
Preaching Mission in the Regular Life of the Church

Ray Porter

Mission leaders are always trying to get churches to give a larger space to World Mission. If some had their way, the church would have no real activity but the support and sending of missionaries. There is, however, a danger that a church will so concentrate on Mission, either globally, or locally, that it neglects other aspects of what it means to be a community of the people of God. If, however, we let Mission flow naturally out of the preaching and teaching ministry of the church, it will not only be of benefit to the task of world mission, it will also produce churches that are more Biblically literate.

False attitudes to preaching mission are found in many churches. The first is that mission should only be mentioned on special missionary Sundays. Some church members like notice of a missionary speaker so that they can arrange not to be present. Some churches only have one Sunday a year when Mission may be mentioned. Many Anglican churches have mysterious creatures called “Deputations” that are regularly fought over by the representatives of the societies the church supports. They often end in tears. Partly this is the fault of the church that fails to communicate to society representatives what they want them to do. Often it is the fault of societies who do not send out representatives who are capable of doing what the church wants. Some churches want just a few stories of strange places. Such a request keeps Mission in its marginal role. Often the stories present aspects of mission that do not reflect the main thrusts of Modern mission. All too often it reinforces an imperialistic view of the world with “needy natives”, rather than the expanding maturing global church from whom we should receive instruction as to what it means to be the people of God. This form of deputation does nothing to develop the Biblical thinking, the renewal of the mind, that is the task of the preacher within worship. People are only entertained, not enlightened.

A mission should be asking serious questions as to what the church wants. One of the best ways of ensuring that there is a fresh presentation is for the church to set the Biblical passages that should be explained as part of the message of mission. Continuity of mission within the life of the church is often demonstrated if the mission speaker is asked to take one of the topics or passages that is part of the regular teaching ministry.

Ministers’ attitudes to Missionary Sundays are varied. There is first the absentee minister. I know of one mission leader who will not visit a church if he knows that the minister will not be there. While some may be grateful that there is an opportunity for mission input on a Sunday when the minister is preaching elsewhere, a minister who is never present for a Missionary Sunday is conveying a very clear message to his congregation – this is something with which I do not personally want to be involved. There are various reasons for this. For some it is financial. “Please Lord, we are struggling financially, don’t let the congregation be carried away by the needs of other work”. For others the agenda and theology of the mission is not something that fits in

with their vision for the life of the church. For a few it is professional jealousy – “I don’t want to let anyone else into *my* pulpit!”. This may be due to their experience of bad missionary preaching. I believe that there are also ministers who have never fully resolved their calling to home ministry. Those who were brought up with the mistaken idea that to be a missionary is more glorious than being a minister may sometimes question themselves as to why they are not overseas. I remember working through with a group of Ordinands in Oxford the qualifications needed for overseas service in physical, psychological, spiritual and social terms and seeing the relief in some faces as they realised that the person God had made them to be was not one who could easily serve in another country. (Incidentally, it is sad to note that there are nowadays many fewer ministers who are called to overseas service). Others may be so burdened with the needs of Britain that they don’t want people thinking seriously about a calling to other places or the greater needs elsewhere. We need a full Biblical theology not to become so nationally concerned that we are no longer true to the Gospel.

I believe that the way mission should be tackled is to put it in its proper context of the preaching ministry of the church. If Mission is a major part of God’s purposes for his people, it should be found throughout the scriptures and not just in certain familiar passages. One may struggle with some parts of the Old Testament, but I believe that Missions can be preached from almost every book of the Bible. There are two reasons for this. First we have a God who is concerned for the salvation of all people from every culture and nation. Secondly, in different ways, in every book of the Bible we are dealing with a cross-cultural situation, either within the book or in our own interaction with it. The problem for many preachers is that they do not recognise the message of cross-cultural mission within the text of scripture. Commentators are not often missionaries. A recent review of commentaries on Deuteronomy commented on Chris Wright’s superb volume in the New International Bible Commentary Series:

The distinctive feature is ... its orientation to missiology, for which Deuteronomy is shown to have interesting and unexpected implications (relevant, incidentally, to the troublesome problem of the book’s attitude to the non-Israelite peoples of Canaan).²

Sometimes a blinkered Western viewpoint can produce erroneous comments as in Westcott’s commentary on John 2:3

when the wine failed, as it might be expected to do from the unexpected addition of seven guests to the party already gathered³

No one who has ever attended a Middle Eastern or Asian village wedding where the guests may number several hundreds would ever make that remark.

More often we do not notice the elements of cross-cultural mission within the text of scripture because we are so concerned with our own agendas. When you last preached from Genesis 1, what questions did you address? Were you concerned to defend the truth of a creator God? Do you get all heated up to promote a belief in a creation in seven days? Was your sermon an attack on evolution rather than an exposition of scripture? Did you expound clearly the relationship of mankind to the rest of creation? Did you present the purpose of God that a man and woman in relationship are to be the image of the relational God in the world? Did you reflect on the carefully constructed form of this chapter with its combinations of sevens in the Hebrew text? Or

did you think about the strangeness of this chapter as the beginning of the writings of little Israel in the midst of a hostile world? Were you struck by the audacity of the claim that Elohim, who is also Yahweh, the God of Israel, is set forth as the creator of the whole universe? Did you note the way in which all the rival claims of other nations' gods were picked off one by one? If you regarded the Sun or Moon as the supreme god you worshipped, how would you have liked to see them referred to as mere 'lights'? If your life were ruled by your horoscope, would you have been happy with the throwaway line 'he made the stars also'? And at that point you suddenly realise that this is not just a presentation of the creator God to attack the beliefs of long dead Sumerians or Babylonians, but a very relevant passage in your own cross-cultural ministry to people who always read their horoscopes in their daily paper.

If you are bold, you may want to reflect on the attack on the deification of animals that is to be found in the story of their creation and subjugation to mankind. The implication this might have for Egyptian readers is clear. Then you move on in chapter 2 to their unsuitability as the companion to mankind and suddenly you are facing the attitude of Miss Jones who loves her dog while being misanthropic and sour in all her relationships with fellow human beings. By the time you have mentioned the animal rights people and reflected on the role of the serpent in chapter three, you will be in all the local papers and in conflict with most of your congregation. In so doing you will have realised the extraordinary boldness of Genesis 1 as it was originally given. And then you might go on to reflect the importance of the early chapters of Genesis in the evangelism of Hindus or Buddhists or Muslims. For many in Britain this will not be just the question of what missionaries are doing in other countries, but how to communicate with your neighbours. Different theologies of God and mankind produce different cultures and different doctrines of salvation.

Genesis begins the long story of God creating humankind to be his image in the world, which is then frustrated as mankind rejects that role of living to the glory of God in favour of listening to the creature and serving our own desires. Our Biblical theology will grapple with the way in which God set about rescuing mankind, both through his special revelation of himself within Israel and his supreme self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Throughout that story, there is the particularity of the cultural revelation of God as well as the interaction with surrounding cultures of the people, in whom God is revealing himself.

Sometimes the relevance of a passage to Mission may surprise us. Recently I had to stand in for two Sundays while our minister was ill. I decided to expound 2 and 3 John. It was only as I began to prepare 3 John that I realised that I wasn't having a break from preaching on Mission. Gaius receives missionaries and ministers to them, not because he knows them or is friendly with them, but just because they have gone out because of 'the Name'. To support friends is natural. To support people because of the message they bear and the task they are involved in, is spiritual. Diotrephes didn't like what Gaius had done. There are too many Diotrephes in churches today.

Let us look at one other passage to illustrate the use of narrative material to preach mission. 2 Kings 5 is a familiar Sunday School story. It is also an account of how the message of the saving power of the God of Israel penetrated across hostile cultures. How do you penetrate the household of a heathen general? A young girl captured in

battle and made a household slave. She keeps her belief in the God of Israel, despite her traumatising experience of capture, and speaks to the general, not from a position of power, but in the weakness and humility of a servant. She is someone who has a love and concern for those she is living among. In fact, she is the ideal picture of a person who has gone with their job or profession to witness in another culture. Filipino servants in Saudi Arabia are probably an exact parallel, but the character of this girl is what one looks for in any professional. The writer brings out a contrast between the exiled nameless maid who was a true witness to the love of the God of Israel for the stranger and Gehazi, the servant of Elijah, ever living near to the prophet and the word of God. The girl was faithful in a foreign land, Gehazi was faithless, worshipping his own desires, in the land of promise. He was in Israel, but with a heart distant from the God of Israel. Which servant would you like to be?

A realisation of the cross-cultural message of the scriptures will be of vital use, not only in thinking realistically about world mission, but also in our own interface with contemporary British culture. What does the use in Proverbs of maxims that were also to be found in Egyptian writings, or Paul's adoption in Acts 17 of poetic verses about Zeus to explain humankind's relationship with the God of resurrection, say about our adoption of modern cultural forms to explain the Gospel? How does the Song of Solomon speak to the prevalent views of sexuality in British churches or to the erotic carvings of your local Hindu temple.

In a missiological expounding of the Old Testament, we get an understanding not only of an agrarian culture with which a lot of the world is still familiar, but also of the behaviour of the people of God in a pluralistic world. I believe also that we begin to see the characters of the OT as real people. Looking at them in their own context, comparing them with people in parallel cultures in the world today, we see them in their own dignity and not as rather English characters on which we can hang some pietistic or spiritual lessons. To enter their struggles to be true to God's revelation within their own culture, will help us and our hearers to exhibit the same faithfulness. While we do not want to equate our nation with Israel, a study of the OT will help us to understand the political struggles of the church in many parts of the world. State events cannot be separated from the context in which the Gospel has to advance.

Turning to the New Testament, we are presented with the life of the emerging church of Jesus Christ, composed of people from a variety of cultural and social backgrounds. We have the story not only of the advance of mission into West Asia and Europe, but also the struggles of the emerging church as its members reacted with their own host cultures. Much of the research by evangelical scholars over recent years has made us more aware of the cultural background of the New Testament. While some may see these as rather obscure academic studies, in fact they make us realise afresh that we are dealing with real people struggling to be faithful within their culture. The continuing dialogue that is presented in the Epistles shows us the working and reasoning that we need to apply in our own cultures today. A knowledge of what God is doing in the world today will help us to understand how typical the NT churches are of emerging churches in other parts of the world. It will also help us as we react with our own increasingly pagan society.

The parallel between NT churches and the emerging churches in other parts of the world today was brought home to me in a new way by Don Cormack, the author of

Killing Fields, Living Fields,⁴ speaking about the church in Cambodia. He said that this church was now in AD70, having just come through the Neronian persecution. How revealing it is to look at churches in the light of parallels with churches of similar age in the NT. As we look at emerging churches, we understand why so many struggle with morality or power. The NT churches had the same struggle. It is part of what it means to gather a people for God out of a nation.

Above all in the NT there are two characters that will be the foci of our preaching about Mission. They are of course our Lord and the apostle Paul. Our Lord is the prime example of a cross-cultural missionary. He came from the glory of God to reveal the character of God as an authentic human in first century Jewish life. We see the ways in which he related his mission into that Jewish context. His parables were often familiar stories to which he gave a counter-cultural twist and an ending which attacked the preconceptions of his hearers. Ken Bailey's⁵ books are particularly useful in helping us to see this. A missionary in the Philippines is attempting to rework Jesus' parables into Filipino dress so that they will come as a corrective to their natural thinking. It is not just Jesus' words that convey the truth of God, but his life and death that show forth what God is like. Here is the authentic calling of any missionary – to manifest within a different culture the character of God. Just as our understanding of God is redefined by the life of our Saviour, so other people understand the nature of the God through the life of the missionary who proclaims him. There is not only the challenge of that fact to the individual missionary, but also a base line for all our thinking about the task of cross-cultural mission in the world today.

Paul is the typical missionary as much as he is a picture of the Christian worker. It is a long while since Roland Allan wrote his book on Paul's Missionary Methods.⁶ There have been numerous other books on the subject, but many people still think that you can expound Paul without remembering that he was a missionary. Have you preached through Romans without giving much attention to Ch. 15? James Dunn has at least called his recent book, *The theology of Paul the Apostle*. Many in their desire to formulate theology from Paul's writings ignore the dynamic of church planting. The great issue of the early church was the defining of a trans-racial and trans-cultural community who knows God in Jesus Christ. Whatever view you might take of the writings of people like Dunn and Tom Wright on Justification, it must be admitted that they have reminded us that the arguments of much of the New Testament are directed at what was the strange social phenomenon of the emerging church – that it brought together in one social community people from divergent and opposing social contexts. I am sure that if that theme had been preached more clearly in our churches over the years, there would not be so much xenophobia and racialism within them today. Moreover, there would be a much clearer understanding of the missionary imperative and the difficult path of obedience to the Great Commission.

Paul's missionary methods as they are demonstrated through his epistles and within the book of Acts, if not totally regulative for Modern mission, do set out a pattern for "doing mission" that we ignore at our peril. The trust that Paul gave to his developing church leaders and the liberty of development is in sharp contrast to the practice of many missions even today who retain control in the hands of ex-patriate missionaries. A church that has worked missiologically through Luke's account of Paul's ministry

and his letters will not only be able to think clearly about church planting throughout the world, but also be a Biblically based goad to those Missions that are still languishing in an imperialistic past.

Notice also the missiological significance of Revelation. Here is a book that brings together all the strands of Biblical literature from Genesis onward. There is the great picture of the completed church of Jesus Christ drawn from every nation, tribe, people and tongue. While it presents the certainty of God's victory over all evil, it also holds out a message of salvation to the nations. With each fresh disaster on the wicked, the gospel message goes out again. It does not seem able to picture even a new heaven and earth without the gates being open for the riches of the nations to be brought in (21:26). The final chapter of Revelation has the Spirit and the Bride sounding forth the familiar Gospel call from Is 55.

So, from Genesis to Revelation there is a consistent message of Mission. To neglect to preach mission in our regular ministry is to misuse scripture – and none of us would want to do that!

References

- ¹ Christopher Wright, *Deuteronomy*, NIBC Vol. 4 (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1996)
- ² *Biblical Studies*, Bulletin Issue 12 June 1999 (Nottingham, Grove Books)
- ³ BF Westcott, *The Gospel according to St John*, Volume 1 (John Murray, London, 1908) p. 81
- ⁴ Don Cormack, *Killing Fields, Living Fields* (OMF/MARC/Monarch, 1997)
- ⁵ For example Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant & Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1983)
- ⁶ Roland Allan, *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (London, Robert Scott, 1912)

Ray Porter is the Southeast Regional director of OMF and lectures on world missions at the London Theological Seminary.

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Finally we return to urban mission with a book edited by Michael Northcott entitled ***Urban Theology: A Reader*** (Cassell 1998). This is something of a text-book on urban theology and ministry, but I have to say it is a very mixed bag. There are some very good pieces in it from the likes of Jacques Ellul and Ray Bakke, but much if it is long on theologising in a vague kind of way and short on the applying Scripture to urban church life and mission. If you want to familiarise yourself with current thinking in this area of mission this book is useful, but your money would be better spent on books by the likes of the late Harvie Conn, Roger Greenway and Ray Bakke. Of a similar kind is ***Urban Churches, Vital Signs*** (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) edited by Nile Harper. This book contains a number of short profiles of urban churches and ministries in the United States. A few are evangelical, but most are liberal and largely involved in social ministries of one kind or another. While it is interesting to read of how inner city American churches are seeking to meet the enormous social needs around them there is not much help here on thinking biblically about the city. That said the efforts of these churches challenge evangelicals like us regarding our social involvement. Surely we have even more reason than liberals to seek to show God's mercy to those in need by good works. Chalmers understood this. To use his famous phrase, "the expulsive power of a new affection" in Christians should make us people who work to see the City of God filling the City of Man.