



# The Mission of the Church Today in the Light of Global History

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**T**HE TWENTIETH CENTURY HAS BEEN THE MOST REMARKABLE OF ALL THE Christian centuries since the first. Within this century, the composition of the Christian church, ethnically and culturally, has changed out of recognition. On the one hand, there has been a great retreat from Christianity. That retreat has been centered in the west, and especially in western Europe, where active Christian profession has dramatically receded. At the same time, there has been a massive accession to Christian faith. One has to go back many centuries for any parallel to the number of new Christians and new Christian communities. This accession has taken place outside the west, in southern continents, including many areas where, before the present century, Christians were few in number.

At the beginning of this century, some 83% of those who professed the Chris-

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*The twentieth century has brought both a great retreat from Christianity and a massive accession to Christian faith. Understanding this process will provide hints for Christian mission for those of us who live in the mammon-worshiping culture of the west, the last great non-Christian culture to arise.*

tian faith lived in Europe and North America. Now, some 60% (probably) live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or the Pacific Islands, and that proportion is rising every year. The center of gravity of the Christian church has moved sharply southwards. The representative Christianity of the twenty-first century seems set to be that of Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific region. These areas look destined to be the launch pad for the mission of the church in the twenty-first century.

To consider that mission in the light of global history—six continents and two thousand years, to take only the Christian centuries—is hardly a task to be undertaken in this short space. The most that is possible is to point to some recurrent features that seem to have characterized Christian history in its first two millennia which may give some clues to the essential nature of Christian faith and, thus, of Christian mission. Three such features are suggested here:

- I. The spread of Christianity has not been progressive, but serial
- II. Christian faith involves translation, cultural as well as linguistic
- III. Christianity is about conversion

#### I. THE SPREAD OF CHRISTIANITY HAS NOT BEEN PROGRESSIVE, BUT SERIAL

Long ago, Kenneth Scott Latourette pointed out that the history of Christianity has not been one of steady progress, let alone of resistless triumph. There have been periods of advance, but also periods of recession or falling back, of withering and decay. Islam can make a much better claim than Christianity for progressive expansion, for steady numerical increase and geographical growth. Generally speaking—there are some exceptions—lands that became Islamic have so far remained Islamic. The Arab lands seem now so inalienably Muslim that it is hard to remember that the Yemen was once Christian territory. Contrast Jerusalem, home of the first Christian church, or Syria, Egypt, Asia Minor, and North Africa, which once provided the brightest examples of Christian devotion, scholarship, and witness. Or take my own country, Scotland, where John Knox and John Wesley once preached, now full of unwanted churches turned into furniture stores, garages, or nightclubs.

In each of these latter cases, a place that had been a Christian heartland, a shining center of Christian devotion and activity, ceased to have this function; the light burned down or burned out, and the candlestick was taken out of its place. But in none of these cases did this decline mean the disappearance of the Christian faith or the end of Christian witness; rather, the reverse. By the time the Jerusalem church was scattered to the winds, the gospel had taken hold in the hellenistic world of the eastern Mediterranean. When the literate civilization of the Roman Empire broke up, the gospel was making its way among the barbarians north and east of that empire. And as the modern recession began to accelerate in Europe and to wash into North America, the churches of Africa, Asia, and Latin America began to come into their own. The Christian story is serial, its center moves from place to place. No one church or place or culture owns it. At different times different peo-

ples and places have become its heartlands, its chief representatives. Then the baton passes on to others. Christian progress is never final, is never a set of gains to be plotted on the map. The rhetoric of some of our hymns and many of our sermons about the triumphant host streaming out to conquer the world is more Islamic than Christian. Christian history reveals the faith often withering in its heartlands, in its centers of seeming strength and importance, to establish itself or begin anew at its margins. It has vulnerability, a certain fragility, at its heart, the vulnerability of the cross, the fragility of the earthen vessel.

## II. CHRISTIAN FAITH INVOLVES TRANSLATION, CULTURAL AS WELL AS LINGUISTIC

Our faith depends on the word made flesh, God made human. One way of looking at this is as a great act of translation: in the incarnation, God is translated into humanity, the whole meaning of God is expressed in human categories, as though humanity is the receptor language into which God is translated. But when God became human, it was not as generalized humanity but as a particular person, a person living in a particular culture at a particular time, the culture of a Palestinian Jew of the first century. The only humanity we ever know is culturally specific, reflecting the customs and language of a particular time and place. The cross-cultural spread of the gospel leads to Christ being received by faith in other cultures, and thus successively retranslated into the customs and languages of those peoples. The extraordinary thing is that this process of re-translation constantly reveals new truths about Christ. To take the most obvious example, to be seen within the New Testament itself: The first believers were Jews who saw Jewish history, tradition, and belief. But when they came to share that faith with Greek-speaking gentile peoples, they found it was of little use to talk of Jesus as Messiah. The word meant nothing to Greeks, and needed endless explanation. They had to translate, to find a term that told something about Jesus and yet meant something to a Greek pagan. According to Acts (11:19-21), they chose the word *Kyrios*, “Lord,” the title that Greek pagans used for their cult divinities. Jewish believers (and the action was taken by Jewish folk) had long thought of Jesus as Messiah. For them, that word, standing for a rich, pregnant concept, indicated the ultimate significance of Jesus. Greeks, on the other hand, could readily think of “the Lord Jesus.” This was a rich concept, too, but it gave a new dimension to thinking about Christ. Translation also raised questions, awkward questions that a Jew would never ask. Jewish believers could readily use a phrase like “Jesus is at the right hand of God.” The significance of that statement was well understood by the Sanhedrin: using it brought Stephen to his death. But a Greek would be puzzled by such a phrase—did it really mean that the transcendent God had a right hand? What Greeks wanted to know was the relationship of that ultimately significant Christ to the Father. Thus, inevitably, the language of *ousia* (“substance” in the Creed) and *hypostasis* (“person”) enters. Were Christ and the Father of the same *ousia*? Or different as to *ousia*? Or

similar in *ousia*? To find out meant a process of exploring what Christians really believed about their Lord, using the indigenous methods of Greek intellectual discourse. It was a long, painful process; but it issued in an expanded understanding of who Christ is. Christian theology moved on to a new plane when Greek questions were asked about Christ and received Greek answers, using the Greek scriptures. It was a risky, often agonizing business, but it led the church to rich discoveries about Christ that could never have been made using only Jewish categories such as Messiah. Translation enriched; it did not negate the tradition.

Similar developments can be traced in later Christian theology as new questions have arisen as a result of the gospel crossing cultural frontiers. We are now at the threshold of a time when new questions will be asked about Christ, arising from the attempt to express him in settings that are dominated by the venerable traditions of Asia and Africa. If past Christian experience is anything to go by, this can only enrich the church's understanding of Christ and lead to new discoveries in theology.

### III. CHRISTIANITY IS ABOUT CONVERSION

The theme of conversion, of turning to Christ, is closely linked with the previous theme of translation. God is the great Translator. In Christ, God is translated into humanity, so that we look at that human being and say, "This is what God is like." If the idea of translation expresses something of the saving activity of God, the idea of conversion may express the proper human response to that activity.

Conversion means turning. Conversion to Christ is turning towards him. There is a vital difference between converts and proselytes. Long before the time of Christ, Jews had designed ways of welcoming gentiles who recognized the God of Israel and wanted to serve him in the community of Israel. Proselytes, as such people were called, were circumcised, were baptized, thus symbolically washing away the dirt of the heathen world, and entered into the life of Israel by seeking to obey the Torah. It would have been very natural for that first, entirely Jewish, community of believers in Jesus to maintain this venerable system. But the great council described in Acts 15, which considered how gentiles who believed in Jesus should be introduced into the community, deliberately rejected the time-honored model of the proselyte. It was an astonishing decision. Hitherto all believers in Jesus had been circumcised and kept the Torah, just like the Lord himself. It was the standard lifestyle for believers. But the early church decided that gentile believers in Jesus—ex-pagans, remember, without the lifelong training in doctrine and morality that Jews had—should not be circumcised, should not keep the Torah, and should be left to find a Christian lifestyle of their own within hellenistic society under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They were not to be proselytes, but converts.

This distinction between convert and proselyte is of fundamental importance. If the first gentile believers had become proselytes, living exactly the style of life of those who brought them to Christ, they might have become very devout be-

lievers indeed, but they would have had virtually no impact on their society; they would effectively have been taken out of that society. In fact, it was their task as converts to convert their society; convert it in the sense that they had to learn to keep turning their ways of thinking and doing things—which, of course, were Greek ways of thinking and doing things—towards Christ, opening them up to his influence. In this way a truly Greek, truly hellenistic type of Christianity was able to emerge. Not only so, but that hellenistic Christianity was able to penetrate the hellenistic intellectual and social heritage. Hellenistic thought, hellenistic social and family life, and hellenistic civic organization were challenged, modified, and put to new uses—but from the inside, by people whose own inheritance they were.

Conversion means turning. It is not about substituting something new for something old; that is the proselyte model, which the early church might have adopted but deliberately abandoned. Nor is it a matter of adding something new to something old. It is much more radical than either. It is the steady, relentless turning of all the mental and moral processes toward Christ. In other words, *it is turning what is already there*; turning to Christ the elements of the pre-conversion setting. Origen puts it beautifully, with a little touch of his own special sort of exegesis. How is it, he says, that the Israelites were able to make the cherubim and the other gold adornments of the tabernacle when they were in the wilderness? The answer is that they had previously despoiled the Egyptians. The cherubim and the vessels were made from Egyptian gold, and the tabernacle curtains of Egyptian cloth. It is the business of Christian people, he goes on, to take the things of the heathen world and to fashion from them things for the worship and service of God.

Together, these three features of global Christian history may give us some hints for Christian mission today. The serial nature of Christian expansion has taken its heartlands away from the west and into the southern continents. The translation of the faith into new cultural contexts and the new questions to which that process gives rise will expand and enrich—if we will allow it—our understanding of Christ. And Christians everywhere, including those who live in the mammon-worshipping culture of the west, the last great non-Christian culture to arise, are called to the relentless turning of their mental and moral processes towards Christ. In the process, and in the fellowship of Christ, we may notice that the tabernacle is now adorned with African gold and hung with curtains of Asian cloth. ⊕