POWER IN MISSION

A Rapid Response to Keynote Articles by Alan Roxburgh, Juan Martinez and Martin Robinson

A friend of mine recently asked me, “Do you believe that mission is inherently colonial? Do we need to be colonial in order to be effective missionaries?” Almost without thinking about it, I answered, “No, mission was never meant to be colonial.” I took him to the Scriptures, especially to those texts in the New Testament where Jesus Christ told his disciples that he would send them as vulnerable lambs into a corrupt and antagonistic world system that would be to them as dangerous wolves. We saw this in the book of Acts where the church was persecuted and dispersed from Jerusalem. In this apparent vulnerability and brokenness, history tells us that the church made great advances in mission, planting itself in the major cities of the Roman Empire, North Africa and went as far as India within one generation—without any imperial power on their side. My friend had problems because he had learnt that for mission to be possible, it has to be enforced by the powers that be—almost like colonialism. Our conversation challenged that belief, but it also left him optimistic about mission in a post-Christendom world.

The question that my friend asked was not just about colonialism and how the spread of Christianity for many centuries gained impetus from imperial powers. It was about the relationship between power and mission and how a seemingly powerless post-Christendom church can continue to follow God’s mission in the world, here and now. **“How do we participate in God’s missionary work in the world when**

the church is no longer at the center of the society and the culture is antagonistic to the Christian message?" Yes, Christendom is dead and Christianity is often thought to be irrelevant in this developed world. Indeed, the church has lost its place of privilege at the center of Western culture. However, the church has been in this state before, and as the New Testament seems to suggest, this state is favorable to mission. A marginalized and persecuted church may find its impetus for mission. A vulnerable church, that does engage in mission, may actually get the job done. It is for this reason that the thought of mission in a post-Christendom world greatly excites me.

Power and Mission

Among many reasons, I find mission after Christendom exciting because, at least here in the Western world, it demands that we rethink the question of power and authority in the church's efforts to spread the Good News. Before the fall of Christendom, the church had some power to compel the culture to conform to the church's norms. With the fall of Christendom, the church has lost much of this power, and audience. It has been pushed to the margins of society. In this seemingly powerless state, however, the church must continue to follow the God of mission, in God's work of redeeming creation. In actual fact, this marginalized church is more likely to have the humility it will take to reach the world. Because of this, mission demands that we rethink local congregations' relationships with their host societies and the wider church's relationship to society at large.

Three keynote articles in this issue have addressed this question of power in one way or another. Power informs Roxburgh's discourse on Christian identity and practices in relation to the wider community. Indeed, the social location in which the Christians live is not a power vacuum. Neither are the missional practices that he proposes, lived out in a power-free world. In the same way, the divine initiatives that Martinez suggests are shaped in a sphere where power dynamics matter. Martinez's attention to the global south draws our attention to the presence of the global south in the West. Current migration trends have brought many Latin Americans, Africans, and Asians to the Western mission field. Most of these immigrants belong to other religions, but many are Christian. The Western context of cultural and religious diversity means that the relationships between various Christian groups matter, just as much as those between Christians and the people they are trying to reach.

It is Martin Robinson, however, who makes an explicit connection between power and mission (and the Christian impulse to meet people's needs). There is a power dynamic operating when people's needs are met. Without developing relationships with communities, churches run the risk of helping from a distance instead of "incarnating" themselves among the people God has entrusted to their care. Authentic relationships between churches and their communities will balance the power dynamics and allow the church to speak to the community. When I led a church plant in Saint Paul, Minnesota, one local leader (not a Christian) came to me and said, "If your agenda is anything other than love, you have no business speaking to us." That statement has stayed with me ever since.

In addition, the question of power and mission must go beyond the Christian's relations with the people

they are trying to reach to include the relations between the many Christian groups in the West. In its marginalized state, and yet in a desperate mission field, the Western church cannot afford to marginalize Christians and missionaries from the rest of the world. The culturally diversified mission field of the West needs a diversified and yet united missionary presence to share with it the love of Christ. In my missionary experience in North America, I have observed that the most difficult area to negotiate is relationships between various immigrant Christian groups and local (Western) Christians. Power is at the center of this. A piece of research that I carried out in Minnesota in 2011 suggested that this is a serious problem.[1]

Many works of other African and Hispanic scholars like Jehu Hanciles, Afe Adogame, and Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi confirm the difficulties. It is common to meet Western Christians who would happily work with African Christians in Africa, while having nothing to do with the African immigrant congregation that rents their church space for its services. The same happens with Hispanic and Asian Christians in Western cities. In this regard, I have always wondered about the authenticity of short-term mission trips to Africa and other parts of the world when most Western Christians do not *see* the non-Western Christians living in their own cities. If you cannot work with the African Christians in your own Western neighborhoods, the honesty of your short-term mission trips to Africa stands questionable.

Further, even though the segregation of Western Christianity worked well with the Christendom church, our post-Christendom and post-colonial world calls for a more collaborative approach to church and mission. That it is a well-accepted fact that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the United States of America is a bad testimony to God's mission in the world. At the very least, a dialogue among the different Christianities would set us on a path to effective missional partnerships in our neighborhoods. Authentic intentional dialogues that involve Christians from different theological and cultural contexts—and different parts of the world—will help understand better what God might be up to in the world at large. The excitement that is seen around inter-religion dialogues must also shape intra-Christian dialogues that bring together various Christian traditions for the sake of God's mission in the world.

Relationships with Community

Mission in a post-Christendom world gives the church a chance to do away with the imperialism that shaped mission before and to assume a humble position to speak to the world and to one another, from what David Bosch called "bold humility."[2] A vulnerable church can speak to the world with humility. Missionary power is not to be found in material riches and financial possibilities—though these certainly make the work easier—but in the Spirit and purposes of our missionary God's Son "who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant … He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Phil 2: 6-8). Generally, the challenge of *bold humility* is not with *boldness*. Observe the way the church often deals with difficult questions of morality in society. The difficult part is the humility. It is easier to condemn than to listen. Nevertheless, for the missional church, humility is not an option. Indeed, the missional church must be a humble church that is willing to listen to the community

without interrupting to provide solutions. Among my people in Malawi, we talk about "listening one's way into a relationship." In this way, the church can have trusting relationships with its host society—and this may lead to effective witness. It is in this way that mission can avoid colonialism.

Bibliography

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1. "Harvey C. Kwiyani, "Pneumatology, Mission, and African Christians in Multicultural Congregations in North America" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Luther Seminary, 2012). [↑]
2. David J. Bosch, Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission, American Society of Missiology Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 483-89. Also see W. A. Saayman and J. J. Kritzinger, Mission in Bold Humility : David Bosch's Work Considered (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996). [↑]

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