

THE MISSIONAL CHURCH AND THE MISSIONAL EMPIRE

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Introduction

For decades now, missiologists have attempted to engage critically the reality of empire as the context in which Christians are called to be in mission throughout the world. While this is not a new conversation, recent postcolonial theory and the publication of books such as *Empire* (Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, 2000) have served to broaden and intensify the conversation among Christians, who have become increasingly aware of the way empire enacts a multi-layered and interlocking set of violent and hegemonic relationships that produce a perpetual state of war, poverty, injustice, environmental destruction, and social fragmentation. Given the impact of empire on virtually every aspect of our lives, and given our own complicity as Christians in the economic systems, political arrangements, and cultural processes by which empire enacts its inescapable formations, how are Christians to bear witness to the good news today?

One way of responding to our present context may be found among those theologies that, over the last half century, have emphasized God's kingdom and mission as more expansive than the church and that have likewise called for a subordination of the church to the *missio dei* as a way of counteracting the inherited ecclesiocentrism of Christendom. That ecclesiocentrism not only permitted but sustained a chaplaincy role for the church in relation to the ambitions of empire, as the church became preoccupied with its own security, prosperity, and expansion.

Without defending ecclesiocentrism and while affirming that the church should ever move outward in service to the world, this paper argues that something important is lost when the church is subordinated to mission and instrumentalized in relation to salvation. Within our present imperial context, it is as important as ever to affirm that Christian salvation is intrinsically ecclesial and that the *missio dei* is the calling and formation of a Christ-shaped people who embody and thereby proclaim to the world a new humanity that stands in contrast to imperial social orderings and formations. Bearing faithful Christian witness depends upon the alternative political, social, and economic formations associated with what the first Christians referred to as "ecclesia." As Lesslie Newbigin puts the matter, "The Church cannot fulfill the Kingdom purpose that is entrusted to it . . . if it sees its role in merely functional terms. The Church is sign, instrument and foretaste of God's reign for that 'place', that segment of the total

fabric of humanity, for which it is responsible – a sign, instrument and foretaste for *that* place with its particular character” (138). This paper argues that while the church must be ‘missional’, mission must also be ‘ecclesial’.

Empire

Historically speaking, there is no avoiding the association of Christian mission with ‘empire’. Christianity’s early growth throughout Europe and Asia and subsequent spread around the globe is inconceivable apart from imperial edicts, trade routes, and other economic and political structures. It makes a great deal of difference, however, whether Christian witness is carried out at the fringes and on the underside of empire by a church that is persecuted, marginalized, and martyred by the empire or whether it is carried out by a church that has assumed the role of chaplain to the empire, ‘succeeding’ where the empire succeeds and expanding where the empire expands. Martyrdom and chaplaincy, in fact, turn out to be two fairly important and contrasting postures, practices, discourses, and sets of imagination that the church has assumed toward empire. And insofar as they represent radically different ways of relating church to empire, they obviously structure Christian mission in dramatically different ways.

Our present imperial context is complex to say the least. Empire is not always visibly recognized for what it is. While at the beginning of the 21st century many would understand empire to be centered in the United States, empire is not reducible to a single nation-state, person, or emperor as its agent and is instead a much more complex, multi-headed, and de-centered Leviathan, or what Rui de Souza Josgrilberg has called a “global machine” (41). There is no reason to think of empire as being directed by some individual or individuals toward a grand conspiracy. Rather it is a complex invention of social and political imagination over time that embraces complex multi-national economic interests and that influences an astonishing range of scientific, educational, cultural, and technological dimensions of life. Joerg Rieger, in thinking about empires across history, defines them as “massive concentrations of power that permeate all aspects of life and that cannot be controlled by any one actor alone” (2). Thus, even if Alexander the Great may be said to have created an empire and even if our current president presides over one today, empire is always much more than what any one agent is able to create or maintain. Indeed, within our present context, empire has become even more complex and

expansive given its intrinsic relations to the boundary-defying ambitions of global capitalism. We can speak of empire, therefore, as “seek[ing] to extend its control as far as possible; not only geographically, politically, and economically—these factors are commonly recognized—but also intellectually, emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, culturally, and religiously” (2-3).

Because these “conglomerates of power” that we call empire have a stake in “controlling all aspects of our lives, from macropolitics to our innermost desires” (vii), the challenge before us is to detect the way the church and its practices are formed by the logic of empire and yet also to discern why, where, and how Christians have kept from being co-opted by empire. For while it is certainly true that no one can escape the empire’s influence completely, it is also true, as Rieger notes, that “empire is never quite able to extend its control absolutely” (3-4). The good news is that Christian witness has not always been overtaken completely by empire and that from the beginning there have always been Christians who understood the church’s mission in the world not as a form of chaplaincy but as a form of obedient witness to the nonviolence of God’s reign.

The problem, however, is that it is increasingly difficult to know who and where the emperor is or when we are serving as his chaplains. It is also true that while it is difficult to resist a pagan empire, to refuse to fight its wars or worship its gods, it is far more difficult to resist an empire that has come to think of itself as Christian (Cavanaugh: 80). Then too, one of the differences between 4th century empire and 21st century empire is that the latter is far less interested in securing and defending a single official religious sponsor or chaplain and more adept at domesticating all religions equally as purveyors and administrators of essentially private experiences. 21st century empire, rather than persecuting religious heretics or minorities, can afford to protect religion as a private good by assigning it to a private space that can be protected from “public” interference, on the one hand, while protecting a pluralistic “public” against the particularities of religion, on the other hand. The U.S. context, for example, is a unique one where, on one hand, presidential candidates have to be people of faith (an atheist could never get elected president of the United States) while, on the other hand, candidates have to try very hard to convince the electorate that their faith won’t actually make any difference to their politics.

The Ecclesiality of Salvation

While empire aided the numerical and geographical expansion of the church, the costs to Christian mission and its relationship to the church (what we might call the ‘ecclesiality’ of mission) were extraordinarily high. In the third century, Cyprian of Carthage famously wrote that “outside the church there is no salvation” (Epistle 72:21). Cyprian, and other early Christians with him, could not have imagined Christian salvation as it was later construed within the social imagination of Christendom, where “church” came to refer less and less to a distinctive social body with an alternative set of behaviors, disciplines, practices, and social patterns that incorporate believers into the new world made possible by Christ, and more and more to an imperially allied institution bearing an already attained perfection such that it was in a position to both dispense and guarantee salvation for those who belong to it. To be sure, Cyprian’s images for the church – an ark, a walled garden, a sealed fountain, etc. – lend themselves to later Christendom interpretations. But Cyprian’s was a church that had recently passed through the brutal Decian persecution, and his assertion of the ecclesiality of salvation presumed a church whose politics was rival to empire rather than a church that had become the endorsing arm of an imperial politics.

As John Howard Yoder has pointed out, what was most striking about the transition from a pre-Constantinian church to a Constantinian church “. . . is not that Christians were no longer persecuted and began to be privileged, nor that emperors built churches and presided over ecumenical deliberations about the Trinity.” Rather, says Yoder, “what matters is that the two visible realities, church and world, were fused. There is no longer anything to call ‘world’; state, economy, art, rhetoric, superstition, and war have all been baptized (1998: 57). The refusal to let the world be the world by fusing it with church meant also that the church would no longer be the church – at least not in the sense of a community given over to the way of Jesus – a loss that proved to have tremendous consequences for Christian mission and evangelism. Baptism, rather than enacting one’s transition from death to newness of life in Christ through incorporation into his body, the church, would now mark one’s membership in the empire, a very different *ethnos*.

Prior to its role as chaplain of the empire, the visible deviance of the church was intrinsic to its witness, as the life and deaths of its martyrs attested. The church “evangelized” by forgiving enemies, welcome the stranger, sharing bread with the poor, and refusing to fight imperial wars or engage in imperial entertainments. Its corporate life together in the world *was*

its offer to the world of a new creation. But having made peace with the empire, the church now found itself killing those that the empire counted as its enemies, serving and benefitting from its economy, and imagining its corporate life on imperial terms.

In a Christendom context, the church shifted from *being* salvation to functioning instead as an institutional mediator, or instrument, of salvation. Under the conditions of late modernity, the church has become even more instrumentalized as a consumer-oriented vendor of a salvation that is intrinsically private and individual. The church now has to be shown to be a helpful and useful *vehicle* of a salvation that is essentially non-ecclesial. Within the social imagination of late modernity, salvation can now be construed as an intellectual assent to propositions about who Jesus is or a private, inward, and dematerialized experience of Jesus as one's "personal savior" that is only subsequently expressed, if at all, in the church as an aggregate of saved individuals. Ironically, as Andrew Davison and Alison Milbank point out, this kind of individualism was for early Christians what came with excommunication, "the ultimate penalty and remedy for offenders" (57). Even then, it was to last only for a period so that the sinner would understand the ecclesial shape of salvation.

What for Cyprian was a tautology (Christian salvation *is* incorporation into the church as the body of Christ) is in our time widely rejected as a repugnant ecclesiocentrism. Rather than correcting the imperial ecclesiology on which Christian mission came to be founded and upon which the ecclesiality of salvation was premised, the post-Christendom "correction" veers in the direction of rejecting ecclesial salvation altogether. Not surprisingly, there are forms of Christianity that have surfaced within modernity which advocate something like a "churchless" Christianity.¹ For it is a relatively short jump from conceiving of the church as having an instrumental relationship to salvation to conceiving of the church as not only unnecessary but even an obstacle to salvation.²

¹ These range from the "no-church" movement founded by Uchimura Kanzo in 1901 in Japan to more recent forms of emerging church.

² As one emerging church blogger writes, "After all, if salvation is delivered, or found, in or through the church then what does it matter what my relationship with Christ is? All I need do is go to church on a weekly [basis] and sit there, and I will be saved. The idea that salvation is tied to the church is both nonbiblical and controlling." Emergent Evolution, http://postmodern_theology.blogspot.com/2005_01_01_archive.html.

If, however, “salvation” is a way of naming the actual practices, patterns, habits, and way of life of the body of Christ, then the church is not merely the social *application* of a prior and individual, saving faith. On the contrary, salvation is our being made a part of a new people and therefore impossible apart from the church. This is not because the church has *received* salvation as a possession and is now in a position to *dispense* it to others or *withhold* it from others. Rather, salvation is, in the first place, a distinct form of social existence. To be saved is literally to be made part of a new people and a new social body – the body of Christ. Karl Barth puts it this way:

[The Christian] is not in [the church] in the sense that he might first be a more or less good Christian by his personal choice and calling and on his own responsibility as a lonely hearer of God’s Word, and only later, perhaps optionally and only at his own pleasure, he might take into account his membership in the church. If he were not in the church, he would not be in Christ. He is elected and called, not to the being and action of a private person with a Christian interest, but to be a living member of the living community of the living Lord Jesus. (188)

A salvation that is conceived of as fundamentally private and individual is largely compatible with the increasingly hegemonic and far-ranging claims of the empire over our lives, just as a church that is reduced to a privatized arm of the empire poses no real threat to the pretensions of that empire. The claim that Jesus is Lord now becomes compatible with the de facto reality that the emperor is Lord, as the church’s relationship to empire is de-politicized. But in reality, of course, a depoliticized faith is all the more political precisely by virtue of the way it acquiesces to the political status quo, even if only implicitly. As Rieger notes, “One of the odd things about empire in our time is that many people have no sense for the pressures produced by empire and do not perceive empire at work. As a result, there is no context for observing the difference between Christ as Lord and the emperor as Lord. This may explain the otherwise strange attraction to ‘purely religious’ and depoliticized language. Yet when Christians in a context of empire are unaware of the political implications of their faith, their Christ is likely to be co-opted by empire by default” (44).

In contrast to the posture of chaplaincy that accepts the church’s domestication within the space and on the terms that empire has provided us, our primary task is not to find better ways to engage the church more effectively in imperial politics, but rather to *be* a distinctive politics in the context of empire. Too often when Christians do ‘go public’, we do so out of residual

Christendom assumptions about the relationship of church to empire so that we come to believe public witness means swinging elections or dominating school boards rather than modeling before the world a new politics of the Spirit that runs counter to prevailing patterns of wealth and poverty, domination and subordination, insider and outsider. In other words, the public witness we do have is too often but a parody of itself, a caricature, and little more than a voting block. A voting block, however, is not a church. And to the extent that this is the most to which our social witness amounts, we will never pose a problem to the aspirations of empire.

The Ecclesiality of Mission

If the effects of the instrumentalization of the church in relation to salvation have shaped the way the church thinks about and engages in mission, it is not clear that the recent emphasis on the “missionality” of the church has proven to be an exception to this instrumentalization. To be sure, the emphasis on the “missional church” with its accompanying shift away from a narcissistic ecclesiocentrism to a focus on God’s mission in the world is a healthy corrective to the Christendom tendencies of the church. But the subordination of church to mission generates a false dichotomy and forces a trade-off that too easily loses the eschatological and not merely functional nature of the people of God in the economy of salvation. As John Howard Yoder put it so well:

The political novelty that God brings into the world is a community of those who serve instead of ruling, who suffer instead of inflicting suffering, whose fellowship crosses social lines instead of reinforcing them. This new Christian community in which the walls are broken down not by human idealism or democratic legalism by the work of Christ is not only a vehicle of the gospel or only a fruit of the gospel; it is the good news. It is not merely the agent of mission or the constituency of a mission agency. This is the mission. (91)

While the church must undoubtedly be missional, the language of “mission” is notoriously malleable. Consider, for example, George W. Bush’s 2004 State of the Union Address:

America is a nation with a mission, and that mission comes from our most basic beliefs. We have no desire to dominate, no ambitions of empire. Our aim is a democratic peace – a peace founded upon the dignity and rights of every man and woman. America acts in

this cause with friends and allies at our side, yet we understand our special calling: This great republic will lead the cause of freedom.³

Apparently, the U.S. is a missional nation! But note the particular way the words ‘empire’ and ‘mission’ are linked in Bush’s speech, for it illustrates the way imperial power readily co-opts the language and imagery of ‘mission’ while simultaneously disavowing pretensions toward empire. At the same time, this linking suggests the possibility that the church’s understanding and practice of ‘mission’, especially when formed within the context of empire, may already inhabit an imperial social imagination that relies on the discourse of benevolence, calling, leadership, and global responsibility. At the very least, Bush’s words may lead us to be suspicious about the vacuous nature of words like ‘mission’ and ‘missional’, whether applied to the church or to any other entity.

When mission becomes the goal and the church is accorded an importance relative to the service of that goal, what Davison and Milbank say about the Fresh Expressions movement in relation to the Church of England is right on the mark: “mission becomes about nothing but itself” (53). Even worship is subordinated to mission. This instrumentalization of the church, however, is ultimately an instrumentalization, if not a rejection, of bodily and social mediation that comes with the separation of form from content, so that the shape of the church floats largely free from the good news itself, determined solely by context or by personal preference. That rejection also comes with a cultureless and intellectualized or spiritualized understanding of faith that is logically prior to and abstracted from the particular form of life that renders faith meaningful.

The relativization (if not rejection) of bodily and social mediation produces a church that is now free to be recruited by the empire into killing those that the empire counts as its enemies, serving and benefiting from the empire’s economic conquests, and inevitably imagining its own corporate life together on terms set for it by the empire. The real question for the practice of mission today is not whether or how we can reach more people for Christ, grow our churches, or expand our influence. The more fundamental question is whether it is possible for the church to learn how to bear public witness once again on other than imperial terms and perhaps recapture

³ Quoted in Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Saving Christianity from Empire* (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 1.

some of the ancient church's counter-imperial deviance. What we really need, as Shane Claiborne has rightly said, is not "more churches" but "*a church*" (145).

Admittedly, the church will today look very different than it did in the second or third centuries. But now as then, a common denominator of the Christian's witness in the context of empire is still that Jesus is Lord and Caesar is not. It is confession, not ontology or even moral purity that divides church from world at this point. The reign of God is not real because we make it so. Nor is it made visible and habitable in the world to the extent that oppressive empires are dismantled, terrorists destroyed, and tyrants overthrown. It is made visible when, in the midst of violence, oppression, terrorism, and empire, a people who worship God as their sovereign refuse to find the security and meaning of their lives in their own power. It is made visible and habitable when that people, by placing themselves into the Spirit's hands become dispossessed of every pretense to gaining a foothold in the world for themselves or their cause. The church's first and primary mission as citizens of the commonwealth of God is to live *as* citizens of the commonwealth of God thereby making visible in their own bodies the body of Christ.

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