

Liberative Solidarity: Contemporary Perspectives on Mission by K. C. Abraham

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Chapter 1: Perspectives on Mission

David Bosch, in an admirable book, Transforming Mission, has provided different paradigms of mission that have emerged in the life of the Church: Discipleship, Proclamation, Liberation, Dialogue and others. A paradigm shift takes place as the Church responds to the new situations and challenges. In India too we have evolved many different paradigms of mission as the Church seriously faced its task to respond to the specific challenges of the Indian context. The purpose of this paper is to highlight some of these paradigms and indicate the need for newer paradigms as we face newer challenges.

Proclamation of the Good News: Evangelism

Perhaps the earliest paradigm of mission may be characterised as evangelism; the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Missionary enterprise was guided by this model. When the Church of South India was formed, it declared that:

It is the primary duty of every member of the church to witness by life and word of Jesus Christ, who came into the world to save sinners. This work of evangelisation may be done both individually and by groups, and should include special methods, such as lyrical preaching and the distribution of the scriptures and other evangelistic literature (Constitution: Ch. IV, Rule 1 and 26).¹

Even today this continues to be a model widely accepted by the members of the congregations. To act in obedience to the great commission, and to give money and time for direct evangelism is considered to be the primary duty of every Christian. While acknowledging the importance of proclamation in our work of evangelism we endeavour to keep an integral relation between work and deed. Although in the early pronouncements on mission a great deal of stress is placed on direct evangelism, a broader framework for interpreting mission is discernible as the church faced new challenges.

Nationalism: Challenge of Hindu Renaissance

The nationalist movement, a movement whose specific purpose was the removal of foreign domination, provided a new context for the Church to rethink its mission. Nationalism was linked with a reassertion of Hinduism and its values. A response to the Hindu Renaissance was therefore, an integral part of Christian witness in modern India. A social issue that was widely discussed in regard to this is the attitude of Christians to other faiths and the relation of the Gospel to the claims of other religions. P. Chenchiah, who was committed to this task, articulates

the need for a change in the Christian attitude to Hinduism in these words:

There was a type of convert in the past who hated Hinduism and surrendered himself wholeheartedly to what he supposed to be Christianity. The convert today regards Hinduism as his spiritual mother, who has nurtured him in a sense of spiritual values in the past. He discovers the supreme value of Christ, not in spite of Hinduism but because Hinduism has taught him to discern spiritual greatness. For him, loyalty to Christ does not involve the surrender of reverential attitude towards the Hindu heritage.²

People like Chenchiah, V Chakkarai, A. J. Appasamy and others made the affirmation that the living forces of Hinduism could be “a positive key to the still inaccessible riches of Hinduism.”³ They were not content with a mere intellectual approach to Hinduism but wanted to enter into the spirit of Hindu religion with a desire to learn new things about their own faith and to express them on the basis of their encounter.

A positive attitude towards Hinduism and other faiths was based on the faith in the universal Lordship of Christ. The conviction widely shared by many Indian theologians was that God is already at work in whatever area of life the Christian is speaking to make the Gospel effective. P. D. Devanandan has expressed his conviction in the following words:

Is the preaching of the Gospel directed to the total annihilation of all religions other than Christianity? Will religions as religions, and nations as nations, continue characteristically separate in the fullness of time when God would gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth?

Christian faith distinguishes between the Gospel of proclamation of the fulfillment of God's promise of the Kingdom, and the hope in fulfillment of all religious faith, wherever it is found. Fulfillment in the second sense would mean that all sincere humans striving to reach out to God will indeed find favour with him.⁴

Paradigms of Mission Inculturation and Dialogue

The new-found theological conviction and a positive attitude towards other faiths have made distinct impact on the mission praxis. All have agreed that the missionary era directly or indirectly associated with colonial rule has come to an end. Mission was no more foreign mission, directed towards the conquest of a pagan culture and satanic religions. Mission, it was affirmed, is the witness of a community of faith to God's transforming act through Jesus Christ. Mission is not an aggressive propaganda but a way of life. Further, the Church became conscious of its alien character and the need for becoming rooted in the soil of this country. The mission model that evolved during this period is **indigenisation** or **inculturation**.

Attempts were made to adopt Hindu symbols, architecture, and thought forms for worships and liturgy and also for communicating the Gospel. Amalorpavadas, a Roman Catholic theologian, has done some pioneering work in this area. He describes inculturation as:

The process by which the Church becomes really incarnated in every human group, society, culture and sharing, humble service and powerful witness to the Spirit of the Lord at work in the universe and dwelling in our heart. Having no culture of her own, she communicates with others and expresses herself through the human and social, cultural and religious signs of the people among whom she is incarnated.⁵

Inculturation for him and other theologians is incarnational. Culture has a broad meaning here. It stands for all aspects of life of people in a given context. The attempt at inculturation met with several criticisms. A majority of Christians in India refused to accept this uncritically, with the result such attempts remained esoteric without the church owning it. Recently a fierce controversy was generated in the Church of South India over a prayer used in its Synod meeting that attempted to interpret the Christian Gospel through Hindu symbols and forms of worship used by the exponent of inculturation, taken from the higher forms -- Hinduism and Sanskritised Culture of the dominant community. They argue for a process of inculturation that takes seriously the symbols that emerge from the life and struggles of the oppressed. While inculturation is an attempt at rectifying some aspects, of the missionary era it has not sufficiently taken into account the class association of mission with colonial power. The cultural distortion of Christianity is to be seen as power distortion as well. Church and mission are closely associated with the dominant groups and their interest, the colonial powers in the past and the capitalist forces in the present.

Closely related to inculturation is the dialogue model. It is a process in which Christians with sensitive awareness of the religious heritage of others try to listen, share and to cooperate with them in building a common humanity, based on the values that are germane to these faiths. The focus of inculturation model is on the life and worship of the Christian community. But in dialogue the emphasis is on shared values and on mission. Theological convictions that underlie dialogue are important. There is the affirmation:

- a) That plurality and differences are God's gift and integral to the structure of God's mission. Differences should not divide us. They enhance the beauty and harmony of our life.
- b) The centre of faith is a mystery we know only in part. Christ is ultimate for Christians. But the way they apprehend the meaning and interpret it are influenced by different cultural and social backgrounds. Only when these different perceptions are allowed to be in dialogical relationship can we begin to see the fullness of truth.
- c) The Church is only an agent and a sign of the Kingdom of God. This presupposes that there are other signs and instruments. A report on a consultation on "Dialogue and Mission" held in Tambaram, Madras, clearly articulates this:

The mission of the Church, God's active purpose in world history being carried out by the Christian movement, need not be, and in fact we can see is not, God's only mission in the world.

This is theologically certainly, more valid. For it is truer to the God whom we know, whom Jesus Christ has revealed to us, to recognise that he is constantly and everywhere at work; that his mission to humankind cannot be, and has not been, and is not now, confined within the limits of one geographical segment or one ecclesiastical organisation or one historical or one religious movement. The mission of the church is worldwide; but it is not God's only mission. It is not even his only worldwide mission. Anyone who accepts the doctrine of the holy spirit, without setting ecclesiastical frontiers to his activity already admits this is theory, though many have yet to see and feel it in their hearts.⁶

An attitude of humility and openness is the starting point for genuine dialogue. We need to listen to the other and be willing to learn from others.

There are different forms of dialogue. A comparative and critical examination of different perceptions of the religious faiths, is one of the earliest attempts at dialogue. This has not borne much fruit. A more creative form of dialogue is expressed as cooperative action. In solving the

problems of poverty, communalism, environmental destruction and others, all religions should unite. There is nothing like Christian hunger or Hindu hunger! The hungry have to be fed. To protect our environment is a task in which we all join together. If we want to plant more trees or clean the area in which we live, should we not ask all people to join in?

A question is often asked : Is mission unnecessary when dialogue is practised?

Yes, we are asking for a new way of understanding and doing of mission. Mission is still important. In fact, if we do not have a mission we have no right to exist as a Church. But our mission is not an aggressive crusade directed to condemning other religions and enlisting everyone in the Church. We are committed to sharing through our lives and action God's liberating and transforming presence in the world. When we participate with people of other faiths in love and mutual trust there are plenty of opportunities to share the source of our inspiration for our life -- Christ the giver of New Life.

We attempted a detailed discussion on dialogue as mission model because it has challenged many presuppositions of the traditional understanding of mission and opened a way for a meaningful form of Christian witness in a pluralistic context⁷.

Nation Building: Service, Development and Justice

The struggle for independence and the process of nation building have also brought challenges to the churches with regard to its social and political witness. The question was posed as to how to witness to Christ in the midst of socio-political changes? A conviction widely shared at this point was that Christ was present in social and political realities, judging and transforming them. Witnessing to the Gospel in the social and political context was a theme developed by the synod of the Church of South India that met in 1962. A resolution passed by this synod was a landmark concerning Indian church's thinking on social questions.

The Synod believes that the social revolution now taking place in India is a manifestation of the eternal purpose and judgement of God in human history. It believes that the Church is created by God to be a people wholly unto the Lord and to seek the establishment of Righteousness, Mercy and Love in human society. It therefore calls the members of the Church of South India at this critical time to a series and prayerful consideration of the implications of this belief for their worship, work and witness in a changing India.

The synod called upon all Christian institutions, congregations and individuals to take seriously their responsibilities in relation to:

- 1) The need to offer the love and compassion of God in Christ to all sorts and conditions of men;
- 2) The need to establish within the life of the Church a fellowship transcending distinctions of caste and class;
- 3) The need that each Christian should be a politically conscious and responsible citizen;
- 4) The need to witness to the kingdom of God, to set forth and establish in society both the love and the righteousness of God in Christ;
- 5) The need to make Christians in 'secular occupation' realise that their occupations

themselves which supply the physical and economic needs of society are also in the plan and purpose of God for the total redemption of society.⁸

Several paradigms of mission have emerged at this time. One of the traditional modes of the Church's participation in national situation is service, The Church in India did pioneering service by establishing medical and educational institutions. Many charitable institutions like orphanages and relief operations through the Church's Auxiliary for Social Action (CASA), have provided help to the needy regardless of their religious affiliations. Some of these programmes are well-known and there is no need to describe them elaborately But the churches moved to a new phase in this when they started developmental projects with the help of foreign donor agencies They are directed towards self-employment for the poor and to creating the infrastructure that is necessary for community based development in health and other areas.

It is important that in a situation of extreme poverty and continuing misery of millions in rural and urban areas the churches have to provide service for the needy. Sometimes such actions are powerful witness to churches solidarity with people, breaking its isolation.

In their study of the churches in North India, J.P. Alter and H. Jaisingh make a pointed reference to one such moment in the life of the Church in Delhi. In 1947 there broke out the worst communal clash between Hindus and Muslims and thousands of refugees streamed into Delhi. Christians took the lead in ministering to the needs of victims and this was widely acclaimed:

This service to refugees was of profound significance for the life of the Church. It demonstrated that Christians, though neutral in the communal struggle, were not indifferent to the sufferings of their neighbors. It created a fund of goodwill which proved to be of great value in subsequent discussions concerning faith Above all, it helped to draw the Christian community out of its isolation and to identify Christians as responsible citizens of the new Democratic Republic.⁹

However, laudable and necessary such charitable and developmental activities are, they seldom challenge the existing system and structures of injustice that perpetuate poverty and unequal distribution of resources. In the long run they do not provide an answer to the search of the poor for their dignity and justice. It is this critique that led to the awareness that the poor have to be organized to fight for their rights and they should not be mere objects of charity but subjects of struggle for a new, just order. That mission of **struggle for justice** is the paradigm that emerged very clearly at this time. An awareness that the struggle for justice is the context of Christian mission and a new vision of Christ as Liberator,¹⁰ both these have contributed to the emergence of this new paradigm of mission. Justice is a dimension of the saving act of God. To participate in the struggle for justice is to participate in God's mission. This paradigm is also based on the critical analysis of the economic and political situation in India, and the phenomenon of poverty.

It brings, to our awareness the importance of organized struggles of the poor for justice. During the past decades several groups of young men and women have gone into organizing the landless, marginalised groups. They are certainly Christ-inspired, but not necessarily controlled by ecclesiastical machinery. Moreover, the team of workers in each group is multi-religious and they work with people of all faiths. There are many clusters of these groups -- prominent being the Urban Industrial Rural Mission (UIRM) and Programme for Social Action (PSA).

Initially the action group started to evolve among the marginalised sections of society with the specific intent of raising their critical consciousness against oppression. In this process they have linked with the groups which are not Christian and become part of wider movements of people such as tribals, Dalits and workers. This partnership influenced their style of functioning.

What is disheartening in the development of action groups work, however, is the apparent conflict between them and the church organisations. The style and structure they have developed, which were necessary for their expression of solidarity with the marginalised, have moved them further and further away from the institutional Church. The dialogue between them has not proved very constructive. The churches keep on raising questions, sometimes legitimate, about the style and structure of action groups and people's movements, without showing any readiness to face the challenge posed by the vision and strategy (justice and collective action) for the Church's ministry and mission. Can we truly say that in a situation of poverty linked with unjust economic and political structures, justice oriented ministry should be the preponderant form of Christian mission? If we face this challenge honestly then the present forms of ministry and the church structures that support them will also undergo drastic changes. For one thing our preaching and worship will authentically reflect the cries of the people for justice and our church structures will become catalysts for strengthening the struggle for all people and not just ghettos that preserve our narrow parochial interest -- they truly become the salt of the earth.

Before we close this section a brief mention of one other point is necessary. Questions are raised in the discussion on mission about the relation between proclamation of the Gospel and the Church's involvement in politics and society. Some maintain that evangelism should be distinct from other forms of witness like dialogue, development, service and struggle for justice. But others reject this separation and affirm an integral view of mission embracing all aspects of life and its relationships. One has to proclaim the Gospel through one's words, deeds, and life. They are inseparable. However, we cannot ignore the fact that on programmatic level the Church has been making some distinctions and it is difficult to obliterate them. But we need to ask how each can be informed as well as critiqued by others.

For example the justice oriented approach raises critical questions to all developmental and service endeavors of the Church. If service projects and institution do not lead to the removal of unjust structures, they should be viewed with suspicion. All institutional forms of service in which significant resources of money and personnel from other countries are even now involved, come under critical scrutiny especially as some of them provide subsidised service to the middle and upper middle class sections of society. In this section we will mention some of the contemporary challenges to Christian mission. They will be discussed in detail in the later chapters.

a). *The Struggle for Identity and Justice*

The struggle by different ethnic groups for their identity and justice has brought serious questions to the mission of the church. Identity is a way of asserting one's place in society. Culture and history provide a framework for people's self-understanding, the source of their identity. These elements in the life of marginal groups have been totally suppressed. A conscious recovery of them is essential for their struggles for dignity. Reflection on mission should be related to this newly gained awareness of marginalised groups.

In the past the Church has been ambiguous with regard to this response to the identity question. Christian mission for sure has enormously contributed to the social transformation of Dalits and indigenous people. But it has been insensitive to people's struggle for cultural identity. The Church has often projected a view of uniformity that suppresses all differences. But plurality is the principle of creation.

If the struggle for Dalit and tribal identity is a demand to secure the rightful space for indigenous people in the wider human discourse and relationship then it should be accepted as integral to

God's purposes for them. The theological link between Christian faith and the struggle for identity should be strengthened and that should be the basis for a pluriform community. The missionary obligation should be reformulated as the church's solidarity with the marginalized that seeks its identity. The struggle for identity is also a struggle for justice and participation. This gives a concrete and distinct focus for our struggle. Here the biblical tradition of faith can make a significant contribution. The prophets were uncompromising on their stand on justice. They rejected any pattern of relationship that fails to ensure justice as contrary to God's will. I believe that this focus on justice in our identity struggle gives us a concrete direction as well as a new theological meaning for it.

The relation between Gospel and culture should be considered in this context. Many things are written on it and several insights are today widely shared. It is clear that the Gospel comes to us in a cultural medium and for most of us in India it has come through western culture. We need to be sensitive to these cultural trappings. We also know that the Gospel fulfills as well as judges the cultural aspirations of people. It is this dialectic that makes our task daunting.

b) Ecological Crisis: God's Cosmic Mission

Ecological crisis raises a host of new questions about the concept and practice of mission. There was a time when we thought this was not a Third World problem. But today we are convinced that preserving the environmental integrity and promotion of an ecologically responsible development are a matter of survival for the whole world. Fast depletion of natural resources, pollution of air, land and water, the global warming and other atmosphere changes have catastrophic affects. A consultation on ecology and development has correctly observed that while all are affected by the ecological crisis, the life of the poor and marginalised is further impoverished by it. Storage of fuel and water add peculiar burdens to the life of women. It is said that tribals are made environmental prisoners in their own land. Dalits, whose life has been subjected to social and cultural oppression for generations are facing new threats to them by the wanton destruction of the natural environment. What we witness today is a steady deterioration and degradation of the biosphere all life and physical environment.

The biblical insights on our dependence on nature and our responsibility for nature bring new challenges to our understanding of Church and mission. The Church is cosmically oriented (Moltmann) and participates in God's cosmic mission. "The mission is not for humans alone, but for the whole of God's cosmos. Its aim is not geographical, territorial and numerical expansion, but transformation of the whole cosmos"¹¹ God's saving activity has a threefold dimension calling persons to commit to the Kingdom of God, justice and peace in society and ecological health in the land (Amos 9:14-15). All three dimensions are integral to the cosmic mission of God and they should be expressed together. "The environment will continue to deteriorate if we pay attention only to evangelism and social mission."¹² How concretely should we participate in God's cosmic mission?

It is no mere coincidence that the root word OIKOS is the same for ecology economics and ecumenics. We are committed to preserving the living space that is common to humans and all other living and non-living things. At the World Convocation on "Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation" which met in Seoul in March 1990 the churches covenanted together to renounce "all idols of wealth, power, race and gender superiority and security which cause people to suffer and the earth to be dominated, plundered and destroyed." Further they made a commitment to build a just economic order on global, national, regional and International levels of all people. Ecologically oriented mission is expressed as a commitment to a set of values that are wholistic

and humane. Perhaps, the scale of values may be summed up as follows,

Need against greed.

Enabling power against dominating power

Conservation against consumerism

Integrity of creation against exploitation of nature.

Unless the values which we consider important become part of our life-style, they remain vague and empty. Justice, freedom, human dignity, enabling power, all these should be made readily recognisable in our corporate life of the churches.

c) Is the Church Credible?

The Church proclaims and lives by the mystery of Christ. Specific challenges from the situation provide an occasion to delve deep into its meaning and to formulate appropriate response to it as mission. Thus the parameter of mission expands with the ever-widening horizon of the Gospel. But the institutional church by far prefers to remain in the security of the familiar and the traditional. Members often get entangled in the power struggle of the caste and communal groupings. Self-aggrandisement of the leadership further distorts the vision and the message of Christ.

Every religious organisation, including the church, possesses ritual power as well as institutional power. Both can be easily misused by the hierarchy and others in leadership positions. They use their ritual and institutional power to manipulate people in order to perpetuate vested interests and to maintain the dominance of ecclesiastical functionaries. Blatant forms of corruption, misappropriations, nepotism and other forms of misuse of power have become a rule and not an exception.

Can this church be trusted with mission? How can the Church be a community where different identities can flourish without fear of domination because of its overriding commitment to the values of the Kingdom? How can the Church truly bear the Cross of Christ? The call is for fidelity to the Lord of the Kingdom in everyday practice. Schillebeeckx, the Dutch Catholic theologian, developing the theme “The New Testament Churches as Exodus Communities”¹³ points out that N.T. Churches were not “activist” churches. But they have developed a paradigm in regard to their witness in the world. They wanted to express in their life and relationships the vision of the Kingdom with which they impact the society.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have attempted to discuss important models of mission that have emerged in the modern period as the Church responds to the challenges of other faiths and socio-political realities. We have also indicated some of the new challenges we face today. They will receive further attention in the following chapters. A question remains : Is there a new paradigm of mission being evolved? It is perhaps too early to make a definitive formulation. But one may venture to describe mission as **Celebration and Sharing** of Life. This will be the theme in the next chapter. It is an attempt to express holistically our mission embracing all our aspects of life. Mission is an endeavour of the Christian community to celebrate and to enhance God’s gift of life. The essential character of this life which the community shares with other human beings and nature is interrelatedness. In responsibility to one another and to nature life is preserved and God’s purpose for it is fulfilled. The demand for life abundant. “Where Jesus is, there is Life”.¹⁴

To follow Jesus is to witness to the abundant life. More concretely it means to support values, practices and institutions that affirm and enhance life and to denounce systems and structures that diminish and extinguish the lives of so many. Further, commitment to life-affirming values should be expressed in the life and relationships of the community of faith.

Notes:

1. Tiff Book Christian Literature Society, Madras.
 2. Rethinking Christianity in India,
 - 3 *Ibid.*
 4. Preparation for Dialogue (Bangalore: CISRS. 1964), p. 192
 5. Quoted in JAG Gerwin Van Leeuwen, Fully Indian and Authentically Christian (Bangalore National Biblical Catechetical and Liturgical Centre, 1990), p. 241.
 6. “Tamaram Revisited, Papers and Reports of a Consultation on Dialogue and Mission” *International Review of Mission*, Vol. LXXVIII, No. 307, July 1988, pp. 366-367.
 7. A helpful and comprehensive discussion on the concerns relating to this approach is given in S.J. Samartha’s One Christ-Many Religions, (New York: Orbis Books, 1991) and Indian edition, SATHRI, Bangalore, 1992.
 8. Rajaiah D. Paul, Ecumenism in Action, p. 100
 9. James P. Alter et. al., The Church as Christian Community, p.35
 10. This model can also be appropriately called Liberation model. Liberation and justice are interrelated concepts.
 11. Quoted from a study guide of the Presbyterian Church (USA), 1991.
 12. *Ibid*
 13. Christ, (New York Cross Roads, 1988)
 14. Jurgen Moltmann, The Passion of Life (Philadelphia Fortress Press), 1978, p. 19.
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