

Mission from a Nepali Perspective

Ganesh Tamang, Simon Gurung & Kamal Thapa¹

Historical Background

When the Capuchin missionaries entered Kathmandu valley during the early 1700's, they propagated the gospel and started the churches mainly among the Newar community. They were expelled in 1769. In 1950, Nepal was declared a multi-party democratic state and was open to foreigners again. Missionaries were invited to provide health services and education, but they were strictly forbidden to convert people to Christianity. The first mission body that entered Nepal in 1952 was known as International Nepal Fellowship, and this was followed by the United Mission to Nepal in 1954. Such mission organizations were involved in social welfare programs like hospitals, clinics, and schools. They continue their services as social workers or as an international non-governmental organization. The positive aspects of their mission are: (a) that the Nepalese have access to the services like hospitals, schools, hydro-projects and other social works; and (b) a few numbers of Nepalese came to know Christ through their services. Even though there were some mission efforts made by both organized and unorganized missionaries to propagate the gospel, the majority of churches in Nepal are unique in terms of being self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating.

There is no prominent impact of these international mission agencies in terms of church planting in Nepal. Those who played important role for the entry of the gospel in Nepal were the Nepalese in diaspora in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, India and the Nepali workers in different parts of the world, especially the Gurkhas. These Nepalese were assisted by the fragmented mission efforts from outside. Nepal also received some Marthomite missionaries from Kerala in 1954.

Our Understanding of Mission

One biblical text that gives us a model of mission is John 4, which is about a nameless Samaritan woman. Despite the social stigma she faced, as one despised by society, she had an opportunity to encounter Jesus. Such encounter transformed and empowered to be a witness to her community, the Samaritans. The Samaritans, an outcast community, later declared, "We no longer believe just because of what you said; now we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this man really is the Savior of the world" (vs. 42). Later Jesus resided with them for three days. Mission is the work of introducing Jesus and making him reside Jesus among our neighbors just like what the nameless Samaritan woman did. Or, it is making Jesus' name known but not one's own. Depicting the model of the Samaritan woman, all believers who confess Jesus as their personal Savior are missionaries to carry out God's life-changing mission. We all are missionaries of God and assigned to introduce Jesus without highlighting ourselves.

¹ Ganesh Tamang is the principal of Nepal Institute of Theology while Pastor Simon Gurung & Mr. Kamal Thapa are members of the National Council of Churches of Nepal.

The Challenges of Nepali Churches

The mission of the United Nations is clear but the mission of the so-called missionary agencies is often not clear. Usually it refers to converting people to Christianity by hook or crook in order to expand their colonial version of Christianity. There are some historical mistakes that mission organizations and missionaries have committed in Nepal. There are two missionary phases in the history of Christianity in Nepal: (a) pre-1990 and (b) post-1990.

After the freedom from the autocratic Rana rulers in 1950, the International Nepal Fellowship and United Mission to Nepal entered Nepal to begin their social works. These were international non-governmental organizations with Christian names but they did not have any spiritual and moral authority over Nepal because they came with terms of agreement with the Nepali government that they would not evangelize the gospel. Thus, the Gospel was never presented as an encountering power against the corrupt political and social structures in Nepal. By accepting the terms of the corrupt government not to evangelize, these missionaries were willing to compromise the life-giving message of Jesus Christ. To the outside world they presented themselves as mission agencies, while in Nepal they were limited to the commands of the corrupt government.

These disguised mission agencies could not embrace the broader vision of the growth and development of Nepali church in a collective way; rather, they hand-picked a few Christian leaders individually. When individual personalities become powerful, the church as a collective body becomes weak. This is the second mistake of the mission agencies: they hand-picked Nepali church leaders who were supported with overabundance of finance, buildings, huge plot of land, vehicles and other resources. Now, most of these properties are captured either by these leaders' children or some have already been made private property. It is sad to say that some of them have already sought asylum in the US and other developed countries. While these mission bodies commonly alleged that Nepalese are dishonest, we do not accept this allegation and disgrace but insist that the first generation Christian leaders were made dishonest by those mission agencies.

The second phase of the history of Christianity in Nepal begins from 1990 with the success of the democratic movement. After 1990, the Christian faith and practices were no more illegal. With Nepal as a mission receiving country, the history of mission in the post-1990 is completely perverted. New generation leaders learned wrong lessons from their predecessors, and they knew how to become more powerful and influential in the church. In other words, the national Christian leaders committed themselves to pleasing foreign missionaries and mission agencies for their financial gain. Many were tempted to become pastors. This was assisted by so many unorganized mission groups who came to Nepal with handsome money. They purchased so many churches, tagged with the label of their mission or denomination, and acted as though they were the church pioneers. As a result, churches are financially controlled by mission agencies and become their national puppets.

It is a biblical principle that mission is not something greater than the church. One of the identical shortcomings of the post-1990 is that the churches are dependent upon foreign

mission for everything. As a result, the local churches are crippled; they are losing their spiritual authority, dignity and identity in the eyes of the non-Christian Nepalese. The second shortcoming is that, mission's hand-picked person became more important rather than his/her calling and quality to serve the Lord. Division within and among churches is another blemish of mission agencies when it does serve the purpose of its own. Inter-church relationship is almost broken because of money and power. The post-1990 has received mostly a report-making and photographer missionaries. Thus churches have lost their reputation that comes from obeying Jesus Christ.

From the theological point of view, Nepal is one of the weakest countries in the world, not because we do not have enough Bible schools. In 1981, the Nepal Institute of Theology was the only Bible school to offer a two-year Bible training course. The post-1990 has seen the establishing of about 40 Bible schools within the city of Kathmandu. Unfortunately, none of them offer a widely recognized degree, and the quality of education is very poor. Instead of strengthening existing Bible schools, there is duplication of what has already been existing.

Implications for Holistic Mission

Despite these above-mentioned weaknesses, the churches in Nepal are growing fast. Obviously, the mission agencies and missionaries are not solely to blame for our shortcomings; they cannot be made the scapegoat for our weaknesses. In order to make mission work more relevant, meaningful and efficient, Nepali Christians also have to play a positive role so that the past mistakes may not be repeated. Hence, the following steps are suggested:

1) **Analysis:** If mission agencies are willing to work among Nepalese for a long-term basis, they must do a thorough research about their values, needs and potentialities. An approach to mission with proper value assessment will prevent duplication and also bring new possibilities and make use of resources for right programs.

2) **Spirit of Partnership:** The term 'mission' has negative connotations for all the time. The topic, "Mission from the perspective of receiving countries" itself indicates that the receivers of mission are always inactive and inferior to the sending body, no matter how qualified they are. Therefore, the term 'mission' does not help to promote the spirit of partnership. In partnership, neither receivers nor senders are inferior or superior to each other. It is rather a resource sharing process with mutual understanding and respect. It is clear that no foreigners in the 21st century will be able to pioneer churches in Nepal by themselves. At the same time, in today's global world, no national Christian leader can avoid assistance from outside (whether in the form of ideas or material resources). Therefore, if the receivers are comfortable to receive them, missionaries should come as partners, not as masters. Likewise, the receivers also should receive them not as masters but as partners. In this way, the gap between senders and receivers can be bridged.

3) **Empowerment:** Unfortunately, mission work has always been wrongly ascribed to the foreign mission while the roles of the indigenous church are being ignored. By nature, most

Nepali churches are self-supporting. By following the example of the nameless Samaritan woman, Nepali Christians are capable missionaries. But they can be empowered to do mission work without importing missionaries.

4) **Leadership development:** As mentioned earlier, mission is not greater than the church. In many cases, the churches are ended along with the dismissal of mission. This happens when the mission agencies are not serious about transferring the leadership to the new generation. Here we should apply 2Timothy 2:2 to build up leadership: "Take the teachings that you heard from me, proclaim in the presence of many witnesses, and entrust them to reliable people, who will be able to teach others also."

5) **Theological development:** The post-1990 has witnessed the sprouting of several church denominations. Unfortunately, Nepali Christians do not know about their doctrinal stand. For example, a Nepali Mennonite church member may not know what is his/her doctrine as a Mennonite. This is the time that churches in Nepal are capable of formulating their own theologies to contribute to the world. Therefore, Nepal is not in need of the Gospel-preaching missionaries but the strengthener-partners to transmit their skills and ideas in order to build up or to strengthen what is already there.

Attempts: Despite all these shortcomings, National Council of Churches in Nepal has made meager, yet some serious attempts to articulate Christian faith into the society by addressing the burning issues like, Dalit, women, human rights, religious harmony, justice, peace and so on. NCCN has in the recent past especially played the role of mediation and negotiation in order to make peace between the government and the Maoist rebels. In this way, the voice of Christians has to some extent been heard. However, these efforts are not enough to shake the strongholds of prevalent evil structures. Therefore, we keep on struggling with so many untouched issues (e.g. theological vacuum in the church, issues of tribal groups, Christian prophetic role in the time of political instability, etc.) by making Jesus and the Bible speak in our situation.