

Have We Lost Our Way?

By Samuel H. Moffett

This address was presented to the annual PFR Breakfast at the General Assembly in Wichita just days before the Assembly overwhelmingly accepted the report of the GAC Review Committee which stated that the Re-Imagining Conference, an ecumenical women's conference, went beyond the boundaries of Christian theology.

I wanted to call this short address, "It's the Theology, Stupid." But in the interests of a more irenic General Assembly I have toned down the title to "Have We Lost Our Way?" remembering how Jesus once said to doubting Thomas, "I am the way and the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me." (John 14:6) I wonder if, in this new age of doubt, we aren't losing that Way again.

There was a time, back before the great theological depression in the mainline churches - there was a time when Christians didn't feel the need to re-examine or re-imagine the world Christian mission every three or four years. They didn't need to ask why they had missionaries, and what missionaries were supposed to do. It was axiomatic. It was simple, and dangerous, and overwhelmingly urgent. It was as simple as the command of Christ, and as urgent as life and death. For millions upon millions were dying without Christ. Every second saw more souls slipping into a Christless eternity. No one had ever given them a chance. No one had ever told them they were lost. No one had ever told them that they could live forever in Christ. Faced with a challenge as simple as that, the Church exploded into the modern missionary movement, a race against time and against the devil for the greatest of all prizes, the eternal salvation of the human soul.

If I've over-simplified and over-dramatized it, forgive me, but that is the classic, and to many people the most familiar, theology of missions. It is evangelical theology: salvation free for all, but only in Christ. And if you are expecting me to ridicule it, I am going to disappoint you. It is not as old-fashioned and outdated as some people think it is. It was my parents' theology. But - and this is important - that same theology is also the theology of the Korean Presbyterian Church today, a Presbyterian theology which gains three or four times more members every year than Presbyterians in America lose every year. In fact that theology is not just Presbyterian; it is the theology of the vast majority of the churches of the third world. And who are we to call them ridiculous? They're the ones who are growing not we.

I must also confess that, in large measure, that was the theology that sent me to China, and one of my brothers to inner city America, and another to India, and

still another into medical missions, not all that long ago. No, I don't ridicule it.

This is how it happened to me. One day in Princeton's Miller chapel, the chairman of the Board, Robert E. Speer, was speaking. At one point he stopped, took out his watch, and said to us, "Young men," (we were all men at the seminary then), "this watch could tick for nine-and-a-half years without numbering the unbelievers in china alone." I couldn't get that picture out of my mind.

That theology of the lostness of unbelief, and of salvation in Jesus Christ alone, still sends more missionaries around the globe than any other theology of missions. Most people do not seem to realize that the number of foreign missionaries from North America has been growing every year - except, alas, in our mainline churches. It is a missionary theology.

But you know as well as I that there came a day of the shaking of the foundations. The old urgencies were denied, or at least ignored. No one seemed sure of anything eternal any more. So the challenge changed. The 1928 Jerusalem Conference of the International Missionary Council said (if you will excuse their language), "Our fathers were impressed with horror that men should die without Christ; we are equally impressed with horror that they should live without Christ."

It was a shift of balance, really, more than a denial - a strategic withdrawal, they thought, to what was considered firmer theological ground. Millions upon millions are living in misery and in filth. No one can deny that. No one has ever given them a chance, they said. No one has ever helped them to the life abundant that Jesus came to give them. This was a challenge to a future in history - a future without hunger and without hate, without sickness and without tears, where all men are brothers and all women are sisters, where justice rolls down like the waters and the nations shall study war no more.

This is the second theology of missions, more modern, more practical, more "works" centered than "grace" centered, a theology of the Kingdom. In its most popular form it is a theology of liberation, an attempt all too often to try to build the Kingdom without the King. But I do not intend to ridicule Kingdom theology either. Even the King keeps his eye on the sparrow. It has never seemed ridiculous to me to feed the hungry and to heal the sick and to work for peace and justice. Jesus who said, "I am the way..." also said, "I am the life." What you have done "for the least of these" - the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the sick, the prisoners - "what you have done for them, you have done for me." That kind of liberation I can never ridicule.

But again the paralysis of doubt struck. The foundations shook, and the roof

fell in. Wars, holocausts, depressions, brutalities, corruptions, AIDS, drugs, and failed revolutions – all this in a disheartening crescendo of defeat. Worst of all, much of this was happening right here in our "Christian" West, in what too many had believed was the Kingdom, Western civilization. That kind of a Kingdom somehow refused to stay built no matter how hard the liberators tried, and the builders began to lose hope. Have we lost the Way?

Those have been the two familiar descriptions of the missionary: on the one hand, the saver of souls, the evangelist; and on the other, the builder of the Kingdom, the social activist. The problem of missions today is that neither the evangelist nor the activist has proved to be able, by himself or herself, to carry the whole church together into mission. Critics of the left still caricature the evangelical promise as "pie in the sky by-and-by." Critics from the right even more devastatingly point out that the "paradise-here-and-now" activism of yesterday's failed revolutions has given us more hell on earth than hope in heaven.

So where do we begin mission in this kind of a world, and in our kind of a discouraged church? Where can we find a compelling motive to unite and renew the whole church in Christian mission? For those who will listen there is still a way. Jesus is still saying, "I am the Way..."

It might help if both the unfairly caricatured evangelists, and the well-intentioned but much criticized builders of the Kingdom, would first take one step backward for a better start on their way to mission, and then together take another step forward toward a deeper, more biblical theology of missions, a Christ-centered theology. Christ defines our mission, and He is not pluralistic.

Our mission must witness to the One Way, Christ. Anything more is idolatry. Anything less is no longer Christian. The evangelist is not the way; neither is the social activist. The Bible reminds us that the evangelist can no more save souls than the 'social gospeller' can build the Kingdom of God. Souls are saved by the Holy Spirit, whose witness is never separated from Jesus Christ as the only way. And only God can build the Kingdom, whose promised King is Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, King of Kings, and Lord of all of life.

But both the evangelist and the activist are so right in so much of what they are doing. The evangelist proclaims the good news, the gospel; the activist seeks to serve and improve the world. We need them both. And in all fairness to our forebears, whatever their other faults may have been, the pioneer missionaries had them both. They didn't polarize the evangelistic and social gospel. While they preached, they opened schools and hospitals; they laid foundations for the liberation of women and the oppressed; and the churches they planted changed the lives of

whole nations. Moreover, the evangelist and the reformer are actually not all that much different in their basic motivation. At their best, both honestly believe that their motive is love, Christian love.

But love has lost much of its biblical meaning in today's post-Christian world. America's modern culture-captive theologies use the word "love" in such a warm, loose, fuzzy way that I am beginning to question just how far we can use that word any more to describe our motivating base in Christian mission. Some, even in the church, confuse it with erotic love, or trivialize it with sugary sentiment. How very American! The "Love and Justice" slogan is a better watchword. But that too easily turns into a polarizing double track for mission, with the soft-hearted opting for love, and the hard-headed for justice.

I am thrown back, therefore, to a yet more primal level of motivation for mission: not love, but obedience. Obedience in love, I hasten to add. C.S. Lewis once observed in his pithy way, "[We] do not fail in obedience through lack of love, but have lost love because [we] have never attempted obedience"

Of course love is fundamental, love as the New Testament describes it. It is still "the first and greatest commandment." But was love the motive in the original mission of the church?

It was love that started the mission. Yes. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that everyone who believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life" (NRSV). But that was the love of God the Father. The missionary was God the Son.

But surely, the Son came on his mission with no less love than that of the Father who sent him. Yes, I believe that. However, it is interesting to note that the Bible does not say so. The life of Jesus on this earth was filled with love. His was a compassion that knew no bounds. He loved the publicans and sinners, Jews and Gentiles, unbelievers as well as those who believed. That is all true. But where are we told that he came into the world because he loved it? Insofar as the Bible distinguishes between the Son and the Father (a dangerous distinction, I know, and one which slips easily into heresy) – but so far as it does distinguish between those two persons of the Trinity in reference to the mission, it tells us that the Father founds the mission because he loves; the Son goes on the mission because he is sent. He obeys. The motive of the Son, the missionary, is obedience.

Look at the rare glimpse Paul gives us into the mind of Christ before the mission of his incarnation. The lesson is not love, but humility and obedience,

obedience "even unto the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:5-8). He loves the world, of course, but he goes because he is sent. That is the only explanation Jesus gives of the narrowness of his mission, "I am not sent but to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 15:24). He loves the world enough to die for it, but he goes to the cross because he obeys: "Not my will but thine be done" (Lk. 22:42). The insistent, compelling motive of the mission is obedience. God is love; but it is obedience that forges and focuses and incarnates that love into a mission.

The lesson is the same when we turn to the apostles, the first missionaries of the church. Was it love for a despised and rejected race that sent Philip to the Ethiopian? Not according to the record. "The angel of the Lord spoke to Philip and said, 'Arise and go...'" (Acts 8:26). And he went. Was it love that sent Peter to the proud and unclean, the Roman centurion? Not according to the record. "The Spirit said to him, 'Arise and go...'" (Acts 10:20). And he went.

Was it a passion for millions of lost Gentile souls dying without hope and without Christ in this world that made Saul into Paul, "the apostle to the Gentiles"? He loved his own people, the Jews, too much for that, as the record shows. It was obedience that made him a missionary. "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them," said the Spirit (Acts 13:2), and obedience sent him almost reluctantly to the Gentiles. In the "strange new world of the Bible" (Barth), apostles and missionaries are made not by looking at the world in love (though that they must do), but in the most basic sense, by listening to God in obedience. They go in love, or they should not go at all. But they go because they obey.

At this point most of us are inclined to change the subject in embarrassment and wish we could go on to more practical missionary matters than theology - go on to things like techniques, and methods, and cross-cultural relations, and fund-raising appeals. How can we wait around to listen for the voice of God, when there is a whole world out there that needs to hear the good news and see it practiced.

I remember an incident back in my college days. This story, I admit, won't sound like most colleges today. One of the young women, earnest and intense, desperately wanted to go as a missionary to Africa. But God had not called her, she thought. There were no voices, no visions, only this inexplicable silence on the part of God. It was making her almost ill with anxiety. So one night a tough-minded, realistic, practical-joking friend stepped in to take a hand. She gathered a group of girls together, robed them all in white sheets, and at midnight they stole into the troubled girl's room, moaning in hollow tones, "Come to Africa; come to Africa."

Don't laugh at the poor girl waiting for the voice of God. She was partly right, but partly wrong. Wrong in her stereotyped notion of how God ought to speak to her, but completely right in believing that without the positive assurance of God's leading she would never be a missionary even if she did go to Africa. And don't rush to condemn the practical jokers, either. They were wrong to pose as substitutes for the voice of God, a temptation not unknown also among preachers and professors. But they were right that God does in his own mysterious way, choose to work through imperfect human means. Especially in missions. That is why our theology is so important. It keeps us on the right way. We are only dressing up in white robes and stealing in upon the unwary with false guideposts and lesser challenges if we settle for anything less than truth, love, and, through it all, obedience, according to the Scriptures.

Two years ago we had a surprise call. A Korean pastor whom we did not know, from the Sangdo Presbyterian Church in Seoul with which we were not familiar, wanted to fly us down to Chile for the ground-breaking of their new missionary project of which we had never heard. They told us that the church was celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary, and wanted to commemorate it by undertaking a missions project in Chile. We wondered: Why Chile? Well, they said, we remembered that Jesus said, "...to the uttermost ends of the earth." So our people got out a globe and put a pin in South Korea. Then they stretched a string as far as it would go all the way to the opposite end of the globe. It turned out to be Chile. They found out that there were already three Korean evangelists at work in Chile, but no Korean missionary doctor. They said, "The missionaries who came to us opened hospitals. So the best way for us to obey Christ's command would be to celebrate our twenty-fifth anniversary by building a Christian hospital for the Mapuche Indians in southern Chile." And they did it. It was dedicated last spring.

As simple as that. A firm faith; and cheerful obedience. If that sounds too simple for us sophisticated American Presbyterians, I suspect we may be getting too academic, like the professor from Yale who visited our mission in northern Korean years ago. He wanted to preach in a country church. So the mission sent him with a missionary interpreter out into the country. The professor began his sermon, "All thought is divided into two categories, the concrete and the abstract." His interpreter looked at the little congregation sitting with eager attention on the floor of the little church - toothless grandmothers, schoolboys without shoes - and made a quick decision. "Dear friends," he began his translation, "I have come all the way from America to tell you about the Lord Jesus Christ," and from there on the sermon was firmly in his hands.

I vote for more simplicity in our Presbyterian challenge to mission. Who knows

what this General Assembly will do? How will people remember Wichita '94 fifty years from now? Will it be, "Oh yes, those Presbyterians. They lost it at Wichita. They talked about 'the concrete and the abstract,' and about gods and goddesses, and who knows what else. And no one understood. And then they got angry; and no one wanted to listen. And they went home and disappeared. Whatever happened to the Presbyterians?"

Or will the Holy Spirit, the Great Interpreter, take over here and now with grace and power, so that people will hear us saying, "We have come all the way to Wichita to set a course to tell the world about the Lord Jesus Christ." If so, perhaps fifty years from now they will say, "Look at what those Presbyterians have done in only fifty years."

Jesus said, "I am the Way... No one comes to the Father but by me." We know the Way. God gives the power. Our part is to obey.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Sam Moffett was born in Korea, a son of pioneer Presbyterian missionaries there. He served the Presbyterian Church first as a missionary to China, and then with Eileen served in Korea for twenty-six years. Currently he is Professor of Ecumenics and Mission, Emeritus, at Princeton Theological Seminary. He is at work on "History of Christianity in Asia: Vol. 2".

DR. & MRS. MOFFETT

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SHM p. 9-15
EFM p. 12, 30-31
SAM p. 19-29

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프린스톤 한인 장로교회

Princeton Korean Presbyterian Church

500 Plainsboro Road, Plainsboro NJ 08536

통합교회명: 프린스톤 영광 장로교회 (1995.11.19부터)

New Name: Princeton Glory Presbyterian Church

새주소: 115 Sand Hill Road,

Monmouth JCT, NJ 08852

전화: (908) 940-0550