

Vision in God's Mission

Vasi Gadiki

Vasi Gadiki is a Koitabuan, and was Principal of Rarongo Theological College from 1990-1996, during which time he also served as the Secretary/Treasurer of the Melanesian Association of Theological Schools. He holds a Masters degree in Pacific church history.

For 1993, the United church Assembly adopted the theme: "Vision in God's Mission", and this paper attempts to discuss this theme, from the standpoint of the United church. I shall introduce the discussion, with a brief reference to the history of Christian mission, in order to focus our attention on the vision of God. There follows a discussion of God in mission, and of the United church in mission, leading into a consideration of the purpose of the mission of the church. The concluding remarks will discuss who benefits from the vision in God's mission.

The title is an important object for the universal church, since Christendom's attempt to understand the inspired word of God in the scriptures, is to grasp the vision of God, in His mission to, and in, the world. The leaders, and people of God, in worship, endeavour to know the mind of God in the incarnation, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ. The church interprets the coming of Christ into the world, and His leaving of it, as the core of the grace of God. Christ has been classified as being both human and divine, yet it is His humanity that leads men to believe, and accept His divine nature.

The mission of the church is to proclaim what God has done in Christ for the world. The core of the gospel, is the grace of God, revealed by Christ on the cross, and, in mission, the church attempts to reach the many people who have yet to hear its message. At the same time, the church continues to nurture, and care for, those who have accepted the gospel, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, so that they may grow to maturity in their faith.

The mission of the Christian church has often been defined primarily as evangelism, under the following points:

- (a) Mission, as the proclamation of the Word.
- (b) Mission, as the task of sending missionaries overseas.
- (c) Mission, as the act of saving the souls of neglected peoples.
- (d) Mission, as the social responsibility of the church to the world.

The object of mission, as been seen, as is the conversion, and the civilising, of the heathen. To achieve their conversion, the missionaries embarked on the following means for evangelism:

- (a) Educating the heathen;
- (b) Providing health services;
- (c) Developing the converted, so that they, themselves, proclaim the gospel to their own people;
- (d) Translating the scriptures into the local languages.

In more recent times, the concept of mission was narrowed down to three basic points:

- (a) Teaching and instruction, to develop the faith of the converted to maturity and responsibility.
- (b) The development of facilities, from which to administer the functions of the church.
- (c) The development of human resources, to manage the affairs of the church in the local environment, so as to foster the growth of the church.

Mission has been understood as sending people out from their own country to witness the gospel to peoples of other cultures. The message

proclaimed needs to be related to the new cultural context, so that the emphasis in mission has been the contextualisation of the gospel message. The fast changes, and developments, in modern times, require adaptations in the strategies for mission, whereby modern man may be able to understand, and accept, the message in the pluralistic, or secularised, world.

The cultures of the peoples, with whom the gospel has to be shared, have gone through many changes. Culture is the total way of life, the norms of the society, the religious forms, beliefs, practices, and the methods of survival in the society. Culture conditions the styles of dress, the forms of music, art, and languages, as well as the peoples' ideas and values. Culture is the code of ethics, and influences the peoples' view of the world. It creates a sense of order in the environment, and influences the learning experiences and the skills of each generation.

This means that the gospel is not proclaimed in a vacuum, but in a ready and fertile ground of religious beliefs and practices. Culture has created a fertile environment, in which the gospel may be planted, and the mission of God established. This is similar to the context of Matt 5:17, where the Lord Jesus stated: "Do not think that I have come to do away with the law of Moses, and the teaching of the prophets. I have not come to do away with them, but to make their teaching come true." This verse needs to be applied to the Melanesian context as: "I have not come to do away with the Melanesian, or Pacific, cultures, but to make their teachings come true."

The similarity, indicated above, teaches us that religious experience, with its ethical nature, expresses the importance of culture in the mission of the church. There seems to be an urgent need for the contextualisation of the gospel message, in order for it to become a living reality in the lives of those who have received the Lord Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. This thought brings us back to the concept of the vision of God.

Vision of God

Christendom understands the vision of God in the preaching of Christ. Jesus called a few people out of the crowd to stay close to Him, observing His words, actions, and relationships with people. These elected, or called, people learnt much from the example of Christ; and the vision of the church must be to understand His mission strategies.

These can be clearly seen in the temptations, where the Lord struggled against the misuse of power to turn stones into bread. The second temptation (to fall from the top of the temple) was to adopt an easy way, where miracles may be used to gather people easily. The third temptation was to gain the whole world by worshipping the devil (Matt 4:1-11).

The temptations were the Lord's struggle against adopting an easy method for mission. The decision, in the end, was to keep to the plan of God for mission, even though, at times, the task was difficult, and beyond human strength. The Lord Jesus also outlined the task of mission, by quoting from Is 61:1-2:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has chosen me to bring the good news to the poor . . . to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and announce that the time has come, when the Lord will save His people (Luke 4:18-19).

There are several important points, expressed above, which need some brief discussion.

1. The Lord Jesus was making a public claim that the Spirit of the Lord God Almighty was upon Him. This may also be taken as being filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the Lord inspires mission activity.
2. Jesus claimed that He was chosen by God to carry out the vision of mission. Christ clarified that the participants in the

mission of God are selected by God to fulfil His vision in the world.

3. The function of the chosen was, and is, to take the message to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed. The most important task of mission is to proclaim a message of liberty, recovery of sight, and freedom.
4. The theology of the proclamation of the good news is salvation for the people, who have accepted, believed, and lived the message of Christ in their daily lives.

The vision of God is that people may accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Saviour. The teaching ministry of the church enables them to follow the example of Christ, in order that there is love of neighbour, and of self, thus fostering harmony in the society.

In the scriptures, the concept of a vision from Almighty God to prophets is mentioned 79 times. The prophet had a vision, whereby God conveyed a message directly, or through another channel (either an angel, or other means), to warn or remind the people of God. Visions are often revelations from God, dealing with immediate situations (e.g., Gen 15:1f), and often with a promise of reward (e.g., Acts 12:7, the release of Peter from prison). On the other hand, in Isaiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Micah, Daniel, and John, the visions dealt with more distant events, in regard to the development of the kingdom. Visions, in both the Old and New Testaments, were means, whereby God made Himself known, with the granting of a vision being dependent entirely upon His divine will. Thus, there is no indication in the scriptures that those who do not have visions are lower in spiritual category than those to whom they have been granted.

The vision of God was, and is, the message God had intended to reveal to mankind in the world. Human beings were expected to grasp the plan of God, through the visions that lead people to realise His purpose in their lives.

God in Mission

The mission of God in the world, through the elect, was to proclaim the message of God's justice and righteousness. The Lord worked through the elect to achieve His own purpose for His glory. The servants were not expected to claim the glory that belonged to God. In the Old Testament, prophets were selected to convey God's message to the people in the form of reminder, direction, or warning, to lead, and direct, people back to the road they were meant to follow. In the New Testament, the disciples were commanded to participate in the mission of God. The task of the servants was to proclaim the righteousness of God, to baptise, and to make more disciples, in which ministry the Lord Jesus Christ promised to be ever-present (Matt 28:19, 20). There was the promise of the Holy Spirit to lead, guide, and direct them in the mission task.

The mission of God was well discussed in *Mission and Evangelism: an Ecumenical Affirmation*, in which emphasis was placed on the call to evangelisation. In the document, seven points were discussed, as the ecumenical convictions for mission:

1. **Conversion.** The gospel proclamation includes an invitation to recognise, and accept, in a personal decision, the saving Lordship of Christ.
2. **The gospel relates to all realms of life.** The scripture never limited religious life to the temple, nor isolated it from the total daily life of the individual.
3. **The church and its unity in God's mission.** The churches are to be a sign to the world. They are to pray and serve as Christ did in His ministry. They are to celebrate the eucharist, as a proclamation of the death of the Lord, until He comes. There is a call for renewal and transformation of the churches, specifically including the call to unity.
4. **Mission in Christ's way.** "As the Father sent me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). To participate in mission requires Christian obedience to the pattern of the ministry and

teaching of Jesus. The task of mission is simply following the example of Christ in his earthly ministry.

5. **Good news to the poor.** Christ, who was Himself incarnated as poor, gave more attention to the poor and marginalised of the society. The message of Christ was to liberate the poor and the oppressed in society, where there was a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor.
6. **Mission in, and to, six continents.** Churches, everywhere, are in a missionary situation, to encourage Christian values, in the age of secularism, and loss of morals.
7. **Witnessing among people of different faiths.** The Christian message of God's salvation needs to be offered to other religions of the world.

The above points give clarification of God's work in mission through the church. Their mission task is to proclaim the message of God, revealed in the ministry of Christ, to convert and liberate, in order to achieve salvation.

The United church in Mission

The mission of the United church in Melanesia, is to fulfil the missionary task, stipulated in the scriptures. The proclamation of the gospel of salvation to the people of Melanesia requires Christian values to be shown in the church here.

The United church's participation in mission, is through the human resources, developed to be the channels, through whom the Almighty God may reach people. There is a great deal of evangelisation in the United church, in the following aspects: mass evangelism, or crusades, child evangelism, and personal evangelism. The object of these evangelistic activities is for conversion, or recommitment in faith. The converted require nurturing and caring to enable them to grow into maturity in faith. This implies faithfulness and obedience to the commands of Christ, taking up their own responsibility for continued mission of the Christian church.

The converted need teaching, or education, to understand the expectation of God for man's participation in the ministry of the church.

During the early days of the United church, the challenge was for conversion from heathenism and paganism. However, that stage of our development is now over, and the more-recent challenge to the church has been the need for participation in ecumenism, to which the United church is contributing much, in both Melanesia and the Pacific.

Other challenges to the United church are now the various new religious movements, especially fundamentalism, and the Pentecostal, or pietistic, emphasis, with its lack of responsibility in the community. Equally, there are the challenges of secularisation, and the loss of self-identity, through alienation from our own cultures. The concept of contextualisation of the gospel is, therefore, a new trend in the proclamation of the word of God.

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