Christian Mission for the 21st century

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Introduction

A number of people in Africa have since long time heard the word *mission* in general, whereas those who embraced Christian faith know its message. Generally, Mission organizations, their activities and the people in the field of mission are seen as sources of innovation with some exceptions of people who have ill feeling towards the idea of mission. The ordinary people in my area, for example, see mission as an organization where Europeans or white people, the *Ferenjes*, work in the fields of education and medical enterprises for the local peoples' benefit. A mission station, in this regard, is understood to be a safe zone and trusted by people to which they send their children to mission schools and take their sick individuals for medical treatment. The conviction is that "there is safety and healing at the mission!"

Definition

Webster´s Dictionary defines the word "mission" as: "Act of sending, a ministry commissioned by a religious organization to propagate its faith or carry on humanitarian work, assignment to work in a field of missionary enterprise." Government activities are also expressed in the terms of the word mission. When it is used in this sense, it denotes a group sent to a foreign country to conduct diplomatic or political

negotiations, a permanent embassy or legation. Expressions like trade mission, space mission, and military mission are also possible.

Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology gives us technical terms and definitions which strike the key note of Christian mission. These terms are: *missio*, a Latin word for "sending away" and *apostellein,* a Greek word "to send."[52] The purpose of this article is to touch upon an idea of mission in the sense of *missio* and *apostellein* by putting emphasis on the holistic approach of the concept of mission. My argument is that Christian mission should strive to meet spiritual, mental and physical needs of human beings as the Lord Jesus commanded in the gospel: "you give them something to eat and go ye therefore…." (Matt. 14:16; 28:18-20).

The Origin of Christian mission

All persuasions have starting points where they are originated, grown and expanded. Christianity as a religion, for example, was originated in Jerusalem or Antioch whereas Islam started in Saudi Arabia. In a true sense of the Christian mission, however, its origin is not traced in the world, but in heaven. This mission started when the incarnation took place. The incarnation implies that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus said: "As the father has sent me, even so I am sending you" (John 20:21). In fact, Jesus is the *Great Missionary, founder, and Chief in Command* of the task of Mission. As the result of His death and victorious resurrection, He commanded: "Go ye therefore into the world and preach the gospel to all creatures" (Mark 16:15).

In the Acts of the Apostles, this mission was implemented in Asia Minor and Europe (three major missionary journeys). Mission organizations and Christian Churches of any time are to do it until the return of the Chief in Command of this Mission.

Necessary conditions for Christian mission

From the outset, the predecessors in the field of mission experienced an authentic conversion. According to the *Nelson Study Bible*, the

[52] Langley, "*Mission, Morality*" (1995), p. 595.

apostle Paul experienced four elements of conversion:[53]

1. Paul's conversion touched his *conscience*. He recognized that he had been fighting God and that his vicious treatment of Christians was wrong (Acts 26:9-11; 1 Tim 1:13)
2. His conversion touched his *understanding*. He discovered that the Jesus he was persecuting was none less than the risen Messiah, the Son of God (Acts 9:22)
3. His conversion touched his *will*. He gave in to Jesus and began following Him (Acts 16:19-20)
4. His conversion produced noticeable *change in his life*. His ambitions, his character, his relationships, his outlook – everything changed as a result of his encounter with Christ (Phil. 3:7-11).

Currently, theological studies are among the educational fields which one can enter and later become a professional missionary both at home country and overseas. Such a field can be entered with or without conviction / conversion. What is amazing in such a case is that sometimes those who enter a missionary career are converted in the field of mission among the people to which they are sent. The devotion of the people they are working with in the field strikes the heart and results in conversion. A combination of the commitment of the indigenous people on one hand, and missionaries' profession and humbleness on the other, brings changes. The combination of the two attitudes and mutual respect makes collegiality sweet and takes the gospel forward. Humble spirit, respect and love are strong forces to bring conversion. Missionaries are, therefore, to humble themselves to receive some spiritual blessings from their colleagues in the field.

Holistic approach of missionary work

As clearly seen in the endeavor of missionary strives, reaching the target population with the gospel has not been so smooth and easy. The people in the mind of mission organization/s can be inaccessible with direct preaching of the gospel. The authorities in charge of that people may hinder access to it or the people would be unwilling to receive the

[53] Nelson, *The Word in Life Study Bible* (1998), p. 610.

gospel. If we take Ethiopia as an example, Ethiopian authorities did not allow missionaries to go out of its stations / compounds to talk / preach to the people. In co-operation with the government authorities, the Ethiopian Orthodox Church clerics were avowed enemies of the work of missionaries, who erected walls of defamation against missionaries.

Amidst such situation, *medical and educational* works became bridges which connected the missionaries and the people in their surroundings. At schools, Bible teachings were given. Mission schools had a good reputation of producing well trained citizens – thus admired by elites and rich people who preferred them for their children. High moral standards of mission schools were attractive and dependable for bringing up children, especially girls. This moral quality of mission schools facilitated communication for the missionaries.

Medical care was a service where a number of people turned to for good treatment. Missionaries and indigenous preachers used health facilities to preach the gospel. People who could not be reached otherwise got opportunity to hear about Jesus through medical services. So, engagement in education and medical work should continue to be part and parcel of missionary work.

The hitherto resistance to Christian Mission

Political resistance

Such a resistance has begun already at the infancy of Jesus. At the birth of Jesus, the innocent children of Bethlehem were murdered "as a result of the proud, ungodly acts of powerful leaders".[54] On the other hand, the murder that was aimed at Jesus got transacted to the Bethlehem male children. Their wounds, tragedy and the tears of their mothers must have tormented Jesus' mind. Nelson Study Bible says that Jesus "must have carried the pain of that throughout His life and onto the Cross".[55] Thus, children were target population for His mission (Matt. 18:6-7). He himself became the subject of hatred among

[54] Ibid. [Matt. 2:13 ff].
[55] Ibid.

the Jewish authorities for the sake of the mission he was given by His Father, and later he died for the implementation of that Mission.

The apostles as well suffered repeated persecution and paid heavy prices to discharge the responsibility of the mission. Later, Christians suffered in the hands of the Roman Emperors and received unjust treatments and lost their lives for the mission message. Many more Christians, preachers and teachers were mistreated, denied justice and were burned at the stake. Remember what happened to John Huss of Bohemia (1415).

Resistance posed by Innovative Ideas

Modernism and Postmodernism mocked and influenced people to regret Christian mission and its message. Adherents of the Enlightenment Modernism considered their forefathers' Christian faith to be superstition.[56] As a result, Christian faith became target of mockery for atheism which encouraged loss of moral values, certainty, and hope among the people. Consequently, all sorts of evils, lawlessness, violence and murder took grip on people. Look how many American school children, their teachers and the black population lose lives and are terribly wounded now and then. Godlessness brings nothing, but violence.

Eastern religions claim to be the sole agency of true religion. The Egyptian Coptic Church lives under endless fear of the acts of terrorists who claim to have the only true religion. Ethiopian refugees were beheaded in Libya for their Christian faith. The leader of a Korean Christian medical team to Afghanistan was beheaded by the Taliban.

The claims of *natural religion* are also reviving and putting hindrances for the Christian message. Such claims are, most often, attached to political claims of some ethnic groups who have a strong aspiration for power. Politicians approach such groups in the context of their religion and magnify cultural and religious values of their ancestors. The agitation is: "back to your forefathers' faith."

[56] Green, *Reclaiming the future of Christian Education* (1998), p. 6-7.

Abuse of the golden message as hindrance of mission

In the previous century, gospel Christianity was abused and made tool for political or economic interest. Portuguese and Spanish Conquests of America and the 19th century colonization of Africa brought Christianity with colonial conquest and subjugated, enslaved, exploited and plundered. This horror of the people gave rise to a thinking that colonization and Christianity are identical and an enemy of the local people. It is sad to hear people saying: "colonizers came with the Bible in one hand and the Maxim gun in the other."

Philosophical approach as resistance of mission work

Adherents of *Marx and Lenin* considered religion as an opiate. The Marxist and Leninist utopia, which deceived and kept the mass under the domination of communist leaders and their families, contributed abundant ideas which diverted peoples' heart from Christian message wherever it landed.

The history of Religions studies attempted to arrest the gospel by their argument that "religions should confine to their places of origin, and ought not to proselytize" other people. Such propaganda and many more curb mission and evangelistic works.

Anthropologists also contribute to the hindrance of missionary works. They oppose Christian mission as "imposition of alien cultures and lifestyle" on other people.

People with *humanist adherence* are in the circle of opponents to do away with reaching people with the true message of the gospel. They put emphasis on "humanization rather than missionization" which was seen as proselytization.

Conclusion

As discussed above, there were many opponents of the mission of the Lord and are prevalent even in our time. However, amidst stern prohibition from preaching, the apostles did not cease teaching and preaching in the temple and "the number of disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem…" (Acts 6:7). Threats, beatings and mockeries – all the

gates of Hades have never halted the mission (Acts 5:42). Cognitive deviance and religious pressure as mentioned in this article did not get away with eliminating the gospel message. So, the fire of the gospel is still burning! Therefore, take courage and have faith that the gates of Hades will not triumph over the Christian mission even in the future.

But new strategies are needed. Missionaries played a leadership role in former times and were followed by indigenous people. There must be a flip now. The indigenous people, for they know the language, culture and values of their society, should be the ones who communicate with the local people. Missionaries should come on the back and play roles of equipping and supporting the mission work.

Finally:

- Exercise these three Christian *essentials*: 1. *Thorough Bible study*, 2. *Consistent prayers* and 3. *Adhesive Christian love*. Have faith that God has solutions for the problems of the world and the Church. Pray for the rains of renewal.
- Keep the idea that Jesus is *unique* – the only way, the only life and the only truth.
- Most Africans are expressive – they express their joys and sorrows, ululate for joy and cry for loss. Be *empathic*, not judging. Correct mistakes with love.
- Seek strong *solidarity* with others for no one is sufficient by himself in the face of the global threat to the Gospel
- Involve *indigenous people* (Mission in Return).

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