

“RESPONSE TO JORGE JULCA AND GIFT MUTKWA”

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The theme of this Theological Conference is "Christology-Knowing Christ" (Philippians 3:10). I am responding to Dr. Jorge Julca with his theme "Christ as a Paradigm of Mission: Reflections from Latin America" and Dr. Gift Mtukwa with his theme: "The Cruciform Mission of Paul in Thessalonica: The Profile of the Incarnational Ministry".

I greatly appreciate the contribution that our brothers have made to the Global Conference on Theology in an effort to build a theological reflection relevant to their own contexts on a crucial issue for the present and future of our church.

I will take first of all Dr. Julca's paper on "Christ as a Paradigm of Mission: Reflections from Latin America". Julca presents us with three theological key moments or axes, as he himself calls them. The first axis is the "Incarnation", the second is the "Crucifixion and Death of Jesus" and the third the "Resurrection". These three issues are, and have been, the core of the Christian faith. Dr. Julca's proposal is to reach an understanding of these as a paradigm of mission.

The first axis, the Incarnation is defined as "a historical reality that marked a mission model that we must imitate". Dr. Julca quotes John 3:16 to point out that "God sent his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). But in addition, the same gospel mentions in 1:14, that the Word who "was with God and was God" (1.1b), "became flesh and dwelt among us".

According to Dr. Julca, one of the most outstanding aspects of the Incarnational model is that the Lord "focused on the most vulnerable of his generation ...". The scope and content of the mission are involved in Jesus' incarnational dimension. This means that its reach is universal, penetrating every dimension of human life and in its content, it is a message of hope and justice.

Dr. Julca concludes with these words: “This transforming message of the Incarnate Jesus shows that the purpose of God is to create, under this new humanity in Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit, a community that embodies the values of the Kingdom and witnesses to the world.”

I consider that the incarnational axis represents also a missionary impulse and a praxis for the mission of God. And it can function as an evangelistic corrective, preventing evangelism from being placed only in the dimension of attracting others; the incarnational dimension is an outward movement.

Second axis is the crucifixion and death of Jesus and sacrifice as supreme evidence of love. We deal here with the heart of the gospel: “The cross is the central and culminating point of faith in the New Testament.” Under this consideration Dr. Julca asks a question that we have to consider to be fundamental: what is the place of the cross in our models of contemporary mission?

The Pauline theology of the cross in the second letter to the Corinthians demonstrates a very fine thread about Paul’s theology of mission; it is a theology of the cross vs. theology of glory in the context of the mission. In the 1 Letter to the Corinthians Paul has already made a strong statement: “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2: 2). But it is in the second letter that he develops core issues of his theology of the cross. I believe that in 2 Corinthians we have a Pauline model on the place of the cross in the ministry that serves us in our models of contemporary mission.

The cross in the Pauline ministry occupies a central place. Paul shows that the theology of the cross must be understood in the context of Christian mission in the church. The signs of an apostle as referred to by Paul are intimately related to the cross. The “signs,” as Paul calls them,

somewhat ironically, are not related to miracles or spectacular expressions of any kind but are related to the desire to be spent for the church and the Lord of the church (2 Corinthians 12:15). His listing of the signs is in absolute contrast to the values of the ministry of his opponents (2 Corinthians 11: 16-33). Paul glories in his weakness (2 Corinthians 12: 5-10). “That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10).

The third axis is the Resurrection of Jesus: hope in Christ against the despair of the world. As Dr. Julca says: “A model of mission based on Jesus needs to be focused on the Lordship of a triumphant Christ ...”.

Dr. Julca assumes that the affirmation of the Lordship of Christ in the Great Commission can be expressed as “All power of Jesus over earth and heaven.” So, the church can carry out its mission with the certainty of the Lordship of Jesus, because the declaration that “Jesus is Lord” was rooted in this reality. Indeed, we cannot even think about carrying out our work to the world, without trusting in Him who has overcome and has been given all power.

As my answer and contribution to what was exposed by Dr. Julca above, I want to underscore Gustav Aulen’s important contribution on the meaning of the cross reminding us that in the cross, as Paul understands it, there is a victorious Christ in the midst of the most terrible struggle of his ministry. This means too that the cross is also linked to the theme of Christ's victory over the powers of evil as well as in the resurrection (Col. 2:15).

The death of Jesus on the cross, his sacrifice is not the prelude to a victory that has not yet happened, but it is already a decisive step of the victory that will be consummated in the resurrection. In this sense, the quote from Stam seems correct: "his death was not a tragedy, it was the road to victory to enter into glory".

The cross continues to reflect a Christ who, though crucified, won and conquered, and in his resurrection this reality has been confirmed and consummated.

Dr. Mtukwa's writing, entitled "The Cruciform Mission of Paul in Thessalonica: The Profile of the Incarnational Missionary" is an exegetical theological study of 1 Thessalonians. 2: 1-12. Where he investigates Paul's critical work, clarifying "the missionary task, its motivation and method."

Mtukwa connects Jesus' words in John where he says: "As the Father sent me ..." (John 20:21), with the term used by Paul "sent" (*apestalken*) in perfect tense. So, the perfect tense, says Mtukwa, teaches us that Jesus begins the mission, and in the same way we continue - we do not begin - the mission, which is His mission, the *missio Dei*.

Dr. Mtukwa divides his work into the following parts: the character of the missionary, the nature of the mission (methods), the conduct of the messengers, the purpose of the ministry and the implications for cruciform missions.

In each section, the exegetical-theological considerations are taken from of the text, based on a study of terms that shed light on the *cruciform Mission* in the Pauline mission.

His careful work is a good example of how the biblical text works as a source of our cruciform theology of mission.

I share here some implications that I pick up and take from his study of the passage:

1. Paul's mission in Thessalonica was an incarnation of the cruciform mission.
2. The methods used in this ministry must be consistent with the preached gospel.
3. Act as servants rather than as teachers.
4. Those who preach Christ should not impose themselves authoritatively, but behave like children who have no claim to make.

5. The Gospel cannot be different in nature and methods to the one who sent it.
6. The mission is defined by the crucified Christ.

The character, method, goal and behavior of the missionaries must embody the cruciformity of the gospel as Paul's missionary work among the Thessalonians did. Those who are in search of upward mobility - in the ecclesiastical spheres – should have no participation in this ministry.

Conclusions

Both Julca and Mtukwa's studies shed light on common themes and complement each other. We need both theological reflection and biblical exegetical reflection.

Both writings highlight, in my opinion, central aspects of the mission in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. In one case, the centrality of Christ as a paradigm of mission that shows us the incarnational dimension, his crucifixion and resurrection. Each element not separated but in a dynamic, that allows us to see the whole.

In the other case, we can see the inseparable connection of the message and the messengers, their nature, character, their aims and methods of the mission.