

MISSIONS MID-STREAM

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Introduction: “We’re About Missions”

As this is my initial participation in the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, perhaps I should take a minute to establish my *bona fides*. Let me go back to the beginning, ..., well, not really the beginning because the 1809 *Declaration and Address* might trump the first establishment of the first church of our movement at Brush Run. But, Brush Run is close enough to the beginning. One of those baptized by Alexander Campbell at the Brush Run church and who, along with Campbell, left that church in 1823 to form the church at Wellsburg, was a certain Stephen Priest, my great-great-great-grandfather.¹

A century later, another relative named, for obvious reasons, Walter Scott Priest, a cousin of my grandfather, was a minister and a member of the Board of the Directors of the United Christian Missionary Society. My grandfather was a life-long preacher, my father at almost 80 years young still preaches every week, and here we are today, close to beginning our third century, and we still have Priests in our catholic church which we now fondly call the Stone-Campbell movement.

I am humbled to be here, invited to represent the Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, in shorthand, the 4C stream of the Stone-Campbell Movement. Being from such an eclectic and entrepreneurial missions bunch as we are, I am fully aware that any of, say, one-thousand other people could address this subject. In the 4C stream, as you know, there are no officially designated spokespersons, and since by its very nature the Church exists for mission, in my place could be any number of missions professors, missionaries, mission agency leaders, ministers of missions, college missions majors, short-term mission trip participants or ministerial staff committed to expanding God's Kingdom around the world. I assure you, each of these, and many more, have an opinion regarding the bottom line on missions in our stream! Perhaps, tongue-in-cheek, we might say that the chief qualification for being a missionary in the 4C stream is simply to label yourself as such. And many do! Be that as it may, you're stuck with me.

As this is the Stone-Campbell Dialogue, and since I have read every paper presented to this group, may I summarize all of those addresses regarding the subject of mission to a quote from Robert Welsh's paper "Models of Unity: A Changing Landscape." Robert wrote, "our understandings of the nature of the unity we seek have shifted in recent years – moving from an emphasis upon structural and institutional unity to one that finds its focus in relationships and mission centered in Jesus Christ."² He went on to amplify that notion with this Johannine and Campbellian statement, "Christian unity is not for its own sake, but for the sake of the world and its salvation."³ I wholeheartedly subscribe to this statement which is also reminiscent of a quote from Paul Pollard's chapter in the second volume on *Evangelicalism and the Stone-Campbell Movement*: "the outward manifestation of spiritual unity is not a neat organizational flow chart,

but witness to the world.”⁴ There can be no more appropriate affirmation for us and our task this morning.

Here is what James North wrote on the same theme: “Not until the Restoration Movement got underway was anyone concerned about restoring the unity of the church by restoring the original standard of the church. Restoration of biblical authority, that the Church may be united, in order that the world might be won according to the prayer of Jesus -- that is the pre-eminent purpose of the Restoration Movement. Nothing else has the importance as does this premier goal of evangelism. Unity and biblical authority are means to an end, not ends themselves.”⁵

What I have said thus far, and with which I now conclude this introduction, is really quite simple. “We’re About Missions.” It’s whence we arose; it is where we are today, and I trust, where we will always remain as a movement.

Reflections on the Current Situation

The missions enterprise in the 4C stream today is at an all time high no matter which metric is used. Our major missionary sending agencies have more missionaries on the field than ever before. Many Bible Colleges report significant numbers of students with mission majors. The number of churches being established around the world through these efforts is heartening. The number and theological acumen of non-American church leaders rises rapidly. In recent years the National Missionary Convention has surpassed the attendance of the North American Christian Convention.

Income for missions efforts is also at an all time high. I was recently with the larger mission agency leaders from the 4C stream and most of the eight commented on a significant

increase in income over the past couple of years. My own agency, CMF International, for example, had an 11% increase in income in the last year.

In a recent article, missions statistician Michael Jaffarian made three observations about the current missions scene that generally coincide with the 4C stream. First, “the North American missions movement is sending well more than sixty times as many mission-trip participants as long-term missionaries.”⁶ Second, though the majority of missionaries still define their role in such terms as evangelism, church planting, and leadership development, the majority of funds received are linked not to those activities per se, but to the activities of relief and development.⁷ Third, “the number of non-North American Christian workers supported is now far greater than the number of North American Protestant missionaries sent.”⁸

I had thought of gathering statistics to share with you regarding the number of 4C missionaries. In earlier years, I could have done so. Today, it is impossible because the determination of who is a missionary is unclear. Does the definition of a missionary refer to one who works cross-culturally? Cross-geographically? Cross-nationally? Is it appropriate to label one who receives financial support from a church and serves as a bookkeeper in the home office of a mission agency a missionary? Is a missionary one who intends to work overseas, but who has not gotten there yet? Is a missionary one who goes on a mission trip, even if for only a week?

It is all very nebulous. From personal experience I can say that to try to standardize the definition can lead to a vociferous and emotional response. Basically, in the 4C stream, each agency has its own definition for who is a missionary and the same goes for each church, not to mention each person who determines to be labeled as such.

To complicate matters, many Christians work in countries that are closed to historic missionary vocations. So those people call themselves by a whole host of names: teachers, students, businessmen, soldiers, interpreters -- kind of like New Testament times.

There are primarily two ways of being a missionary in the 4C stream. You go with an established agency, or you go independently, that is, under the auspices of a congregation or (usually) a 'Mom and Pop' board that is established for your ministry and so that your contributors can receive tax deductions.

Well, if I am unable to define what a missionary is, at least let me share what others have said. Here is Michael Jaffarian again commenting on the number of overseas personnel: "For almost twenty-five years, . . ., only seven agencies ever appeared among the top five: Southern Baptists, Wycliffe, YWAM (Youth With a Mission), New Tribes Mission, Assemblies of God, Christian Churches/Churches of Christ, and Seventy-Day Adventists."⁹

The latest edition of the Mission Handbook which focuses on U.S. and Canadian Protestant Ministries Overseas notes that the following figures for the 4C churches:¹⁰

- Missionaries serving 4+ years - 915
- Missionaries serving 1-4 years - 100
- Non-residential - 50
- Short Termers, serving less than 1 year - 2000
- Non-US serving in own or other country - 422

Perhaps it says something about our stream that we need to go to a non-4C publication to get these figures. I am sure if we gathered our own statistics, the numbers would be different. All in all, it is an exercise in futility to determine just how many missionaries we have. Suffice it to say, we have a lot, and in comparison with most other denominations, we rank fairly high.

Part of the definition of a missionary should relate to exactly what it is that a missionary does. But again, there is no clarity in those waters for missionaries do just about anything you

can imagine being related, if even only tangentially, to advancing God's Kingdom. There are the usual suspects – translators, physicians, teachers, preachers, and evangelists; and there are lot of other roles: well-drillers, trainers at a physical fitness center, graphic artists, sports coaches, mechanics, dorm parents, and the list goes on and on, including farmer of snails. No kidding. An innovative 4C missionary in Peru has established a business which has become the third largest snail producing farm in Latin America, with most of snails shipped to Europe as delicacies. The profits from the business are being used to undergird a variety of mission efforts, his own version of Pauline tent-making. It is not an exaggeration to say that his products are delivered via snail mail.

What comprises mission work in our stream is our version of “Name It and Claim It.” As a long time participant, I must say that at times I am tremendously energized by all we are doing. At other times, I am tremendously embarrassed.

A Missiological Agenda for Our Time

We now turn our focus to the mission task before us. Andrew Kirk point out that in “every generation, the church is emerging afresh from the shape of the past to take on new forms appropriate to God's present missionary intention.”¹¹ In our generation and throughout much of the world, the reality is globalization. The fact is, as Jesuit missionary Michael Kelly reminds us, “Globalization has resulted in wealth, prosperity, influence, and future promise for the few; poverty, exclusion, voicelessness, and stagnant hopelessness for the many.”¹²

Theology arises out of the human context of its adherents. In our day, that context is the majority world. Therefore, Christian theology will increasingly focus on the issues of wealth and poverty, injustice and oppression, over-population, pluralism, and the environment as well as

evangelism and church planting. Concerns for peace, environmental action, human rights, liberation, material welfare, health, hunger, HIV/AIDS and a host of other problems fall within the scope of mission, if indeed mission is concerned with the bringing of the abundant life for which Jesus came.

Christopher Wright's dictum is one I support. "Mission may not always begin with evangelism. But mission that does not ultimately include declaring the Word and name of Christ, the call to repentance, and faith and obedience has not completed its task. It is defective mission, not holistic mission."¹³

Case Study: The Reach of the Table

Since I am a believer in holistic mission, since transformation involves bringing all aspects of life, both individual and communal under the Lordship of Christ, and since spiritual and material poverty is so pervasive, I thought I might share a true story with you because it exemplifies missions at this time.¹⁴

Elizabeth is a woman living in the Mathare Valley slum of Nairobi, Kenya. When Elizabeth was a young woman, her husband died, leaving her destitute with a couple of children. She had no work, so she had no income to care for her family. To earn a bit of money, she would walk in the morning to a forested area to cut down and carry fire wood back to the slum to sell so that people could cook their food. However, it was illegal in Kenya to cut down the trees, and guards were posted around the forest to enforce that.

When Elizabeth came to the forest, the guards demanded a bribe before she could collect some wood. She had no money, so they made her pay for the wood by selling herself. Because

she had few options, and because her children were starving, she did. She had to do this every time she went to the forest. For a woman in the slums, this story is commonplace.

To escape her feelings of inadequacy, hopelessness, pain and degradation, Elizabeth turned to cheap alcohol.

During an open-air meeting, Elizabeth came forward and committed her life to Christ. It was difficult for her to come forward because it meant a lifestyle change and she literally could not walk in a straight line since she had been drinking. The woman who had led the meeting, Mary, is a Kenyan with whom we partner on a team she leads. Mary knew that follow-up would be vital to keep Elizabeth focused on her decision so she went to Elizabeth's shanty early the next morning before it was time to go to the forest for wood. Elizabeth said she could not remember making a commitment and could not be born again anyway because of what she did in the forest. Mary reminded her that whether she remembered the commitment or not, God did. She counseled Elizabeth and prayed with her.

At the conclusion of the prayer, Elizabeth remarked that now she would have to do something different to make money. So, Mary asked, "If you had money to start a business, what would you like to do?" Elizabeth said that she knew how to make flat bread, and she could sell those. Mary loaned Elizabeth the money to get started. Not much was required; a skillet, some oil, a couple of bags of flour, and some salt. That's all that was needed. The loan was for a grand total of \$8.00.

That very day Elizabeth began her business, which now provides an adequate income for her and her two daughters. The children now attend school, and every year they receive awards for being the cleanest children in school. I've been in Elizabeth's home, a room about 10 feet by 10 feet which houses her, her two children and her mother. I've eaten some of the flat bread she

has prepared. Elizabeth has joined a church, become a baptized believer, and is actively involved in the church's choir ministry.

My heart was broken several months ago when I made a return trip to rural Kenya. We drove out of Nairobi to head toward the escarpment, which is the edge of the Rift Valley. As we drove down the escarpment to get to the valley floor, we began the 35 mile drive across the valley. When I lived in Kenya thirty years ago, I made this crossing many, many times, and in the intervening years the land has become terribly eroded. In several places the erosion was washed the road away. The erosion is due to the deforestation. Deforestation is due to poverty, the same cutting down of trees that Elizabeth and thousands of others in the majority world do because they have no electricity or natural gas to cook with.

But that isn't all that bothered me. About mid-way through the valley was a police check post called Suswa. There used to be nothing at Suswa save for a little shack where the policeman stayed. Over the intervening years, a town has grown up there, which includes many little shops where you can purchase, sugar, tea, salt, flour and so on. Most of these items are sold and then put into plastic bags. The formerly pristine valley floor around Suswa on which roamed zebra, giraffe, and gazelle is now littered with thousands upon thousands of empty plastic bags of all colors and sizes. It is a terrible eye-sore. Even the lovely acacia trees with their long thorns have empty plastic bags dangling from them, blown there by the wind.

Plastic bags come from petroleum products. Those plastic bags take decades to decompose. And there they sit, empty, used once, thrown away, on the bottom of the Rift Valley floor.

In Nairobi, the urban poor have another use for the plastic bags. None of their shanties have toilets, and there are almost no outhouses in the slums. With a million people living in

about the one square mile of Mathare Valley, you can imagine the amount of sewage that is generated. Because the poor have no place to relieve themselves, they use the plastic bags and then they fling them at night as far as they can from their homes. These plastic bags have a name in the slum. They are called ‘flying toilets’. It sounds kind of humorous, but it is not at all funny. The roofs and the ground are littered with plastic bags. Flying toilets are a symbol of poverty, depersonalization, environmental degradation, and despair.

The poor often depend directly on a diversity of natural resources for their livelihood and therefore are the most severely affected when the environment is degraded or their access to natural resources is limited or denied. It is the poor who suffer most from unclean water, indoor air pollution from smoky cooking and heating fires, and exposure to toxic chemicals as vividly seen when people live and exist on the garbage dumps of most major cities around the world.

Conclusion

Wright reminds us that “it is not so much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world, but that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the church, the church was made for mission, God’s mission.”¹⁵

Let us agree that the one mission of the church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, is to call people into communion with God, into communion with one another, and into communion with God’s creation. We have a great and single mission in front of us. We must recreate the *agape* meal fellowship of Jesus where rank and social status are erased. In Communion, around the Lord’s table, the destitute and the marginalized are welcome to eat and drink with the tax collectors and temple officials without feeling guilty and inferior. As John Mark Hicks notes, “The table is inclusive and extended to the poor, blind, and oppressed. The table reaches across

all socio-economic, racial and gender barriers as it unites a lost humanity at one table.”¹⁶ The *koinonia* of the meal fellowship mirrors the *koinonia* of God.

As we sit at the Lord’s table in eternity, we will be privileged to sit with many from the slums. Across the table, sharing in this *koinonia*, will be Elizabeth.

Sources Cited

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¹⁵*Ibid.* 62.

¹⁶John Mark Hicks, “The Lord’s Supper as Eschatological Table,” in William R. Baker, ed., *Evangelicalism & the Stone-Campbell Movement. Vol. 2* (Abilene, TX.: Abilene Press., 2006), 199.