

# Baptists and a Theology of Mission

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## Overture

Baptist identity is deeply shaped by our commitment to the *authority of the Holy Scriptures of the Christian church*. The Holy Scriptures are the well from which we drink. It is there where we find the story of Jesus, the foundation and content in our living and the hope in our dying.

Within the Christian Bible, the text at the end of the Gospel of Matthew – *Mt 28:16-20* – has been of shaping influence to the Baptist understanding of faith and mission. This text, like a drop of rain that reflects the many and beautiful colours of the rainbow, echoes for us the colourful grace of God. It is a text that brings together the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and as such can serve as a paradigm for a baptist theology of mission.

This text summarizes the biblical story, emphasizing that the question whether we should be engaged in *mission or not* is not at our disposal. It is given with the very being and activity of God. Just as fire is in burning, and light is in shining, so God is in loving and saving and liberating. God calls and empowers Christians to mission. By hearing, trusting and obeying God's liberating call to mission we not only echo the nature of God, but we have the noble privilege of becoming *συνεργοὶ θεοῦ* = ("God's fellow workers" – 1 Cor 3:9).

It is the *role and function of theology* in the Christian community, not to question the importance, yes, the necessity of mission, but to ask what a responsible theology and practice of mission may look like today. Such a theology hears the biblical message, is aware of the promises and problems of Christian missions through the ages, reads the signs of the times, and then asks what the Spirit of God may be doing in the world today.

It is that what we as Baptist Christians would want to do: to join *what God is doing in the world*. A difficult undertaking! The gulf between heaven and earth is great. Our consciences are compromised by our personal, national and ecclesiastical self interest. Like Amos of old predicted, we wander "from sea to sea, and from north to east ... seeking the word of the LORD" (Amos 8:11f.). Shall we find it?

## Trinity (identity)

Let us start at the beginning and move straight to the centre. When Christians in the first few centuries tried to gather their understanding of God into words and thoughts, *human* words and thoughts, what resulted was the understanding of God as *trinity*. To the present day the trinity has remained the identity symbol of the Christian faith, and in recent years we have witnessed a renewed interest in the trinitarian understanding of God. With the doctrine of the trinity Christians do not want to define God and thus remove the divine mystery which is needed to inspire a living faith. But, without wanting to encroach upon holy space, they wanted to maintain two things that are of import for Christian thinking at all times and in all places.

i. By linking the Word "God" to *Jesus*, Christians confess that "God is love" – *unconditional love*. That is more than saying that "God loves" or that "God is lovely" or that "love is God". It says that love is God's nature. God is nothing else but love. And what that love is, is spelled out by the story of Jesus and the mission of the Spirit.

Jesus narrates this in the parable of the sheep that lost its way in the stony wilderness. When it became confused and tired, it just laid down among the bushes. Then there was rustling in the bushes, footsteps. The shepherd appears. The joy of discovery gives him the strength to put the sheep on his shoulders and carry it back to the fold. Such is the being of God.

God manifested faithfulness to his own being when he raised Jesus from the dead. Jesus had fleshed out obedience to the first commandment, and consequently radical love and solidarity for and with others. By raising this Jesus from the dead, God confirmed that his holiness, his difference to us, is that God's "heart" is ruled by compassion (Hosea 11:8f.) and a yearning for freedom (Exod 3).

***Christian mission is Christian in that it echoes the being of God as love.***

ii. Linking the word "God" with the *Holy Spirit* implies that the Christian message must be *contextual*. Not in the sense that the context or the situation decides what the word "God" means. But in the sense that God is a *living* God who inter-relates his divine being with each respective situation. In the Christmas story of the evangelist John we read that "the light *shines* (present tense!) in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5 in the context of 1:1-18). Grace aims at becoming event. It wants to modify and transform the situation. For that to happen there need to be *points of contact*. The God, whose being corresponds to Jesus, needs to be perceived ever anew in each situation.

***Christian mission is Christian in that it responds to what God is doing in each situation.***

For a theology of mission these references to the trinity entail two imperatives.

i. In Christian mission, in our words and actions, it must become absolutely clear *who* God is. In word and deed, in thought and prayer, we witness to a God who *is* love. That is our identity.

ii. While the *content* of the mission of God's love is global, its *form* must vary from situation to situation. Baptist missionaries like William Carey (1761-1835) in India and Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) in Burma are revered to the present day for their cultural sensitivity and their holistic understanding of and witness to the gospel.

**Context (relevance)**

As far as the context is concerned, a modern theology of mission must address the following challenges. I mention four. The list could easily be extended.

**Religious pluralism.**

As Christians we do not only confess that God "*desires everyone* to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth", but we claim that Jesus Christ is the "*one* mediator between God and humankind", that he *alone* is "the way and the truth and the life", and that "no one comes to the Father except through" him. Indeed, we confess that in Jesus Christ "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily", and that therefore "there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved." (1 Tim 2:4f.; John 14:6; Col 2:9; Acts 4:12).

At the same time we know that for masses of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, agnostics and atheists the Christian message is perceived not to be one of love, but of aggression, intolerance and conquest. Christian leaders, including Baptist leaders, have recently added fuel to the fire of prejudice when in the wake of September 11, 2001 and October 12, 2002 they made ill considered and malevolent statements against Islam. And despite official denials, the war against Iraq has an anti-Islam element to it.

The challenge is to develop a theology and a praxis of mission in which there is coherence between the way we do it, the *form* of mission, and the *substance* of the gospel. In a pivotal text the apostle Paul affirms that in Christ, "God was reconciling the world to himself," but at the same he insists: "we *entreat* you ('beg!' - deo/meqa) on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:16-21). The use of force, disrespect and malice in our relationship to other religions would be contrary to the nature of the gospel and an impediment to Christian mission.

### **Religious fanaticism.**

September 11, 2001 and October 12, 2002 remain stark reminders that religious faith can be functionalised to kill and destroy. The Muslim fanatic who on December 30, 2002 killed three missionaries in the *Jibla Baptist Hospital* in Yemen said that he shot the American workers "to cleanse his religion and get closer to Allah."

It is high time that all religions, including ours, say a loud, clear and radical "*No*" to any and every *form of violence*. The World Council of Churches is to be commended and supported for declaring the present decade as the "Decade of Overcoming Violence". The recent war against Iraq will affect our mission work for years to come. We shall have to tread even more softly on the earth.

### **The militarism of the Christian "West".**

Militarism is a world wide phenomenon. Our world is militarised. Governments are more concerned with power and security than with helping the poor and vulnerable. In North Korea the government pumps ever new millions into a nuclear program while people are starving and dying. The documentary "Bowling for Columbine" shows that in the USA, where we have the largest Baptist constituency, not the gospel but the gun is perceived as guaranteeing freedom and democracy. In the horn of Africa people are starving and dying of AIDS, while governments and revolutionaries have massive military budgets. During the discussion about the morality and legitimacy of a pre-emptive war against Iraq, it was good to see that most churches and church leaders around the world said a clear "No" to war. If such a "no" is not pervasive in our Baptist family our mission credibility is seriously curtailed. *We cannot follow the call of Matthew 28 and then refuse to obey Matthew 5-7.*

In this regard it may prove helpful if we retrieve the roots of the non-violent Anabaptist movement in Switzerland, Austria and Southern Germany from the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **The wealth of the Christian "West".**

While the "West" has unimaginable wealth and while the military budgets of the "West" know no limits, the Washington based *Worldwatch Institute* in its recently published *2003 World Report* gives the general diagnosis that "the human race has only one, perhaps two generations to rescue itself", and reminds us of the particular fact that 1.2 billion people, 1/5 of human kind, live in abject poverty, a poverty that none of us can imagine. For the "West", mission abroad would gain credibility if we would lobby at home that money would be better spent to empower the poor and give hope to the oppressed rather than feeding our military machinery with billions of dollars.

Having located our identity in the trinitarian history of God, and having sketched the context and its challenges in which our mission work must take place, we shall now gather our thoughts into a constructive Christian theology of mission from a baptist perspective.

## Mission

### Matthew 28:16-20 as a paradigm

If there is one text that has influenced our understanding of Christian faith (we may modestly call it "evangelical" with a small "e" or "baptist" with a small "b") more than any other, it is the last few verses in the Gospel of Matthew:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the *mountain* to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they *worshiped* him; but some *doubted*. And Jesus came and said to them, "*All authority* in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Go therefore* and *make disciples* of all nations, *baptizing* them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching* them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, *I am with you always, to the end of the age.*" (Mt 28:16-20)

#### 1. Resurrection and Mission – The risen "Jesus came and said to them ..."

The *risen Christ* is speaking and calling to mission. The resurrection of Christ is the foundational event of the Christian faith and the Christian church. We may have different opinions as to what resurrection means and how to understand it. But one thing is clear and, indeed, it has never been controversial in main stream Christianity: if Jesus had not been raised from the dead, there would be no Christianity, no faith and no church. By raising Jesus from the dead, God has, once for all, defeated the estranging powers of death. On that basis we can confess and proclaim that *nothing* "will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:39).

The resurrection of Christ contains an inner thrust to shape history in the direction of *shalom*. But as we said before, it belongs to the mystery of grace that God does not by pass human obedience but invites it. The resurrection accounts in the gospels are therefore inter-related with the call to mission.

... he appeared to the eleven.... And he said to them, "*Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation ....*" (Mark 16:15).

(The risen Christ) said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. *You are witnesses of these things.* And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high." (Luke 24:46-49).

"... you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and *you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.*" (Acts 1:8).

(The risen) Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. *As the Father has sent me, even so I send you.*" And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." (John 20:21).

Also on the personal level, when the risen Christ appeared to Paul (Gal 1:15f.) and Peter (John 21:15-17), their moment of truth, their encounter with God, their conversion, included a call to mission and service.

## **2. Universalising Jesus' vision of life – "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.*"**

Through the resurrection, Jesus has been freed from the limitations of time and space. His way of life, his unconditional acceptance of others, his view of the comforting and challenging nearness of God - all that is now given *universal* dignity and status.

By raising Jesus from the dead, God has declared that at the centre of reality there is a *good* God whose concern for his creation is passionate and strong. At the centre of life there is not nothing, there is not a dark fate, but there is a God who cares. With the resurrection of the *crucified* Christ we confess that life at its centre is not marked by war, but by peace, not by competition, but by reconciliation, not by individualism, but by relationship, not by conquest but by service – because Christ is our peace, and he "came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

## **3. Responsible Freedom – "Go therefore..."**

If Christ and his vision of life has been given "*all* authority, in heaven and on earth", if it is God's will that all people know him and be saved. Yes, if the shepherd is so concerned about the one sheep that is lost, that he leaves the 99 in order to rescue the one, what does that mean for our human living and dying? Are we puppets in the hand of God? Can we with our life make a difference? Or is our only responsibility to look after ourselves, build our little castles and make our few years on earth as comfortable as possible?

The "*therefore*" is important. The universal authority of Christ does not exclude, but it includes our freedom and responsibility. The power of God is the power of love. As such it invites and empowers believers to participate in God saving and liberating passion for the world.

## **4. Call to Mission – "... *make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*"**

The call of the universal mission to "all nations" and the trinitarian emphasis Baptists share with all Christians. Nevertheless there are specific emphases which are part of the baptist tradition and which Baptist should recall and recover today.

We cannot ignore that mission, especially foreign mission, inter-cultural mission, is in crisis today. Terror is religiously motivated and people think and say that religion is dangerous. Critical voices in the "West" point to the cultural insensitivity of Christian mission and say that mission is outdated and should be stopped. That is not possible, however! Can a mother stop loving the child of her womb? Can God stop loving the world? As long as God is God the *missio dei* cannot be stopped.

What can be stopped and what must be stopped is to use "worldly" means for the divine mission. Positively, our mission theology and our mission praxis must be in continuity with the story of Jesus. They must echo the being of God as love. We need to admit the errors of our mission work, we need to repent for the mistakes, and if possible try to undo their consequences. But as believers we cannot ignore the call to mission. As long as the church is responsive to a God who is love, people will want to share their lives. And sharing our lives means mission.

We saw it already: *resurrection faith implies mission*. The early Christians spoke about the risen Christ as "the *beginning*, the *first-born* from the dead" (Col 1:18; compare 1 Cor 15:20.23; Rom 8:29; Acts 26:23; Rev 1:5). With the resurrection of the crucified One, God has begun to win creation back to himself.

*Having heard* the good news that Jesus' vision of life is an expression of the heart of God, believers do not withdraw into a comfortable existence, but they *go!*

As Baptists, our tradition, reaching back into the beginnings of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe and 17<sup>th</sup> century England and now found in all corners of the world, has laid two important theological emphases on our hearts:

*Faith as discipleship.* Faith can easily go astray. It can stand for private piety, and at the same time be used to justify war. It can be interpreted as intellectual assent to doctrines or as intense religious experience. Ways must therefore be found to guard faith against human subjectivism and human self interest. The Anabaptists distinguished between the "sweet" and "bitter" Christ. From their perspective, the Reformers preached "a sinful sweet Christ", who does not lead to a "betterment of life"<sup>1</sup>. Hans (John) Denck summarizes the Anabaptist ethos of Christian discipleship well: "... none may truly know (Christ) unless he follows after him with his life. And no one can follow after him except in so far as one previously knows him."<sup>2</sup>

In our time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer distinguishes between "cheap" and "costly" grace and warned:

Cheap Grace is the deadly enemy of our Church. We are fighting today for costly grace. Cheap grace means .... Grace without price; grace without cost! .... Cheap grace means grace as a doctrine, a principle, a system. It means forgiveness of sins proclaimed as a general truth, the love of God taught as the Christian 'conception' of God. An intellectual assent to that idea is held to be of itself sufficient to secure remission of sins. .... Cheap grace therefore amounts to a denial of the living Word of God, in fact, a denial of the Incarnation of the Word of God. .... Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate. ... The word of cheap grace has been the ruin of more Christians than any commandment of works.<sup>3</sup>

We find the same emphasis in one of the most creative and focussed missiologists of our time, Lesslie Newbiggin, when he elaborates that Jesus refused both the Zealot option of using violence to bring in the kingdom of God and the Essene option of withdrawing from responsibility for the present. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem on a donkey or an ass rather than on a military horse he enacted a parable for the church to follow: "neither withdrawal from world into a religious sanctuary; nor ... engagement with the world on the world's terms." The church must focus on "something else"! The "authenticating marks of the missionary church will be the marks of the passion ..."<sup>4</sup>

For the credibility of the church as a presupposition for mission, we must maintain a clear witness that Christian faith is focused on the resurrection of the *crucified* Christ. It is him, the *crucified One* whom Christians are called to echo with their lives and their institutions.

*ii.* Related to the emphasis on faith as discipleship is the baptist insistence on *believers' baptism*. We recognise, of course, that infant baptism has a long history, and that it can be seen as a powerful symbol for *sola gratia*. At the same time it is the baptist responsibility within the wider church to keep the testimony alive that the early Christians baptised believers by immersion, that believers baptism by immersion is the more powerful symbol for "dying and rising with Christ" (Romans 6), and that grace does not by-pass but invites the response of faith and obedience. In baptism the believer and the community of faith celebrate and confess publicly to whom they belong.

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<sup>1</sup> Conrad Grebel and friends, "Letters to Thomas Müntzer," (Sept. 5, 1524) trans. Walter Rauschenbusch (revised) in George Huntston Williams and Angel M. Mergal, eds., *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers*. The Library of Christian Classics XXV (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1957, 73-85) 74, 78f.

<sup>2</sup> "Whether God is the Cause of Evil," (1526), trans. George Huntston Williams, in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers* (1957, 88-111) 108.

<sup>3</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, trans. R. H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth (New York: MacMillan, 1963 [1937]) 45-47 and 59.

<sup>4</sup> Lesslie Newbiggin, *Mission in Christ's Way. A gift, a command, an assurance* (New York: Friendship Press, 1988), 26f.

## **The mission of love – "... *teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you.*"**

Recently (Dec 30, 2002) three Christian missionaries were killed in the *Jibla Baptist Hospital* in Yemen. The missionaries were sought out and gunned down by a Muslim fanatic. The gunman said he shot the American workers "to cleanse his religion and get closer to Allah."

Christianity is not the only Missionary religion. For that reason some Islamic nations voted for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which contains an article on the freedom of religion and the right to share one's religion with others. How then do we respond to religious fanaticism and to cultural insensitivity?

How can the mission work of the Christian church become part of that movement in all religions that refuses to use their religious faith for political, nationalistic and economic ends? How can we make sure that Christian mission is grounded in God who is not a tribal deity, but who is creator and sustainer of "heaven and earth" and whose compassion shows a special leaning towards those who are struggling?

### **A Christian theology of mission responds by inter-relating the *content of faith with to the story of Jesus.***

The risen Lord had gathered his disciples on a mountain. A *mountain!* It is the mountain of God. Jesus' famous sermon was preached on the mountain. And that is to where our text points us: to the content of faith as expressed in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount.

We can't repeat the whole content of the Sermon on the Mount here. It is there for us to read – ever again. But, given the challenges that lie ahead of us, we may well take note of the following emphases.

i. We note, first of all, that the *church is named as a community with a mission.* It is to be the "*salt of the earth*" and the "*light of the world*". Just as a little salt in a soup makes a decisive *difference*, just as light *transforms* the darkness, so the church has a mission in the world.

The church's task is not to provide a divine halo for the status quo or to serve national and ideological interests. Our privilege is to *witness with word and deed to a new way of being.*

ii. The stuff of the new way of being is *love.* Why? Because "God is love". The Sermon on the Mount therefore does not promise eschatological blessings on those of power and privilege, but on the "meek", on those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness", on the "merciful", on those who are "pure in heart", and on the "peacemakers". It is they, who echo the God who is love, who "will inherit the earth", who "will receive mercy", who "will see God", and who "will be called children of God".

iii. *Evangelism, justice and peace* are the structures of love. Commitment to a mission of love implies, *firstly*, that we overcome the unfortunate division between evangelism and social action. The recently founded *Micah Network* (2001) of evangelical mission has suggested the helpful concept of "integral mission":

Integral mission or holistic transformation is the proclamation *and* demonstration of the gospel. It is not simply that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other. Rather, in integral mission our proclamation has social consequences as we call people to love and repentance in all areas of life. And our social involvement has evangelistic consequences as we bear witness to the transforming grace of Jesus Christ. If we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to serve the world. If we ignore the word of God we have nothing to bring to the world. Justice and justification by faith, worship and political action, the spiritual and the material, personal change and

structural change belong together. As in the life of Jesus, being, doing and saying are at the heart of our integral task. (*Micah Declaration*)

And the *second* emphasis implied in a mission of love is that special attention be paid to the global situation and see what our mission can contribute to spread peace, eliminate poverty, resist racism, further reconciliation and empower people who struggle with the challenges of life.

iv. The baptist tradition, together with Mennonites, Quakers and Brethren, has heard Jesus' call to peace making. Although this has never been part of the official ethos of most Baptist churches, the question is, whether in light of the present global militarism and given the *World Council of Churches'* designation of this decade as the *Decade of Overcoming Violence*, we should not retrieve the Anabaptist emphasis on non-violence and thus make a prophetic gospel witness to our time.<sup>5</sup>

Non-violence is an essential dimension to the Jesus Story. We can't have Jesus without it. A modern theology of mission will therefore emphasise non-violence, and thereby pave the way towards the day when politicians will have to solve human conflicts without the instrument of war.

Mission, yes! But it must be the mission of love.

## **6. Divine Presence – "And remember, *I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"**

The challenge is great. The privilege is noble. But how can we do it? We join, ever again, Abraham and Moses and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Amos of old becoming aware of our human frailty in light of the divine call.

Memory brings into our awareness that God knows our reluctance, our limitations, our lovelessness, our anxieties. Just as Moses experienced the self-revelation of God overcoming his human anxiety (Exodus 3), so the risen Christ promises to all who hear, trust and obey: "*I am with you always, to the end of the age.*"

***Thorwald Lorenzen, 2 June 2003.***

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<sup>5</sup> There is an increasing stream of theologians who argue strongly that commitment to Jesus Christ implies the renouncing of violence and war to solve human conflicts. Compare Compare James Wm. McClendon, Jr., *Systematic Theology – Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986) pp. 299-326; also the writings of Stanley Hauerwas and John Howard Yoder.