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The Mission of the Church as the Context of Theological Education

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THE mission of the church is a subject of earnest discussion and serious questioning in contemporary theology. The discussion was engendered in revolutionary circumstances among those non-Christian and sub-Christian peoples who have been traditionally understood as the objects of that mission, and in the seeming failure of traditional theories and methods of missionary activity to confront the contemporary situation with the Christian message. The discussion has now extended beyond the specialists in the science of missions, and has stirred the interest of many who are engaged in biblical, historical, and doctrinal studies. Thus Christian mission as a segment or branch of theological knowledge and teaching has become the subject of widespread re-evaluative conversation among theological faculties, church administrators, missionary workers, and leaders of various Christian agencies. As far as I know, never before has a single subject of theological enquiry been so thoroughly investigated, weighed and reported upon by one man as missions has been by O. G. Myklebust, whose prodigious labours are evident in the two volumes of *The Study of Missions in Theological Education*.¹ That study traced the history of the science of missions, its career in the theological schools of the West, its place in present-day curricula, and the development of its specialists and of the chairs (or settees) they occupy. It urged full recognition of the science as an independent and indispensable branch of theological learning.

Two efforts at improving missions study were pointed out by Myklebust. First was that of *addition* or *emphasis*, by which he meant the establishment on theological faculties of chairs of missions filled by technical experts, and the development of major courses of study (both prescribed and optional) in the theological curriculum. He much preferred this path to that of *orientation*, by which he meant the partitioning of the subheadings of missions science and their distribution among the appropriate chairs and disciplines of Bible, history, doctrine and pastoralia. The options of emphasis and orientation are not exclusive of one another, nor did Myklebust present them as if they were. But he contended further that these approaches, even if used in combination to effect changes in curricula, would not secure sufficient attention to missions unless they were accompanied also by a liberal salting of the extracurricular affairs of theological students with missionary presentations, programs, and visits by missionary personnel.

Acknowledging an unamortizable debt to Myklebust's study and to the general discussion of which it is part, I desire nevertheless to assert that the

1. Oslo: Egede Instituttet, 1955, 1957; hereinafter cited as *SMTE*.

present status of missionary thinking and of theological education (especially in America) does not admit a solution of the problem of mission teaching by the approach either of emphasis or of orientation, either by adding specialists and courses in an independent field of missions or by partitioning and distributing that field among established disciplines. Rather, the mission of the church properly is, and demands universal recognition as, the *context* of all theological study and teaching. The church inescapably lives its life and thinks out its proclamation in the context of a single dialogue, a dialogue between Christ as the creating, redeeming agent of God, and human culture as man's expression of his awareness of a status under God. Both polarities claim the whole attention of the church. The dialogue gives the church its essential functional attribute of mission. All theological study and teaching is prompted, controlled and unified by the dialogue. Thus that which makes theology possible is identical with that which constitutes the church as mission. The intimate relation between mission and theology, then, defies simple expression by means of emphasis or by means of orientation. In this sense all theology takes as its controlling context the mission of the church.

I. THE EMERGENCE OF THE SCIENCE OF MISSIONS

It is of primary significance that the claim of missions to an independent and important place in theological education came to its neoteric articulation at the World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, in the report of Commission Six on "The Home Base of Missions." Myklebust rightly regarded this Conference as beginning the process of expansion in missions teaching. Now that Conference, which deplored the wholly unsatisfactory status of *missionswissenschaft* (the science of missions) and *missionslehre* (the teaching of missions) and demanded their central place in all theological schools, asserted in confidence of a general agreement on the matter that "the specific purpose of all theological education" was "to prepare men to be able and efficient preachers of the Gospel among all nations." Not only in the Commission's report but quite generally it has been on this assumption that the addition or emphasis of missions courses has been urged, regardless of the degree of the orientation of other "usual theological disciplines" to missions.² Now the undeniable importance of Edinburgh 1910 as a major watershed in very modern church history is to be seen in the light of the profound challenges made at that time and since to various assumptions prevailing in the nineteenth century about the church and the world; e.g., the assumption that "older churches" exported Christianity and "younger churches" imported it; the assumption that universal norms of Christian faith and action were to be found in the infusion of Christian principles into the then plainly dominant civilization of the West; the assumption that the major western reformed churches possessed the resources with which Asia and Africa were to be Christianized; the assumption that the geographical areas of Christendom were and would remain under Christian

2. SMTE II, cf. *World Missionary Conference 1910*, VI, pp. 162-181.

allegiance. Such assumptions were carried confidently in 1910 to Edinburgh. But after Amsterdam 1948 it was manifest that they had been radically (although implicitly) challenged at Edinburgh and had been progressively discarded during the intervening years.

II. THE NEW GOAL IN GENERAL THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

Silently perhaps but nonetheless surely the leading assumptions about theological study and education were also challenged during that generation, so that this phase of Christian endeavor also has been transformed. A current crisis in the Faith and Order Commission illustrates the change that has taken place. The grounding of theological study in confessional or denominational traditions, together with the self-consciousness of theological teachers as trainers of ministers, made possible the comparative ecclesiology on which the Faith and Order Movement proceeded; but the Faith and Order Commission finds the approach of comparative ecclesiology at an impasse—and the underlying reason for the impasse is the emergence of an ecumenical theological interest and a new self-consciousness among theologians as to the purpose of their work.³ Recent penetrating studies of North American centers of theological education reveal a new consciousness of their purpose as the advancing of knowledge of the Christian revelation in terms of the thought-forms of contemporary culture with due regard to the problem of the adequacy of these thought-forms to perform such a function. To be sure, the training of ministers remains an indispensable function of this work, but its directing purpose is seen far more broadly today than it was a half-century ago, as the provision of centers of the intellectual activity of the church, of loving God and neighbor with the mind.⁴ The specific purpose of a theological school is to be peculiarly and unashamedly (though not condescendingly) an intellectual enterprise in the name of and for the sake of the whole church, dedicated to clarifying for a time and place God's revelation in Christ and to appraising critically the patterns of human response to that revelation. Their function is to admit the prospective leadership of the church, both clerical and lay, into the circle of their discourse, for the sake of offering their thought along with every other feature of church life to the praise of God and the service of the world. By its very nature the enterprise is incurably critical, for it must reflect upon and articulate the church's failures to respond to the revelation along with her successes, failures past and failures present, in order that future responses may be more singularly loyal to the revelation and more penetrating of human cultures.

Meanwhile, during this transformation in the character and consciousness of theological education, the actual process of training men and women for the program of the churches' work has come to be conducted, quite

3. Comparative ecclesiology is the study by comparison and contrast of the doctrinal beliefs of the Christian denominations and particularly of their doctrines of the church.

4. Cf. H. R. Niebuhr, *The Purpose of the Church and Its Ministry* (New York, 1956) esp. ch. 3.

properly, by the programming agencies of the church: local, regional, national and otherwise. At every point the intellectual endeavor interacts with the actual training process, and care needs to be taken to insure a relation of mutually critical co-operation between the two, for their separation is as harmful as is the failure to distinguish between them. The atmosphere of the former is that of unfettered, critical investigation; of the latter, that of the urgency of the next practical step. Insofar as missions is to be understood as the work of an ecclesiastical agency, the promotion of its program rightly belongs to the agency, which must focus attention not only upon future church leaders but also upon present ones. Within the same understanding of missions the role of theological study and teaching is that of investigation and appraisal under the norms of the commission of God to His folk and the circumstances of the peoples of His world.

The acceptance by theological educators of an investigating and critical role in the life of the church makes theological education an inappropriate vehicle for training young men and women for the particular tasks of world evangelization. But, as I hope to show, it also puts it under an even weightier responsibility to the mission of the church.

III. CHURCH AND MISSION?

How is "the Christian mission" or "the mission of the church" or "missions" regarded in our day? Again largely owing to movements originated or influenced by the World Missionary Conference—the Life and Work Movement, the Faith and Order Movement, the World Council of Churches, the International Missionary Council, world-wide confessional conferences and the national Christian councils—the concept of mission has undergone radical rethinking and transformation. The change in this conception is perhaps best epitomized by the saying so frequently repeated by missionary thinkers: the church does not *have* missions; the church *is* mission. Needless to say, this reorientation of the definition of mission as constitutive of the church, away from a notion of missions as constituted by the church, involves a number of revolutionary ideas. No longer is a simple geographical denotation of the term "mission" possible, and no longer, *mutatis mutandis*, can the history of missions be regarded simply as the geographical expansion of churches. Perhaps more disruptive is the evacuation of economic designations of missions as dependent ecclesiastical organizations (although this practical denotation seems at present ineradicably fixed in the minds of church administrators). Neither can there be maintained under the concept of the church as mission the great nineteenth-century extension of Henry Venn's idea of the goal of missionary enterprise (as the building of self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating churches) into the distinguishing mark between church and mission. However, the more embracing idea of mission as the constitutive attribute of the church is not intended to generalize "mission" until the term bears no specific meaning. Designation of the church as mission, wholly responsible to the

dialogue between Christ and culture, indicates that the church is sent, not sender; the herald of redemptive revelation, not its imparter; the urger of grateful response to redemption in the full variety of human cultures, not the systematizer of "religion" in the sense of one such historic response in obedience to which all cultures must be brought.

IV. THE SCIENCE OF MISSIONS: ITS FIELD AND SPONSORS

Missionswissenschaft must, like any other science, mark off its field of primary investigative interest. Just here arises the problem today. If approached historically as investigating the theory and practice of missions (various enough in itself!) according to recently outmoded understandings of "missions," the science is manageable but irrelevant to contemporary missionary conversations. If approached from the standpoint of contemporary missionary conversations, the science becomes so diffuse as to banish all distinctions among traditional theological disciplines. It seems remarkable that the significant contributions to the development of a new and far-reaching understanding of the mission of the church in this century came, on the whole, not from the specialists in the science of missions but rather from persons whose disciplines were systematic and historical and biblical theology. To be sure, the work of scholars in the latter fields came to bear upon the understanding of missions more prominently after 1925, as Myklebust points out.⁵ It is nevertheless difficult to omit mention of the fact that the major terms of missionary debate in the last two decades were posed by two men, Kraemer and Hocking, whose scholarly specialties were not missions but, respectively, linguistics and philosophy! Now nobody would assert seriously that the church is the Bible, or biblical theology, or church history, or patristics, or historical theology, or dogmatics, or ethics, or moral theology, or worship, or preaching, or pastoral care, or Christian education, or hymnody. One hastens to say that experts in these fields often act as though they wish they might reasonably make that assertion for their specialties, yet they refrain, in the interest of making sense of their studies if for no other reason. That they may at times make omnivorous curricular claims for their fields of interest is due to no serious identification of the church with their specialty, but rather is one of the dangers of proceeding without a conscious understanding of mission as the ruling context for theological education. The claim for missions as a *separate* field of study tends to surrender the mission as the *context* of all theological studies and teaching. The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches has attributed "reluctance on the part of the theological faculties and colleges to institute the study of missions as an independent subject" to the presupposition of "a static, rather than a missionary church" and to a consequent failure of sufficient concern "with the task of taking the Gospel to those outside."⁶ That

5. *SMTE* II, 17.

6. *The Calling of the Church to Missions and to Unity* (1951), p. 7, quoted by *SMTE* II, p. 288.

seems an accurate enough description of theological education in 1910 in many places, but it hardly does justice to the anomaly of the science of missions in 1951, when "taking the Gospel to those outside" was at the least a very problematical demarcation of the field of study of missions.

The science of missions and the teaching of missions are youthful enterprises in Western Christianity, traceable in their foundation to the work of German and Scottish scholars of about a century ago. At that time the continuous tradition of North American theological education was itself very young and by no means was accorded its present place in church life. There existed a general receptivity to missions teaching in the Presbyterian churches, due to their congenial combination of universalizing evangelical theology with high educational interest. Anglicans and Lutherans, however, have "paid but scant attention to the missionary education of their clergy."⁷ On the whole the independent science of missions grew in the theological schools of church traditions of biblical, rather than those of doctrinal or ecclesiological, orientation. With specific regard to American theological schools, the *independence* of missions study seems to have been declared within biblically emphatic church traditions at a time when their biblical scholarship was *literalistic and static*. The fact that missions teaching among Anglicans fell to church historians by and large, while giving the impression of relegation to a status of dependence, nevertheless gave to missions a certain prominence of association with ecclesiological study.

But today biblical theology is generally alive again, very largely because of a new emphasis in the understanding of the choosing and commissioning of Israel, old and new, for missionary vocations. That is as salutary a development as is the apparent necessity, in the light of the ecumenical movement, for a thorough re-evaluation of traditional ecclesiology in the context of the assertion that the church is, and does not simply have, mission. For these developments to spring from either a dependent or an independent science of missions gives cause for thanksgiving. Perhaps the accomplishment of new missionary understandings could reach farther into theological education if the issue of the dependence or independence of a now frighteningly diffuse science commanded less attention and the claim of the Christian mission to be the matrix of all Christian thought were granted.

V. A DISTINCTIVE AMERICAN APPROACH

The total situation of the American churches indicates a unique opportunity for mission study and teaching here today. Myklebust reminded us of the startling leadership provided by these churches to the missionary enterprise at the middle of our century. More than one-half of the personnel and more than three-quarters of the funds of the total Christian world mission came in 1950 from the U.S.A. In the same year American theological schools had three times as many persons devoting their full energies to teaching missions as had the rest of the Protestant world. The

7. *SMTE* II, p. 219, cf. *ibid.*, pp. 323 f.

ecumenical leader Adolf Keller has observed that theological seminaries provide "the most important link in the whole chain of North American missionary effort."⁸

American church life in its total pattern stands as a bridge between the lingering impetuses of European church-societies, extended into our generation by post-Reformation confessionalism, and the purely voluntary character of the younger churches which bear their witness in the milieu of the pluralistic, renascent cultures of Asia, Africa and Latin America. More than anywhere else in the world today, Christianity in America combines strong numerical and material resources with a relatively fresh recollection of having benefited from the missionary efforts of the older churches. Thus at ecumenical gatherings Americans seem to Europeans identifiable with younger churches for their practical bent and their youthful aggressiveness, while seeming to younger churchmen closely linked to the European churches from which they historically derived and whose stamp they still bear in many ways. In brief, American Christians can remember Christendom while knowing full well that their own era is beyond Christendom. This situation is reflected in their theological education which in this century has shown itself remarkably open to creative influences from the traditionally organized theological faculties of Europe, and at the same time restless to break the traditionalism and traditional intellectualism which are said to tempt European theology. Somewhere between the continental proposal of missions as an independent science or the British option of partitioning missions among the established disciplines on the one hand, and on the other hand the tendency in the younger churches to regard their entire experience so unilaterally as an experience in "missions" that scant particular attention can be given the matter, lies a viable approach for American theological education.

VI. SEVERAL SUGGESTIONS

Out of these observations there spring several suggestions about the operation of theological education in the context of the mission of the church.

The entire range of theological study, from Hebrew to Homiletics, takes as its ruling context and theme the mission of God's Israel to the world. The character and content of the mission are progressively unfolded in Biblical studies. The conditioning of the response to the mission by a variety of human cultures is amply illustrated by the Christian study of history, including in that field a sufficient breadth of man's activity to clarify the qualitatively equal demand of that mission upon all human religions including the Christian religion. The demand and characteristic human responses to it provide the matter of systematic theological reflection, as the thought-patterns of a given time and place provide its form. The communicative vehicles of that mission and viable patterns of response to it in a given culture are the data of pastoralia.

8. *SMTE* II, pp. 327 ff., quoting Keller, *American Christianity Today*.

The *terminus a quo* and the *terminus ad quem* of the inescapable mission of Christianity are so variable as to demand the skills of all branches of theology for their elucidation. The boundaries from, across and to which a Christian may be sent are very various: linguistic, social, educational, geographical, racial, religious, political, economic, regional, professional, to name but a few examples. Certainly no imaginable proliferation of ecclesiastical administrative bureaus could manage to designate an official agency for each possible boundary. Above all the traditional tendency to regard spatial remoteness as the measure of mission is to be discarded in a day when temporal distances have virtually vanished. In a word, the Christian mission is eminently more variable than the church departments bearing its name would indicate. The widest variety of theological labors is needed to explicate and articulate for our day its manifold forms.

The demand of the Christian revelation for the transformation of every cultural and religious circumstance makes it imperative that the teaching of the mission of the church be made available in its full breadth to all Christian workers. A missionary calling is at its height when the recipient of the call is sent to the most alien circumstance he can imagine. In a pluralistic society the missionary vocation may mean for a given person the pastorate of what he calls his home parish. Apart from deep reflection upon the church's whole experience of mission, preparation for any piece of Christian work is defective. No single, independent science, nor even the sum of several such, can accomplish that reflection. The whole of the church's experience in its constitutive function is the uniting element of the most diverse theological disciplines. Without the mission of the church as the single context of all theological study and teaching, no single discipline can adequately perform its task.

The differentiation of functions among a theological faculty working in the context of the Christian mission consists less in a parcelling out of the prerogatives of departments of theological learning, and more in a specifying of responsibilities for dimensions of Christian thought and life. Given reasonable time, any passably intelligent theological professor could ably teach any subject of the theological curriculum and find himself comfortably ahead of the modern crop of students. But the church historian with a strong interest in canon law soon wearies of hermeneutics without a biblical theologian around who is willing to function as his colleague and thereby to keep him honest. Probably in most theological faculties in North America today there is still need for a colleague specifically responsible for the dimension of the mission of the church in the whole range of disciplines. But if so he will be needed as a colleague and his task will be one marked by responsibility rather than by academic prerogative. He will be a busy beaver, and he will read the exegetes and theologians and philosophers and poets as well as the historians of religions and the letters from missionaries and the daily newspapers. What he says to his colleagues will depend upon him and upon them and upon the appropriate mode of conversation in his collegium.

But in conversation with them he must somehow be, not as with fellow-specialists but precisely as with colleagues without whose companionship in study and teaching his responsibility for missions cannot be borne. He may even offer a course on missions as such, but if he does he will discover himself to be teaching Bible and history and doctrine and pastoralia—all from the standpoint of the Christian mission—which is just what he is to expect his colleagues to be doing.