

Keynote Address

In Search of a New Vision for Christian Mission in Asia

- *Mathews George Chunakara**

Much has been said and discussed about the purpose and relevance of Christian mission. The great Commission (Mt. 28: 16-20) has always been the theological basis and motivation for the Church. Missionary movements at all times arose in response and obedience to this calling: “...go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”. However, the concept and praxis of mission have been defined or interpreted differently at times in history. The essence of the message has been propagated, interpreted and received with different emphases. For some, mission is a program to win over some more followers or new believers to their side. Others do their mission through persuasion or coercion. For several others, Christian mission is still considered as an expansion of their denominational identities and they are even prepared to undertake proselytization as the main task of their mission. Unfortunately, these narrow interpretations and distorted versions of Christian mission defeat the real purpose of proclaiming the message of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In Biblical history and interpretation, we see that Mission is an activity of God. Mission is a divine action of God. God alone is the source of missionary enterprise and the one who retains in His own hands without surrendering it to any other authority. The Mission remains with God in which the Church participates and is involved. Often, a question is asked, “Does the Church perform a mission or does the Church participate in God’s Mission?” M.A. Thomas, an internationally known Indian ecumenist responded to this question by saying that, “However closely does the Church and mission belong together, the Church does not perform the missionary enterprise. This is an activity of the Trinity. While Mission is an activity of God in which the Church participates, missions are particular forms related to specific times, places, or needs of the participation. The Church is the Church only insofar as it participates in the mission of God. The very function of the Church is mission. Therefore a call to mission is a call to join God’s action in the world”.¹ This points to the fact that the prevailing notion of mission and the activities carried out in our surroundings in the name of mission with an emphasis of aggressive mission activities do not match with the message and spirit of the gospel as they are only distorted versions of the original concept and real purpose of mission. K.C. Abraham, a noted Indian theologian says, “the aggressive crusading mission is the product of Christendom culture and not born of biblical faith”.² He says a recovery of the New Testament meaning of mission is necessary to ward off much of the distortions that have come into our understanding of the Church’s mission. The word mission is from the Latin version of the

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biblical word “sending”. Missionary is “apostle” and mission is ‘apostolate’. We are called to be messengers of God. It is explicitly stated in the Gospel of St. John, “As the Father has sent me, and I am sending you.” (Jn. 20:21). The World Mission Conference held in Melbourne, in 1980 on the theme “Your Kingdom Come”, explicitly interpreted Christ’s words in this context: “As the Father has sent me, I am sending you. The self-emptying of the servant who lived among the people, sharing in their hopes and sufferings, giving his life on the Cross for all humanity. This was Christ’s way of proclaiming the Good News, and as disciples we are summoned to follow the same way”. In his messianic mission, Jesus brought a new dimension; a new vision and a new message of God’s call to be engaged in this world. We see in the gospel of St. Mathew how that message of Jesus’ messianic mission was conveyed to the messengers of John the Baptist who approached and enquired about his mission. Jesus’ response to their query was, “*Go back and tell John what you are hearing and seeing: the blind can see, the lame can walk, those who suffer from dreaded skin diseases are made clean, the deaf hear, the dead are brought back to life, and the Good News is preached to the poor*” (Mt. 11: 4-6). Jesus’ public pronouncement about his prophetic mission was spelt out when he read the passage from the book of Isiah in the synagogue which Luke narrates, “*He has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed*”. (Luke 4:18). When Jesus proclaims the manifesto of his mission, he affirms the significance of the all essential factors needed for ensuring the fullness of life: “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full*” (Jn. 10:10). Jesus told his disciples later about their mission and how they will continue his mission: “*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8). This is the reason for us to understand that any attempt to reduce the mission or limit it to mere obedience to a command that comes from elsewhere will reduce the real purpose and distort the very goal of mission.

We realise God’s ways are mysterious and beyond our comprehension. This truth is evident in many contexts. We read the story about Peter and Cornelius and how God worked in a very remarkable way while they were engaged in their mission. God’s intervention changes the contexts in which the disciples preached the gospel only to the Jews, or those Greeks that were circumcised and proselytized to the Jewish religion. But, the situation changed and they turned to the Gentiles to deliver the good news. We see here the fascinating story of the mysteries of God’s ways signifies God’s mission; how Cornelius was directed by a vision to send for Peter, and did send for him accordingly (Acts 10:1-8); how Peter was directed by a vision to go to Cornelius, though he was a Gentile, without making any scruple of it, and did go accordingly (Acts 10:9-23); the happy interview between Peter and Cornelius at Caesarea (Acts 10:24-33); the sermon Peter preached in the house of Cornelius to him and to his friends, (Acts 10:34-43); the baptizing of Cornelius and his friends with the Holy Ghost first, and then with water (Acts 10:44-48). When Peter reports back to the Church in Jerusalem, he reveals that truth: “*The Holy Spirit fell on them even as on us at the beginning*” (Acts 11:15). Through this action we understand how a new Pentecost for the Gentiles involves them in the Mission of God.

In another context, we see how Paul was directed by the divine spirit to proceed in the proper direction while he continues the mission during his second missionary journey. Paul and his colleague Silas went throughout Phrygia and the region of Galatia. The incident reads as “*And*

they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing beseeching him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them". (Acts 16: 6-10). The divine vision Paul experienced, an angel appeared to him, to intimate to him that it was the will of Christ he should go to Macedonia. Let him not be discouraged by the embargo laid upon him once and again, by which his designs were crossed; for, though he shall not go where he has a mind to go, he shall go where God has work for him to do.³ The Church is not the ultimate authority or the officers of the Church are not the sovereign decision makers according to their interest to initiate mission. The Spirit is sovereign to take the initiative and goes ahead with the mission. It is our common notion that the mission of the Church is mainly to proselytize people to their churches and to add more numbers in their churches. The Church is called to be the co-worker with God in the mission of God. Mission rightly understood is *Missio Dei*.

Christian Mission in Asia

Christianity has been rooted in certain parts of Asian soil from the first century onwards. However, the Christian mission started to spread across the continent more systematically only from the 16th century. The history of Christian mission in Asia by and large has projected a negative image in the eyes of non-Christians. Although colonialism ended in Asia several decades ago, the Church in Asia is seen as a by-product of the colonial activities in Asian countries. The Church in Asia is often identified as an arm of western imperialism. The day-to-day lives of most Asian churches replicate the customs, cultures and even costumes of the West rather than being indigenous in terms of worship, liturgy, music, theology, architecture of church buildings, institutional and organisational structures of Church administrative bodies, etc. Three years ago I attended the dedication service of a Cathedral Church in Pakistan where I could see the new big portrait of Jesus Christ fixed at the middle of the wall of the altar. The appearance of Jesus in the painting looks as if Jesus as a Westerner. The Pakistani artist who identifies and visualises Christianity with the West can imagine and paint the portrait of Jesus only in that way.

The legacy and loyalty of Western branded Christianity still continues in many Asian contexts. Bishop Stephen Neils, in his book, 'A History of Christian Missions', identifies colonialism as an external factor. He observes a number of factors and events around 1858-1863 which advanced colonialism to its acme. In his study on 'Serampore Missions and Colonial Connections', J.S. Dharmaraj narrates the history of how evangelicals in England tried to secure the inclusion of a clause in the East India Company's Charter requiring the Company to let missionaries work in India. Colonialism gave an advantage to the missionaries in terms of access to the colonised countries. However, colonialism with commercial motives and profit-making exploitation backed by the gun, and the association of the missions with the colonial masters were considered then and now as an evil. Colonialism was after all oppression and the oppressed always resented the oppressor. This close identification of the colonialists with Christianity did far more harm in the long run than the benefits it brought. A suspicion existed against Western missionaries in many countries mainly because of the

closeness of the missionaries with the colonialists. In fact, such overshadowed the good work the missionaries did among the poor and marginalised, although many missionaries from the West sacrificed their life for the propagation of the gospel as well as to work among the poor and marginalised. While nationalism was growing and decolonisation struggles were taking momentum in colonised countries, missionaries often became the targets of anti-colonial sentiments. About 160 missionaries were killed in the Boxer rebellion in China in 1900 mainly due to feelings of resentment against colonialism. In other words, those missionaries in China became victims of anti-colonial feelings of the nationalists.

The end of Western colonialism posed serious questions and challenges to the missionary enterprise as well as to the younger churches in the former mission-fields. Sardar K.M. Panicker, devoted one chapter of his book in his famous work on 'Asia and Western Dominance' to a discussion on Western Missions. In this book, he describes the failure of Christian missions. K.M Panicker's book deals with a survey of the "Vasco Da Gama epoch of Asian history 1498-1945". He coined the expression 'Vasco Da Gama period' and considered Vasco Da Gama as the pioneer of the vast economic, political and cultural expansion which has been the dominating factor in the relations between Asia and the West from 1498 to 1945; that was for 450 years. While recognising the fact that Portuguese colonialism also brought Christian missions to Asia, and subsequently other colonialists and different Christian missions collaborated in various contexts in Asia, it was natural to think in terms of linking the end of colonialism and end of Christian missions in the Asian context. K.M. Panicker concludes his survey with a few observations on the causes of the failure of Christian missionary activities in Asia. He categorically stated that it cannot be denied that the attempt to convert Asia has definitely failed. The following are his other observations:

1. the success of the mission need not have been so meagre but for certain factors. In the first place, the missionary brought with him an attitude of moral superiority and a belief in his own exclusive righteousness;
2. the association of Christian missionary work with aggressive imperialism introduced political complications. National sentiment could not fail to look upon missionary activity as inimical to the country's interests; that diplomatic pressure, extra territoriality and sometimes support of gun-boats had been resorted to in the interests of the foreign missionaries could not be easily forgotten;
3. the sense of European superiority which the missionaries perhaps unconsciously inculcated produced also its reaction. The educational activities of the missionaries stressing the glories of European culture only led to the identification of the work of the missions with Western cultural aggression;
4. the wide variety of Christian sects, each was proclaiming the errors of others, handicapped missionary work. With the disappearance of European dominance, Christianity which assumed its natural position as one of the religions of Asia and the missionaries ceased to have any privileged position.⁴

Visser't Hooft, former General Secretary of WCC then responded to Panicker's observations and stated that "we must not reject this interpretation without having considered the force of its arguments".

Christianity has become a world religion today and at the same time the heartlands of global Christianity are shifting from the North to the global South. The World Mission Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 categorized the world into binary camps – the 'Christian' and the 'non-Christian'. There were two separate official messages sent out from the Edinburgh Conference: the first one addressed "to the members of the Church in Christian Lands" and the second one addressed "to the Members of the Christian Church in non-Christian Lands". Christian land was the European and North American continents and non-Christian lands were predominantly considered as Africa, Asia, or South Pacific. Philip Jenkins, distinguished professor of Church history and religious studies who authored two classical books on the changing faces of Christianity, ('The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity' and 'The New Faces of Christianity'), asserts that by the year 2050 the centre of gravity of the Christian world will have shifted firmly to the Southern Hemisphere. In Africa alone, the number of Christians increased from 10 million in 1900 to 360 million in 2000. All these trends indicate the fact that the world can no longer be divided or described as 'Christian' and 'Non-Christian'. The ecclesial landscape is already changed. Large scale migration and movement of people made many parts of the world religiously pluralistic. In certain areas in European or North American cities and towns, there are more non-Christians than Christians. Some of these religious or faith groups are more active and aggressive in their missionary activities than Christians or their denominations. When the so-called Christian countries in the West face such issues, in countries where once Christianity was a minority religion, the churches face the dilemma of threats from the majority religions as they are concerned about the growth of Christianity and the Christian missions.

Changing Paradigms of Mission

The period starting from the middle of the 20th century has seen the paradigm of mission changing. Since the 1950s there has been a significant rise in the use of the word "mission" among Christians. Until the 1950s "mission" had a fairly limited set of meanings. It was used to denote the sending of missionaries to special areas, the activities of such missionaries, the agencies which sent the missionaries, the non-Christian world or "mission-fields", etc. Prior to that, until the 16th century the term "mission" was used exclusively with reference to the doctrine of the Trinity; that is, "of the sending of the Son by the Father and of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son." The Jesuits were the first to use it in terms of the spread of the Christian faith among people, including Protestants, who were not members of the Roman Catholic Church. In this sense, it is clear that their "mission" was intimately associated with the colonial expansion of the Western world. In the emerging ecclesiology, "the church is seen as essentially missionary". The biblical model behind this conviction is found on the principle in 1 Peter 2:9. Here the church is not the sender but the one sent. Its mission is not secondary to its being. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams says, "Mission is not only the carrying of good news; it is the willingness to hear the good news as the Word goes abroad and is embedded in culture after culture. We see more and more of its depths as we see more and more of what it does in diverse lives and worlds". He is of the opinion

that “the old adage of the most far-sighted of mission thinkers has come true: mission must now be from all and to all’.

The late Rev. Dr. David J. Bosch, from South Africa, whose studies in the area of missiology are widely acclaimed, observes in his book, ‘Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission’, that as far as mission is concerned, it faces a contemporary crisis, which manifests itself in three areas: the foundation, the motives and aim. Mission, which is founded on Scripture, particularly the “Great Commission” and on the monotheistic nature of the Christian faith. Other equally important natural grounds for mission identified are: the absoluteness and superiority of the Christian religion when compared with other religions, the acceptability and adaptability of Christianity to all peoples and conditions; the superior achievements of the Christian missions on the mission-fields; and that Christianity has always shown itself as a stronger religion than other religions. The reflections on missionary motives and aims also were often equally ambiguous due to “impure motives” – imperialist motive (turning ‘natives’ into docile subjects of colonial authorities); the cultural motive (mission as the transfer of the missionary’s “superior” culture); the romantic motive (the desire to go too far away and exotic countries and peoples); and the motive of ecclesiastical colonialism (the urge to export one’s own confession and church order to other territories). The other motives- motive of conversion, eschatological motive, motive of *plantatio ecclesiae* (church planting), the philanthropic motive – and their manifestations are often seen as ambiguous. An inadequate foundation for mission and ambiguous missionary motives and aims lead to an unsatisfactory mission practice. This motive was commented on by Bishop Leslie Newbegin who expressed concerns about how the young churches planted on the mission-fields were replicas of the churches on the mission agency’s home front, blessed with all paraphernalia of those churches, “everything from harmoniums to archdeacons”. Almost half a century ago Hendrick Kraemer said that we had to “recognise a crisis in mission”. At the same time, he also said, “we do not stand at the end of mission”, rather, “we stand at the definite end of a specific period or era of mission, and the clearer we see this and accept this with all our heart, the better”. Kraemer further observed that “in the mission-field the superiority-feeling has so many victims indicate the intellectualist distortion of the Gospel into which pious Christians can lapse”. Quoting missiologist Walbert Buhmann’s observations in his book ‘The Coming of the Third Church’, Lade L Wostyn, a Catholic missionary priest of the CICM says “we are not at the end, but rather at the beginning of an extraordinary missionary era” and “one missionary period is indeed ended”.⁵

There are many reasons and observations for us to properly analyse the reasons for emerging crises for missions in today’s globalised world. Mission of the church today faces issues they have never dreamt of. The church and its mission are faced with numerous challenges. While the traditional homeland of Christianity, the Western hemisphere, is losing its dominant position, Western theology and missiological concepts are facing new challenges. Dominant theologies once considered as superior cannot claim any superiority over theologies emerging in other parts of the world. For many centuries, the superiority claimed by Christianity over other religions was taken for granted. The missionaries and their theological interpretations taught that Christianity is the only saving religion in the world. The resurgence of religions, increasing role of religion in political affairs of countries, patronage of ruling powers and constitutional guarantees and privileges to majority religions, and systematic methodologies and mission approaches of other religions pose serious challenges to Christianity.

Politicisation of religion by ruling elites and authoritarian rulers often give preferential treatments to majority religions which threatens the Christian missions in several countries. The International Missionary University of Theravada Buddhism in Burma trains at least 2000 young monks annually and they are being sent out to country sides and border areas for mission work where ethnic Christian communities live. This is being supported through government funds. Although freedom of religion is constitutionally guaranteed in most countries, there is a growing trend to curtail the freedom of religion through other legal measures and statutory mechanisms. The anti-conversions bill introduced by the Sinhala Buddhist parties in Sri Lankan parliament, anti-conversion bills passed by seven Indian states, Sharia laws introduced in several states and regions of Indonesia are some of the examples where politicisation of religion hamper Christian missions. As long as religious pluralism and resurgence of religious fundamentalism remain a major threat to communal and religious harmony, they pose serious challenges to Christian missions and missionary confidence. The same kind of confidence that was present at the beginning of the twentieth century is no longer seen among an increasing number of Christian missions today. For example, M. Thomas Thangaraj argues that the proceedings of the 1910 Edinburgh Conference echoed the missionary confidence of that era. The fact of religious plurality did not produce any anxiety in the minds of the missionaries at the time of the Edinburgh Conference. But today, the proximity of people of other religions has affected our confidence in a very significant way. The situation in most South East Asian countries where Theravada Buddhism and Islam are predominant and become aggressive, Christianity faces enormous challenges.

An emerging pattern of missionary trend is that churches become more “missional” in their life and witness. Local churches are taking the centre stage of mission activities in several churches, reaching out to mission within the country and beyond their borders. Proliferation of missionaries in economically poor countries is a common trend. In the Asian contexts, they are engaged in freelance missionary evangelism in countries such as Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, East Timor, Mongolia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Thailand, and Bangladesh. We cannot say that this trend today is part of colonialism or Western domination. More and more Asian churches and Asian missionaries are engaged in this ‘missionary enterprise’ and they are being supported by local congregations in economically advanced Asian countries such as Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, etc. The emerging trend of mega church phenomena and prosperity theology culture provides financial support for missionaries from these countries to be based in comfort zones in poor countries where they are engaged in missionary activities with the assistance of local people through sub-contracting ‘missionary enterprises’.

Vision for Mission in Unity and Wider Ecumenism

Church leaders from various ecclesiastical traditions often emphasise the need for unity, mission and evangelisation. In his encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, Pope John Paul II addressed the question of the relationship between full unity and evangelisation. He affirmed that the lack of unity among Christians weakens and discredits their missionary witness and thus underlines the close relationship between unity and evangelisation. A statement on ‘The Calling of the Church to Mission and to Unity’, adopted by the WCC Central Committee in 1951 noted that the “ the words ‘Church’ and ‘Mission’ still denote in the minds of most Christians two different kinds of institution. Yet we know that these two things cannot rightly

be separated". It is important to insist that this word (i.e. ecumenical), which comes from the Greek word for the whole inhabited earth, is properly used to describe everything that relates to the whole task of the whole Church to bring the Gospel to the whole world. It therefore covers equally the missionary movement and the movement towards unity, and must not be used to describe the latter in contradiction to the former. We believe that a real service will be rendered to true thinking on these subjects in the Churches if we so use this word that it covers both unity and mission in the context of the whole world.

The highlight of the prayer by Jesus Christ is "That they all may be one". The essence of this prayer asking for the gift of unity which is to be demonstrated to the world – to the 'whole inhabited world' that is the '*oikoumene*'. This prayer is both an expression of a wish, and a call for action. The call to all Christians and churches for the unity of the '*oikoumene*' and the missionary responsibility is implied in this prayer. The missionary nature of the Christian faith is based on the central message of the cross and this crucified Christ. It affirms God's care and love for all '*oikoumene*'. Our challenge in today's world is to be involved in a mission to explain the faith in terms of joy, faithfulness, justice and solidarity. We are called to bear the witness to the God of justice, hope, consolation and reconciliation, seeking to identify with the poor and the marginalised.

When we seek the wider dimensions of mission, we cannot ignore the wider dimensions of ecumenism. We need to constantly affirm the fact that mission and ecumenism represent two dimensions of the same task of the church; to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the whole world. In order to fulfil this task, we need to rediscover the role of the church in its mission and unity at every level, starting from the local to global contexts and this task needs to be strengthened. Mission and evangelisation of a church should not be aimed at proselytization. Christian mission is primarily and ultimately God's mission – *the missio Dei*, it is rooted and centred in the loving of the triune God for humankind and all of creation. The WCC's Canberra Assembly in 1991 affirmed this vision of mission in unity in a more explicit way: "A reconciled humanity and renewed creation (Eph.1:9-10) is the goal of the mission of the Church. The vision of God uniting all things in Christ is the driving force of its life and sharing". The overarching emphasis of the mission was constantly reminded that mission carries a holistic understanding: "the proclamation and sharing of the good news of the gospel by word (*kerygma*), deed (*diakonia*), prayer and worship (*leiturgia*) and the everyday witness of the Christian life (*martyria*); teaching as building up and strengthening people in their relationship with God and each other; and healing as wholeness and reconciliation into *koinonia* – communion with God, communion with people, and communion with creation as a whole". This reminds us of the need for a new vision, a locally rooted mission by churches in their missionary witness. In the first instance, mission should be the task of the local churches instead of subcontracting this assignment to a centralised body or mechanism. Unity of God's mission needs to be evident while witnessing Christ and engaging in missionary activities. The issue of cooperation among Churches in their witness and mission in the same place or country or region should be addressed in a proper way. As competition among missionaries and lack of collaboration in mission activities continue to be common threats, especially when it happens in the name of church planting and church growth, it adds more disunity among Churches. This is evident in several South East Asian countries. The motivation of all churches should be affirmed as they are engaged in witness and mission of God. Such motivation also needs to be reflected in a common agenda of the missionary task of each

church. This should also reflect their commitment to make the mission relevant, contextual and culturally sensitive. It should also aim at overcoming the parochial and denominational rivalry as they are engaged in mission in each context. Robinson Radjagukguk, a New Testament scholar from Indonesia says, the churches in Asia today are called and challenged to make the Gospel, the Good News relevant for the people in every context and situation. Mission can no longer be defined in one universal formula, but must be addressed in context. The churches in Asia are challenged to develop new goals and see new visions of opportunities for mission in Asia.⁶

It is an imperative that Churches in Asia should envision new praxis and identity for mission in multi-religious and pluralistic contexts as well as within the social and cultural gamut in Asia.

¹ M.A Thomas, *Towards Wider Ecumenism*, Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore, 1993, p.15.

² K.C Abraham, *CTC Bulletin*, Vol.XXIV, Nos.1-2, 2008,

³ Matthew Henry's Commentary; www.biblegateway.com.

⁴ K.M Panicker, *Asia and Western Dominance*, ps 297, George Allan and Unvin Ltd, London, 1959.

⁵ Lodel L. Wostyn, *Doing Ecclesiology*, Claretian Publications: Quezon City, 1995, p.17

⁶ Robinson Radjagukguk, *Biblical-Theological Foundations of Mission through Asian Eyes*, CTC Bulletin, Vol. XXIV, Nos. 1-2, 2008.