

## 10. The Logic of Mission

Perhaps my title, "The Logic of Mission," may seem an odd one, but I am concerned to explore the question how the mission of the Church is rooted in the gospel itself. There has been a long tradition which sees the mission of the Church primarily as obedience to a command. It has been customary to speak of "the missionary mandate." This way of putting the matter is certainly not without justification, and yet it seems to me that it misses the point. It tends to make mission a burden rather than a joy, to make it part of the law rather than part of the gospel. If one looks at the New Testament evidence one gets another impression. Mission begins with a kind of explosion of joy. The news that the rejected and crucified Jesus is alive is something that cannot possibly be suppressed. It must be told. Who could be silent about such a fact? The mission of the Church in the pages of the New Testament is more like the fallout from a vast explosion, a radioactive fallout which is not lethal but life-giving. One searches in vain through the letters of St. Paul to find any suggestion that he anywhere lays it on the conscience of his readers that they ought to be active in mission. For himself it is inconceivable that he should keep silent. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!" (1 Cor. 9:16). But nowhere do we find him telling his readers that they have a duty to do so.

It is a striking fact, moreover, that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to questions asked by those outside the Church. This is so in the case of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, of the testimonies given by the apostles and by Stephen under interrogation, of the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian, of Peter's meeting with the household of Cornelius, and of

the preaching of Paul in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia. In every case there is something present, a new reality, which calls for explanation and so prompts the question to which the preaching of the gospel is the answer. This is clearly so in the first of the cases I have cited, the sermon of Peter on the day of Pentecost. Something is happening which prompts the crowd to come together and ask, "What is going on?" The answer of Peter is in effect a statement that what is going on is that the last day has arrived and the powers of the new age are already at work, and that this is so because of the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus. The sermon leads up to a climax in the citing of the Psalm 110 (Acts 2:34). Jesus, whom they had crucified, is now seated at the right hand of God until all things are put under his feet. This has to be told to all who will hear simply because it is the truth. This is the reality which all human beings must henceforth take into account. The real government of the universe, the final reality which in the end confronts every human being, is the crucified and risen Jesus. And to the question "What, then, are we to do?" the answer is "Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus." To repent is to do the U-turn of the mind which enables you to believe what is hidden from sight, the reality of the presence of the reign of God in the crucified Jesus. To be baptized is to be identified with, incorporated into that which Jesus did when he went down into the waters of Jordan as one of a company of sin-burdened men and women and so inaugurated a mission which would lead him through his great encounter with the principalities and powers to its victorious climax in the cross. To be baptized is to be incorporated into the dying of Jesus so as to become a participant in his risen life, and so to share his ongoing mission to the world. It is to be baptized into his mission.

His mission. It is of the greatest importance to recognize that it remains his mission. One of the dangers of emphasizing the concept of mission as a mandate given to the Church is that it tempts us to do what we are always tempted to do, namely to see the work of mission as a good work and to seek to justify ourselves by our works. On this view, it is we who must save the unbelievers from perishing. The emphasis of the New Testament, it seems to me, is otherwise. Even Jesus himself speaks of his words and works as not his own but those of the Father. His teaching is the teaching of the Father, and his mighty works are the work of the Father. So also in the Synoptic Gospels, the mighty works of Jesus are the work of God's kingly power, of his Spirit. So also with the disciples. It is the Spirit who will give them power and the Spirit

who will bear witness. It is not that they must speak and act, asking the help of the Spirit to do so. It is rather that in their faithfulness to Jesus they become the place where the Spirit speaks and acts.

This means that their mission will not only be a matter of preaching and teaching but also of learning. When he sends them out on their mission, Jesus tells the disciples that there is much for them yet to learn and he promises that the Spirit who will convict the world will also lead them into the truth in its fullness (John 16:12-15). What does it mean that Jesus is at the right hand of God until all his enemies submit? To believe it is not to arrive at an end of all learning but to arrive at a starting point for learning. All history and all experience have now to be understood in terms of this faith and this promise. But this "understanding" is something the Church has to be learning in the course of its mission. Even the incarnate Lord, according to the Scriptures, had to learn obedience by the things which he suffered (Heb. 5:8). Like its Lord, the Church has to renounce any claim to a masterful control of history. By following the way her Lord went, the way of suffering witness, she unmask the powers which claim this masterful control and confronts each succeeding generation with the ultimate goal of history. What Christ's lordship over the world means, what it means that all authority is given to him, is something which the Church has to learn in her journey. The Spirit, the foretaste of the kingdom, who performs the works of power in the midst of human weakness and thus convicts the world in respect of its most fundamental ideas, by the same token leads the Church into the fullness of the truth, a fullness which will be complete only when Christ's lordship is no longer hidden but manifest to all.

The mission of the Church is to be understood, can only be rightly understood, in terms of the trinitarian model. It is the Father who holds all things in his hand, whose providence upholds all things, whose tender mercies are over all his works, where he is acknowledged and where he is denied, and who has never left himself without witness to the heart and conscience and reason of any human being. In the incarnation of the Son he has made known his nature and purpose fully and completely, for in Jesus "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:19). But this presence was a veiled presence in order that there might be the possibility of repentance and freely given faith. In the Church the mission of Jesus is continued in the same veiled form. It is continued through the presence and active working of the Holy Spirit, who is the presence of the reign of God in foretaste. The

mission of the Church to all the nations, to all human communities in all their diversity and in all their particularity, is itself the mighty work of God, the sign of the inbreaking of the kingdom. The Church is not so much the agent of the mission as the locus of the mission. It is God who acts in the power of his Spirit, doing mighty works, creating signs of a new age, working secretly in the hearts of men and women to draw them to Christ. When they are so drawn, they become part of a community which claims no masterful control of history, but continues to bear witness to the real meaning and goal of history by a life which—in Paul's words—by always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus becomes the place where the risen life of Jesus is made available for others (2 Cor. 4:10).

It is impossible to stress too strongly that the beginning of mission is not an action of ours, but the presence of a new reality, the presence of the Spirit of God in power. The whole New Testament bears witness to this, and so does the missionary experience of the Church through the ages. Perhaps this has been made especially clear to us in the present century through the experience of the Church in the Soviet Union and in China. In both these vast countries we have seen the Church crushed to a point where no kind of explicit public witness, in spoken or written word, or in service to the public, was permitted. And in exactly these situations, we have seen the marvelous growth of the Church through the active power of the Spirit drawing men and women to recognize in this human weakness the presence and power of God. This corresponds to what we have seen in the New Testament, not only in the explicit linking of the mission with the presence of the Spirit, but also in the fact that the great missionary proclamations in Acts are not given on the unilateral initiative of the apostles but in response to questions asked by others, questions prompted by the presence of something which calls for explanation. In discussions about the contemporary mission of the Church it is often said that the Church ought to address itself to the real questions which people are asking. That is to misunderstand the mission of Jesus and the mission of the Church. The world's questions are not the questions which lead to life. What really needs to be said is that where the Church is faithful to its Lord, there the powers of the kingdom are present and people begin to ask the question to which the gospel is the answer. And that, I suppose, is why the letters of St. Paul contain so many exhortations to faithfulness but no exhortations to be active in mission.

The presence of the kingdom in the Church is the presence of its

foretaste, its firstfruit, its pledge (*arrabōn*) in the Spirit. It is the presence of power veiled in weakness. It is a presence which leads us to speak, with the New Testament, both of having and of hoping. "We ourselves," says St. Paul, "who have received the firstfruit, namely the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved" (Rom. 8:23-24). It is this indissoluble unity of having and hoping, this presence now of something which is a pledge of the future, this *arrabōn* which is both a reality now and at the same time a pledge of something far greater to come, it is this which constitutes the Church as witness. But the Church is not the source of the witness; rather, it is the locus of witness. The light cast by the first rays of the morning sun shining on the face of a company of travelers will be evidence that a new day is coming. The travelers are not the source of that witness but only the locus of it. To see for oneself that it is true, that a new day is really coming, one must turn around, face the opposite way, be converted. And then one's own face will share the same brightness and become part of the evidence.

This presence of a new reality, the presence in the shared life of the Church of the Spirit who is the *arrabōn* of the kingdom, has become possible because of what Jesus has done, because of his incarnation, his ministry as the obedient child of his Father, his suffering and death, his resurrection, his ascension into heaven, and his session at the right hand of God. When the apostles are asked to explain the new reality, the new power to find joy in tribulation, healing in sickness, freedom in bondage, life in death, this is the explanation they give. It follows that the visible embodiment of this new reality is not a movement which will take control of history and shape the future according to its own vision, not a new imperialism, not a victorious crusade. Its visible embodiment will be a community that lives by this story, a community whose existence is visibly defined in the regular rehearsing and reenactment of the story which has given it birth, the story of the self-emptying of God in the ministry, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Its visible center as a continuing social entity is that weekly repeated event in which believers share bread and wine as Jesus commanded, as his pledge to them and their pledge to him that they are one with him in his passion and one with him in his victory. Instead of the celebration of the sabbath as the end of God's old creation, they celebrate the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, as the beginning of the new creation. In this they find enacted and affirmed the meaning and goal of their lives as part of the life of the cosmos, their stories as part of the universal story. This story

does indeed lead to a glorious end and is therefore filled with meaning, but the end is not at some far distant date in terrestrial history. The end is the day when Jesus shall come again, when his hidden rule will become manifest and all things will be seen as they truly are. That is why we repeat at each celebration of the Supper the words which encapsulate the whole mystery of faith: "Christ has died. Christ is risen: Christ shall come again."

It is in this light that we must understand the purpose and goal of missions. I am here using the word "missions" in distinction from the more all-embracing word "mission." This latter word I take to mean the entire task for which the Church is sent into the world. By "missions" I mean those specific activities which are undertaken by human decision to bring the gospel to places or situations where it is not heard, to create a Christian presence in a place or situation where there is no such presence or no effective presence. The goal of such a missionary action has been defined in different ways. Sometimes the emphasis is on the conversion of the greatest possible number of individuals and their incorporation into the Church. The success of the mission is to be evaluated in terms of church growth. Sometimes the emphasis is on the humanization of society, the eradication of social ills, the provision of education, healing, and economic development. Success in either of these aims is hailed as success for the mission. By contrast St. Paul's criterion seems to be different. He can tell the Christians in Rome that he has completed his work in the whole vast region from Jerusalem to the Adriatic and has "no longer any room for work in these regions" (Rom. 15:23). What, exactly, has he done? Certainly not converted all the populations of these regions. Certainly not solved their social and economic problems. He has, in his own words, "fully preached the gospel" and left behind communities of men and women who believe the gospel and live by it. So his work as a missionary is done. It is striking, for a modern reader, that he does not agonize about all the multitudes in those regions who have not yet heard the gospel or who have not accepted it. He does indeed, in the same letter, agonize over the fact that the Jews, to whom the gospel primarily belongs, have rejected it. But he is certain that in the end "the fullness of the Gentiles will be gathered in" and "all Israel will be saved" (Rom. 11:25-26). We shall have to consider in a later chapter what to make of this confidence of the apostle. The point here is that he has completed his missionary task in the creation of believing communities in all the regions through which he has passed. These communities are, as he says to the Corinthians, composed

mostly of people whom the world despises. They do not look like the wave of the future. They are ignored by contemporary historians. They do not pretend to take control of the destiny of the Roman Empire, let alone of the whole world. What, then, is their significance?

One could answer most simply by saying that their significance is that they continue the mission of Jesus in accordance with his words: "As the Father sent me, so I send you." They share his weakness, and as they do so, they share in the powers of the new age which he brings. They thus perform, as he did, a critical function. They confront men and women with the ultimate issues of human existence. They therefore share, in their measure, his passion. "A servant is not greater than his master, nor a messenger [apostle] greater than the one who sends him" (John 13:16). All this is spelled out in the apocalyptic passages of the first three Gospels and the corresponding sayings in the fourth. As the coming of Jesus precipitated a crisis for Israel, so the coming of the Church will precipitate a crisis for the world. The coming of light into darkness must necessarily have this effect. In the darkness things can be hidden; when the light comes people have to choose. If Jesus was rejected, so will his messengers. Not only so, there will be false Christs. The coming into the world of the promise of total salvation, of a radically new age, precipitates at the same time the appearing of those who offer salvation on other terms. Therefore it will not only be the old pagans that fight against the Church, but also the new messianisms. Wherever the gospel is preached, new ideologies appear—secular humanism, nationalism, Marxism—movements which offer the vision of a new age, an age freed from all the ills that beset human life, freed from hunger and disease and war—on other terms. It is no accident that the only areas of India where Marxism has become a real power are areas of vigorous Christian missionary activity, or that those who led the Marxist revolution in China were the products of Christian schools and colleges. Once the gospel is preached and there is a community which lives by the gospel, then the question of the ultimate meaning of history is posed and other messiahs appear. So the crisis of history is deepened. Even more significant as an example of this development than the rise of Marxism is the rise of Islam. Islam, which means simply submission, is the mightiest of all the post-Christian movements which claim to offer the kingdom of God without the cross. The denial of the crucifixion is and must always be central to Islamic teaching. But Islam and Marxism are only the most powerful illustrations of something which must necessarily mark the progress of the Christian mis-

sion to the nations. Once the real end of history has been disclosed, and once the invitation is given to live by it in the fellowship of a crucified and risen messiah, then the old static and cyclical patterns are broken and can never be restored. If Jesus is not acknowledged as the Christ, then other christs, other saviors will appear. But the gospel must first be preached to all the nations. Every human community must have the opportunity to hear, believe, and freely accept the true goal. That goal lies beyond history. Kingdoms will pass away. The earth itself and the visible cosmos will pass away. In the end Jesus Christ will be seen as the one to whom authority is given. And so the call is for patient endurance.

What I have been saying seeks to reflect the material of the synoptic apocalypse. The corresponding Johannine teaching is to be found in chapters 14-16 of the Fourth Gospel. Here, too, the disciples are warned that they will be rejected and cast out (John 15:18ff.). They are promised the presence of the Spirit, who will himself be the witness and by whose presence they also will be witnesses (John 15:26-27). This same Spirit will bring the world under judgment, exercising the same power that had been present in Jesus to overturn accepted ideas of sin and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8-9). The Spirit will call for the same radical conversion to which Jesus called men and women. The Spirit is the Spirit of truth, in contrast to the many spirits of this age which lead men and women into falsehood. The Holy Spirit will lead the Church into ever fuller understanding of the truth—beyond what it was possible for the incarnate Lord to communicate to that group of disciples limited to one time and place and culture (John 16:12-15). The work of the Spirit will be to manifest the glory of Jesus by taking what belongs to him (which is in fact everything, because "all that the Father has is mine") and showing it to the Church. By the work of the Spirit the Church will be able to understand "the things that are to come" and to learn that all that exists belongs to Christ. As it lives in the power of the Spirit, and as it shares in the suffering and rejection of Jesus, the Church will learn more and more fully what it means that Jesus is the clue to history, its source and its goal. But clearly this learning process is part of and cannot be detached from the Church's missionary journey to all the nations. There is already in the life of the Church a foretaste of what is promised for the end, namely that the nations shall walk in the light of the Lamb and their kings shall bring their glory into the Holy City (Rev. 21:24). In this sense, as the mission goes its way to the ends of the earth new treasures are brought into the life of the Church,

and Christianity itself grows and changes until it becomes more credible as a foretaste of the unity of all humankind. The first steps of this journey are chronicled in the New Testament, where we see the struggles which were required before the Church could accept that the Gentiles, as Gentiles and not as Jewish proselytes, were to be part of the new community.

The fulfillment of the mission of the Church thus requires that the Church itself be changed and learn new things. Very clearly the Church had to learn something new as a result of the conversion of Cornelius and his household. And, once again, the point must be made: this is not an achievement of the Church but a work of the Spirit. In that story we see Peter's extreme reluctance to mix with the household of a pagan Roman officer. He tells the story of Jesus in that Roman house because he is directly questioned. The fruit of the telling is an action of the Spirit which takes matters out of Peter's hands. He can only confess with astonishment that these uncircumcised pagans have been made part of God's household. So the Church is moved one step on the road toward becoming a home for people of all nations and a sign of the unity of all. The last two centuries have seen giant steps along that road. The Church is now recognizable as a universal community in which all human cultures can be welcomed. But still we are only on the way, and the Church has to continue to learn new things as new peoples are brought to Christ. Only at the end shall we know what it means that Jesus is Lord of all. Till then our confession can only be partial, culture-bound, and thus incomplete. The whole world needs to know what Jesus' lordship means. The writer to the Hebrews, speaking of the saints of the previous generations, says that apart from us they could not be made perfect, because God had prepared some better thing for us (Heb. 11:39-40). The same logic leads us to look into the future and say that we cannot be made perfect without those who are to come after. God's perfect reign cannot be made manifest to all until the mission of the Church to all nations is complete.

In this sketch of the logic of mission, it is obvious that the center of the picture is not occupied by the question of the saving, or the failure to save, individual souls from perdition. That question has dominated Protestant missionary thinking at many times and places. Clearly it cannot be left out of the picture, but I do not find that in the New Testament it occupies the center. If this were the central question, St. Paul could not have said that his work in the Eastern Roman world was finished. However many local churches had come into being through

his ministry, only a tiny minority of those who had died during the years of his ministry had died as Christian believers. If this is the criterion by which missions are to be judged, then plainly they have been and still are a colossal failure. Not only today, but through all the centuries, the great majority of human beings who have died have died without faith in Christ. The missionary calling has sometimes been interpreted as a calling to stem this fearful cataract of souls going to eternal perdition. But I do not find this in the center of the New Testament representation of the missionary calling. Certainly Jesus tells us that God seeks the last lost sheep, and Paul is ready to be all things to all people in order that he may by all means save some (1 Cor. 9:22). And he goes on to say, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings." I shall return to this verse. But meanwhile we must also consider the important passage in Romans 9-11 where Paul gives his most fully developed theology of mission, and here the center of the picture is the eschatological event in which the fullness of the Gentiles will have been gathered in and all Israel will be saved. This is in spite of the fact that the vast majority of Jews have rejected the gospel, and that the event to which Paul looks forward will certainly occur long after the death of the unbelieving Jews. Plainly Paul is not thinking in terms of the individual but in terms of the interpretation of universal history. The center of the picture is the eschatological event in which the fathomless depths of God's wisdom and grace will be revealed. His ways are inscrutable and his judgments unsearchable. He has consigned all men to disobedience in order that he may have mercy on all (Rom. 11:32-36). Until that day none can share in God's perfection. Until that day, we are all on the way. There is no room either for anxiety about our failure or for boasting about our success. There is room only for faithful witness to the one in whom the whole purpose of God for cosmic history has been revealed and effected, the crucified, risen, and regnant Christ.

So the logic of mission is this: the true meaning of the human story has been disclosed. Because it is the truth, it must be shared universally. It cannot be private opinion. When we share it with all peoples, we give them the opportunity to know the truth about themselves, to know who they are because they can know the true story of which their lives are a part. Wherever the gospel is preached the question of the meaning of the human story—the universal story and the personal story of each human being—is posed. Thereafter the situation can never be the same. It can never revert to the old harmonies, the old securities, the old static or cyclical patterns of the past. Now decisions have to be made for or

against Christ, for Christ as the clue to history or for some other clue. There will always be the temptation, even for those within the Christian community, to find the clue in the success of some project of our own, to see our program (whether of church growth or of human development) as the success story which is going to give meaning to our lives. The gospel calls us back again and again to the real clue, the crucified and risen Jesus, so that we learn that the meaning of history is not immanent in history itself, that history cannot find its meaning at the end of a process of development, but that history is given its meaning by what God has done in Jesus Christ and by what he has promised to do; and that the true horizon is not at the successful end of our projects but in his coming to reign.

One may say, therefore, that missions are the test of our faith. In earlier chapters I have emphasized the fact that the Christian gospel cannot be validated by reference to some more ultimate commitment. The Christian faith is itself an ultimate faith-commitment which can be validated only in its exercise. As such it is open to the charge of subjectivity. In drawing on the epistemological work of Polanyi I referred to his insistence on the importance of the subjective pole in all our knowing. All knowing is an exercise of a knowing subject which involves personal commitment. How, then, is it saved from pure subjectivity? This is a vital question in our present cultural situation where Christian faith is widely regarded as belonging to the world of subjective values rather than to the world of objective facts, and as being therefore merely a matter of personal choice about which the words "true" and "false" cannot be used. How is this charge to be refuted? Not by seeking some more ultimate ground on which faith could rest. There is nothing more ultimate than Jesus Christ, through whom all things came to be and in whom all things will find their consummation. Polanyi's answer to the charge of subjectivism is that while we hold our beliefs as personally committed subjects, we hold them with universal intent, and we express that intent by publishing them and inviting all people to consider and accept them. To be willing so to publish them is the test of our real belief. In this sense missions are the test of our faith. We believe that the truth about the human story has been disclosed in the events which form the substance of the gospel. We believe, therefore, that these events are the real clue to the story of every person, for every human life is part of the whole human story and cannot be understood apart from that story. It follows that the test of our real belief is our readiness to share it with all peoples.

I do not say that that is the only way to speak of missions. Missions are also an expression of our hope: they express our belief that there is a real future for us and for the world and that there are therefore solid grounds for hope. Missions are also an expression of love. As Paul says, the love of Christ constrains us. We have been reconciled to God through the atoning love of Christ, and therefore we have an obligation to share that love with all for whom he died. We have a ministry of reconciliation entrusted to us because God has reconciled us to himself. But clearly both of these motives depend on the truth of what we believe. If it is not true, then there are no grounds for hope. And if it is not true, then to persuade men and women to follow Jesus is not an act of love. Missions are the test of our faith that the gospel is true.

It will be clear from what I have said about Paul's eschatological vision of salvation that I am not placing at the center of the argument the question of the salvation or perdition of the individual. Clearly that is part of what is involved, but my contention is that the biblical picture is distorted if this is put in the center. But it may be asked: if it is true that those who die without faith in Christ are not necessarily lost, and if it is also true that those who are baptized Christians are not necessarily saved, what is the point of missions? Why not leave events to take their course? In answer to that question, I would refer again to the word of Paul which I quoted earlier, "I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings" (1 Cor. 9:23). Jesus said as he was on his way to the cross, "Where I am, there shall my servant be" (John 12:26). The one who has been called and loved by the Lord, the one who wishes to love and serve the Lord, will want to be where he is. And where he is is on that frontier which runs between the kingdom of God and the usurped power of the evil one. When Jesus sent out his disciples on his mission, he showed them his hands and his side. They will share in his mission as they share in his passion, as they follow him in challenging and unmasking the powers of evil. There is no other way to be with him. At the heart of mission is simply the desire to be with him and to give him the service of our lives. At the heart of mission is thanksgiving and praise. We distort matters when we make mission an enterprise of our own in which we can justify ourselves by our works. I said at the beginning of this chapter that the Church's mission began as the radioactive fallout from an explosion of joy. When it is true to its nature, it is so to the end. Mission is an acted out doxology. That is its deepest secret. Its purpose is that God may be glorified.