



Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective

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The Church as Missionary

Is a nonmissionary church a church? Can we say that missionary identity and commitment is a good thing, but dispensable?

The suggestion that to be missionary is a mark of the church would add something significant to debates within Western churches and the ecumenical movement, especially to Faith and Order debates about the nature of the church and its renewal or about the faithful structure of the church. To say that to be missionary is a significant mark of the church also relates to Western Christianity's church and society discussions. The ethnicity and the ethics dimensions of a missionary church would make a big difference in these various debates. In relation to the ecumenical movement, we would need to ask, "What is the meaning of separation? Is there a possibility of apostasy, or must we assume that all churches are faithful? What is it that we meet about when we can meet with Christians of other movements?"

In relation to mission, we would see the light this mark throws on the home church and the continuing temptation to fall back into an ethnically defined identity even though the church may have a missionary theology. Also, this mark may be a criterion for recognizing the point at which a younger mission church is identifiable as a sister church. For instance, if we were discussing missionary methods and principles we would pay a lot of attention to the concept of self-propagation as one of the criteria for the church's maturation out of the tutelage of the missionary organization.

The concept of the marks of the church has to say at least this much: there is such a thing as not being the church. I would argue that it is proper to say this much despite the difficulties in knowing what else we can say. The concept of "not church" is thinkable in two forms. One is that there is something we call *world* that is not the church, and that is a significant thing to say since Constantine. This distinction is not simply tautology or playing with words. We have to be able to say it meaningfully.

Second, there is such a thing as *apostasy*, something that is so fundamentally unfaithful that either its message or its status as church must be denied. Apostasy is different from error or weakness. It is commitment to some specific and basic error that makes the "church that calls itself church" an effective adversary of the true church's mission. Where the empirical church is an adversary of the church's biblically defined mission, we need the term *apostasy*. Our theology has to provide for that possibility even though it threatens contemporary ecumenical manners. An example would be the Inquisition or the Crusades in which the linkage of the church to a particular power structure, including its military, was such that the people the church dealt with could not conceivably perceive it as embodying a reconciling mission. This example, along with anti-Semitism, racism or the Judaizing of the far right

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BOOK EXCERPT

John Howard Yoder (1927-1997), author of *The Politics of Jesus* (1972), was best known for his writing and teaching on Christian pacifism. He taught at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries and the University of Notre Dame

wing of the earliest church in the time of Paul, is a form of apostasy with respect to its missionary character. To be apostate often means having the wrong doctrine. The New Testament itself talks about people who went out from us and are not of us because of what they did or did not say about Jesus. But in relation to the missionary mark of the church, apostasy can also be a matter of the church's form or structure. . . .

The church used to define heresy in doctrinal terms. When it was defined doctrinally, the church could find those who held the wrong doctrine and disqualify the whole church or group. I am saying we should start rather at the point of function: mission is the measure of fidelity. The mark of apostasy that matters the most is when we structure the denial of mission.

Then we have to ask, can a theology be condemned as apostate if it does not point to mission, if it rejects the necessity of mission or does not contribute to mission? There are theologies that deny the usefulness or necessity of mission or that reject the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity as a goal. This is something we will see later in the discussion about other religions. But that question is ambiguous. When someone rejects the conversion of non-Christians to Christianity as a goal, which Christianity are they talking about? Are they talking about the Christianity of the Crusades or the Christianity of Jesus? We may not call "missionary" the way the medieval crusading church forced the Spanish Jews to become members, for instance. But if that is what we think Christianity entails, then we may reject conversion to Christianity. We always have to ask which Christianity we are talking about before we know whether the affirmation or the denial of its particular form of mission is what we want.

We have not discussed what the mark of the church as missionary means for relations to other religions or what we think about the meaning of Jesus in the context of other contemporary religions. But suppose that were all cleared up and there were a theology that would deny the duty of Christians to call people to follow Jesus and be members of his covenant people. An adaptation of my thesis would say that to exclude any category of persons from the imperative to make disciples is apostasy. It affirms wholeness before God on other grounds than the movement of God in Jesus. That is possible to affirm, but when we affirm that, we are not following Jesus. Apostasy in this sense is defined simply by a historic reading of whether the imperative to make disciples of all persons is part of the Jesus movement or not. It is not a reading about whom God loves or what categories of people God can tolerate. Faithfulness or apostasy depends on whether the church is a community that is propagating the Jesus message.

— Adapted from chapter nine, "The Church as Missionary"

