

22) The Church, Part 5

In this final part under the theological heading: “The Church”, we explore what’s been called: the mission of the church. And once again, there is much diversity historically and between various churches within Christianity.

1) Jesus' final words to his disciples as recorded in Matthew are these: "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, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you." (Matthew 28: 19-20) But what does this really mean? It seems straightforward, but is it? Is our interpretation of Jesus' teaching the one and only interpretation? Is Jesus' teaching best taught with words or with actions? Is there one way to be a follower of Jesus or multiple ways? And do we need to learn from others as much as teach them?

There is a big gap between how these words were interpreted and lived out in the early church compared to how they were interpreted and imposed by the church once it became "Christendom" wedded to empire in Europe and beyond through missionary endeavours in support of colonization.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the mission to ‘evangelize’ (which means: bringing the good news of God’s love come to earth in Jesus to heal and renew creation beginning with humans) begins with Jews among Jews. The focus is healing the nation within with a message of God’s forgiving love aimed at renewing the nation's vocation to bless the world. But something surprising and unexpected happens. Non-Jews become attracted to this good news of God’s love in Jesus and the Spirit challenges the church to move beyond its familiar understanding of community.

And none of this is straight forward or easy. The church struggles with how much the gospel can be shaped and understood by different people in different places against the understanding that it is tied to a particular culture (the Jewish culture). The apostles Peter, and especially Paul, pave the way to a much wider understanding of the gospel. As they witness non-Jews from different parts of the world who respond to the Spirit, they recognize Jesus rising in other peoples just as Jesus rose in and among them. Other Jews resist such expansion and close themselves into an us-versus-them understanding of the gospel which believes that unless you become like us and fall under our authority, you cannot be saved.

Unfortunately, even as Peter and Paul win in the early church and the church becomes universalized, within a few hundred years, the church becomes subsumed within the Roman empire. It becomes established and endowed with land, wealth and power so that all other religions become banned. This also changes the mission of the church. No longer is it about following the Spirit in how hearts are opened and how new expressions of the gospel are witnessed from diverse people and places. Now it becomes about spiritual conquest supporting

military and cultural conquest. To become a Christian is to become like us in every way and to fall within our authority, teaching and understanding of the gospel. We will mould you into us and make sure to erase everything that makes you different than us. And if you resist, we will pressure you with promises of tangible benefits or threaten you with punishment physical, psychological and eternal. Even as some missionaries took a different approach, trying to embrace other cultures and the development of a more indigenous understanding of the gospel, the larger current of missionizing coming out of Europe and North America served a colonizing agenda.

2) So how do we repent and refresh our understanding of the church's mission in our world today after a long history of colonization? How may we understand mission today under the inspiration of the gospel of the early church? While we as Protestants still functioned within a colonizing mindset when we began in 16th century Europe, as Protestants we also recognized that the church is a human institution that has made mistakes and will make mistakes. The church needs to be reformed and continually reforming under the illumination and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Other denominations (Roman Catholics/Orthodox on the one end and some evangelical churches on the other) can often come across as if the church is superior in holiness than the secular world and become defensive when the church's sins as an institution are exposed. In our Presbyterian understanding of the church, we recognize the church will get it wrong despite being 'saved' by God in Christ. Why? Because we are saved by grace (purely the forgiving love of God in Christ) outside any good works or righteous behaviour. Whatever good we do is a response of gratitude for divine grace not a step toward earning it. This means we recognize that sin is an ongoing reality in us as much as in the world. We are not saved (as if it's simply in the past) but are being saved (it's an ongoing life-long journey).

3) This also means that our approach to mission these days must be one of humility. We approach others in search of healing and forgiveness ourselves (for example, in relation to indigenous peoples and LGBTQ+ folk), and we prefer to demonstrate the love of God in Christ through our actions in front of our words. Also, when we offer support overseas, we do not go with an agenda of imposing on others our understanding of the faith but offering them our help and resources with their leadership and involvement in directing us in how they want us to help. Finally, as much as we may teach others around the world our Christian faith, we are fascinated to learn their understanding of Christian faith which will enhance our own understanding. The mission of the church is Christ's mission. In so far as we embody him as his hands, feet, voice and heart, we reflect his love to heal and bless both others and ourselves.

4) Finally, let's offer a word on our mission as the church in relation to peoples of other faiths. What does it mean to follow Christ? Is it about beliefs or is it about the quality of our faith, hope and love? What if a person of another faith who may not embrace Jesus in name or beliefs, embodies his love and carries the kind of faith and hope that believes love can and will win despite the personal cost of such commitment? What if another person who doesn't

confess Christ embodies his justice in forgiving an enemy and prosecuting right without capitulating to revenge? Is that not the Spirit of Christ at work? Following the early church's experience in Acts where the Spirit challenged them to move beyond their narrow understanding and cultural/confessional walls, may the Spirit not be calling us to see in people of other faiths who share the quality of compassion, care, love and justice we see in and through Jesus kindred spirits on a common quest to help heal a broken world? That's what I have come to believe as I have witnessed it in siblings who belong to other faiths. While Christ was embodied in a middle eastern peasant from northern Palestine, Christ is far bigger than our confessions and understanding. His Spirit continues to call us and challenge us to see him moving in and through other people beyond our confessional walls. What do you think?

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