

Toward a practical theology of Christian mission

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The teaching of Christian mission

Recent developments in understanding the mission of the church are reflected in the historiography of mission. The multi-volume work by Kenneth Scott Latourette¹ is confident in tracing a record of continual growth, and even as late as 1986 Stephen Neill and Owen Chadwick² could say “Christianity alone has succeeded in making itself a universal religion.”³ And which “was to become the faith of all mankind.”⁴ We may contrast this untroubled interpretation with the views of Jean Comby⁵ who says “The historical church does not have a monopoly of signs and realizations of the kingdom.”⁶ He continues “Since there are many ways of bearing witness to the gospel, we can understand that the number of conversions can no longer be the criterion of the authenticity and effectiveness of witness.”⁷ The magisterial work of David Bosch⁸ replaces the history of expansion with a succession of theological models, creating the expectation of further paradigm shifts. The British missiologist Stephen Spencer⁹ adopts a somewhat similar approach using Weberian types instead of Kuhnian paradigms, arranging them in a sequence suggesting similar radical transformations. The most widely read recent major English textbook in this area, by the American Catholic missiologists, Bevans and Schroeder¹⁰ reassures us that there are continuities across the centuries, and escapes from the history of European Christendom by giving us a global and a less patriarchal perspective.

One of the problems confronting the contemporary missiologist is the very diversity of the concept of “mission”. Is it, in effect, simply evangelisation, is it the expansion of Christianity by whatever means, or is it some wider participation in the purposes of God? What significance should be attached to the distinction between church and kingdom? And to what extent should the radical interpretations of the mission of Jesus¹¹ suggest a completely new approach?

Mission and ministerial training

All of this is having some impact upon theological education, and in particular the training of Christian ministers. The same issues which are revealed in the historiographical changes above are at work in the British churches where the impact of pluralism, secularity and diverse spiritualities are amongst the factors requiring ministerial candidates to study mission. Much seminary training has returned to an emphasis upon evangelism, in spite of the relatively unsuccessful Decade of Evangelism (1990-2000)¹² and the problem of semantic emptiness in a society where Christian language has largely ceased to function.

¹ *A history of the expansion of Christianity* London, 1938-45

² Stephen Neill *A History of Christian Missions* second revised ed. Owen Chadwick, Penguin 1986

³ Neill and Chadwick p. 14

⁴ Neill and Chadwick p.16

⁵ *How to understand the history of Christian mission* London: SCM Press 1996 [First French edition 1992]

⁶ Comby, p176

⁷ Comby, p176

⁸ David Bosch *Transforming mission: paradigm shifts in the theology of mission* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991

⁹ Stephen Spencer *SCM study guide to Christian missions: historic types and contemporary expressions* London: SCM Press, 2007

¹⁰ Bevans and Schroeder *Constants in context: a theology of mission for today* Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004

¹¹ eg. Ched Myers, *Binding the strong man: a political reading of Mark's story of Jesus* Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988

¹² Leslie J. Francis and Carol Roberts *Growth or decline in the Church of England during the Decade of Evangelism: Did the Churchmanship of the Bishop matter?* *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 24, No. 1, Jan. 2009 pp.67-81

In guiding the church toward a new focus upon mission, the Anglican Consultative Council in 1984 drew up a statement for the worldwide Anglican communion, and the bishops of the Lambeth Conference adopted it in 1988. The statement set out five marks of mission, and these were adopted by the General Synod of the Church of England in 1996.¹³ They are as follows:

1. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
3. To respond to human need by loving service
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and to sustain the life of the earth

Although the Five Marks continue to act as a sort of ideal check list, the actual policies and practice of the Church of England have been influenced by a report entitled 'Mission-Shaped Church' presented to the Archbishops Council, a senior body of the Church of England in 2004.¹⁴ Unfortunately, this report did not seek to represent the full range of the Five Marks, but concentrated rather upon revision of the parochial structure and the emergence of fresh expressions of church life. This has tended to focus on the second of the marks, and says virtually nothing about the fourth and fifth marks. This has led to my criticism that the report offered the church not so much a mission-shaped church as a church-shaped mission,¹⁵ and few subsequent developments have encouraged me to revise this view.¹⁶

In this emphasis, the report of 2004 did reflect the interests of the local churches since generally it would be true to say that congregations find the first three Marks more comfortable than the last two. It is easy to see why. The first mark, to proclaim the Kingdom, is a general catch-all that can mean what you want; the second mark, encouraging discipleship of Jesus, is in the interests of local churches, since it is interpreted as increasing church membership, and the third, the stretching out to the community in loving care, is vary natural for most churches. The final two marks are the difficult ones. Achieving them is not evidently in the immediate interest of a local congregation; the issues are more abstract, and intrinsically controversial. What are 'unjust structures'? What makes them unjust? How can structures, as distinct from persons, be unjust? How can such structures be identified, and what is the process of their transformation? These are difficult questions, but in spite of this there is a theological literature on them.¹⁷

The final mark, about protecting the environment, is probably more approachable. The churches have made huge strides in directing their congregations towards climate change, and there is a sense that this is part of a Christian duty towards the planet and its life.¹⁸

The Anglican tradition and the teaching of social justice

Although the origins of modern Anglican concern for social justice may be traced back as far as the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge,¹⁹ it did not become prominent in church and nation until the Christian Socialist movement in the middle years of the 19th century, associated with F D Maurice,

¹³ Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross (eds.) *Mission in the Twenty-first Century: exploring the five marks of global mission* London: Darton Longman & Todd, 2008

¹⁴ Church of England, *Mission-shaped church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context*, London: Church House Publishing, 2004

¹⁵ John M Hull, *Mission-shaped church: a theological response* London: SCM Press, 2006 p36

¹⁶ John M Hull 'Mission Shaped-Kingdom Focused' in Steven Croft (ed.) *Mission-shaped Questions: Defining issues for today's Church* London, Church House Publishing, 2008, pp114-132; John M Hull 'Only One Way to Walk With God' in Louise Nelstrop, Martyn Percy, (eds) *Evaluating Fresh Expressions: explorations of the emerging church*, London, SCM press, 2009, pp 105 – 121

¹⁷ Examples are Delgado, Sharon, *Shaking the gates of Hell: faith-led resistance to corporate globalization*, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2007; Ched Myers and Lattea, Karen (eds) *Say to this mountain : Mark's story of discipleship*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996; Walter Wink. *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1992

¹⁸ Church of England *Church and Earth 2009-2016* London, 2009

¹⁹ Peter d'A. Jones *The Christian Socialist Revival 1877-191: religion, class and social conscience in late-Victorian England* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968 p48

John Ludlow and Charles Kingsley.²⁰ However, there does not seem to have been much impact on the training of clergy before the closing decades of the century. B. F. Westcott, soon after his appointment as bishop of Durham, wrote in a letter that ‘all candidates for Holy Orders take CSU [Christian Social Union] lessons in social responsibility.’²¹ It was argued by Mudie-Smith that “nothing has so alienated the people ... as the age-long opposition of the churches to their most elementary rights.”²²

One of the principle theological emphases of the social movement was the corporate nature of the eucharist, and the implications of this for the training of clergy were quite clear. Stewart Headlam (1847-1924) believed that ‘It becomes impossible for a priest who knows what the Lord’s Supper means not to take a part to the best of his power in every work of political and social emancipation’.²³ The influence of this social theology upon the churches was substantial. Between 1889 and 1913 there were 53 bishops appointed in the Church of England, and no less than 16 were members of the Christian Social Union,²⁴ which had been founded in 1899 and had among its members Henry Scott Holland, Charles Gore and B F Westcott.

The 1908 Lambeth Conference was dominated by the concerns of social theology,²⁵ which reached its climax in the COPEC conference held in Birmingham in 1923 with the future Archbishop of Canturbury William Temple in the chair.²⁶ The socialist theology movement may be said to have achieved its greatest success with the creation of the welfare state after the second world war, and it certainly does not occupy a place in the thinking of the Church of England in 2010 comparable to its influence in 1910. The work of Kenneth Leach stands out as a beacon of this tradition in the period from 70’s to the 90’s.²⁷ But it is too important to be entirely lost. The deep roots of Anglican theology in the incarnation, the Trinity, and the sacramental life of the church are too rich and relevant not to encourage a revival of social commitment. In a very small way, and with some differences in emphasis, this is perhaps beginning to take place here in Queen’s.

Social Justice and Clergy Training in the Queen’s Foundation

Since September 2008 all ministerial students coming to train at The Queen's Foundation for Ecumenical Theological Education in Birmingham are asked to indicate what they will do to incorporate social justice into their preparation for ordination. This is looked upon as an aspect of theological competence, and is supported by modules in Christian Mission, Black Theology, Feminist Theology, Bible and Liberation, God in the Market Place and many others. The social justice activities themselves, however, are not part of the formal curriculum, but are regarded as complementary ministerial training, a bit like being attached to a congregation, or taking part in daily chapel worship. Provided it is thought through from a theological point of view, the Foundation does not mind what students do to meet this obligation, but they must do something.

To help them in this, and to provide a forum for planning and education, the Centre for Ministerial Formation (one of the several centres in the institution, and the one responsible for ministerial training) has created a Prophetic Witness Planning Group (PWPG). This was previously called ‘The Committee for Prophetic Ministry’ but was changed because some students thought it had to do with prophetic ministry as practiced in many of the Pentecostal and charismatic churches,

²⁰ Charles Raven, *Christian Socialism 1848-1854* London: Macmillan, 1920

²¹ Jones p. 180; Reckitt Maurice *Maurice to Temple: A Century of the social movement in the Church of England* London: Faber, 1947 pp. 65-93

²² Richard Mudie-Smith (ed.) *The Religious Life of London* London: H & S, 1904 p13 quoted by Jones p59

²³ Jones p. 160

²⁴ Jones p.164

²⁵ Jones p. 214

²⁶ Paul T. Phillips *A Kingdom on Earth: Anglo-American social Christianity 1880-1940* Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996 p.109

²⁷ Leech, Kenneth *Subversive Orthodoxy: traditional faith and radical commitment* Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1992; Leech, Kenneth *The eye of the storm: spiritual resources for the pursuit of justice* London: DLT, 1992; Leech Kenneth *The social God* London: Sheldon press, 1981

not that the Foundation is unaware or unsympathetic towards such expressions, but something else was in mind.

The concept of prophecy is used in contemporary church life in several ways. Perhaps the most widely known is the practice of charismatic inspiration, usually of a Spirit-filled leader, who is in direct touch with God, and is able to witness to the church of the will of God. A second interpretation, found mainly among a minority of evangelical Christians, is that of biblical prophecy. This is the view that the Bible makes predictions about events in the modern world. Sometimes this emphasis is called 'End Times Theology'.

I regard this second view as being based upon uninformed scholarship, and as tending towards unhelpful spirituality.²⁸ Such Christian faith evades social responsibility, and obscures the ethical teaching of the Bible. I prefer to call this point of view 'Biblical Futurology'.

A final meaning is that which is inspired by the great prophets of the Hebrew Bible, and by Jesus as a prophet. The prophets denounced the injustice of their contemporary social and political life; they uncovered the signs of the times, and sought the purposes of the God of the poor. They presented their teachings in company with prophetic signs, which might have been a tree in blossom, the fate of a city, or giving their children ominous names. Jesus turned the water into wine, and entered Jerusalem on a donkey. The task of modern prophetic witness is to discover contemporary equivalents for these signs, and to present them in the public place. This demands critical discernment, and the possibility of errors. To guide us in this, fifteen criteria for the approval of such actions have been drawn up (Appendix 1). When the PWPG has considered the possibility of inviting students to take part in an activity, it is presented to the staff of the Ministerial Centre, and if approved, it goes either to the principal and heads of centres meeting, or to the whole staff. If approved, the action becomes an official activity of the Foundation.

This is not without potential controversy, and it might be asked whether it is the official policy of the institution to press local coffee shops to adopt fairly traded products, or to urge the British government not to renew the Trident nuclear missiles. The view taken in response to these concerns is to point out that when a student minister preaches in a near by church as part of his or her training, not everything that is said represents the opinion of the Foundation, although the student does represent the Foundation in the sense that he or she is there officially as a trainee. Similarly, students may take part in an anti-nuclear weapons protest, and do so with the official approval of the Foundation, but only in so far as the Foundation acknowledges that the activity is an appropriate aspect of training. As an institution in law, no view has been adopted on the actual question at issue. Having said this, however, it is very important for the mission of the church that such prophetic actions should be conducted in the name of the entire congregation or institution. Duncan Forrester wisely remarks

"I find quite unconvincing the argument that while the generation and sustaining of vision and the pronouncement of general principles may be the proper function of public theology and the Church, prophecy and dealing with specific issues are not a responsibility of the Church as a whole, or of representative church leaders, but should be left to the occasional interventions of individuals."²⁹

The activities that have been undertaken may be divided into those that have taken place on the campus, and those that have occurred outside. We have prepared a shoe rack containing 23 pairs of children's shoes, each pair standing for one thousand children who have died that day from preventable causes. This was to express our support for the Ecumenical Advocacy Campaign of the World Council of Churches programme to draw attention to shortages of food. The shoes stand was formally presented in chapel, and then moved around the campus, spending a week or two in the various teaching rooms. Students took part in the 32 day fast of solidarity with the thirty two most heavily indebted countries of the world, each student electing to fast for a day in sympathy with one

²⁸ D. Brent Sandy. *Plowshares & Pruning Hooks: Rethinking the Language of Biblical Prophecy and Apocalyptic*, Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 2002

²⁹ Duncan B. Forrester *Truthful action: explorations in practical theology* Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000

country. Perhaps the most successful on campus activity has been the post card avalanche. Hundreds of campaigning post cards were collected from various agencies, and over a period of three weeks, students were invited to sign and post these in support of the various campaigns. Outside the campus, we have revived the concept of liturgical lamentation as a public symbol. For two years we marked the anniversary of the commencement of the Iraq war with a solemn procession in the city centre. Accompanied by a drum, the names of some of those killed in the war, both British and Iraqi, were called out accompanied by reading from the *Lamentations of Jeremiah*. Three years running groups of students and staff have sung anti-consumerist carols in the central shopping area in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

But the most dramatic events have been conducted at military sites associated with nuclear weapons. Three of our people were arrested when a party of nearly thirty from four theological colleges went to take part in the protest against the nuclear submarine base at Faslane in the Clyde,³⁰ and twice we have witnessed at the gates of the Atomic Weapons Establishment near Aldermaston near Reading. These events have had a deep impact on all who took part.³¹

The programme next year is carefully arranged from less to more challenging experiences, so as to gradually educate students into direct action for social justice. Our two most difficult problems are in overcoming the fear which prevents people from taking part, and the question of whether candidates will be able to lead their future congregations into such activity once they have been ordained and have left their training behind them. Already signs are appearing to suggest that some churches are changing.

Creating a new branch of practical theology

The first influential theologian to include practical theology in a course of theological studies was Friedrich Schleiermacher 1768-1834 but he did not extend it beyond training for church leadership.³² The subject of practical theology was the church and its efficiency. Practical theologians on the continent in the late 19th Century regarded the subject as dealing with practical aspects of ordained ministry. The gradual move from concentration upon the church to concentration upon society in the light of a theology of sociology was greatly influenced by Johann-Baptist Metz (1928 -) this implied the inclusion of lay people within the scope of the discipline. When in the 1960s and 70s there were serious attempts to overcome the older church centred approach the concept of the Kingdom of God became very important. The task of practical theology was increasingly understood as all attempts to realise the Kingdom.

Gerben Heitink, the author of the most authoritative contemporary manual of practical theology, says that the subject implies both the theory and practice of theology, that is, it is a theory of Christian action.

“This term implies that any involvement with this discipline cannot be limited to an understanding or explanation of praxis of believing and of “being church” but must also have as its purpose to influence and change this praxis.”³³

He adds “...thus the exercise of practical theology does not have the church, but rather society, as its horizon.”³⁴

According to Heitink the main disciplines in practical theology are liturgy, homiletics, catechetics and ethics. He suggests in addition poimenics³⁵ (shepherding or pastoral care) and deaconology “...defined as the theory of the service to humankind and society through compassion

³⁰ Ian Jones and Peter Hammersley *Social protest as formation for prophetic ministry: an experiment in transformative theological education* In press

³¹ Illustrated reports on many of these activities may be found at <http://www.queens.ac.uk/ordination/prophetic.php> consulted on 5th May 2010

³² Friedrich Schleiermacher *A brief outline on the study of theology* Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966

³³ Gerben Heitink *Practical theology: history; theory; action domains: Manual for practical theology* Cambridge: Eerdsman, 1999 p.6

³⁴ Heitink p.9

³⁵ Heitink p.49

and justice.”³⁶ It is time now to add a new discipline: prophetics. This would be the theory and practice of the church’s counter-cultural protest in the service of the kingdom of God. To create and act upon such a theology must now become one of the central purposes of the teaching and practice of Christian mission.

³⁶ Heitink p. 251