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The Gospel and the Mission Task of the Church

ROLAND E. MILLER

Here we seem to be on safe ground. If the gospel and the mission task of the church do not belong together, what does? The gospel reveals a God whose very nature is missionary, and it constitutes the people of God whose very *esse* is *missio*. The gospel's good news, absolutely good and absolutely new, creates the mission and determines its nature, extent, and urgency. The gospel and mission go hand in hand. What could be more obvious than this?

For some the implication of this truth is quite plain. There is really nothing to talk about, except possibly for some discussion on methods. Both the nature of the gospel and our proper response to it are simply stated, and all else is secondary. So the matter, for some, is closed. Let us now get on with the job!

There is no debate about the fact that we must get on with the job. Not everyone, however, will agree that there is really nothing further to discuss about the gospel and the mission task. On the contrary, the issue is raised in full force when we restate our concern as: "The relation of the gospel and the mission to contemporary man." Again and again events take place in the mission of the church that raise the most serious questions. An example is the monumental decision taken in India in 1950. B. Ambedkar, one of the architects of Indian freedom and the leader of India's

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outcaste community, had lost faith in the capacity of Hinduism to reform itself. He and his followers turned to Christianity, examining it hopefully. Failing to discover there what to his satisfaction seemed to be an effective principle of human dignity and equality, Ambedkar turned to Buddhism. Declaring himself a Buddhist at the World Congress of Buddhism, he stated as his reason: "Buddha has made equality the fundament of his doctrine."¹ In the following decade the Buddhist population in India grew a remarkable 1,670 percent (from 181,000 to 3,250,000), largely as the result of the movement from the outcaste community.² This rejection is something to talk about.

THE PROBLEM

The problem may be this, that the gospel seems unrelated to contemporary man, his hopes, his problems, and his dreams, so far as can be judged from his reactions. The many glorious exceptions only underline the general pattern of response. We live, if we are alive at all, in complex situations. We know that the gospel is disregarded in those situations, and we have experienced the feeling that this leaves with those who live by the gospel and for the gospel and who see the gospel as the hope of man. It is perilous to avoid this primary datum of the current mission context, for this is

¹ Ernst Benz, *Buddhism or Communism* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1965), p. 48.

² *Census of India, Paper No. 1 of 1963* (Delhi: Manager of Publications, 1963), p. ii.

God's gospel and God's world. These two, meant for each other, in whose union is man's hope, stand apart in drastic measure in the world today.

Mission "is not a calculus of success, but an obligation in love."³ If we are to consider realistically the relation of the gospel and the mission task of the church today, we must begin with the agreement to describe things as they are. "Hold tight, hold tight, we must insist that the world is what we have always taken it to be."⁴ This sentiment is one kind of reaction to the challenge of the present. This reaction, fortunately, does not typically describe the church today. The church in mission is now able to assess and face this new situation because it is no longer bewitched by the mirage of "Christendom." While the "younger churches" were being established in Asia and Africa, the erosion and partial disintegration of the base churches were taking place under the impact of modern forces. The awareness that unbelief and the ignoring or rejection of the gospel are universal marks of contemporary man, that therefore all lands are mission lands, and that the frontiers of mission now include the boundaries of every Christian's personal environment, has struck with existential force.

The church in mission is therefore involved in a process that combines both external opposition, internal decay, and its rapidly increasing minority status. In 1907 the Christian population was 34.3% of the

³ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), p. 334.

⁴ T. S. Eliot, *The Family Reunion* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1939), p. 43.

world's population; in 1963 it was 29.2%.⁵ The figure may be reduced to 15% by A. D. 2000. The true gravity of the situation is underestimated by linking the retrogression primarily to the population explosion. The critical problem is "civilized man." In the areas of hope for the growth of the church, the inverse relationship between the attraction of the gospel and the relentless forces of modern life is clearly demonstrated.⁶ The mission cannot depend on new "Christendoms."

In seeking the causes of the present situation we reckon with both the fearfulness of human pride and the power of demonic forces. But as far as the mission task of the church is concerned, either the gospel is not being proclaimed, or the proclaimed gospel is not being accepted. Without ignoring the former, we suggest that it is the latter that is the particular mark of our time. If this is so, we face a rigorous theological task. Theological work "stands on the field where the gospel meets the spirit of our times."⁷ To learn why the world is ignoring or rejecting the gospel, the church must let the world speak about itself and the church must listen. This necessity thrusts the church into a living and profound encounter with the world.

We must pause here to look at two red

⁵ *Map of the World's Religions and Missions*, 4th ed. (Berne: Geographical Publishers Kümmerly & Frey, 1966).

⁶ Nothing so spectacularly illustrates this point as the development of the "cargo cults" in the South Pacific islands, especially in New Guinea. A paganized worship of the white man's secret power over money and things, these cults are an extreme expression of the power of materialism.

⁷ Daniel Day Williams, *What Present-Day Theologians Are Thinking* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1959), p. 20.

flags that may have been dropped. The first alarm is the necessity to recognize the offense of the gospel. By its very nature the gospel is "a stumbling-block to Jews and folly to the Gentiles." Its burden is to be alien to the "carnal mind" and, therefore, its inevitable cross is scorn and rejection. This is the true constant in the history of the church's mission, which must always await the *kairos* of the Spirit. The second objection questions the epistemology involved in listening to the world. The world is precisely not the source to which we look for understanding about either the gospel or our mission task. The gospel is the changeless declaration of God's objectively saving action for man in Jesus Christ, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, and it is witnessed to by a changeless Scripture.

The first contention, the offense of the gospel, is amply testified to in both Scripture and experience. What must be brought together with this is the actual history of the church in mission. It is normal experience in church life that similar situations in different hands produce differing results. Personality, character, zeal, sensitivity—all may be factors involved. Though we do not understand all the implications, we see from our daily experience in mission that God in a real sense has bound the gospel to its bearers. We may extend this thought to the corporate church in mission. The ignoring or rejection of the gospel does not always happen because of its inherent offense, but sometimes because the church itself is insensitive, irrelevant, unloving, or even offensive as it offers God's gospel to men. Therefore the church must listen not reluctantly but eagerly to the world, which as God's

strange agent speaks to it about its bearing of the gospel. When Ambedkar's Buddhists, Islam, communism, and the U. S. Supreme Court—each in their own way—declare that caste and racism is wrong at a time when churches themselves are either amazingly sightless or powerless to rectify anomalous situations even within their own circles, not to speak of rendering prophetic ministry and example to society as a whole, it is not the offense of the gospel but the offense of the church that is involved. When for that very reason the world withdraws from Christ, the church is involved in that rejection.

The second contention, the epistemological concern, suggests that the world informs us not only about its own nature and about the character of the church but also about the character of the gospel. This is not a sudden and inadmissible departure from the givenness of the gospel as it comes to us with all the authority of the saving and sending God. The world informs the church's understanding of the gospel. It does this in a negative way by exercising what Tillich called "the judging function of the secular," by judging Christian failure to apply the inherent meaning of the gospel. It also does this in a positive way, however; not directly, to be sure, because it does not know the gospel, but indirectly. It unconsciously speaks to that inherent meaning of the gospel itself, saying to the church, "There is more in your gospel than you dreamed of, dimensions of meaning that you have either forgotten or never known."

Is this possible? We are ordinarily ready to admit that the Lord of the gospel is greater than our capacity to apprehend Him. We are also certain that this great

Christ is an endless source of new goodness as His Spirit leads the church into all truth. When He encounters the thought world of the great religions or animistic cultures new and unexpected things take place.⁸ But that experience of the church at the seemingly distant frontier is not unique. Church history's most remarkable testimony is the Reformation discovery and emphasis on justification by faith as the key to the understanding of the gospel. This is a parable of the Spirit's work on the church in the world, for this emphasis is not noticeably present in the writings of the ante-Nicene fathers, nor does it appear to fall naturally on modern ears.⁹ The entire thought world of the Reformation era, it seems, focused on the great scriptural theme of justification by faith. Under the Spirit this dimension of the gospel was discovered then; it is ours now, not to be lost. That Holy Spirit has power to

⁸ The necessity to reexamine and deepen our understanding of the concept "Son of God" as a result of our encounter with Islam is an apt example of this process. In the area of ethics we may cite the rethinking forced upon the church by the Hindu concept of *ahimsa* as expressed through Mahatma Ghandi's principle of nonviolence.

⁹ Cf. the comment of the Rev. Marc A. Splingart, executive secretary of the French Lutheran Hour, quoted in *The Lutheran Layman* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Layman's League, September 1968), p. 3: "In reality the Frenchmen of this century appear strangely perplexed when face to face with justification by faith. . . . They are much more pre-occupied with the organization and future of this world than with their eternal salvation. . . . Far be it from us to deny the Scriptural character of this doctrine. Nevertheless, it is a fact, first of all, that the notion of a juridical relation between God and us no longer 'speaks' to men of today; and secondly, it is also a fact that this juridical notion by no means exhausts the Biblical revelations about our redemption."

uncover to us that which enlarges our understanding of the gospel. That discovery will come primarily from fresh experience with God's surprising Word.

But if it should be that the world also helps us in that discovery as we try to put gospel-mission-world together, let us neither be doubtful nor defensive.

To say that the world is in no way to be part of the subject matter and substance of theology is to deny the meaning of *logos* or word and meaning, to deny one side of historic Christian theology, and to join in the prophecy and assertion that God is dead, eclipsed, abolished, or at least in no way involved with the world.¹⁰

Whatever does come to us from the world, if it is good, is from God, who alone is good. God's speech and action in the world (Romans 1 and 2) are not contradictory to the gospel, and therefore (since there is no alternative) are supportive of it when understood by redeemed men "interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit" (1 Cor. 2:13). We may therefore boldly and hopefully ask: What is the world saying to us?

FACTORS SIGNIFICANT FOR MISSIONS

What are some of the dominant factors in the world that are held to be significant for the mission task of the church today? Opinions in answer are many and varied, reflecting the actual complexity of the situation.

Some suggest that the really significant factor is the technological revolution, born in the West but now a universal phenome-

¹⁰ Martin Marty, "Religion in General," *Operation Theology*, ed. Andrew J. Buehner (St. Louis: The Lutheran Academy for Scholarship, 1967), pp. 40—41.

non. The dramatic new context for mission is well summarized by Kenneth Cragg:

Aside from human nature itself, it is the supreme common denominator of our existence. For the first time in recorded history we have a pattern of civilization which is effectively universal, not in degree or completeness, but in quality and essence.¹¹

Others see the critical factor in the development of a mood of triumphant secularism that follows upon the scientific explosion. Mankind in general has assumed the stance of self-sufficiency.

Humanism is a confidence of this kind, an enthusiasm for human possibilities, and a fine quality of living, nourished by knowing how. Increasing mastery of logistics makes possible a strategy not only for the advancement of learning, but also for the advance of mankind. Humanity is seen to be a social creation, a product of culture, something in the making, with a creative present, a boundless future, and not without achievements in the past.¹²

"I am an eagle," the cry of the Russian astronaut Titov in orbit, is the cry of secular man.¹³ To face this conviction is to

¹¹ "Encounter with Non-Christian Faiths," reprinted from the Union Seminary Quarterly Review in *Religion and Society*, XIV (March 1967), 38.

¹² H. J. Blackham, "Modern Humanism," *Religions and the Promise of the Twentieth Century*, ed. G. S. Métraux and F. Crouzet (New York: New American Library, 1965), p. 157.

¹³ As this is written, headlines cry, "Man Circles Moon!" The feeling aroused is summarized by the comment of K. Gatland, vice-president of the British Inter-planetary Society, quoted in *The Indian Express* (Dec. 25, 1968), p. 1: "The human spirit this day has begun to soar to new dimensions of experience, exploration and discovery." Despite the humble Christian witness of the first astronauts to circle

engage in what A. van Leeuwen calls "the true confrontation with our time."¹⁴

As opposed to this strong mood of secularism is the confidently programmed secularism of the communist movement, widely regarded as the critical problem for the church in the 20th century. Not since Islam gulped down half of the Christian church in the seventh and eighth centuries has the Christian church suffered such a numerical and geographical defeat as it has in its encounter with the militant materialism of the proletarian revolution. This "worship of collective human power on a world-wide scale"¹⁵ challenges the spiritual assumptions by which man has understood the universe. It offers a message of hope, hope for this life. To that message man assents, often by the free exercise of personal choice.¹⁶ Where persuasion does not avail, the challenge is made through a combination of fanaticism, the application of technological means, and the use of force. The fact of communism presses hard on the church's thinking on gospel-mission.

There are those who see the key factor in none of these, but rather in the current demand, which is the mark of all societies, for justice, earthly justice of all kinds, but especially economic justice. This visceral demand for basic human satisfaction is

the moon, nothing is more calculated to further exhilarate secular man than this victory.

¹⁴ "Reply to Critics: A Defense of Christianity in World History," *Religion and Society*, p. 56.

¹⁵ Arnold Toynbee, *Christianity Among the Religions of the World* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1957), p. 79.

¹⁶ The state of Kerala, India, is now passing through its second extended period of communist rule, freely chosen by an intelligent and religiously minded electorate.

screamed out, as hunger, poverty, unemployment, and disease continue to accompany a large portion of the human race as its ever-present and ever-willing companions. On the 20th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, said:

There are still too many areas where unemployment undermines the right to work, where illiteracy inhibits the right to education, where poverty and squalor make mockery of the right to health, where conflict and violence negate the enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms.¹⁷

Different from these is the negative mood of secularism that follows upon the alleged defeat of science. Some hold that science has been tried and found wanting. One reaction this conviction brings is disgust with man as he is and disgust with what he produces. Flowing from this feeling and combined with it is despair. Man lives, but because he lives without hope, he is, in effect, dead. J. C. Hoekendijk concludes: "We are given the impression that the actual theme of tomorrow is already fixed—namely, 'Man is dead.'"¹⁸ Man, as a result, may live in a kind of perpetual *Angst*.

What ambush lives beyond the heather . . .
And beyond the sinking moon?
And what is being done to us?
And what are we and what are we doing?
To each and all of the questions
There is no conceivable answer.
We have lost our way in the dark.¹⁹

¹⁷ Quoted in *The Indian Express* (Dec. 11, 1968), p. 6.

¹⁸ *The Church Inside Out*, trans. I. C. Rotenberg (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 172—73.

¹⁹ Eliot, p. 128.

On the other hand, he may lash out against the despair with a revolutionary fervor, seeking release in either the exotic or the violent. Or he may coolly accept the fact and go on, because that only is what is left to do.

Others detect the key factor for mission in the political realm, namely, in the spirit of nationalism that is so obviously and so contradictorily the sign of our age. These movements, which are externally political, usually secular, and at least nominally democratic, derive their real strength from their internal cultural and religious aspects. "We are living at present through a world situation of which it cannot be said too often that it is unprecedented."²⁰ The separations that have been produced are bedrock in nature. On the whole they have effectively slowed the expansion of the church in the world by traditional mission methods, and in some areas have stopped it entirely. Christopher Dawson in 1959 asserted that the fact of the different world of nations

is the fundamental problem that Christianity has to face. . . . It has hitherto proved an insurmountable obstacle to the ecumenical development of the Christian faith and has confined Christianity to one very limited portion of the human race.²¹

Developments of the last decade forcefully accentuate this judgment.

Related to this is the massive renaissance of the major non-Christian religions. This recovery of meaning and resurgence of elán has far-reaching implications.

²⁰ Hendrik Kraemer, *World Cultures and World Religions* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960), p. 272.

²¹ *The Movement of World Revolution* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1959), p. 158.

One must be aware of their new spirit in order to understand what is going on in the world. There is a change which has overwhelmed us Christians in our introverted and surfeited existence.²²

The general effect has been to reduce Christianity from its "ready-made" position to the status of an equal among the religions. In the natural homelands of the religions where it has been combined with nationalistic views the renaissance has put Christianity under attack and at times has endangered its representatives.²³ Missionary zeal has accompanied it. Even more important, however, is the non-formalized spread of the religious philosophies involved. Coming into "the existential crisis and religious vacuum of contemporary western societies,"²⁴ they have had major impact. Not only has this forced a rethinking of the geographical orientation of mission, it has confronted with strange and challenging theological contexts a gospel that has been largely formulated and proclaimed in terms familiar to the hearing of semi-Christianized Western man.²⁵ This

²² Georg F. Vicedom, *The Challenge of the World Religions* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 7.

²³ There is a great company of the persecuted among the members of the church in mission to the world today. It is composed of those who are actually suffering deeply for Christ's sake. On the one hand, their number will never be fully known; on the other hand, it is frequently indiscreet to publicly point to the known cases. It is sufficient that the church be aware that it is so.

²⁴ Mircea Eliade, "Paul Tillich and the History of Religions," in Paul Tillich, *The Future of Religions* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 31.

²⁵ Ibid. Eliade reports how Tillich in his last days felt that a new systematic theology was needed, one "taking into consideration not only the existential crisis and the religious

encounter, previously restricted to the mission fields, faces the whole church.

The thrust toward the unity of mankind is regarded by some as the significant factor for the church in mission. This developing movement toward togetherness is expressed through a vast variety of social, political, and economic agencies. One of the characteristics of the movement is the increasing pressure toward a common world religion. In this search for a new harmony the mission of the church with its call to radical discipleship strikes a seemingly discordant note. It is suggested that the view of God as love requires a reinterpretation of the traditional understanding of the gospel. We ought to

try to purge our Christianity of the traditional Christian belief that Christianity is unique. . . . In the past this arrogant view in Christianity has in fact led . . . to the rejection of Christianity. . . . The same Christian arrogance, if Christians fail to purge it out now, will lead to the rejection of Christianity in the future.²⁶

The demand that religion play a construc-

vacuum of contemporary western societies, but also the religious traditions of Asia and the primitive world, together with their recent crises and traumatic transformations." Tillich himself stated in his last lecture (ibid., p. 91) concerning such a "period of interpenetration" of systematic theological study and religious historical studies: "This is my hope for the future of theology."

Significantly Henrik Kraemer, the doyen of the church's mission in the 20th century and Tillich's theological opposite, takes a similar position, maintaining that the theologians have not yet taken these issues into their perspective. There "arises for the Church and the theologians the imperious demand to leave all parochialism and regionalism aside and ascend to a yet unknown dimension of world-embracing, mundial thinking." (Kraemer, p. 23)

²⁶ Toynbee, pp. 97—98.

tive role in the drive toward the unity of man places a heavy obligation on those concerned with gospel-mission to reflect and speak.

This sketch of the factors confronting the church in mission as it considers its task in the world today is intended to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. We have not discussed the uplift in educational standards, the spirit of revolt, the breakdown in morality, and others that might be cited in this connection. We cannot fail, however, to point to the bare fact of the present rate of population growth which suggests a total population of three billion before the century closes. What, it is argued, could be more significant for mission than the very fact of these burgeoning multitudes, who pass through life unopposed by the Lord of all? *Veni, Creator Spiritus!* For even to think of what lies ahead is to crush the bruised reed and the smoldering flax of the church's tired will.

THE PRIME FACTOR

As we attempt to consider the gospel and the church's mission task against this background, we are overcome by its very complexity. Within these bewildering circumstances is there no focal point to which the gospel can relate? Is it not possible to detect an underlying theme that binds the whole together?

We suggest that the theme is there. *It is the discovery of man.* Since the evidence for this is all about us, we risk stating the obvious. Yet nothing is so much needed as the formal recognition that this is what the world is saying to the church in mission. Here, then, is the basic

grist for the mill of Christian thought and action in today's world.

It may be objected that the judgment is centuries late. From the Middle Ages and the Renaissance through the period of the Enlightenment to the anthropocentrism of the 19th century, man's developing preoccupation with man is evident.²⁷ While this is true, we may nevertheless affirm that never before has "everyman" discovered man as he has done today. This concern for man as he moves into the last third of the 20th century is both ecumenical and revolutionary in quality. His rights, needs, and hopes are no longer only debated in the *schola* but are demanded in the *agora*. The psalmist's address to God, "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" has changed to a cry to man, "Man, you had better be mindful of us." Jerald Brauer says of those involved in the student revolution: "They are fighting for what they feel is their essential humanity."²⁸ This phrase likewise describes the vital, aggressive discovery of man by every man in our age.

This theme, the discovery of man, expresses the underlying unity in the factors indicated above. Technocracy at its best is a construct by man for man. The secular mood is a concentration on the subject of man. In communism the emphasis is on man in society. The cry for freedom, justice, and human rights represents both the demand of man and a program for man. The 20th-century nationalisms are

²⁷ See August Comte's (1798—1857) proposal for a final religion, "The Religion of Humanity."

²⁸ "The Student Revolution," *The New American Revolution*, ed. Andrew J. Buehner (St. Louis: The Lutheran Academy for Scholarship, 1968), p. 52.

the expressions of man's desire for self-identification and self-realization. The thrust for the unity of mankind as man's noblest quest is a principal 20th-century expression of the discovery of man.

Nowhere does this theme so strikingly assert itself as among the major non-Christian religions. Nothing is more startling than the developing concern for man in life philosophies which have not previously been noted for this. The humanist trends of Western philosophy and the ethics of Christianity have streamed into the major religions to be consciously adopted or unconsciously assimilated. In this process the Christian view of man is filling a felt need in the theological systems of Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, providing both a new respect for the dignity of the individual and an active social message.

Man has never allowed himself to be discounted or subdued completely in any religious system. His need for recognition, for meaning, for a present and a future, have always provided an inner pressure on religious systems. The radically changed response to that pressure is typified by Islam. With its emphasis on overpowering sovereign will, Islam saw God but not man. Man's relation to God as an *abd* (slave) and his subjection to God's *qadar* (His absolute predestinating power) yielded no room for a meaningful doctrine of man. Abū-l-Mugith al-Hallādj (d. 922) was an example of a Muslim's attempt to bypass the theological impasse by mystical experience aimed at the reunion of God and man. In the end, utilizing Jesus as his example, he affirmed that it is in the man who has attained to this experience that one can best see God.

If ye do not recognize God, at least recog-

nize His signs. I am that sign. I am the Creative Truth, because through that truth I am a truth eternally.²⁹

Al-Hallādj seemed poised on the double edge of a great truth and a great blasphemy. But for his daring statement "I am the Creative Truth," he was executed for blasphemy.

In this century, however, Sir Muhammad Iqbal (d. 1938), the revered poet-philosopher of Islam and hero of Pakistan, speaks of the same al-Hallādj as "martyr-saint." He further builds a new Islamic understanding of the relation between God and man about the concept of the ego. He speaks of Allah as the "infinite creative ego" and of man as the "finite creative ego." Man is therefore no longer locked up in a predetermined situation. Rather, his is a free personal causality who shares in the life and freedom of the Ultimate Ego. The latter has permitted the emergence of a finite ego, capable of private initiative, and has thereby limited the freedom of his own will.³⁰

When attracted by the forces around him, man has the power to shape and direct them; when thwarted by them, he has the capacity to build a much vaster world in the depths of his own inner being, wherein he discovers sources of infinite joy and inspiration. Hard is his lot and frail his being, like a rose-leaf, yet no form of reality is so powerful, so inspiring, and so beautiful as the spirit of man! Thus in his inmost being man, as conceived by the Quran, is a creative activity, an ascending

²⁹ Quoted from his *Kitāb-al-Tawāsin* in A. J. Arberry, *Sufism* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1950), p. 60.

³⁰ Sir Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, n.d., repr. 1962), p. 108.

spirit who, in his onward march, rises from one state of being to another.³¹

This affirmation of man is a radical intrusion in a traditionally God-dominated faith. While extreme in its form, it is not exceptional in its emphasis. In his commentary on the first *sura* of the Qur'an, the famed orthodox theologian of Indian Islam, Maulāna Abūl Kalām Āzād says of a true worshiper of the one God:

He will not belong to this or that race, community or group but to mankind; he will be a man, and his allegiance will be to humanity. This is the call of the Quran, the real spirit of its message.³²

Al-Hallād's journey from execution to exaltation is a parable, then, of the uneven but definite advance of the doctrine of man in the major religions of the world.³³

From all about us, therefore, comes the call to the church in mission to discover man. There is sharp suspicion in the air that the church does not know what to do with this call, that man is a stranger to the church. A baby-loving doctor summarizes such opinion as he explains the proposed title "A Belief in Man" for a statement of personal philosophy. "If we have gotten away from religion, we must replace it

³¹ Ibid., p. 12.

³² Ashfaq Husain, *The Quintessence of Islam, A Summary of the Commentary of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad on Al-Fatiha, the first chapter of the Quran* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1960), p. 92.

³³ The end of the tale is not yet told. There is every indication that the next stage in this chain reaction will be an inverse effect resulting in definite change in the doctrines of God in the religions. When we now find signs of such change in the doctrine of God in response to the discovery of man, we see how these two doctrines tightly interact. In fact, they stand and fall together.

with something else."³⁴ So organized religion and belief in man are regarded as antithetical. A Christian politician recited this impromptu poem to an assembly of bishops: "Look through your less dark glasses, daring as much for man as for God."³⁵

It is not correct to say that Christianity has failed completely to reckon with the discovery of man. Easiest to document is its theology, which is extensively engaged in reflection upon the doctrine of man, especially in the areas of creation, Christology, and ethics.³⁶ That reflection is empirically oriented. "Man as he encounters us concretely in his life relationships and in the total structure of society is the center of our configuration."³⁷ As a result theology is undertaking a determined dialog with the world. On the one hand, it wants first to discover just who modern man is.

Such theology must ask, who is the modern man to which it hopes to speak. But perhaps instead we should speak of modern men rather than modern man. Never has there been a time when it was more difficult to put one's fingers on the essence of the age.³⁸

Second, it wants to address itself to the questions modern man asks, and to speak in terms that actually communicate.

On the other hand, theology is listening

³⁴ Quoted in *Newsweek* (Sept. 23, 1968), p. 29.

³⁵ Ibid. (Nov. 25, 1968), p. 54.

³⁶ See, for example, the Lutheran World Federation sponsored study of the theme "The Quest for True Humanity," which has been going on since 1964.

³⁷ Hoekendijk, p. 85.

³⁸ Wm. Hordern, *New Directions in Theology*, I (London: Lutterworth, 1968), 151.

for new unfolding understandings of the *meaning* of man. That leads to new understanding of the nature of the good which the gospel intends. As man's creative powers and ebullient spirit cast off shackles, cast out demons, and cast up noble works and structures for man's good, new images of the ultimate purpose of God in Christ stand revealed. Revealed with it is the torment of man unable to cast out the ultimate demons. The process of listening therefore also produces a new realization of the depths of need to which the Gospel speaks. So, for example, to "the desperate search for human community today" comes the response that is "the universal theme of the theological renaissance today," namely,

that the true human community can come into existence, not through human effort alone, but through a discovery that God through His own forgiving love does bring man into a sane, humble, and personally creative relationship.³⁹

THE CHURCH'S RESPONSE

Less easy to calculate is the church's pragmatic response to the theme of the new age. In general, the church in mission has answered the discovery of man by a new appreciation of its own call to servanthood, by the attempt to understand contemporary man, by a fresh spirit of identification with the hopes of men, by more intimate involvement in the structures of society, and by tangible efforts to meet human need. It has affirmed that the church's mission is to the whole man and that its ministry of peace and healing is all-inclusive. The selfless ministry of Jesus Christ, fully "the man for others," repre-

³⁹ Williams, p. 25.

senting in concrete action His self-understanding of the nature of His own presence in the world ("I am among you as one who serves"), is seen as the pattern of the church's presence in the world. The church admits that its following of Christ into the world of men's needs and hopes is marked by serious inadequacy, misdirection, inconsistency, and hypocrisy. But to its confession of sin is added a strong and growing determination to "bear fruit that befits repentance."

Basic to this response is the church's self-discovery that it cannot stand apart from the meaning of the gospel. There is everywhere sudden, overwhelming realization that the world will not believe what it cannot see, and will not believe when what it sees contradicts what it hears. It is no longer possible to avoid the conclusion that "the Church, as it stands is itself, in most places, the stumbling-block for the spread of the Gospel."⁴⁰ The churches are therefore engaging in calls to repentance, revival, and renewal. The church has become aware of the need for radical discipleship and obedience to Christ in today's world. Daniel T. Niles declares that

... the Evangelistic thing is a boomerang. The Church which would call the world to order is suddenly called to order itself. The question mark which it would throw into the world: "Do you not know that you belong to Christ?" comes back as an echo. The Church discovers that it cannot truly evangelize, that its message is unconvincing, unless it lets itself be transformed and renewed, unless it becomes what it believes it is. Thus, evangelism, if taken seriously, will force the churches

⁴⁰ H. D. L. Abraham, "Church and Evangelism," *International Review of Missions*, XLV (1956), 171.

to pray and work for that radical renewal which will make them into letters from Christ, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God.⁴¹

But what has the gospel to do with the discovery of man that marks our common life, sets the theme for our secular and religious world, and reflects itself in Christian thought and action? It is the gospel, understood as the good news of God's burden-bearing in Jesus Christ, that defines the mission. But it is this news which speaks of God's grace that seems to be the square peg in the round hole of the present pattern of felt need and response. For man's attention is elsewhere. He is concerned with his own being and doing. The problem, therefore, is that the very content of the gospel comes to him in categories that seem to have little or nothing to do with the discovery of man. The gospel in today's world seems to be singing a song: "I'm but a stranger here, Heaven is my home." But the world is not singing along.

Perhaps we have not been very effective in answering the question, "What shall we do with the gospel?" At one end of the spectrum of response is dogged avowal of past patterns. We shall go on proclaiming the gospel as we have, in obedience and in trust, confident that inherent in it is sufficient power for the present as there has been for the past. The operative words for this view are "as we have." At the other end is a response typified by the words of a great convert from Islam to the Christian faith, whom the present situation moves to say: "I commend a period

⁴¹ "Editorial," *Ecumenical Review*, II (1949), 2. Quoted in Hans J. Margull, *Hope in Action*, trans. E. Peters (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1962), p. 135.

of reticence for the church."⁴² This view is reflected in those of the apostolate who see the unqualified service to human needs as that which represents the true response of the Christian conscience to the contemporary world, that this is a time for the lived gospel and the *shalom* of God made present in the life of the Christian community.

The instinct of the concerned Christian is that the answer to the question, "What has the gospel to do with the discovery of man?" does not lie in the restricted views of either the "logists" or the "ergists," but in a fresh encounter with Christ Himself. He is the Man among men, the "speaking and doing in the world" Man. He and He alone can provide the final meaning, the ultimate dimension that liberates man from the slavery of his discovery and fulfills it. But to say that the final solution is in Him is to say that it is in the gospel, where He makes Himself known to us. He, the Lord of the gospel, from within the gospel itself tells us what the gospel has to do with this and sends us to the doing. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for a world that has discovered man. It says to the world: There is more in your discovery than you dreamed of. It both declares the glory of man and makes him glorious.

The gospel does not do this without carrying out its "strange work." It cries "No" to man's "Glory be to me! I am the Lord! Behold your God!" The church in mission at this point has no choice and wants no choice. Its task is not to enthrone man but to prepare the way of the Lord

⁴² Daud Rahbar, in an address to the student body at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Mo., 1968.

in the wilderness of human self-esteem and self-acclaim. Therefore the voice cries first that "all flesh is as grass" which withers (Is. 40:6). The gospel's "No" is to all forms of self-worship, gross or subtle. Its "No" is therefore also directed against any glorification of Jesus Christ as authentic man which ignores His testimony that man's authenticity depends on His relation with One who is Father. The attempt to appropriate Jesus Christ on terms other than His own is characteristic of both secular and religious humanism. But Jesus Himself castigates man-worship, especially that based on ethical calculation. "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but God alone" (Mark 10:18). "The Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). "I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will but the will of Him that sent Me." (John 6:38)

But this righteous Nay to human pretension yields quickly to the gospel's message, God's accepting and transforming Yea to man. The gospel is the glad tidings of the grace of God in Christ Jesus *for man*. In the gospel God reveals Himself as "the Incurable Humanist."⁴³ In His self-giving concern for man God testifies not only to man's tragic rebelliousness and lostness but also to man's greatness. Twice God knelt down in the dust for man, once to shape him and then to reshape him in His image. To look biblical testimony squarely in the face with respect to man is to gasp in wonder and astonishment. Who is this man who is God's special creation and His vice-regent over nature? Who is he to be the friend, son, co-worker and co-ruler of the Almighty? Who is this man whose life God shares, cleanses and

ennobles forever? Who is he who is "a little less than God and crowned with glory and honor" (Ps. 8:5)? Who is man? The world's discovery of man demands of the church in mission that it take another look at the Word that affirms man so powerfully, and that it search out the full implications of that affirmation. And all this for the sake of man.

The church will do this in the light of the glory reflected in the face of Jesus Christ. The mystery of man, his final glory and greatness, is both veiled and revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, whom the church therefore proclaims as man's good news. The profundity of that good news is both captured and opened up by the fact that Jesus called Himself the Son of Man. His personalized use of this name is the true "divine surprise." Though the title is recorded 81 times in the gospels, it is not applied to Jesus by others. The significance of this all-embracing title is therefore indubitable, but "the problems raised by this phrase are among the most complex and difficult in New Testament study."⁴⁴ There is a hidden quality in the

⁴⁴ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), p.211. See his entire section on Son of Man, pp.211 to 36. For an older but exemplary introduction to the subject see S. R. Driver, "Son of Man," *Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. James Hastings, IV (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902) 579—88. A brief summary of modern views is found in J. Campbell, "Son of Man," *A Theological Workbook of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1959), p.330 to 31. In terms of our present study the most stimulating treatment is to be found in Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1959), pp.137 to 92. Cullmann states (p.152): "The question whether and in what sense Jesus designated himself the Son of Man is one of the most discussed and contested problems of the New Testament scholarship."

⁴³ Hoekendijk, p. 189.

Son of Man. Yet may we not hope that the Holy Spirit will provide new resources from this very concept for the understanding of the gospel and our mission task in a world full of thoughts about man? Its links with other concepts significant to modern man, such as creation, incarnation, second Adam, Suffering Servant, and the eschaton, hold promise of reward to match the effort involved in seeking out its meaning.⁴⁵ In the Son of Man the church in mission has a message for a world that looks for the well-being and glory of man.

Some understand the meaning of "Son of Man" as descriptive of Jesus' actual or ideal humanity; some stress its eschatological implications. The usage in the gospels is summarized by Vincent Taylor:

Contrary to Christian usage at the time when the Gospels were completed, all the evangelists use the name Son of Man freely. They do so in terms of suffering and rejection, but with an eschatological emphasis, which is most pronounced in Matthew and Mark. In John the name describes the Divine Son in the circumstances of His earthly lot and as prophetic of His predestined glory.⁴⁶

Jesus emphatically takes up the eschatological idea and applies it to Himself. The

⁴⁵ The church in mission is heavily dependent on the efforts of the church's exegetes to quarry new insights from the mine of Scripture that will help it to be the church of the living Word. "Son of Man" illustrates both the need and the challenge. Appropriate is Jaroslav Pelikan's call and warning: "The Protestant theology of the United States needs a period of fresh new exegesis, not merely of crypto-systematic 'biblical theology,' if it is to learn to speak Christologically again." See "Bonhoeffer's Christologie of 1933," *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, ed. Martin Marty (London: SCM Press, 1963), p. 164.

⁴⁶ *The Person of Christ* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1959), p. 22.

Son of Man will come in glory with His angels at the end of time. But Jesus adds to this that the Son of Man who comes in glory comes first as a humble servant among men, and for their redemption. St. Paul advances the theme by building around the idea of the second Heavenly Man a total Christology.

It is not possible in this essay to develop the fruitful lines of thought that stem from this great theme. They are there in abundance. It is important, however, to point up the preexistence of the Son of Man. The Son of Man is not only with God at the end-time. He comes to the Ancient of Days at the end, and is given dominion, glory, and the kingdom (Dan. 7:13). But that is possible only because it is His rightful place, because He is with God from the beginning. He who is at the same time Son of God and Son of Man⁴⁷ is ever with God. "What if you were to see the Son of Man ascending where He was before" (John 6:62)? "The second man is from heaven." (1 Cor. 15:47)

Because Christ is the Son of Man, he is the pre-existent Heavenly Man, the pre-existent pure image of God, the God-Man already in his pre-existence.⁴⁸

As such the Son of Man is the perfect image of God who bears the very stamp of His nature and reflects His glory.

When God, in whom is eternally existent the Son of Man, creates man, He *must* therefore create him in His own image. Man as created by God is the self-expression of His own nature in spontaneous

⁴⁷ Wm. Sanday, "Jesus Christ," *Dictionary of the Bible*, II, 623, states: "As Son of God Jesus looked upwards to the Father; as Son of Man He looked outwards upon His brethren."

⁴⁸ Cullmann, p. 127.

love, the pattern of divinity. He is not God. He is the creation of God. He is not worthy of receiving worship. The Son of Man is not incarnate as the first man, Adam, but as the second Man, Jesus. But the image that Adam bears is the image of true manhood, and thereby he is the bearer of the glory of God. So also when man loses that relation with God, he loses his manhood. The moment he seeks to be God rather than to reflect God, he ceases to be man. But when this happened, "the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The Son of Man's mission is to redeem men by freeing them from the self-idolatry that destroys their true glory, and to restore it by re-creating men to be the image of God.

The role of the Heavenly Man is to redeem men by making them what He Himself is, the image of God. That is his mission. But men are sinful; the first man, Adam, the representative of all men sinned, and redemption from sin requires atonement. The Heavenly Man, the divine prototype of humanity, must therefore himself enter sinful humanity in order to free it from its sins.⁴⁹

In His dying to the old man and rising to the new life, the Son of Man incorporates us in His manhood, and in Him man is once again crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:9). To put on Christ is to put on the new man. To put on the new man is to be restored in the image of God. To bear the image of God is to know the glory of man, even to his final glory, which is to be in God and God in him.

It has been suggested that "salvation is indeed nothing but humanization."

Missio Dei is *Missio Dei* and has to be

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 172.

revealed to us. It is not our work, it is not the work of rigid perpetuation of institutionalism, it is the work of God, manifested in human history. It is indeed human history itself. That the history of mankind is the history of salvation, of liberation from dehumanizing slavery, that salvation is indeed nothing but humanization—that is the concrete form of belief in the Incarnation.⁵⁰

But the greatness of God and His grace and the meaning of man are not understood unless we see as His startling discovery to us in Jesus Christ that humanization is, in a sense, deification. Not until the sons of Adam become the sons of God do they become the sons of men. It is the *Missio Dei* that they so become. So Saint Athanasius wrote:

For men had not been deified if joined to a creature . . . Nor had man been brought into the Father's presence, unless He had been His natural and true Word who had put on the body . . . that He might unite what is man by nature to Him who is in the nature of the Godhead, and his salvation and deification might be sure.⁵¹

The ultimate Christian answer to man's discovery of the greatness of man is a truth so subject to misunderstanding and corruption that it is uttered with trepidation. The moment the psalmist says, "You are gods, sons of the Most High, all of you," he leaps to add, "Nevertheless, you shall die like men" (Ps. 82:6). Yet at the same time the truth must be proclaimed—that man shares in Christ the greatness of God.

⁵⁰ T. Veerkamp, "Looking Forward in Hope," *Religion and Society*, XV (March, 1968), 31.

⁵¹ *Orationes* II, 69, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Vol. IV, Athanasius*, ed. A. Robertson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1903).

His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of Him who called us *to His own glory and excellence*, by which He has granted us His precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become *partakers of the divine nature*. (2 Peter 1:3-4)

So God gives manhood back to men through the Son of Man. The good news is that the Son of Man both reveals the glory of manhood lived in God, and then grants its possibility as a gift. In this gift is incorporated validation of all that is gloriously human. The honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely, the gracious — "if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 1:8). Creation is restored to man with the gift of manhood. Even more, man is restored to himself. God's continuing mission through His Spirit is that every personal human existence bear the mark of the divine life, so that it might be "changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another" (1 Cor. 3:18). His continuing mission, too, is that the mystery of giving and receiving as expressed in the life of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be experienced as human possibility. To that end He not only validates the goal but also creates and brings into the new order of life, whose principle is divine love, a people for His possession. He sends this possessed people into the world of men as His gift to men. They are His gift to men because they are the bearers of the great words that make sense to today's world and by which He calls men to Himself and to their true destiny

— to re-create, reconcile, live, overcome. And they are His gift to men because they are the firstfruits of the Son of Man's vision of a new humanity. In that gift of true manhood which is hid with Him in God the Son of Man declares His final Amen to humanity until He comes.

That Amen of Jesus Christ is so buoyantly liberating and powerfully creative for truly human living because the Son of Man who declares it is the Suffering Servant. In Him we see not only that to be human is to be divine, but that to be divine is to be among men and to be the suffering servant of men. In the New Testament the concepts of Son of Man and Servant of God are indissolubly linked. "The vocation of *ebed*' becomes, so to speak, the main content of the Son of Man's earthly work."⁵² It is the mission of the Son of Man to be a "man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" so that men who thankfully respond, "Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," may in turn become the willing and joyful burden-bearers of the world.

As we see that great apocalyptic figure, the Triumphant One, the Son of Man, not grasping at His equality with God but humbled among men in the Servant and obedient to the death of the cross, the glory of man stands revealed. It is the glory of suffering and victorious love. Because it is the very nature of manhood to do so, God's people take up the cross of humanity. As man's high destiny is revealed in the Son of Man who came to the Ancient of Days, so his true nature is revealed in the Son of Man "who came not to be ministered unto, but to minister and to

⁵² Cullmann, p. 161.

give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt. 20:28). What destroys the temptation to corrupt the discovery of man is the figure of the Man on the cross. There, in the moment when the capacity for man's self-destruction is divulged, the Son of Man reveals what true man is like and what he does. The quality of life that brings the Son of Man to men in this way takes those who are in Him, and who testify to Him crucified, along that same seeking and finding way. Thereby the church in mission discovers its own life in self-giving love and becomes God's sign to the world, the sign of true humanity possible and realized through union with God in Jesus Christ. "The blind receive their sight

and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up and the poor have good news preached to them" (Matt. 11:5). World, you need not wait for another. So also God's humanity treads the path of His glory. "Because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for every one" we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor (Heb. 2:9). As God highly exalted Him who was crucified and gave Him the name that is above every other name, so men shall be lifted up to become the partakers of Christ's glory.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news for a world that has discovered man. The mission task of the church is to proclaim it.