own way all types of action to which the church is called to minister to. For example, theology (or church) ought to respond to the “objection to belief in God, when it is wrong that is, violating rights of other people”. In other words, God is not more than a code for strategies of domination or a projection of people’s inability to cope with social alienation or psychological distress. Whenever missionaries, heads of states, financial institutions and other powerful structures distort the image of God in others (especially the poor) we (the church) and theologians must respond to that situation, because God is on the side of the poor (Cone 1976:98).

Mission work through theology which must address worldly problems that tarnish the image of God in other people, especially the poor. The main aim and purpose of theology is to help people (Christians) to arrive at a Christian mind that rebuilds when there is brokenness and conflict within the community. Instead of Christians unthinkingly adopting current values and practices in any given situation, they should use this theology as an aid which is attuned to the “mind of Christ” (Eph 4:20-24, Rm 12:1-2, Col 3:2 and 2 Cor 10:5). Several issues occur when liberation takes over in our life. It liberates you and the others within the community. This process is

one way of training and empowering people who are oppressed by the global village which has introduced commercials and consumerism in African lives. Luke 4 helps us to understand the process of liberation that occurred during the time of Jesus, as he introduced the new Kingdom of God on Earth.

We should be reminded that Jesus' idea of the Kingdom was in almost every conceivable aspect different from that of the leaders of his time; for example:

- a) Jesus stood on the wrong side and with those that no one wanted to be with ... He declares that God is on the side of the little people, those who have no value for society (Mt 8:10);
- b) He is glad that the Father's self-revelation has been to the simple people, not the wise (Mt 11:25 ff);
- c) He unmasked political power when he said 'those who claim to govern nations behave despotically and the powerful oppose the people.

There are several passages of scripture which are biased against the rich but in favour of the isolated and oppressed people of God. That is our calling and mission. Finally, the gospel gives us sufficient information about how we relate to political powers. There are a number of hints that suggest Jesus' version of the Kingdom conflicted with the practice of power by the Romans, Herod and the Sadducee party. In paying taxes, Jesus clearly distinguishes between God's authority and that of the earthly powers in (Mk 12:17). His reference to Herod as "that fox" (Lk 13:32) shares a lot of how he spoke on behalf of the poor. This statement conveys an indifference to Herod's pretensions and overviews him as a calculating and dishonest pragmatist. He refused to accept the distribution of injustice (Mt 26:57-68), even when practiced by the highest religious authorities in the land. The above clearly speaks out his intention to defend the poor who were crushed by the order as well as the authorities of that day.

4 CONCLUSION

With the above in mind, the church's mission in the way of Jesus' mission is thus to be an instrument of God's righteous and compassionate governance in the world. One can summarise the above through three headings, namely:

- a) to create life;
- b) to create wealth;
- c) to create a non violent society.

4.1 Create life

We are called to create life following the pattern of John 10:10. The church is to be involved in every action that restores even partially, wholeness to human life. Healing is part of this continuation of life. As a result, the church must challenge government to provide health care centres. It is our duty to train people to be open to and care for victims of the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. Training is going to be a crucial part of our mission instead of rejecting and isolating those who are stigmatised.

4.2 Create wealth

We are called to different kinds of ministry. Others are politicians, leaders, doctors, police officers etcetera. All are responsible for seeing that wealth is distributed through our society in proper ways (1 John 3:17-18). Priority is to be given to the weak, defenceless, broken and the oppressed. In this way we will be creating peace within the community. Luke 19:42 describes a process that leads us to fullness, welfare and health. That is our mission based on the strategies of non violent.

4.3 Non violent society

The Christian community is to be part of every effort in overcoming the destructive spiral of violence, crime and destruction of human life. Be it in Iraq, Palestine or Africa. Matthew 5:38-42, relating the practice of an eye for an eye, and a tooth a tooth, challenges us through Jesus to eradicate it. In short, mission means following Jesus in his response to violence, in an attempt to reach those who commit it. There was the frustrated Judas, the violence of Peter in the garden and the official, and structural violence perpetrated by official rulers. These matters needed to be addressed in order to achieve new ways of being human beings. The question to ask is what is the future of mission? The future is there when it corrects its own theology, and focuses itself on Christ who affirms our humanity and then explores with God's people new ways of being human in a violent society. The Church through its missions program is called to challenge a government that oppresses people, for example,

Presidents that change constitutions in order to run for the third time. This is a faith issue and needs to be challenged.

Expressing this faith with the people of God in Jesus' strategies of Luke 4 will be helpful to continue this process with the help of the immense power of God (Luke 24:49), then we will be able to mend the world. Finally, the aim of mission is to remind people that God has not left a disordered world, but that his creation was good. Our Lord is still concerned to serve and repair a broken-down version of the world. This God will do through the consecrated hands and minds of those who know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us therefore teach the new generation in preserving creation, humanity and broken relationships between powerful as well as weak nations. Reflecting on mission strategies, its theology and actions will help us refocus ourselves in Christ mission. This process will bring healing and peace.

Finally, we who have received the love of God through missionaries from Western countries are challenged to go back to Jerusalem (Europe) to help revive their Churches. From the ends of the earth (Africa) back to Jerusalem. This is what partnership is all about – not just money, but exchanging human resources for the sake of the Kingdom.

Consulted literature

- Brino & Ellacura R 1996. *Mission an essential Guide*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Cone, J 1976. *God of the oppressed*, Mary Knoll: Orbis Books.
- Franklin, R M. 1998. *International Review of Mission*, July 1998 Vol. LXXXVIII No. 346), 410.
- Gutierrez, G 1974. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. London: SCM Press.
- Kirk, J A. 2000. *What is mission? – Theological Exploitations*, Minneapolis Fortress Press.
- McFadyson, A L 1990. *The call to personhood: a Christian theory of the individual in social relationship*. NY: University Press.
- Moltmann, J 1990. *The way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Dimensions*. London: SCM Press.
- Ogden 1998: *Doing Theology Today*. London: SPCK.
- Schreiter, R 1985. *Constructing local Theologies*, London: SCM Press.
- Sobrinho, J and Ellacuria, 1. 1996. *Systematic theology: perspective from Liberation Theology*. Mary Knoll: Orbis Books.