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PART TWO

THE BIBLE AND MISSION

2 THE CHURCH AND MISSION

Ray Cawston

This subject is of deep personal interest to me although I sense the danger of going over familiar ground, rather like the writer of a recent book who begins with the words: 'This is *another* book about the church and its mission.'¹ I want to touch first on the basic biblical ground work and then refer specifically to the situation among the churches with which we are particularly concerned.

The biblical relationship

Around the year 48 AD a meeting took place which we might be so bold as to describe as a consultation on world mission even more crucial to the history of the church than the one at which this paper was originally given! The words of two participants put us on course as far as this subject is concerned. James said: 'God has visited the Gentiles to take out of them a people for his name.'² Peter later wrote: 'But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people; that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.'³ The church, then, is the new people of God called, as Israel was, to declare God's glory among the nations. We as part of God's church today repeat with increased fervour the longing of Psalm 67: 'Let the peoples praise thee, oh God; let all the peoples praise thee! Let the nations be glad and sing for joy.' At the birth of the people of God in the Old Testament God's promise to Abraham linked their whole existence to mission, for through them all the nations of the earth would be blessed. More than many of us used to realize, the history of Israel was full of foretastes of the way in which that promise would eventually be fulfilled. Whether through

willing prophets who declared their oracles to the nations, or involuntary messengers like Joseph or Naaman's servant girl, or downright unwilling missionaries like Jonah, the nation of Israel, to a limited degree, acted as God's witness to the Gentiles. 'Israel is called to be a channel, not a storehouse of blessings.'⁴

What may be under-emphasized is the fact that the Christian church, the new people of God, is God's special agent of mission, with 'a new urgency and a new universality'.⁵ The very existence of the nations is linked in biblical history with the confusion of tongues at Babel, with language being to this day the symbol of cross-cultural barriers. It must be profoundly significant that Pentecost saw the reversal of that act of God when the Christian church was launched primarily as a corporate messenger to the world, of God's grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Pentecost is to Christian mission what the Big Bang theory claims for astronomy, and the expanding church around the world is the evidence that mission is central to its existence.

We should not think that worship is somehow primary or that it is competing with the missionary task for the attention of the church. In true worship we learn more about God, and as we express our love to him our hearts beat more in time with his. Because mission is based on the very nature of God, the more we know him, the more the church will reach out as God reached out to us. If our worship makes us introverted and withdrawn then we must conclude that it is faulty. If our meetings as local churches make us introverted and withdrawn, then they too are faulty. Unnecessary barriers of language and dress, too rigid an adherence to traditional forms, too inhibited an expression of joy and even friendliness turns our church worship into an esoteric activity and hinders mission not because it prevents us from reaching out but because it discourages converted people from coming in to our fellowship.

Without detracting from the personal impact of the Great Commission there is no doubt that the full responsibility for its fulfilment is to be borne corporately. Luke, in his history of the church's beginnings, tells us first about 'all that Jesus began to do and teach'⁶ through his physical, human body and then goes on to tell us about what Jesus did through his body the church. A notable feature of the Brethren missionary movement has been the way in which thousands have taken seriously the personal implications of the missionary mandate of the Lord Jesus. There has been, however, a tradition of strong individualism in this movement that does not coincide with a corporate view of mission. We need one another and should seek ways of so working together that we express our strong view of the church in our missionary activities, not only by emphasizing church-planting but also through missionary team-work. W E Vine, at one time an editor of *Echoes of Service*, devotes a chapter to this subject in his book, *The Divine*

Plan of Missions. He concludes with the words: 'The labours of those who are truly "fellow-workers unto the Kingdom of God" are radiant with the smile of the Lord's favour.'⁷

When Jesus sent out the 12, symbolically and actually in mission to Israel, and later the 70, symbolically but not actually in mission to the Gentiles,⁸ he instructed them to preach the message of the kingdom. The preachers of the early church continued to proclaim that same message.⁹ 'This gospel of the kingdom', Jesus foretold, 'will be preached throughout the whole world, as a testimony to all nations.'¹⁰ All authority is given to the king and the central task of the church is to glorify the king and become a means by which his authority is recognized among men. 'The kingdom creates the church, works through the church, and is proclaimed in the world by the church.'¹¹ The spiritual reality of the gospel of the kingdom needs to be taught today, otherwise many will be unprepared to resist an almost exclusively political view of the kingdom.

Differing views of church and mission

The local church is meant to be a reflection of the wonderful, worldwide, international, transformed community of the universal church. The same figures are used in the New Testament about the local church as are used about the universal church.¹² To speak of world mission is to speak of establishing such communities. As Michael Griffiths says: 'Surely the aim of the whole operation must be the planting and perfecting of new colonies of heaven, new congregations of beautiful people.'¹³ As soon as we speak about evangelization we must speak about churches. Decisions have to be taken about spiritual life in such churches, about church structures and government. During January 1987 I was able to revisit the area of the Andes where my wife and I worked for a while. There are 30 churches in that area which have come into being over the past 25 years. Some of their structures and practices may be unnecessary importations, but other features of their church life seem to be eminently suitable for new churches. The emphasis on full participation, on government by elders from the congregation itself, on the weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper and on the supremacy of the scriptures as our source of authority all appear to be healthy features of a missionary ecclesiology. At the same time the use of Andean music with local percussion, wind and string instruments is symbolic of the freedom that also should exist.

One of the outstanding writers today on missions is Dr Ralph D Winter. People like him have helped us all through their insights and through their insistence on current world missionary needs. One of his concepts however is that there are 'two structures of God's redemptive mission' in the New Testament and on through history. The churches and

their associated structures he calls 'modalities' while the structures associated with mission partnership he calls 'sodalities'. He recommends that both types of structure should feature not only in mission planning but also in church planting.¹⁴ Without detracting at all from the need for structures, to suggest that there is some other body in the New Testament almost on a par with the church and running parallel to it in mission activity is, I believe, quite unacceptable. It is a reaction to the 'ecumenical' emphasis on the church which tended to devalue mission and by which the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches were united in New Delhi in 1961.¹⁵ Both this and its reaction seem to be based on the concept of the church as an institution. Surely we would want to emphasize the local church and that primarily as community, a reflection of the thrilling spiritual community of the universal church. It is through the church that the multi-faceted wisdom of God is made known to earthly and even to heavenly beings.¹⁶ While partnership in Christian work is a thoroughly New Testament concept, any structures that are needed are temporary and act as servants of the church. It is the church of Jesus Christ that is the only permanent body. If the missionary structure gets in the way of full local church involvement in the sending of missionary workers, or weakens that local church's concern to pray for, care for, support and counsel then it is at fault. On the other hand sending missionary workers without any partnership arrangement at all does not guarantee local church involvement.

A church movement characterized by mission

When Anthony Norris Groves and his party set sail for St Petersburg on 12 June 1829, the Brethren movement had hardly begun but not only did he associate the movement with concern for world mission right from the beginning, he also introduced a fresh understanding of how such work should proceed. Groves emphasized that missionaries should go as messengers of the local church, and felt that missionary societies at that time weakened such a situation.¹⁷ He also wanted to strengthen the direct dependence of workers on the Lord for their financial provision, a feature since that day of 'faith missions'.

The growth of foreign mission concern within the movement was quite extraordinary. After the launching of the magazine, *Missionary Echo*, in 1872, increasing numbers of workers went abroad. During the ten years from 1885 to 1895 the numbers trebled. From 1895 to 1925 the numbers trebled again. By 1945 there were 1,000 overseas missionaries¹⁸ apart from those who were undoubtedly serving within missionary societies. If we put the number at 1,200 in that year we arrive at the astounding conclusion that in 1945 this tiny church movement was supporting over 5% of the

whole world force of Protestant foreign missionary personnel, put at 22,000.¹⁹

At the end of 1985 the number of missionary personnel listed by the different Brethren missionary service groups was nearly 1,200. It would be relevant to ask whether this is an ageing group of workers, whether interest in world mission has declined. The following figures indicate the proportion of men and women who entered such work in recent years.²⁰ They demonstrate clearly that, as far as the English-speaking world is concerned, there is not only a maintained interest, but even a remarkably renewed interest.

<i>Country of Origin</i>	<i>Total No at end 1985</i>	<i>Began work:</i>			
		<i>1980-1985</i>	<i>1970s</i>	<i>1960s</i>	<i>pre 1960</i>
USA	567	34%	28%	16%	22%
NZ	181	34%	33%	17%	16%
AUSTRALIA	76	39%	29%	16%	16%
UK	368	13%	20%	22%	45%
TOTAL	1192	28%	26%	46%	

The difference between the figures for the UK and for the rest of the world probably indicate two things. One is that the more uniform, rather more dynamic and also more conservative churches of the USA, New Zealand and Australia possibly send fewer of their overseas workers out with inter-denominational societies. Another factor may be that UK workers spend longer on the field. We should not pass this over as a valuable feature of worthwhile missionary effort. The situation in Gospel Literature Outreach, which has developed into a fellowship of full time workers from Brethren assemblies, concerned to promote teamwork, is a further illustration of continued vigour. Since 1965 the movement has grown to 120 full time workers, in 12 countries, with over 15 new workers in 1986.

Are there recognizable reasons for this mission orientation?

It would be completely out of place to draw triumphalistic conclusions from these facts. The only purpose is to persuade ourselves to look for possible reasons in order to cherish valuable features at the same time as we recognize weaknesses. The following are, therefore, suggestions as to why this church movement has been characterized by mission:

1 The emphasis on trust in God and dependence on the leading of the Holy Spirit have been a source of personal courage in launching out, as thousands of men and women have discovered. This is not a monopoly of

the movement but a definite characteristic of it over the years. Such courage is undoubtedly to be sought after as a quality extolled in both Old and New Testaments.

2 The emphasis on the autonomous local church with plurality of leadership, basically drawn from within the church, lends itself to church planting and church survival.

3 The absence of heavy organizational structures has freed energies among church leadership to turn their attention to mission at home and abroad.

4 A factor of a different nature, but very real, is that the traditional reluctance to recognize full time church workers, almost total in the case of women, has meant that those with aspirations to devote their life to Christian service have often turned their attention elsewhere than the home country. This is illustrated by the following statistics:²¹ (1982. All percentages expressed as a proportion of estimated membership)

	<i>Ministers and full time workers in UK</i>	<i>Missionary Personnel</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Proportion of full time workers in missionary service</i>
Methodists	0.72	0.06	0.78	8%
Presbyterians	0.28	0.03	0.31	10%
Anglicans	0.73	0.11	0.84	13%
Brethren	0.29	0.88	1.17	75%
Pentecostal	1.09	0.36	1.45	25%
Baptist	1.06	0.61	1.67	37%

This situation is both a weakness and a strength. The reluctance to recognize full time workers within a church has fostered full participation by church members and freed funds for evangelism and mission. It has at the same time led to weakened churches in a number of cases and for this reason the situation is changing rapidly.

5 The emphasis on participation and activity by all men and to a certain extent by all women, has produced a high proportion of those who discover their spiritual gifts and wish to use them for God. Some interdenominational agencies in the UK have an unexpectedly high proportion of their personnel drawn from Brethren churches for this reason. This concern for 'full employment' is a feature of the Church Growth movement today.

6 The weekly celebration of the Lord's Supper is perhaps more

significant than we sometimes recognise. In a young church the fact that this can take place without ordained leadership adds a dignity to what is often a small, struggling congregation and provides a moment of devotion and reflection that is entirely as our Lord intended.

Conclusion

1 While the church exists to glorify God, for worship, for the edification of its members and for fellowship and mutual care, it is God's agent of mission to win the nations and declare among them his glory and the good news of reconciliation in Christ. An out-going spirit within the local community as well as a sacrificial concern for world mission should characterize every local church. The more we truly know God in our churches, the more this will happen.

2 In order to see this happening, practical steps can be taken:

2.1 Events where world mission is the exclusive concern and a bewildering range of information is presented may be self-defeating and give the impression that the subject is a specialist one. Where biblical teaching and a devotional emphasis are the context, then the subject will be seen as an integral part of church life.

2.2 Opportunities for brief missionary exposure at home and in a cross-cultural situation are often life-changing. Many are moving into full time Christian work by this route. Local churches should encourage this for their younger people as well as for those in leadership.

2.3 If the local church is the principal sending agency for those moving into world mission, then every effort must be made to keep the church fully informed and fully involved in prayer and in financial support. Pastoral care must be exercised before, during and after missionary service. The local church will also want to ensure that its missionary members are forming part of some partnership structure by which they relate to fellow workers.

3 We do need to reflect about possible reasons for the unusual contribution to world mission that churches associated with the Brethren movement have made. This will not only take into account the volume of work and the number of workers but also the quality of work done. Have some churches around the world been established as much according to the pattern of 19th century Britain as according to the frequently mentioned New Testament pattern?

In spite of these reservations it would be a great mistake to imply that today the only route to first class missionary service is by conforming in every way possible to the approach made by other evangelical churches.

Each church movement has something precious to give to God's work. What is it that God wants to give to his church worldwide through the churches within the Brethren movement? Let us repent of our failings but at the same time thank God for our blessings and treasure them in a mission context at home and abroad.

- 1 Darrell L Guder, *Be My Witnesses* (Eerdmans 1985) vii.
- 2 Acts 15:14.
- 3 1 Pet 2:9.
- 4 G W Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (1972) 94.
- 5 P. Cotterell, *The Eleventh Commandment* (IVP 1981) 29.
- 6 Acts 1:1.
- 7 W E Vine, *The Divine Plan of Missions* (Christian Missions Press) 39.
- 8 The Jews held that there were seventy nations and that the law was proclaimed in seventy languages.
- 9 Acts 8:12; 19:8; 20:24–25; 28:3.
- 10 Matt 24:14.
- 11 G E Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Lutterworth 1974) 119.
- 12 Cor 3:16 and Eph 2:21; 1 Cor 12:27 and Eph 4:8–16.
- 13 M Griffiths, *Cinderella with Amnesia* (IVP 1975) 136.
- 14 R D Winter, in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement* (William Carey 1981) 178–189.
- 15 R D Winter, *The Twenty-five Unbelievable Years* (William Carey 1980) 67–73.
- 16 Eph 3:10.
- 17 H. H. Rowdon, *The Origins of the Brethren* (P & I 1967) 199.
- 18 F A Tatford, *That the World May Know* Vol 6 (Echoes 1984) 498.
- 19 R D Winter, *The Twenty-five Unbelievable Years* (William Carey 1980) 54.
- 20 An analysis of: *Commended Missionaries* Vol 14 (Everyday Pub 1986).
- 21 P Brierley (ed) *UK Christian Handbook* (1982) 35 and elsewhere.