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What Is a "Missionary," Anyway?  
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# What Is a "Missionary," Anyway?

By GRAEME M. ROSENAU

WHAT is a "missionary," anyway? The answer cannot be given in 30 minutes or 30 hours. Some things that are extremely important can be said, and this is an attempt to say them. But what is said can by its very generality point only beyond itself to the greatness of the work we missionaries have laid upon us and to the incalculable magnitude of the divine grace that has called *us*, even us, in our weakness and incapability, to perform it and has given us the power and promise that guarantee success. Only let us remember that the success will come in *God's* way and on *God's* terms. In humble trust and submission, then, let us ask, "As a missionary, just what am I, anyway?"

We know that *missionary* is a term not found in Scripture. But the word means "one who is sent," and in the Christian sense has its roots deep in the very nature of God's plan of salvation. God has always sent men on missions for Him. In the Old Testament He sent His prophets. But since they preached primarily to the Israelites and only occasionally to the heathen, they were not missionaries in the usual sense of the term.<sup>1</sup> In the New Testament God sent John the Baptist to prepare the Messianic highway. He sent His Son in a special sense, for this Jesus not only spoke of God, but in Him God appeared. And Jesus, the sent God of God, sent His apostles in turn on a mission of world conquest. Here is really the beginning of

Christian world missions. So as missionaries each of us can properly say, "I am a man who stands in the apostolic succession, a man *on* Christ's *world* mission and in one of His local missions."

## I

First, then, *as a missionary I am a man who stands in an apostolic succession*. It would lead to small appreciation of my status as missionary if I were to pass lightly over those first words: "I am a man." Thus I am descended from him who was created in the image of God and have, but for the fall, a tremendous potential for the creative. But as Adam fell, I, who am born in his image, now have a natural rebellious tendency to destroy. I naturally use the dominion that is part of the divine image not as an agent of God but as His enemy.

But, thank the Lord, I am a man *in an apostolic succession*. I am called by the same Christ who said to the apostles, "Follow Me"—called to be conformed to His image; I am taught through Spirit and Word by the very Christ who instructed the apostles; and I am sent by the Christ who commissioned the apostles. Therefore, as Franzmann well phrased it in speaking of the church, I stand in an apostolic succession "in a sense and in a reality which no unbrokenly successive imposition of palms on pates can guarantee."<sup>2</sup>

I am called by the Christ who said to His first missionaries, "You have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you" (John

<sup>1</sup> Heinz Brunotte, "Mission, Missionspredigt, Missionsreisen," *Biblisch-Theologisches Handwörterbuch zur Lutherbibel und zu neueren Übersetzungen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1954), p. 379.

<sup>2</sup> Martin H. Franzmann, "The Apostolate: Its Enduring Significance in the Apostolic Word," *CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY*, XXVIII (March 1957), 197.

15:16). Here is grace indeed! Out of the world and its darkness Christ has chosen *me*. In the Gospel, spoken, written, and signed, I hear Him say, "Be of good cheer; *your* sins are forgiven!" Without that gracious call and faith therein, I can never rightly call myself a missionary.

If I am called by Christ, I am also a man under the training of Christ through His Spirit and Word. In this sense I am an ever-growing theologian. I will be well versed in systematic theology, especially the Lutheran Confessions. I will be acquainted with the history of the Christian church. I will be a good practical theologian, knowing and practicing the principles of effective communication, for I must be "apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2). But first and foremost I will be an exegete! For God speaks to me first and foremost in the naked Word of Scripture and only by derivation in systematic, historical, and practical volumes. "If you continue in My Word, then are you My disciples indeed, and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31, 32). It cannot be denied that this word of Jesus in a very real sense urges us to a life-shaping pursuit of Spirit-imploping Biblical exegesis!

As a man in an apostolic succession I am, finally, one who has received from Christ a *commission* and the *power* to carry it out. For Jesus has said to His Twelve, and through them to His church, and to me,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and by teaching them to observe all that I have commanded

you. And lo, I am with you always, until the end of time. (Matt. 28:18-20)

Now it is true that I do not hold the office of apostle in the sense that the Eleven received it; that is why I am called not "apostle" but "missionary." But the world mission, the means of performing it, the power to make it effective, and the nearness of Christ are still present actualities for me. As a man after Adam's image, I find it naturally easiest to use my powers for destruction. But in Christ God has called and qualified me for the creative—to be His agent in the work of creating new life in dead men, no less! But this work by its very nature brings greater damnation to those who refuse my missionary call to "repent and believe the Gospel" (cf. John 12:44-50 et al.). It is a work for which, in its glory and its terror, I *alone* would be inadequate. It is an occupation which, in its searingly brilliant heights and blackest depths, would never have entered my unconverted mind. It lies before me as a daily appeal to faith and a constant call to do battle with the ways and opinions of my flesh. It is truly *God's* work, for God has laid His hand upon me, and I am now His missionary, standing in the succession of His apostles. However I may look to the world and to my own fleshly mind, I am a man *on* Christ's *world* mission and *in* one of His *local* missions. It is this dual mission of which I now must speak a little while.

## II

First, then, *as a missionary I am a man on Christ's world mission*. In this phase of my work I am to represent Christ to the world. I go out as one who has met Christ in His Word and as one empowered to witness to what I have seen there. Having received the Spirit of power, I am to cry to

all with eschatological urgency, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of your sins." As a missionary I am not just a Bible passer or tract pusher. This would make it too easy for the person with whom I'm dealing to muse about the matter idly or to fail to ponder it at all. No, I am a man with a living voice to speak the life-giving Gospel. I am to be what Franzmann (p. 194) calls "a living, urgent, and waiting person who will not let us off without a decision."

As Christ's commissioned representative to the world, I am to work hard at dealing with *individuals*. The late Rev. A. H. Haake, former chairman of Synod's Board for Home Missions, often reiterated this point: "You don't build the church from the pulpit." By oversimplifying, the statement makes a valid emphasis. Like the Christ I represent, I dare not rely only on public address for dealing with people. Remembering Jesus' encounters with men like Nicodemus, Simon the Pharisee, and Zacchaeus, I will receive and *seek out* the *individual* to show him the Way of life.

I am a man on a *world* mission for Christ, reaching out to the world *person by person* as the Lord opens their doors. As a man on a *world* mission, I am to reach out to *all* in my neighborhood. In this age of wide travel and student exchange, and in mosaic America, the world may truly lie right at my door. I will therefore extend Christ's call to *all*. The folk idea that the Jews have cursed themselves and can therefore be by-passed must be rooted and burned out of my mind with the pick and fire of Christ's love. I am a missionary of the *Gospel*; I am not the executor of God's wrath! I must call also the Jews in my ter-

ritory. They are part of the world I am sent to conquer, and Christ will welcome them. Schlatter's observation is most thought-provoking; he says of the apostles,

They are to bring the good news to all nations by beginning at Jerusalem. To Jerusalem the Gospel comes first. In the fact that Jesus can give His disciples this commission, the petition "Father, forgive them," which Jesus uttered on the cross, is fulfilled.<sup>3</sup>

As a faithful missionary to the world I will also include those of other colors and those from other countries. I realize that Synod has passed a resolution or several to this effect, but I do not act primarily on that account. I feel the pressure of public opinion both from within and from without the church; but I don't act—or refrain from acting—because of that. For in the mercy of God I learn, as I follow Christ, "to renounce the majority and to go the way of God alone" (p. 187). And the way of God is the way to *all* the world. I act because *Christ* tells me to; His word "Make disciples of *all nations*" is clear.

As a man on Christ's world mission I am to work as a free man in Christ, self-enslaved to all for the sake of the Gospel. St. Paul points the way.

For although I am free from all, I enslaved myself to all in order that I might gain as many as possible. And I became for the Jews like a Jew, in order to gain Jews—to those under the Law as if I were under the Law, although I myself am not actually under the Law, in order that I might gain those who are under the Law. For the lawless I became as if I were lawless, although I am not lawless before God but

<sup>3</sup> Comment on Luke 24:47, 48 in his *Erläuterungen zum Neuen Testament*. Quoted in Franzmann, p. 184.

am in the Law of Christ, in order that I might gain the lawless. I became weak for the weak in order that I might gain the weak. I have become all things for all people in order that I might save at least some. But I do all things on account of the Gospel, in order that I might become its partner. 1 Cor. 9:19-23.

Applying Paul's concise summary of his approach to the unconverted to my own situation, I note that I am free in Christ. I owe my allegiance to no mere man or any human system, for as a slave of Christ I am free from their dominion. I am free from the Jews and their legal codes, from the Gentiles and their lawless service to the flesh, from the weak and their scruples, and indeed from *all* men and the bonds that hold them fast. I have received this freedom in Christ through the Gospel call and Baptism; I keep it by continuing in His Word. And I know it will last when all human categories and claims have passed away.

But I am not free in a vacuum; I am free "in the law of Christ"; this law of love keeps me from using my freedom rashly and selfishly. It makes the other person rather than myself the center of existence and activity. As a missionary I have a goal: to gain as many people as possible for Christ. Above all else I want to save at least some. My life's ambition is to live in such a way as to gain a hearing for the Gospel and thus to become its partner in the work of saving people. Free from all people, I can in love willingly submit to all in order to gain them; for if I do not adapt to their respective ways I am making myself an outsider and blocking communication of the Gospel. The *one* thing I must avoid is compromising, by my conduct, the very Gospel I desire to share with them!

### III

As a Christian missionary I am a man who stands in an apostolic succession, a man on Christ's world mission. But under the practice deemed wise by my fellow Christians in District and Synod, I do not cover as wide an area as did, for instance, the apostle Paul. *As a missionary in this United States I am a man in one of Christ's local missions. In this, the pastoral, phase of my work I represent Christ to His people, the people to Christ, and Christ's people to one another.*

I represent Christ to His people. This is in fulfillment of Christ's commission to make disciples "*by teaching them.*" I am to speak for Christ to His people, giving them His Word as He has given it to me through His Spirit in Scripture. Yet I must not only speak but also listen! I must listen until I approach Christ's own understanding of the people He has placed into my assistant shepherd's care. When I have listened enough to understand, then I can speak the Word of power most helpfully. Bonhoeffer's summary is apt:

Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by Him who is Himself the great Listener and whose work they should share. We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.<sup>4</sup>

I also represent the people to Christ. I am to be an intercessor before Christ in behalf of His people. Notice the apostles' reason for requesting help with the physical details of early church work: "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:4). That is why we, too, have lay helpers and secre-

<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), pp. 98, 99.

taries — in order that we might give ourselves more fully to prayer and the Word. And a big part of that prayer ministry will be taken up with intercession. Says Bonhoeffer:

A Christian fellowship lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another, or it collapses. I can no longer condemn or hate a brother for whom I pray, no matter how much trouble he causes me. . . . Intercession is . . . a daily service we owe to God and our brother. . . . The ministry of intercession requires time of every Christian, but most of all of the Christian pastor who has the responsibility of a whole congregation. . . . Because intercession is such an incalculably great gift of God, we should accept it joyfully. . . . We should train ourselves to set apart a regular hour for it as we do for every other service we perform. . . . For the pastor it is an indispensable duty, and his whole ministry will depend on it. [Pp. 86 f.]

I represent Christ to His people, the people to Christ, and Christ's people to one another. This does not mean that I am to take over the responsibility of each Christian in my care so that he can stop edifying his brother. It means that in the name of and for the brothers I speak the Word to each in public and private, and that in the name of and for the brothers I encourage each to greater love of the brethren and zeal in Christ's work.

As a missionary I am a man *in* one of Christ's *local* missions. *In this, the organizational, phase of my work, I represent Synod to my group or congregation, and my group or congregation to Synod.* I am a mediator between those whose Christian concerns and zeal are centered in *one* locality and those who are concerned with the work of Christ in *many* areas. The

problems, opportunities, and thinking of the church at large come to me through my mission board. These I seek prayerfully to understand and to pass on meaningfully to the people in my care, that they may expand their Christian vision and concern beyond themselves. On the other hand, I know the people in my charge, their problems and needs and special opportunities, perhaps better than anyone else on earth. Therefore I seek prayerfully to lay these before the church at large through the mission board. Thus I am a key person in this delicate diplomatic work of developing the patience of universal vision in the local Christian community and the urgency of local need and opportunity in the church at large. This is no easy thing, and it, too, ought to take up a generous portion of time spent in prayer.

In summary, as a pastor and organizer for Christ of the people He has won through me and others from a given community, I am a man who himself knows God's love in Christ and who practices and propagates its like among His people. For it is *love* which summarizes God's attitude and action toward us, and it is *love* like His that Christ demands as the distinguishing mark of His disciples. As a missionary in a local mission I am to foster the development of a soundly Christian congregational tradition — not the snobbish tradition of the Ivy League nor the exclusive and esoteric tradition of the lodge but the soundly Christian tradition of living *love*. Under God's blessing I am to work with my people so that we recognize ourselves as being actively loved by God in Christ and then demonstrate that we ourselves are actively in Christlike love with one another and with *all*.

An important aspect of this is walking and working *with* those entrusted to my care. I am not their lord or enemy! I must recognize not only their sin but also — yes, *especially* — their God-given gifts. As Bonhoeffer points out,

A pastor should not complain about his congregation, certainly never to other people, but also not to God. A congregation has not been entrusted to him in order that he should become its accuser before God and men. [P. 29]

Such slashing of the congregation or group, whether at pastoral conferences, in letters, or at prayer, is the kind of judging that seeks to justify and magnify self; it is opposed to justification by God's grace and the love and service it produces.

A sound congregational tradition means that I will fiercely fight the growth of a situation in which a few do all and the rest drift; where some are important and the rest are little noticed. Rather I will strive to employ each member significantly. I will realize this profound truth: "In a Christian community everything depends upon whether each individual is an indispensable link in a chain. . . . The elimination of the weak is the death of the fellowship." (P. 94)

#### IV

One last question arises: How long shall I stay where I am? No definite answer is possible, for I stand in a tension. As a man *on* Christ's *world* mission, I am to be mobile. "He charged them to take nothing for their journey except a staff — no bread, no bag, no money in their belts — but to wear sandals and not put on two tunics" (Mark 6:8,9). But as a man *in* one of Christ's *local* missions I am to be stable. About all I can say is that I must be neither so materialistically anchored in my present place

as to be immobile nor so malcontent and loveless as to be unstable. Rather, as a balanced man, I am to follow my Lord and Leader, staying gladly till I'm sure He bids me go, but then going with no compunctions of materialistic or fleshly kinds.

As at the beginning, so also at the end I must say that such an attempt as this — briefly to define what it means for a man to say, "I am a missionary" — is not a self-contained work. It can be only a signpost, pointing to a life under the grace of God — lived to spread the grace of God *thoroughly* in my sector of "all nations" and, by teaching and baptizing constantly, to make disciples for Christ of all in my area who will "repent and believe the Gospel." "As a missionary, just what am I, anyway?" Ultimately, only I as an individual can answer that. For my unique personality and my mission's unique locality will change the answer in its details. "As a missionary, just what am I, anyway?" The final answer in your specific cases and in mine cannot be written on paper. It must be written in individual lives lost by God's grace for Christ and the Gospel in the individual missions of the church. And the God-given validity of each definition will be known only when as individual missionaries we receive from our enthroned Lord and Judge, and only by His grace, the words that may well raise goose bumps even on *heavenly* bodies, words that must first strike us numb and dumb and then fill our lips with an eternal, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and unto the Lamb forever and ever." Those words, of course, are, "Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Lord!"

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