

THE CHURCH'S MISSION OF WORLD EVANGELIZATION AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

C. René Padilla

Inherent to the task that has been given me of defining the Church's mission of world evangelization at the beginning of the third millennium in a paper of 2500-3000 words is the danger of superficiality. The evangelization of the world is at the very heart on the mission of the Church. Nevertheless, it would be naive to assume that all Christians who agree with this statement really mean the same thing when they talk about "evangelization". My intention here is to view the task of evangelization as rooted in the Gospel—the good news concerning the life and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God—through whose proclamation the Church carries it out by being, doing and saying the witness to Jesus Christ.

1. A basic requirement for a proper understanding of evangelization is a proper understanding of the Gospel.

To evangelize is to communicate good news, and the good news that Christians are called to communicate is centered in Jesus Christ, including his incarnation, his life, his death, his resurrection, his exaltation, and his second coming. The whole Gospel involves all these "salvation events", as they are called, and none of them can be left out without affecting one's understanding of the Gospel.

I grew up in an evangelical home, and I thank God for my evangelical inheritance. As time went on, however, I had to recognize that my understanding of the Gospel was inadequate. I had learned that salvation is by grace, through faith—"it is the gift of God, not by works, so that no one can boast" (Eph 2:9)—, but I had not learned that "we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (v. 10). In other words, I had received a gospel that emphasized the benefits of salvation but left out God's purpose in what he intends to do through his people, including me. I had, in fact, received an incomplete gospel.

Later on I realized that my lack of a proper understanding of the Gospel was the result of the kind of evangelization that was fairly common in evangelical circles in my country—an evangelization that majors on *individual salvation*, oftentimes

understood as a subjective experience of forgiveness of sins, but has little or nothing to say on *God's will to bring humankind back to himself, to reconcile the members of the human race to one another, and to restore the whole of his creation, according to his original purpose.*

Once I was able to see my salvation in light of God's everlasting plan, it became clear that I was saved not in order to be happy, or materially successful, or free from suffering, but in order to cooperate with God, however modestly, in the accomplishment of his purpose in history. And I realized the importance of seeing myself as a member of the Body of Christ and, as such, a person who has been called to participate in his mission to transform the world so that it may reflect God's glory and the justice and peace of his Kingdom—the Kingdom that became a present reality in Jesus Christ.

2. A proper understanding of the Gospel involves a commitment to Christ as the Lord of the totality of life and the whole creation.

There is common agreement that the confession “Jesus Christ is the Lord” was the basic confession of the early Church, the criterion on which one's relationship to both God and the faith community was based. Only occasionally does the New Testament refer to Jesus as “Savior”; in contrast, the title “Lord” (*kyrios*) is frequently applied to him. In light of its historical context, it becomes quite clear that in many occasions this title conveyed the idea of deity and that, applied to Jesus, it implied that he deserved the same honor as God. *Kyrios* was also used in the Roman imperial cult, as well as in contemporary religions in Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt to refer to “lords” and “gods”. The confession of Jesus Christ, therefore, developed in conflict with other confessions and loyalties, and this leads Paul to state:

We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one, whether on heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live, and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live (1Cor 8:4-6).

The logical consequence of the confession of Jesus Christ as the Lord—a confession made possibly by the action of the Spirit of God, according to 1 Corinthians 12:3—is the recognition of his sovereignty over the totality of life and over the whole of creation. Christians are by definition those “who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Cor 1:2); those who have received “the word of faith”

which Paul synthesizes in the following terms:

That if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord”, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved (Rom 10:9).

The confession of Jesus Christ as Lord, which may be regarded as the axis of the apostolic message, is equivalent to the affirmation that *the Kingdom of God has become a present reality in history in the person and work of Jesus Christ*—an affirmation confirmed by the Gospel, without however denying the future dimension of the Kingdom. Obviously, in the Greek-Roman world it made much more sense to proclaim the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ in terms of his lordship than in terms of his kingly power as the descendant of King David. From the very beginning Christians understood that Jesus’s exaltation, following his resurrection, meant that he was enthroned as Lord and King of the universe. Thus, Acts 2:36—in which Peter, in his Pentecost sermon, states that God has made Jesus “Lord and Christ [King]”—, among other passages, points to the fact that this conviction was part and parcel of the proclamation of the Church already in Palestine.

The relation between the resurrection and the exaltation of Christ and his enthronement as Lord is clearly expressed in Ephesians 1:20-22, where Paul affirms that God’s power for the believers is the same as the one

he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church.

This is another way to state that the risen Christ has become “Lord of all”; he has been enthroned to exercise, by God’s power, the government over all creation; he has been given “all authority in heaven and on earth”—Jesus Christ is the Lord.

3. Discipleship as a missionary lifestyle—active participation in the accomplishment of God’s purpose for human life and for the whole creation, as revealed in Jesus Christ—, to which the Church and every one of her members have been summoned, is the Church’s mission of world evangelization.

In the so-called Great Commission in Matthew 28:16-20, the commandment to “make disciples” is preceded by the affirmation of the universal authority of the risen Christ: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given me,” he said. “*Therefore* go and make disciples of all nations” (vv. 18-19a, my emphasis). Because Jesus Christ is Lord of the whole universe, he must be proclaimed as such to all nations, that in all of them there may be disciples who confess him as “Lord of

all” and live on the basis of that confession. The sphere where he is recognized as Lord should reach the same dimension as the sphere of the authority given him by his Father.

This aim, however, presupposes the proclamation of the whole Gospel. Without the proclamation of Jesus as the Lord there is no full Gospel, and without the whole Gospel there cannot be a holistic mission either. This is the problem with versions of the Christian message which restrict Jesus Christ’s action to the private life—to “spiritual matters”—but exclude any reference to his sovereignty over other sphere of human life and creation. If Jesus Christ is Lord of the universe— if he has received “all authority in heaven and on earth”—, his sovereignty includes the economic as well as the political sphere, the social as well as the cultural, the aesthetic as well as the ecological, the personal as well as the societal. Nothing and nobody are outside the sphere of his lordship. It follows that if Jesus Christ is Lord of all and everyone, the Church is not an agent for “individual salvation” that puts the benefits of Christ’s work within the reach of people, but the community called to embody the witness to his lordship over the totality of life.

Accordingly, the proclamation of Jesus Christ as Lord and the invitation, addressed to people of all nations to submit to his sovereignty are essential aspects of the mission of the Church to the end of the earth and the end of the age. As Paul says:

There is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, for “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:12-15a).

Whoever hears the Gospel and responds positively, by so doing becomes a follower of Jesus—he or she begins a transformation process which lasts throughout life and involves every aspect of life. God’s purpose is to reproduce in the believer the image of his Son, Jesus Christ, the New Man. This is implied in the reference, in the “Great Commission,” to how to *make disciples*, which is the content of the mission: 1) “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the holy Spirit” (Matt 28:19)—the initiation rite which marks the beginning of walking with Jesus and, therefore, of the Christian life; 2) “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (v. 20)— the formation *in* and *for* the practice of Jesus’ teaching, that is, the will of God without which there is no genuine discipleship.

From a biblical perspective, *orthopraxis*— the correct practice of all that Jesus taught his disciples—is at least as important as *orthodoxy*, if not more, since Jesus’ aim is that his disciples live in order to love and thus show that they are “children of the Father in heaven”—“perfect as [their] Father is perfect” (Matt 5:45, 48). Jesus’ disciples will not be distinct because they are mere adherents to a religion—a “Jesus cult,” so to say—but because they have a lifestyle that reflects the love and the justice of the Kingdom of God. The mission of the Church, therefore, cannot be restricted to “saving souls” and “planting churches”—her mission is to make disciples who learn to obey the Lord in all circumstances of daily life, in

private as well as in public matters, in the spiritual as well as in the material sphere. *The call of the Gospel is a call to a holistic transformation which will reflect God's purpose to redeem human in all its dimensions*—a transformation based on the whole Gospel centered in the Lord Jesus Christ and oriented toward the fulfillment of Jesus' desire that his followers be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world”.

In the “Great Commission” Jesus takes for granted that there is a body of teaching that he has committed to his followers and that they in turn should pass on to the new disciples. The implicit idea is that there is a tradition which is transmitted from one generation of disciples to the next—the apostolic tradition (or teaching) to which various New Testament passages refer (see, for instance, Acts 2:42; Rom 6:17; 1Cor 11:23; Gal 1:8-9; Col 2:6-8).

It must be remembered, however, that Jesus' teaching was not merely, nor primarily, doctrinal or theoretical, but practical and paradigmatic. In other words, his pedagogy consisted mainly in his example and action, through which he transmitted the values of the Kingdom of God embodied in his own person. Quite clearly, the mission of his disciples would not be limited to increase the number of church members but to make disciples whose lifestyle would reproduce Jesus' example—his unconditional love to God and neighbor, his humble service, his solidarity with the weak and the oppressed, his commitment to truth, his intolerance toward every form of hypocrisy. The mission of the Church would therefore be an invitation and a call to follow Jesus as a means to “recover” him in practical life.

Conceived in these terms, discipleship would have a cost that could not be avoided. One aspect of that cost would be leaving aside anything that could interfere with an absolute loyalty to Jesus Christ as Lord. He defined the conditions of discipleship. And he defined it in such a way that he left no doubt that his call was a call to radical discipleship—a discipleship involving a consistent obedience to the will of God in all areas of life, from the area of family relations to that of material possessions (cf Lk 14:25-33).

The formation of disciples in the image of Christ takes place in the context of the faith community, not apart from it. Jesus said: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn 13:35). Clearly, for Jesus the mark of discipleship is love. Nevertheless, no one can learn to love in isolation from others. In fact, the knowledge—the experience—of Christ's love, which according to Paul “surpasses knowledge,” is only possible “together with all the saints” (Eph 3:18-19). It is in the Church, “the family of God”, where disciples learn to love—and indeed not only to love but also to serve, to pray, to overcome evil, to practice good works. It is in the Church, the Body of Christ, that disciples discover their gifts and grow toward “unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). It is true that one's initiation in the way of discipleship requires a personal decision which involves renouncing to a life in autonomy from God and willingness to identify oneself with his sufferings. It is also true, however, that one who decides to follow Jesus can only make much progress as a discipleship to the extent to which he or she

experiences God's grace *in* and *through* the church.

4. Genuine evangelization is primarily the natural expression of life in Christ and takes place through when the Church lives, acts, and says the witness to Jesus Christ as the Lord of the totality of life. This is the call to the Church at the beginning of third millennium.

When the Church loses sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ, it ceases to be church and becomes a religious sect, unable to relate her message to practical life, on both a personal and a societal level. *A holistic church is one that understands that all spheres of life are "missionary fields" and is constantly seeking for ways to affirm the sovereignty of Christ over all of them.* If Jesus Christ is Lord of all, the Church is truly *Church of Christ* in the extent to which she understands herself as "the community of the King" and defines her purpose in terms of witnessing to him, to the glory of God, through what she *is*, what she *does*, and what she *says*.

As Darrell L. Guder has argued in *Be My Witnesses: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (1989), the framework for a proper understanding of the church's mission is God's purpose for the whole of creation. God's election of a people is related to his universal purpose; God's blessing, therefore, is inseparable from mission. The Church is the agency through which the message of God's purpose and his reconciling action through Jesus Christ is made known to the world. The central act of salvation history, as well as the main content of the Christian message is the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As the community of witness, the Church is called to be the witness, to do the witness, and to say the witness. By taking these three dimension into account—being, doing, and saying—the Church's mission is defined incarnationally.

Being a witness. According to Guder, in order to *be* a witness the church must *become* a witness; the indicatives of the faith must be translated into obedience to the imperatives. The presupposition for this step is the church as the *Aequipping* community that enables its members to see themselves as Christ's witnesses to the world. A God allows his Good News to continue to become flesh in the corporate and individual reality of the church in order to make his love and grace known to the entire creation, which Christ died to save.

If the Gospel of reconciliation through Jesus Christ is to be incarnated in the Christian community, there is no way to avoid the question posed by the division of society, on both a local and a global level, along social, cultural, economic, racial, political, or class lines. The Church is called to be, both locally and globally, the community of reconciliation fully committed to unity and mutual acceptance in the midst of diversity, fragmentation, discrimination, exclusion, and social apartheid. Consequently, the first prerequisite for mission at the turn of the century is the formation of churches that embody the Gospel of reconciliation.

The local Church whose constituency is a visible illustration of God's reconciling purpose in Jesus Christ is in a unique position to take the initiative in

promoting the kind of open dialogue which is needed in order to enable civil society to find ways to cooperate towards the solution of social and ecological problems. As Toffler has pointed out, much of the planning which is done today in the hope of solving these problems is long-range, obsessed with economics, and elitist, far removed from the ordinary citizen. Therefore, it lacks the Avital negative feedback [which] can only come from an educated, informed, and involved public.” If society is to move away from that kind of planning, however, the decision-making process has to be democratized, not merely because that is good, just, or altruistic, but because it is necessary [since] without broad-scale citizen involvement, even the most conscientious and expertly drawn plans are likely to blow up in our faces.” For the necessary change, new ways will have to be found to open the entire process, even at the highest levels, to popular input, to feedback from below.” No institution in society is more fit than the heterogeneous Church, that sees the whole of creation under the lordship of Jesus Christ and has a strong sense of unity in him across all kinds of barriers, to foster such a Afeedback from below for the common good.

Doing the witness. The Gospel, says Guder, is not a program of morality or education, or a platform for political and social reform, but we are saved to serve, thus overcoming the heretical division of the church’s task into mission and benefit.”

From this perspective, there is no place in the life and mission of the Church today for the sharp division between the personal gospel and the social gospel, between evangelism and social responsibility, between faith and works. In a world deeply affected by poverty, exploitation, institutional violence, and injustice, the Church is called to embody God’s love and justice. West’s poignant question, addressed to fellow-Christians in the United States but equally relevant to anyone in a position of privilege anywhere in the world, is unavoidable:

Will we keep our eye on the real issue: the use of our great economic and technological resources, or our vast financial system, to promote the welfare of all the people, not the profit of a few, to bring the poor and the dispossessed into full community with the rest of us---in short, to realize justice in the world?

For the community of those who hunger and thirst for justice, every effort to realize justice in the world falls under the category of doing the witness to Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of the God who loves justice (Ps 99:4).

Saying the witness. All too often in evangelical circles the saying of the witness has been isolated from the totality of the witness. In reaction, many Christians fail to see the crucial importance of sharing the Good News orally. Guder calls for Athe saying of the gospel in full harmony with the being and the doing of the witness, and for not doing that only from the pulpit but Ain such a way that the

gospel surfaces out of the interaction of daily life.

Being the witness, doing the witness, and saying the witness are the essential ingredients of the Church's mission of world evangelism. And this is the order of the day for the Church of Jesus Christ in the global village at the turn of the century.