

An address delivered at the *Mission in Europe* Conference, John Owen Centre, Finchley, London, 11-12 September 2006

The title of this lecture is *Mission in Europe: Biblical Basis and Cultural Context*. This immediately informs us that there will be two main parts to this particular concern for missionary work in Europe. In the first part we shall remind ourselves of several key biblical principles which ought to govern our thinking with respect to any missionary activity, whether this is in Europe or any other continent of the world. In the second part we shall draw attention to some of the main influences currently affecting the church's ability to implement its biblical mandate in Europe. Then, in a brief conclusion, I will highlight three priorities which I hope will help sharpen our focus and provide fresh impetus to our missionary endeavours.

Those who in one way or another are actively engaged in missionary work will quickly realise that my own particular stance is a conservative one. I make no apologies for this. Although I am aware of the main developments in missiological thinking, I do have difficulties accepting the thrust of some of these trends. The work that has most influenced my own outlook is J. H. Bavinck's *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*.<sup>4</sup> Even though times have changed since I first became acquainted with the contents of this book, thus far I have seen no good reason to doubt the essential soundness of its stance.

## BIBLICAL BASIS

We begin by seeking to establish a biblical rationale for the work of mission. In doing so there are three points that need to be made at the outset: firstly, although this is an issue sometimes debated among modern evangelicals, I am assuming that the most fundamental business of the church's mission to the world is the proclamation of the gospel. It is my

conviction that the church's task – as distinct from the multi-faceted tasks which may be assigned to individual Christians living in the world – is not social, political or ecological<sup>2</sup>, but the evangelization of a world that is eternally lost without the uniquely salvific merits of Jesus Christ. Secondly, in terms of basic principles affecting content and/or approach to the work of mission, I am assuming that there is nothing fundamentally distinctive about the needs of Europe. In other words, it is not our view of Europe that is to dictate what the church is to proclaim or how she is to carry out the responsibilities thrust upon her, but the teaching of the Bible. The biblical model is sufficient for the work of mission wherever and whenever it is carried out.

Thirdly, in seeking to establish a biblical basis for mission, I must of necessity be selective. Therefore, reflecting on Old and New Testament perspectives, I shall limit myself to the task of reminding you of the following truths with respect to mission:

- (1) that the true author of all missionary activity is, and always has been, the Triune God. He has always been more concerned about this work than we could ever be. Therefore, all mission work should be seen as being first and foremost his work, not ours.
- (2) That the church of Jesus Christ is God's specially appointed *agent* for the work of mission. Therefore, this work must be obediently and continuously carried out, consistent with the principles set out in his Word and 'until the end of the age'.
- (3) That for this work to meaningfully prosper the church must labour to proclaim God's uniquely inspired truth in dependence on the Holy Spirit and through the use of the gifts he has so abundantly provided. In that which immediately follows I shall be seeking to lay a foundation for the way in which we relate to our times and its influences.

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## 1. Mission in the Old Testament era

We begin with the Old Testament. In spite of what may sometimes be supposed, the Old Testament makes clear that the future welfare of all the peoples of the world has always been a concern of the Triune God. The entire world is his creation and under his constant jurisdiction: 'The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it; for he founded it upon the seas and established it upon the waters' (Psalm 24:1–2 cf. 33:12–15). Moreover, perhaps in retrospect, it is possible to see that the very first verse of the Bible – 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth' – is the proper basis for the New Testament's perspective of taking the gospel to 'all nations', 'all creation' and 'to the ends of the earth' (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).

The fact that the nation of Israel was uniquely raised up to a favoured position in no way diminishes the reality of God's concern for the entire world. Indeed, it was prophesied that all the nations of the earth were destined to be blessed through Israel (Gen. 12:3; 22:18). Israel had been called into a special covenant relationship with him. Although this was wholly undeserved on her part, she was not left to the wayward inventions of her own heart and mind like those in the surrounding nations. God had peculiarly revealed himself to her and allied his own glory to that which happened to her. Nevertheless, these privileges brought definite responsibilities with them. Israel was to live out her covenantal relationship with God before the gaze of the nations around her. Through the example of her distinctive life, and the Lord's special dealings with Israel, God could also in some sense be seen stretching out his hand to the rest of the world. Even when he is forced to call his people to repentance through the ministries of his prophets,

this wider vision for the whole world is never far from view (Isa. 2:2–3; 19:23–25).

In that older dispensation, Israel's role with respect to the surrounding nations was of course predominantly passive. Israel would not assault the nations of the world with missionary activity. Nevertheless, the recognition of the glory of God among this people would draw others both to them and to him. This is what Zechariah envisages when he declares, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: "In those days ten men from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the edge of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you'"' (8:23). Although the primary fulfilment of this reference is reserved for the Messianic age, foretastes of the full outworking of this prophecy were experienced prior to that greater era. The point of interest for us is that although in Old Testament times Israel was to be a nation separate from all others by her peculiar relationship to the Lord, he had not lost sight of the world in his redemptive purposes; even in those times peoples were sometimes provoked into seeking the one, true and living God.

Israel's position between the testaments was still one of separation, but her circumstances altered the character of this separation and prepared the way for the arrival of the Messiah and the future work of missions. With their return from Babylon, not only did a covenant people occupy the Promised Land again, but a *diaspora* continued to exist in both East and West. Sometimes they were misunderstood as worshippers of stars and as those who offered human sacrifice; but among those who took the trouble to get to know Judaism more thoroughly, there were those who found themselves particularly attracted by its strong monotheism. Other factors also contributed to the eventual world-wide spread of the

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gospel. Not least among these were the translation of the Old Testament into the Greek language, the acceptance of Judaism by Rome as a legitimate religion, and the *Pax Romana*. With hindsight it is easy to see how respect for Roman law, and the great benefit to travel afforded by Roman roads, was to aid the subsequent evangelization of the world.

## 2. Mission in the New Testament era

As this brief survey moves into the New Testament era, the first tragedy to confront us is that of the Jewish tendency to overlook those Old Testament prophecies which pointed to the sufferings of the Messiah. The vision that tended to dominate their horizon was his eschatological glory. Therefore, it was something of a surprise to everyone that, when the Christ actually came, he not only preached eschatological glory, but a period of prior sufferings and mission too. Indeed, as his own ministry developed he gave increasing emphasis to these features. Then, with his resurrection, and prior to his ascension, Christ purposefully impressed on the hearts of his disciples the necessity of mission (Luke 24:47; Matt. 28:18–20; John 20:21). At first they seemed to think that their immediate task was simply to wait until Christ should restore the kingdom to Israel; to bring in the eschatological glory. This view Jesus had to correct. Their role was not to be a passive one. They were to be active witnesses (Acts 1:6–8). Furthermore, this view of their task is shown through the teaching of the Gospels to be an essential part of the Messianic expectation of salvation. Its fulfilment arrived in principle with the coming of the Christ (Luke 4:16–21), but the great day of glorification was to be preceded first by his sufferings and then by the work of mission.

The great missionary document of the New Testament is of course the book of Acts.

Interestingly, Acts does not actually add a great deal to the Gospels in terms of the foundation for mission. What it does is to emphasise the necessity of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, through whom Christ would continue to be present in the church, accomplishing his missionary purposes. The book of Acts does however emphasise that the work of mission continues to be first and foremost the work of the glorified Christ. It is the work he not only ‘began’ through his incarnation (Acts 1:1), but continues by his Spirit, through the church, and all her providential twists and turns. And so, a misunderstanding in the congregation in Jerusalem leads to the emergence of Stephen conducting a mission among the Greek-speaking Jews in that city (6:1ff); persecution turns out not to be the calamity one might immediately have supposed, but a means of spreading the gospel (8:4); and when the apostles and the church in Jerusalem are slow in fulfilling their calling, Christ raises a Saul (9:15), confronts a Peter (10:1ff), and utilises the amazing gifts enjoyed by the church in Antioch (13:2).

This clear testimony to the existence of Divine activity continues to be prominent in the missionary journeys of the apostle Paul. Although forging his missionary strategy consistently with the use of his considerable natural abilities, he is still profoundly aware of being ‘prevented’ at one place (Acts 16:6–7) and encouraged in another (16:9–10; 18:9–10). The one notably identified as responsible for this interference is none other than ‘the Spirit of Jesus’ (16:7). Indeed, there is such an emphasis in Acts on Christ as the author of mission that the task of his agent, the church, is almost totally eclipsed. Her role however is immensely important, and becomes increasingly obvious. It is the church at Antioch that is called upon to ‘set aside for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have

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called them' (13:1–3). And further on, it is to this same church in Antioch that these men were subsequently expected to report (15:4). Even so, although by this time the church's role has become increasingly apparent, these men still report 'everything *God* had done through them' [emphasis added].

The church is also described as employing all kinds of non-apostolic agents and secondary means in the dissemination of the gospel. Those who had been scattered by the persecution in Jerusalem 'preached the word wherever they went' (8:4): some telling the message 'only to Jews', while others 'began to speak to Greeks also'. The result was that 'a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord' (11:19–21). Paul himself is found picking up a number of 'companions' on his missionary journeys who assisted him in his great missionary enterprise (16:3; 19:29; 20:4). If at this stage we briefly trespass into the New Testament epistles, it is also apparent that a much broader work than that which we normally associate with the public proclamation of the Word was having its place in the life of the church; work that made room for the involvement of both men and women. For example, Priscilla and Aquila are described by the apostle Paul as 'my fellow-workers' (Rom. 16:3); Euodia and Syntyche are recognised as those 'who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel' and, together with Clement and others, are among his 'fellow-workers' (Phil. 4:2–3). 'Our sister Phoebe' is described by the same apostle as 'a servant of the church in Cenchrea' (Rom. 16:1), Mary is one 'who worked very hard for you' (Rom. 16:6), and Tryphena and Tryphosa are 'women who work hard in the Lord' (Rom. 16:12). These forces may have been better organised and utilised later on, but they were certainly not suppressed. We ought not to underestimate the

importance of this. Although the book of Acts attaches great significance to the preaching of the gospel, it never loses sight of the fact that the life and witness of the whole church should be one of its most attractive qualities as far as the unbeliever is concerned.

Having anticipated a move into the New Testament epistles, not only do we continue to observe an ongoing emphasis on the necessity of divine activity but, in greater detail, the way in which the church is to discharge her responsibilities. It is still God who is taking the work and its workers forward. For his part, the apostle Paul views the work of mission as something that is thrust upon him (1 Cor. 9:16). He is God's representative; an instrument in the divine hand. This being so, there can be no room for personal pride (1 Cor. 5:10), and no despairing helplessness either (Gal. 2:20). It is true that the work presents to mere men some seemingly insurmountable obstacles. Nevertheless, the servant's hope is to be in the God who has given a command, who has access to the hearts of men and women, and who alone has power to change them in response to the message given to him to proclaim. It is this reality that quite rightly prompts Bavinck to say that, 'Missionary work borders on the miraculous'.<sup>3</sup> This confidence should inspire the whole church in a variety of ways. In addition to those described by Paul as 'sent' to preach (Rom. 10:14–15), the entire congregation is regularly urged to make its contribution to the spread of the gospel. Primarily she does this through continuous intercession (1 Thess. 5:25; 2 Thess. 3:1; Col. 4:3; Eph. 6:19) and the attractiveness of a life lived in accordance with the Word of God (Phil. 2:14–15). The congregation's role is not, however, to be interpreted exclusively in passive terms. To the degree of gift received, each member is to make the gospel known

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to others (Col. 4:5–6). Like the Old Testament prophets, their New Testament counterparts believed that the distinctiveness of the Christian life would arouse the curiosity and envy of those outside the church's fold, and that this would lead to enquiry. In fact, the New Testament seems to envisage the church being in permanent discussion with the world (1 Cor. 15:58).

In summary, therefore, we are bound to say that whatever the function of human agents may be, the work of mission has always been first and foremost the work of God. It is he who planned it, creates the environment in which it becomes possible, and is ultimately responsible for its success. His normal way of carrying out his work is through the agencies of men and women called out of the world and into the church. The church's responsibility is to proclaim the gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit, aided and abetted by the daily prayer, life and witness of the people of God. And it is this that ought to be at the heart of the church's mission 'to the very end of the age'.

#### **CULTURAL CONTEXT**

We now move on to the second main part of this address. Here I shall limit myself to an examination of some of the ways in which modern culture has influenced the way the world views the church, and to identify ways in which the church has sometimes struggled to avoid being absorbed by the prevailing culture. As we proceed, I shall provide hints about what I consider the best response to these influences. Nevertheless, I will reserve my final recommendations for the conclusion.

##### **1. The influence of modern uncertainties**

I begin our examination of the cultural context with what I am calling the influence of modern

uncertainties. Here I am referring to those world-views which have, for more than a century, influenced the outlook of the vast majority of those living on this continent. We currently live in a world which, in one way or another, has been strongly influenced by the combined forces of Relativism, Pluralism and Secularism.

Relativism is the view that 'true truth' – as Francis Schaeffer used to refer to absolute truth<sup>4</sup> – is something unknowable. The would-be evangelist is regularly faced with individuals who look at him with incredulity as he seeks to proclaim Jesus Christ as 'the way and the truth and the life' (John 14:6). They ask, "But how can you know for sure that this is true?" Alternatively, and somewhat disarmingly, the same sort of person may say something like, "If it helps you to believe in this, then I am happy for you. I wish I had your faith". These and similar convictions are the inevitable outworking of Enlightenment philosophy. In the absence of Divine revelation, the world is condemned to an endless Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis: 'always learning but never able to acknowledge the truth' (2 Tim. 3:7). Even though there have been those brave enough to condemn this stance as 'self-defeating', their voice is rarely heeded in the modern climate.<sup>5</sup>

A close cousin to Relativism is Pluralism. Assuming that all claims to truth are relative, the Pluralist naturally argues that all views are equally valid. As far as religion is concerned, if there is a God, in the absence of certainty about who he is or what he is like, it must be assumed that all roads will eventually lead to him. Superficially, of course, Pluralism seems to offer the moral high ground to its advocates. In theory, at least, it is a call to universal toleration. Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly evident that tolerance does not always

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extend to those who are not convinced that all religions are man-made and therefore a matter of personal preference. Those who hold to such views are not only considered naïve, but a danger. In the present climate they could so easily find themselves on the wrong end of populist legislation.

A popular alternative to both Pluralism and Relativism – although both so easily and logically shelter under its umbrella – is Secularism. This is the view that this world is all that there is. We are born, we live, and we die. There is no such thing as ‘true truth’; there are no ultimate values or worth. We are meaningless germs whose stark choice is between playing the game of life – ‘eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die’ (Luke 12:19; 1 Cor. 15:32) – or, perhaps, refusing to do so by means of suicide. It was Albert Camus who argued that suicide is the ‘one truly serious philosophical problem’<sup>6</sup>. In other words, he was asking whether or not we should bother to play the game at all. During the twentieth century he, and many like him, sought to offer an alternative in which the individual creates for himself temporary, existential reasons or expedients for living. To do so is of course to play the game *and lose*.

The impact of all this upon missionary activity in Europe should be immediate and obvious. If there is no such thing as truth, or if absolute truth is something that cannot be known, why bother with missionary activity at all? Indeed, if there is a God, and all roads finally lead to him, what right does anyone have to go to any other person with the intention of seeking their conversion? Alternatively, if this world is all that there is, then why not simply dedicate yourself to “sucking the marrow out of life”?<sup>7</sup> *Carpe Diem*—‘seize the day’. Although most human beings rarely function consistently with even their most cherished theoretical convictions, the

church and her missionaries ought not to imagine that they can go about their work without recognising the existence of these and similar convictions.

## 2. The vacuum created by familiarity

Another difficulty to have surfaced to prominence within Europe during the same period is that of a discernable religious vacuum, created in part by over-familiarity with the Christian religion. For the most part of course it is not biblical Christianity with which men and women are familiar. Very often it is simply a second-hand, media-driven presentation of it.

For good or ill, however, European culture is replete with images of the Christian religion. It is difficult to travel anywhere within this continent without coming face to face with reminders of its existence, history, art and architecture. These representatives do not always present a very good image of the faith that, some 2,000 years ago, first entered Europe’s doorway through Greece. Its age is also part of the problem. Christianity has been around for so long that it is often regarded as a spent force; even an irrelevance to the needs of the modern world. Generally speaking, its main public image is portrayed through Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Protestantism. All of which, in their own way, have a tired look about them.

Despite all the attention that surrounded a recent papal death, the Roman Catholic Church does not have the practical hold upon its baptised community that it could once take for granted. Although still numerically the strongest of these groups, its members too have been strongly affected by the combined effects of our recent philosophical history. This can be seen in the indifference that often plagues church attendance (particularly in the cities), its failure to recruit sufficient priests for its

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parishes, and the open disregard of its stance on moral issues (not helped by the much-publicized sexual scandals affecting some of its leading churchmen). However, such comments ought not to be taken to suggest that the Roman Catholic Church is on the brink of collapse. Far from it! Roman Catholicism still acts as a vast cultural net, waiting to scoop up those feeling the deadly chill of a materialistic world, plagued by metaphysical uncertainties.

Unlike Roman Catholicism, which has always been capable of adjusting itself to whatever prevailing wind happens to be blowing, the Eastern Orthodox Church finds it extremely difficult to countenance change. At least as far as its external *persona* is concerned, 'tolerance' is a concept with which it struggles to come to terms. Therefore, in the modern age, its primary appeal is likely to be confined to those who have either been raised within its existing boundaries, or among ultra conservatives with mystical tendencies. Then there is Protestantism. It is sad to admit that modern Protestantism often seems woefully disconnected from its sixteenth-century roots. Theological liberalism and the neo-orthodoxy of Barthianism have taken their toll of many of the theological institutions of Europe. In some countries this has had a devastating effect on the ministries and lives of academics, pastors and people. An example of how far-reaching this decline can go is to be found in the Hungarian Reformed Church where it is estimated that, despite heroic efforts on the part of the Bible Union,<sup>8</sup> 90% of its pastors are open advocates of a Christianity shorn of its super-naturalism. When Christianity is seen through the eyes of these representatives, the popular image conveyed is of a tired, failed dinosaur, currently in the midst of its death-throes.

Interestingly enough, despite this somewhat bleak picture, Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*<sup>9</sup> has not been eradicated from European man. All that has happened is that a vacuum has been created by the failure of traditional expressions of Christianity to meet the expectations set for it by the New Testament. Throughout the post-Enlightenment age there have been those who have believed that some form of Atheism was set to take its place. Not only have recent political events seriously undermined this view (and here I am particularly thinking of 1989 and the beginnings of the collapse of European Communism), but some would be prepared to argue that Atheism has itself contributed to the existence of this vacuum. Prominent among Christian commentators in this respect is Alister McGrath and his provocatively insightful book, *The Twilight of Atheism*.<sup>10</sup> I believe that this vacuum clearly exists and that there is no shortage of players seeking to fill it. The growing influence of eastern religions, the rise of neo-pagan, experience-orientated New Ageism, and the authoritarian appeal of Islam are all contenders. The question is: who or what will step in to fill the void? It is time to look at European Evangelicalism.

### 3. The capitulation among Evangelical churches

Within modern Europe, the one Christian group where growth is supposed to be ongoing is among Evangelicals. To some extent this has been particularly true among Evangelicals living and working in parts of Eastern Europe. Sadly, since 1989, additional freedom followed by disillusionment, have done much to undermine this growth; not to mention the exodus of large numbers of people to the West. In a much more limited sense there has also been some evidence of numerical growth among some Evangelical groups and churches on the other side of this geographical divide.

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Nevertheless, before we allow ourselves to get too carried away by the available statistics, it is important that we ask ourselves a simple question: what kind of Evangelicalism are we talking about? Here I am not alluding to denominational differences; nor to those which divide Calvinist from Arminian, or even charismatic from non-charismatic churches. These and other such divisions and sub-divisions exist within Evangelicalism.<sup>11</sup> I am more concerned about the capitulation among evangelical churches to those elements in their thinking and behaviour which simply, and often unthinkingly, reflect the outlook of the unconverted masses living around them. Although not wishing to condemn all that is either 'of this world' or, still less, 'of this age', it should be a matter of concern to evangelicals that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern any significant difference between the church and the world. If it is proper for the church to resist being 'squeezed into the world's mould',<sup>12</sup> then surely an invaluable part of her testimony will include an 'other worldliness' which is alert to compromise in both thought and deed. Too often the modern reality is tragically different. Sadly, most of evangelicalism's current difficulties also have their roots in the political, religious and cultural turmoil which began in the latter part of the eighteenth century. Not only was evangelicalism shaken by Enlightenment philosophy, but subsequently by the combined forces of Higher Criticism, Darwinian optimism, modern psychology and the existentialism which followed. Most churches did not of course capitulate immediately to any of these influences; they were steadily worn down by them. Although initially priding themselves on their 'separation from the world', much modern Evangelicalism has gradually assimilated the world's outlook and ethos. Even

where a 'last ditch stand' was attempted, it often took the form of an anti-intellectual pietism which overly-emphasised individualism and subjectivism. In those places where 'tradition' was not entirely discounted, it eventually learned not to look back more than 150 years. More often, however, tradition was simply supplanted by what C. S. Lewis used to refer to as 'chronological snobbery'. This he defined as 'the uncritical acceptance of the intellectual climate common to our own age and the assumption that whatever has gone out of date is on that account discredited.'<sup>13</sup> Again, more so in Western Europe, but also increasingly so in the East, Evangelical churches have become mesmerised by all that is modern. Our churches are not so much looking to the Bible for their beliefs and practices, but to the consensus around them. Too often the questions being asked are not, "What is true? What will God approve?", but "What will work? What will attract the outsider?" Although theoretically the Bible is held in high esteem, psychological and pragmatic considerations often dictate the way churches think and function.

#### 4. The challenge of mass migration

Another significant influence on both religious and secular spheres has been the movements of large numbers of peoples around the globe. To some extent this is nothing new. Wherever oppressive regimes have existed, so there have been those trying to escape them. Wherever social and economic conditions have been extremely difficult and an opportunity has presented itself for improvement, so there have been those willing to uproot and take great risks in the search of a better life. However, perhaps the main difference between the more distant past and more recent times has been the scale of this movement. The past two decades have witnessed large swathes of people

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migrating from Central and Southern America, Africa and, increasingly, the former Communistic countries of Central and Eastern Europe. The chosen destination for many of these migrants has been the wealthier climes of Western Europe. Such large-scale movement of peoples is not always welcomed. We do not always find it easy to adjust to those whose appearance, language, and customs often differ from our own. Fears are easily fanned into a flame by concerns about employment, housing, and security. In this environment, Nationalism is quick to raise its ugly head.

In the past, however, churches have often shown themselves more adept in responding to such challenges than society at large. Generally speaking, this has continued to be the case in Western Europe. Initially, at least, the influx of peoples from other parts of the world has been welcomed by evangelical congregations. Some have quite rightly seen this as in part “the mission field coming to us”. On the other hand, where migrants have come espousing the Evangelicalism of their home lands, they have usually been welcomed for other reasons. Where churches have long struggled simply for their existence, the sudden influx and enthusiasm of new people has been a source of great encouragement.

This is not to suggest that integration has always been easy. Differences of language and custom – not to mention different theological emphases and styles of worship – have sometimes created their own tensions. In such circumstances, rather than persevere with integration, the easy option for immigrants has been to set up ethnic churches of their own. This, in my view, is almost always regrettable. It denies the body of Christ its opportunity to testify to the uniqueness of the bonds that exist among God’s people whatever their place of origin. Even when this particular temptation is

resisted, such people often absorb a great deal of time and attention as they seek help with housing, employment, and immigration authorities. Then there are those who, having been awakened to the gospel for the first time in their lives, suddenly find themselves faced with an agonising moral dilemma brought on by their status as illegal immigrants. These and similar issues present real challenges to Western congregations, but they can also be a genuine means of demonstrating to the world a oneness of which it knows so little: ‘see how these Christians love one another’.

### 5. The tendency towards ‘every-thing-ism’

This in turn brings us more specifically to the subject of the church’s mission. I have already hinted at the tendency within modern Evangelicalism to equate mission with (what I call) ‘every-thing-ism’. For the best part of the last fifty years there has been an increasing tendency to equate mission with everything Jesus expects his people to do in this world. No longer is mission primarily seen as the church sending people to preach the gospel with a view to bringing men and women to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. In addition to this, she is now regularly urged to concern herself with the vast humanitarian needs of mankind, agitate for social justice and work for a more ecologically-friendly environment.<sup>14</sup>

Now there is a sense in which none of this is particularly new either. With varying degrees of emphasis, Christian people throughout the ages have been concerned about such matters. The difference now is that all these concerns are being placed on an equal footing with the proclamation of the gospel. This, in my view, ought to be challenged. This definition of what constitutes the church’s mission in the world is far too broad. For all the good that

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was done by New Testament believers in such areas, it is doubtful whether the apostles would have understood 'the Great Commission' in such terms. It certainly confuses primary and secondary responsibilities. Yes, the church is to 'seek to do good to all people' (Gal. 6:10); but experience suggests that when equal emphasis is given to the entire range of human needs, it is the gospel that usually suffers most. This emphasis also blurs the distinction that ought to exist between the responsibilities of the church and those of the individual Christian. We ought to have no objection to a Christian involvement in political, social and economic spheres, but it is dangerous for churches to do so. They too readily become identified with particular secondary issues and emphases, rather than the gospel.

## CONCLUSION

So then, briefly, and in conclusion, how is the church to respond to all this? How is she to combine a proper faithfulness to her missionary obligations as set out in the Scriptures and respond to the emphases thrown up by the demands of her immediate cultural context? What are to be the main *foci* of her response? Although I must again be selective, I wish to emphasize three areas which ought to be priorities of concern for us.

### 1. The battle for truth in the mind of man

Firstly, in the age and environment in which we find ourselves, and for the good of the work we are seeking to advance, *there is a great need for the church to be actively engaged in the ongoing fight for the establishment of truth in the minds of men and women.*

In the training of ministers and missionaries, this will involve the need to rehabilitate the place of apologetics. This must of course be done in due proportion to the requirements of other disciplines,

but it must not be relegated to the sidelines. We need to put into the hands of those who will preach the Word of God the tools that will enable them to relate the timeless truths of the gospel to the circumstances in which they minister. Then, as they become increasingly proficient in this, it is to be hoped that they will inspire 'the Christian in the pew' with the confidence to address the assumptions implicit in the world-views of those amongst whom they are living and working.

We have given too much ground to the enemies of truth. Instead of being boldly set 'for the defence of the gospel' (Phil. 1:16), we have tended to retreat into our pietistic ghettos, failing to provide 'an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have' (1 Pet. 3:15). Not surprisingly, in an address delivered nearly one hundred years ago at Princeton Theological Seminary, Professor J. Gresham Machen was sounding this same note. Although acknowledging that 'the regenerative power of God' was the crucial thing in evangelism, he reminded his hearers of the simple fact that...

God usually exerts that [regenerative] power in connection with certain prior conditions of the human mind, and it should be ours to create, so far as we can, with the help of God, those favourable conditions for the reception of the gospel. False ideas are the greatest obstacles to the reception of the gospel. We may preach with all the fervour of a reformer and yet succeed only in winning a straggler here and there, *if we permit the whole collective thought of the nation or of the world to be controlled by ideas which, by the resistless force of logic, prevent Christianity from being regarded as any thing more than a harmless delusion.*<sup>15</sup> [Emphasis added]

I am fully persuaded that this 'battle for the mind' will always require an important place among the priorities of the Christian church if she is to retain any meaningful credibility for her message. This is

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particularly so in the anti-intellectual age in which we live. Alongside a clear, straightforward and earnest proclamation of the gospel, there must be an untiring willingness to engage and undermine those ideas which have reduced Christianity to the status of 'a harmless delusion'.

Sadly, for more than a century, much of the evangelical focus in evangelism has been on methodology. We have become obsessed with ways and means of attracting people into the churches. In doing so, we have succeeded in doing little more than mimic the gimmickry and faddishness of the world around us. In choosing this as our priority we have simply 'fiddled while Rome burns'. But, more importantly, and perhaps inadvertently, we have given credence to the notion that we have lost confidence in the power of God-given truth, proclaimed in the power of the Holy Spirit, to prevail in the minds and hearts of men and women.

## 2. The primacy of the spiritual and eternal

Secondly, *there is a great need for the modern church to be actively seeking a new sense of the spiritual and eternal among those who make up her number.* Relating this to mission, this is simply another way of saying that the church needs life, as well as light, among its peoples if mission is to be a meaningful part of its work in the world. Just as churches rarely flourish in the absence of a keen sense of their dependence on the Spirit of God, so the work of mission can only survive where there is spiritual life and vitality among the churches. True mission is essentially an overspill of spiritual life, and although the external form of missionary activity may survive two or three generations of general spiritual decline, it rarely survives much longer.

One of the regrettable tendencies within the evangelical church during the twentieth century has

been the tendency to confuse *liveliness* with *life*. Very often the evangelical cause has been content with its situation so long as it could be seen to be doing something. Often the great boast was and is that "We have meetings going on every night of the week in our church". Meetings have been multiplied; countless innovations adopted. But the underlying conviction seems to be that all that is needed to halt our decline is a little 'tweaking' of the system. Interestingly enough, the one meeting most likely to be overlooked in this assessment is 'the prayer meeting': the place where a proper sense of inadequacy should be found seeking its sufficiency in God (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5).

The underlying problem here of course is the absence of a meaningful experiential sense of the greatness of God, the glory of the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the eternal destiny of all human beings. This of course is not unrelated to the role of preachers and the work of preaching in the churches. We are in great need of *preachers* of the Word of God. We do not need mere 'talkers'; we have no end of them. We need those who are called and gifted by God to bring the great truths of the gospel to the people in such a way that those who hear its message cannot remain immune to its claims upon them. As in New Testament times, the gospel needs to be preached in the power of the Holy Spirit. Its truth needs to grip the lives of the people of God and, through their response to it, affect the lives of men and women living around the worshipping community. How is this to be brought about? The only means suggested by the Bible is: 'I will be enquired of Israel for this thing'. We need to realise our utter helplessness again; that without the intervention and aid of the living God we can do nothing. We need to re-discover the importance of the prayer meeting for our spiritual life.

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At this point perhaps a brief comment about the resurgence of interest in Reformed theology among evangelicals during the past fifty years may not be out of place. This resurgence is undeniable, even though it has been more prominent within the English-speaking world and among those who have access to its literature. It has brought some much welcomed intellectual vigour and doctrinal clarity into the churches that it has touched. Nevertheless, if it is to make progress, two things are urgently required: firstly, the Reformed movement will need to demonstrate in practice that it is more than an intellectual movement. Historically, it has always been at its best when it has been obviously concerned for spiritual life and practical godliness. Unfortunately, this has not always been evident in the present climate. Secondly, and not unrelated to what we have just said, more must be done to overcome what sometimes seems like a pathological tendency to ignore the necessary distinction between primary and secondary truths within the movement. We know that all truth is important, but not all truth is equally important. A failure to recognize this distinction is constantly threatening to diminish the standing of Reformed theology among those it is trying to attract, and is in danger of sowing seeds of disillusionment among those who count themselves its friends.

### 3. The role of the church in the world

Thirdly, and finally, *there is a great need for the church to recapture a biblical view of the true nature of her role within the world.* Her primary task is the proclamation of the gospel. This is to be that for which she is known at home and overseas. As I have already suggested, a distinction must be maintained between the respective roles of the Christian church and the Christian individual. It is true that there may be occasions where there is some measure of

overlap between their roles but, whatever callings Christian individuals may legitimately pursue, the church is to see her task as the need to prepare men and women for heaven. It is in this great work that she is to be primarily investing her energies. This is in large measure the *raison d'être* for her existence in the world. Although Christian people will always be concerned for 'the whole man', the church must not be deflected from giving priority to the importance of the soul. Especially in a materialistic age, the note she is to be constantly sounding is, 'What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?' (Matt. 16:26a).

It should go without saying that our churches should be places where people immediately feel welcomed. They are to be places in which men and women from all backgrounds and cultures are made to sense something of the reality of what it means to be the people of God. Those who are converted need to be integrated in such a way that they are not merely occupiers of pews, but meaningful contributors to the life and ministry of the whole church. It is vitally important that in each local Christian church the outsider has before him a living example of the oneness that rarely exists anywhere else in the world. No matter what their racial origin, the colour of their skin, or the social strata from which they have come, the church is to be an environment in which it is possible to get such a foretaste of heaven that the outsider wants above all else to become an insider.

These, then, are to be our priorities: we must fight for the truth in the minds of men and women; we must cultivate through prayer a return to God as the only sure means of influencing the world around us; and we must recapture a proper vision of what the role of the church is to be in a culturally confused and embattled world.

## References

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1. J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1960.
2. The position I am opposing here is the one essentially outlined in the contribution made by J. A. Kirk on 'Missiology' in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (1988). This view seeks to place humanitarian aid, social justice, and ecological issues on the same level as the evangelisation of the lost.
3. Bavinck, op. cit., p.44.
4. F. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (1968), Complete Works, vol. 1, Illinois: Crossway, 1982, p.143.
5. R. Scruton, *Modern Philosophy*, London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1994. Concerning Relativism, Roger Scruton makes the following helpful observation: 'A writer who says that there is no truth, or that all truth is "merely relative", is asking you not to believe him. So don't' [p.6].
6. A. Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955, p.12.
7. This quotation is from the film, *Dead Poets Society* (1989), starring Robin Williams as an English Professor (John Keating) who seeks to inspire his students to a love of poetry and to seize the day.
8. The Bible Union is an evangelical group operating in Hungary and mainly among evangelical members within the Hungarian Reformed Church.
9. J. Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, p.43-47.
10. A. McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, London: Rider, 2004.
11. In using the term 'evangelical' I am referring to those who in some sense claim allegiance to the supremacy of biblical authority, the necessity of regeneration, and the belief that justification is by grace alone through faith in Christ alone.
12. This is a utilization of a paraphrase on Romans 12:2 from J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1947, p.27.
13. C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy: The Shape of My Early Life*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1955, p.196.
14. Op. cit., Kirk, *New Dictionary of Theology*, pp.434-436.
- 15 J. G. Machen, *Christianity and Culture from Selected Shorter Writings* (edited by D. G. Hart), Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004, p.404.