

## PENTECOSTAL PERSPECTIVES ON HOLISTIC CHURCH MISSION TODAY

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All mission begins with and emanates from the Triune God. In this way the missionary character of God is revealed. Our God is a missionary God and so the life of the Church must be characterized as missionary existence.<sup>1</sup> Christian faith is intrinsically missionary,<sup>2</sup> or as the Swiss theologian, Emil Brunner, has said, “the Church exists by mission, just as fire exists by burning.”<sup>3</sup> Having made these foundational statements, additional questions always arise concerning the particularities of Christian mission. The “why” and the “how” of mission, as an ecclesial and human enterprise, rest upon the missionary character of the Triune God. My own reflections on this theme are the result of more than thirty years of relationships and ministry among the peoples of Latin America and involvement in the life and mission of the Pentecostal churches of the continent in contexts of violence, marginalization, poverty, and oppression. These reflections have been further enriched by my years of interaction and dialogue with my valuable colleagues at the Church of God Theological Seminary, who have helped to open up new vistas for me in constructive Pentecostal theology, especially as it has related to my work and concerns for holistic mission in and from Latin America. From the days of my childhood, growing up in a Pentecostal family and church, I have been

<sup>1</sup>David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 9.

<sup>2</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Emil Brunner, *The Word and the World* (London, England: SCM Press, 1931), 108.

conscious of a special missionary vocation to and with the people of Latin America. During the years of my missionary engagement, I have made advances, I believe, in terms of my own comprehension of the deepness and wideness of the *missio dei*, or mission of God, in its cosmic, ecological, social, political, and of course, personal and spiritual dimensions. Thanks to many persons and realities which God has placed in my life through these years, I have been enriched and fulfilled as a person on mission for and with God. I hope that I have been able to contribute in some way to the missionary formation of God’s people and the advancement of missionary consciousness in the churches and educational institutions in which I have been privileged to participate.

### 1. The Missionary God in Creation

In creation, God is revealed as “Missionary.” By missionary we understand the idea that God is “Self-sent,” “Self-extended” and “Self-revealed” outwardly through the divine creational activity. In Genesis, we find one of the great principles of missionary existence: the creative desire and ability to open oneself outwardly and take concrete steps to draw near to others with the intention of entering into relationships which seek others’ welfare and salvation.

The original foundation of this principle rests upon the social and communal nature of “trinitarian mutuality,”<sup>4</sup> or the Economic Trinity. In the first words registered in sacred Scripture, it is revealed to us that it was the Spirit (breath or wind) of God which moved upon the empty and void “face of the deep” as the Creator Spirit (feminine voice) of Life. In the history of Christian thought, the Spirit of God has been recognized in her missionary role as the agent which generates and sustains life in all its dimensions.<sup>5</sup> Consequentially, to believe in the Triune God and to do mission in trinitarian fashion is an affirmation of full and abundant life, and must be, at the same time, a negation of anything which diminishes or destroys the life of the creation including, especially, human life in its spiritual, social and physical sense.

In regards to the various missionary ventures of the Church (missions or *missiones ecclesiae*),<sup>6</sup> it should also be recognized that the Spirit precedes

<sup>4</sup>Jurgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1992), 71-2, 248-66.

<sup>5</sup>Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 144-60.

<sup>6</sup>Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 10.

and inspires all legitimate ecclesial and human initiatives, as an already active missionary presence in the world. In this way, we understand that from the beginning, we follow and participate in the missionary initiative of the Triune God and not our own. This must be re-affirmed with firmness and clarity, especially in a time in which Christian mission has been twisted and confused with impure motives and equivocal actions related to neo-liberal economic imperialism. These are attitudes of cultural and spiritual superiority and the manipulation of resources by the cultures of consumerism and “prosperity,” and their corresponding *uncivil* “civil religion” in the Global North at the expense of the majority cultures and Pentecostal churches of the Global South.

Regarding the missionary nature of the social Trinity, the words registered in Gen. 1.26 are illustrative: “Let us make humankind in *our* image, according to *our* likeness.” The *missio dei* is an enterprise which is realized in divine community. The mission of the Church, under the *missio dei*, must be carried out among all the sectors and groups which comprise the ecclesial community, and not simply by a group of “professional missionaries” who too often form an elite class of “super-spiritual” individuals.

The biblical idea of the image of God, or *imago dei*, in human beings, also has clear missiological implications. Human beings, because they carry the image of God and because they are the creation of God, must be treated with dignity and justice. Therefore, the whole missionary enterprise of the Church has as one of its principal objectives the recognition of the value of human life in all of its dimensions. Because God is the Spirit of Life, the Church must be clear in her prophetic proclamation of the dignity of life and in her prophetic denunciation of violence, slavery, racism, abortion, addiction, poverty and war, which are all instruments of sin, death and destruction.<sup>7</sup> This is truly a completely “pro-life” position. Holistic Christian mission signifies the full humanization and dignification of life in light of the image of God in each human being.

<sup>7</sup> On the issue of war and peace from a Pentecostal perspective, see the many pacifist statements issued by early Pentecostal leaders and denominations through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, compiled at the Thirdway Peace and Justice Fellowship-San Francisco website ([www.thirdway.cc](http://www.thirdway.cc)), including many quotations from A.J. Tomlinson, i.e., “War is butchery and contrary to the spirit of Christianity”, in *Church of God Evangel*, Vol. 8, No. 13, March 31, 1917. See also, recent statements from Pentecostal theologians, including information on the website of the Pentecostal Charismatic Peace Fellowship ([www.pentecostalpeace.org](http://www.pentecostalpeace.org)), and Steven J. Land’s statements that “many early Pentecostals were pacifists and quite critical

In the Genesis creation story, it is clear that the mission of God is delegated and shared with human beings, that is to say, with the first human couple, Adam and Eve. In this way, the mission becomes a commission. This fact also points clearly to the social nature of the Trinity. God’s first discourse directed to human beings in Gen. 1:28-30, has been referred to as the *cultural mandate*.<sup>8</sup> Here are also references to human participation regarding the stewardship or care of the natural environment of God’s creation. From this point we see the emerging idea of an ecological responsibility which should occupy an important space in the missiological agenda of the Church. In addition to the environmental responsibility given to human beings, the symbiotic human-ecological relationship is established with the result of providing wellbeing and sustainability to the inhabitants of the planet. This relationship between God, creation and human beings is established within the framework of social responsibility and submission to divine purpose.<sup>9</sup>

With human disobedience and sin registered in Genesis chapter 3, the panorama of human life, and creation, dramatically altered, though not irreversibly. For this reason, the *missio dei* and the *missio ecclesiae* are directed toward the restoration of full life which would later reach its zenith in the redemption effectuated by the Son of God, Jesus of Nazareth, on the cross which is at center stage of salvific history. The good news of the incarnation of God in human history and of a new way of living (the Reign of God) would become the heart of evangelism and occupy the center of the missionary task of the Church.

In this sense, the whole plan of God’s mission revealed in the Old Testament should be seen in anticipation of its fulfillment in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, finding its course in a mandate given by him to his followers who would form the Church empowered for mission by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Church participates in the *mission dei* as sign, agent and sacrament unto the consummation of the reign of God at the *eschaton*.

of society” and that “early Pentecostal pacifism, in a nuclear age of extensive poverty, is the best strategy for the church today,” in *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion for the Kingdom*, Journal of Pentecostal Theology Supplement Series 1 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press), 1993, 180, 207.

<sup>8</sup> Pablo Deiros, *Diccionario hispanoamericano de la misión* (Miami, FL: COMIBAM Internacional), 1997, 267.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the recent excellent work done by Dr. Cheryl Bridges Johns, member of an interdisciplinary and interdenominational task force which issued “An Urgent Call to Action: Scientists and Evangelicals Unite to Protect Creation” National Press Club, Washington, D.C., January 17, 2007.

## 2. The Missionary People of God

From the stark reality of human sin, the mission of God expands as it moves in new directions and takes on new dimensions. Because the mission of God is linked to God's relationship with human beings, God initiates and enters into a covenant alliance with a specific people, beginning in a relationship with the person of Abram (Gen. 12:1-9).

On reading the biblical text, it should be obvious that God's intention is to bless all the peoples of the earth through a particular chosen people. Israel, the people of God, is "blessed to be a blessing,"<sup>10</sup> thus revealing the missionary purpose of God through the particular history of a specific people for all of humanity. Far from constituting a theological or biblical basis for some kind of rigid Zionism, in which the modern geo-political State of Israel becomes an idol of North American fundamentalist churches (including, unfortunately, too many Pentecostal churches), God's Old Testament covenant with Israel should be understood as a salvific act of love and commitment on behalf of all humanity.

With the covenant established between God, Abraham and his descendants, there begins a long process of gestation and formation of a people who would reflect, at its best moments, God's missionary concern toward other nations. This period of formation passes through the stages of immigration of the people to Egypt, slavery under the yoke of a malignant and oppressive empire, the calling and preparation of a national liberator in the person of Moses, and in the great miracles wrought by God in favor of Israel in the Exodus.

Exodus and Liberation, then, figure as indispensable elements of any biblical and practical theology of holistic mission. Mission that does not liberate, in the broadest sense of the word, is not faithful to the *missio dei*.

Upon arriving in the wilderness, the missionary people of God continue the process of conscientization and learning their unique and special relationship with God and with their specific context. Sinai symbolizes the *law* (formation), *holiness* (ethics) and *shalom* (salvation, wellbeing, health, peace, community). In this case, shalom is revealed as God's design and desire, first of all, for Israel, and through them, for all of creation. To be faithful to its missionary vocation, Israel is to live as a model of holiness, which is wholeness before the surrounding nations and in so doing, bear witness to the benefits of this way of life.

<sup>10</sup> W. Douglas Smith, *Bendicidos para bendecir* (El Paso, TX: Casa Bautista de Publicaciones, 1992).

One of the adjectives used to describe the mission of God through Israel is the word "centripetal."<sup>11</sup> This word communicates the idea of movement from the periphery toward the center. The people or nations neighboring Israel would be attracted to the true God, Yaweh, by means of the light which would shine in and through the peculiarity of Israel's testimony and ethics, reflected in a legal and moral code given through Moses.

In regards to social ethics and mission, it is clear that God desires to bless all people, but there are special provisions for three classes of people: orphans, widows, and aliens in the land—the poor of the earth. This "preferential option for the poor"<sup>12</sup> is to be practiced and is made visible in the legal and historical framework of the life relationships of the people of God as it regards these special people. The *Year of Jubilee* (Leviticus 25) is perhaps one of the best examples of a legal code which favors and protects, not only the poor of the earth, but also the *earth itself*. It signifies liberation and rest for human beings and the land, and shows the symbiotic relationship of interdependence between both.

Continuing on the way of salvation history, the pilgrim people of God arrive at last to the promised land and continue the process of formation and consolidation, which includes the development of a firm identity in terms of nationhood (Israelite), culture (Jewish), language (Hebrew) and religion (Monotheism), in contrast to the surrounding nations.<sup>13</sup> The social, political and cultic structures of the nation also continue to be developed through the judges, kings and the priestly class, with a liturgy characteristic of this period.

In the cultic life of Israel, liturgy served to keep the people's collective memory alive, so that the mighty acts of God in history would be rehearsed repeatedly through the telling of the stories of Creation, Covenant, Exodus, and Liberation. In the liturgy, there is also the constant reminder of God's missionary design for the people of God in their relationship to other nations, as seen especially in the Psalms (for example, Psalm 67). In the wisdom literature of Israel there is constant reference to the special love of God toward those who are poor and excluded, and the moral and social responsibility of the nation, in the fulfillment of their mission of justice

<sup>11</sup> Deiros, *Diccionario*, 287.

<sup>12</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) xxv-xxvi.

<sup>13</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1981).

and peace in the world. Later, with the vicissitudes of unethical behavior and the moral and spiritual decadence of the nation, the prophetic movement is raised up to announce judgment upon the people, denouncing their rebellion and calling them anew to the restoration of the covenant.<sup>14</sup> For example, on repeated occasions the prophet Isaiah<sup>15</sup> reminds Israel of the missionary purpose of God, in order that they would be a “light to the nations and to the ends of the earth.” The prophetic vocation always includes a component of social justice which is expected of the people of God in their behavior toward the poor and oppressed (Amos), the hungry and naked (Isaiah 58), and those who are broken and captive (Isaiah 61), echoing again and again the ideal established by God in the “favorable year of the Lord” (Lev. 25; Isa. 61:2; Lk. 4:19).

It is always the “Spirit of the Lord,” the ruach-agent of the *missio dei*, who is always moving, first over the empty and formless deep, and later over the lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs, judges, and kings throughout this salvation history, but especially upon the prophets.

This is evident, for example, in passages such as Isa. 61:1, where it is declared that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” In short, the mission of the Triune God is revealed in the Old Testament through the covenant made with the people of Israel. It is God’s desire that they serve to bless others as a model of the shalom of God and light to the nations. Furthermore, it is the Spirit of God who anoints the prophets to denounce injustice and proclaim the good news of holistic liberation, especially for those who are poor and crushed.

Later, after a long “intertestamental” period of dispersion and apparent silence, the prophetic, future and eschatological dimensions of the trinitarian mission take its transcendental form in the most radical historical fact that the world had witnessed: *the salvific incarnation of God in the history of humanity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, his redemptive crucifixion and resurrection, and the re-formation of the missionary people of God, the Church.*

### 3. Incarnational Mission

In creation, the missionary God is self-revealed, and self-sent toward that which did not yet exist. This was a gesture of supreme creativity in a

<sup>14</sup> Walter Bruggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1978).

<sup>15</sup> Isa. 42:6, 49:6, 60:2-3.

desire to extend divine relational capacity outwardly. Now in the specifically human context, the incarnation constitutes God’s second great act of universal scope and cosmic redemption.

The attempt to explicate the fact that God “bore” a Son and that this Father God “sent” his Son into the world certainly transcends the capacity of human reason and remains a mystery of divine grace. But even as it is a mystery, the incarnation reveals to us much of the nature of the *missio dei*. The noble missionary ideal of opening oneself and risking one’s own existence for the good of someone or something else, has its origin in the salvific history of a humanized and crucified God.<sup>16</sup> The incarnation establishes the pattern for all subsequent missionary activity in various ways. It is not only opening oneself, but also *being sent on mission* for the purpose of the salvation of others. Etymologically, the word “mission” carries with it the indispensable element of the action of sending.<sup>17</sup> It also signifies becoming like the other or identifying oneself with the condition of the other persons to whom one is sent. This idea is well expressed in the words of a popular Latin American gospel chorus,

I am sent by God  
And my hand is ready  
to build a fraternal world with Him,  
The angels have not been sent to change  
A world of pain into a world of peace,  
It has fallen to me to make this a reality,  
Help me, Lord, to do your will.<sup>18</sup>

From the earliest times of Christianity, mission has carried the trinitarian idea of divine sending,<sup>19</sup> the Father is self-sent *in* creation, and later sent *to* creation in the incarnation of the Son, Jesus Christ, and at the same time the Holy Spirit is sent *to and throughout* the world as the divine agent of the *missio dei*.

<sup>16</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1974).

<sup>17</sup> Horst Rzepkowski, *Diccionario de misionologia: Historia, teologia, etnologia* (Navarra, Spain: Editorial Verbo Divino), 357-8.

<sup>18</sup> Author unknown, but originating in Cuba according to Dr. Reinerio Arce, Rector of the Seminario Evangelico Unido de Mantanzas, Cuba.

<sup>19</sup> Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 1-2.

Jesus of Nazareth, sent from God, is the missionary *par excellence*, and is the perfect model of what holistic and liberating mission means.<sup>20</sup> In the inauguration of his ministry and announcement of his messianic platform in the synagogue of Nazareth, Jesus textually cites the prophetic passage of Isaiah 61, making it his own. He proclaims himself as the Sent One from God and Anointed of the Spirit to preach good news to the poor. Here is a clear missiological agenda, which covers all the spheres of human life, unless one attempts to twist the text with a dispensationalist and fundamentalist hermeneutic, leaving only an empty spiritualist shell, and lacking the consistent flavor of holistic mission.

From the specific particularity of the geographical and social location of Galilee, and from the point of departure of Jesus' identification with the repugnant lepers, abused women, forgotten children and marginalized Samaritans, Jesus demonstrates the way of mission. It is the road of solidarity with those who suffer persecution, the poor in spirit, those who are thirsty for righteousness, the humble peacemakers, those who are merciful and of a pure heart: because the Reign of God belongs to them (Mt. 5:3-12).

However, one cannot speak adequately of the incarnational mission of the Triune God without recognizing the medullar place of the *cross*. The cross is situated at center stage of salvific history and constitutes the hinge upon which the *kairós* of God turns. Everything before it anticipates it, and all that proceeds from it depends upon it as it is remembered. God's entire salvific work is sealed upon the cross and there "it is finished" (Jn. 19:30). In regard to mission, then, the cross is the example and the reminder of the suffering and martyrdom which is required of all faithful missionaries. On the road of mission there will be sacrifice, cross, and death, for the sake of reaching others with salvation. But, after the cross of death comes the victory of the resurrection. After the sacrifice and martyrdom of mission comes the full life of redemption in persons who are evangelized, societies transformed and in the creation renewed.

In this way, the evangelical message of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was and always shall be: "The time has been fulfilled and the reign of God has come near; repent and believe on the Gospel" (Mk. 1:15). The reign of God, then, becomes the vertebral cord of Christian mission and seeks the restoration of "all things" in Christ Jesus (Rev. 21:5). The Church, as such, is not the final goal of the *missio dei*, but the

<sup>20</sup> Dario López Rodríguez, *La misión liberadora de Jesús: El mensaje del evangelio de Lucas* (Lima, Peru: Puma Ediciones, 2004).

penultimate goal.<sup>21</sup> The Church belongs to the Kingdom, but the Kingdom extends beyond the Church. The Kingdom is the realization of the final goal of the full manifestation of God's shalom in the world, when in the *parousía* of Jesus Christ, all that has been created will be completely renewed and the image of God will be totally recuperated in all of humanity at the eschaton.

In the interim, we continue to move forward in the missionary age of the missionary Church by the power of the missionary Spirit.<sup>22</sup> The Church has been chosen as an indispensable instrument in the "hands" of God in the fulfillment of the divine mission. The Church may not be the only instrument available to divine agency but has been called out (*ecclesia*) to occupy a singular place of special prominence and privilege in the vanguard of God's mission. As John the Baptist prophetically made the way straight in preparation for the coming of the Son of God (Mt. 3:1-17), in the same way, the true Church prepares the way for the coming and final consummation of the reign of God.

The faithful Church continually lives the experience of the "coming and going" of mission. She is called to union with God in Jesus Christ, to the communion (fellowship) of the saints, and to reunion (meeting) for temporal worship. But she is also called to go out in the dispersion of mission, in evangelization and in the transformation of life in all its facets. In this sense, the mission of the Church has a *centrifugal*<sup>23</sup> character somewhat distinct from the *centripetal* character of that of the Old Testament people of God. Said differently, the Church moves from the center of her faith, worship, and commitment to Christ toward the periphery of mission in the world and, in this way, overcomes the multiple barriers of time and space, culture and race, and idiom and ideology.

The Holy Spirit is always the agent of mission, the force and power of the Church-in-mission, animating her so that, in the words of the Lausanne Covenant affirmed at the International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974, "the whole Church will take the whole Gospel to the whole world."<sup>24</sup> Under this rubric, the Jewish Festival of

<sup>21</sup> Orlando Costas, "Crecimiento integral y palabra de Dios" in *Iglesia y Mision*, 3 (1984). Also, see Costas, *The Integrity of Mission: The Inner Life and Outreach of the Church* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1979).

<sup>22</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993).

<sup>23</sup> Deiros, *Diccionario*, 287.

<sup>24</sup> See Article No. 6 of the Lausanne Covenant in Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Strassky, ed., *Mission Trends No. 2: Evangelization* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1975), 239-48.

Pentecost (Acts 2) becomes not only a celebration of another annual cycle of spring harvest, but the beginning of a new, end-times, worldwide cycle of ingathering by the Lord of the harvest (Mt. 9:38), with the sending out of workers so that the mission of God will be carried out in the world. Pentecost has the significance of both missionary event and movement. It is the humble and insignificant Galilean peasants who are converted into the protagonists and actors at the center stage of divine mission as they lend their voices to the xenolalia of the Spirit so that the festive representatives of the United Nations in Jerusalem are able to capture the salvific significance of the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus and thereby answer the question which spontaneously arose from the multitude, "What is the meaning of this?" (Ac. 2:12)

Pentecost, then, represents a new wind of the Spirit with the same character of the breath of creation life imparted by the Spirit of God as she brooded over the face of the deep on the first day of creation, and gave life to the first human beings on the sixth day of creation, (Gen. 1:1, 27-31). Pentecost also signifies the purifying, sanctifying fire of God, which cleanses and separates the people from the profane for the sacred uses of missionary service, as experienced by the people of God when the fire fell on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19). Pentecost is the prophetic and miraculous announcement of the good news of the reign of God in Christ Jesus in the languages of the world, represented that day by the various delegations of pilgrims gathered in Jerusalem.

As a result of Pentecost, the people of God, the Church is revived by the Spirit for her mission in the world and through her existence begins to demonstrate the evangelical values of communion one with another, of the sharing of bread and other belongings (including properties), and of perseverance in the teachings of Jesus Christ and the apostles (Ac. 2:42-47; Mt. 28:18-20).

Finally, in the new post-Pentecost era, eschatological hope comes to play a catalytic role which orients, motivates, and mobilizes the mission of the Church in its multiple expressions (word, sign, deed), dimensions (incarnational, liturgical, diaconal, numerical), and directions (vertical, horizontal)<sup>25</sup>. Far from giving in to an escapist scheme of a rigid fundamentalist eschatology, or of falling prey to a neo-liberal economic, globalizing ideology, or to imperialistic neo-colonial politics, Christian

<sup>25</sup> Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1967); Steven Land, *Pentecostal Spirituality: A Passion of the Kingdom* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); and Juan Stam, *Profecía bíblica y misión de la iglesia*, (Quito: Consejo Latinoamericano de Iglesias).

mission recovers new energies in the promise of God to liberate the whole creation, so that on the final day of the eschaton, the Day of the Lord, the great multitude from all the nations, tribes, people and tongues, will cry in a loud voice saying, "Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb" (Rev. 7:9-10). Then, the *missio dei trinitaria*, will be completed, having finished its course from the Creation, to the Covenant, to the Incarnation and the Cross, and passing through Pentecost until the Consummation of all things in Christ Jesus to the glory of the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit! AMEN!

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