

# Christian Mission as Ecclesial Holiness

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I postulate that Christian missiology is fundamentally ecclesiology, and that the most missional thing the church can do today is to be the church – to live together as a worshipping, reconciling, forgiving, nonviolent, compassionate, just, and inclusive community that bears visible, embodied, and corporate witness to God’s reign in public. It is thus the very shape and character of the faith community as God’s “new creation” that is the source and aim of Christian mission. On this understanding, the *missio dei* is neither the individual, private, or interior salvation of individuals nor is it a more or less thorough Christianization of the social order. It is, rather, the creation of a people who are both “pulpit and paradigm” of a new humanity.<sup>1</sup> And insofar as evangelism is the heart of mission (as I believe it is), it is this very “people” that constitutes both the public invitation as well as that to which the invitation points. That is why the church does not really need a “mission” strategy. The church is the mission strategy.

Because the formation of a “people” with distinctive character is so central in this understanding of the *missio dei*, I believe that we should talk about Christian mission as ecclesial holiness.<sup>2</sup> It is symptomatic of the twentieth century that holiness Christians stressed either personal or social holiness, with the emphasis on one frequently excluding the other. Holiness believers in the Wesleyan tradition have often tried to maintain a balance between (or synthesis of) the two. Rarely, however, has this taken place in such a way as to escape the solipsism inherent in modern notions of the “personal,” on the one hand, or Christendom assumptions about the “social,” on the other. The waning of modernity and the crumbling of Christendom, however, afford us an opportunity to rethink holiness in fresh, new ways – ways that take seriously the fundamental role of the faith community as the embodied locus of holiness and the (theologically) prior reality out of which both personal and social holiness make any proper sense.<sup>3</sup>

But what might an understanding of mission grounded in ecclesiology look like? What would it mean to speak of Christian mission as “ecclesial holiness”? While nothing less than a fully developed theology of mission would be required to justify adequate answers to these questions, I would suggest that, at a minimum, it would mean, first, that mission arises out of a calling from God to be a distinctive people in the world and, second, that the aim of this “peopling” is to bear embodied witness in the world to what Jesus speaks of as “the reign of God.” In other words, it is ultimately out of a calling to be a people that mission arises (here,

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<sup>1</sup> John Howard Yoder, *For the Nations: Essays Public and Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 41.

<sup>2</sup> One might also speak of “congregational holiness.” There is, however, a danger in reducing “church” to “congregation.” So, for example, a truly Methodist understanding of church begins with the “connexion” that transcends (while including) congregation. At the same time, something important is lost when we abstract too far from the live, visible, and embodied witness to God’s reign that is the local congregation.

<sup>3</sup> The field of Christian ethics is largely in the same sort of position. Christian ethics, both in the academy and in daily life, has typically been tipped (or in some cases reduced) either to social ethics or to personal ethics. But rarely, if at all, has the notion of congregational ethics been advanced with any degree of seriousness, despite the fact that it is the Christian faith community that is, I should like to argue, the logically prior foundation for either social ethics or personal ethics.

*memory* would figure centrally) and it is ultimately toward God's reign that mission is aimed (here, *hope* would figure centrally). In fact, it is the very existence of this called-forth people that constitutes the offer *to* the world and foretaste *in* the world of God's purpose *for* the world.

A truly missional church, then, is one that is a visible and communal witness to an alternate (but ultimately more real) reality – God's reign – in which present social orderings are turned upside down and inside out. Here, the first become last while the last become first (Mt 20:16). Rulers are brought down from their thrones while the humble are exalted (Lk 1:52-53). The poor and the hungry are satisfied while the rich and the well-fed are sent away hungry and empty-handed (Lk 6:20-25). Those who suffer now find comfort and healing. Those who are ostracized now are included (Mt 21:31; Lk 4:25-27).

Both compassion and justice, therefore, are at the heart of mission as ecclesial holiness. It is impossible to be the people of God apart from corporate solidarity with those who suffer as well as corporate protest, critique, and resistance against those powers that inflict suffering. As Hannah Arendt says, "poverty itself is a political, not a natural phenomenon, the result of violence and violation rather than of scarcity."<sup>4</sup> In the case of both compassion and justice, however, embodiment is the key. A disembodied justice is as worthless as a compassion that has become mere sentiment. Ecclesial holiness requires a new humanity that concretely casts its lot with the poor, as opposed to being merely in favor of it. Ecclesial holiness requires the creation of a new social reality, the church, that actually practices forgiveness of one another and forgiveness of enemies in public. Christian mission today requires a people for whom the very embodiment of solidarity with those who suffer is at the same time the disclosing of justice and exposing of injustice. Embodiment is the necessary but also the sufficient condition for mission.

Mission, of course, is nowhere more problematic today than for those of us who find ourselves in societies where Christianity has historically been tied to the center of political, economic, and cultural power, but in which the old Christendom model is being increasingly dismantled. The church that once was at the center of Western civilization, that could presume for itself a privileged voice in culture, and that could conduct "missions" on its own terms now finds that center unraveling and itself increasingly at the margins of culture. It may be, however, that it is precisely from the margins that the church is best able to be both holy and missional, to live in such a way before the world that God's reign is taken seriously and as a genuine possibility in the world. It may be, therefore, that it is from the periphery *of* the world that the church is best able to be a church *for* the world.

The efforts by some to claw our way back as a church to the center of culture, then, I take as fundamentally misguided. Contrary to prevailing opinions within the contemporary literature on evangelism, I do not believe that our most daunting challenge as a church is that we will fail to reach unchurched, secular people because our boring preaching and stuffy music puts off the tastes, expectations, and preferences of our culture. Our greatest challenge is that, in reaching our culture, we will fail to challenge its racism, individualism, violence, and affluence, having been instead enamored of them all. Our church will then in no way subvert an existing unjust order, but rather mimic and sustain it. We may reach more people, but the

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<sup>4</sup> Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1967), 56.

gospel with which we reach them will have become a version of “Christendom lite,” a pale reflection of consumer preferences and a market-driven accommodation to felt needs. The subversive nature of the gospel will then have become itself subverted and that which is unprecedented and radical about the people of God will have become compromised in favor of mere ‘ratings.’