

**A Focused Response
Regarding
The Nature and Mission of the Church,
Its Leadership, and Its Witness to the World**

by
James V. Garrett

1022 Masters Avenue, Ashland, OH 44805
jgarrett1958@hotmail.com

A Project
Presented to
Dr. Wendy Corbin and Dr. Luke Keefer
Ashland Theological Seminary
In partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the class of DM 912- People in Relationship to God

Introduction

The role of the church has proven to be enigmatic, particularly when its *raison d'être* is compared with its contemporarily- (or even, historically-) observed manifestations. Perhaps those observing Christian history have been premature in their judgment against the people of Israel and their neglect to abide within their realm of God's intent; the Church, too, has often appeared far below the designed intent of God. God has always had a purpose for His people. The Church, like the people of Israel, has been given a distinct purpose. Although that purpose is many-fold, primary intentions are for the Church to worship God, to be a communicator of God's message of grace, and to be a model to the world of what a people of God in relationship with Him, with one another, and with the world should look like. That purpose for the Church is referred to as part of the *missio Dei*, the mission of God. As a vehicle for the *missio Dei*, the Church possesses many opportunities and responsibilities. It is from these opportunities and responsibilities that the Church develops and does its theology. One writer has concluded, therefore, that "mission is the mother of theology" (Guder, 2000, 2). David Bosch also summed up the concept of *missio Dei*

mission [may be understood] as being derived from the very nature of God. It [is] thus put into the context of the doctrine of the Trinity, not of ecclesiology or soteriology. The classical doctrine on the *missio Dei* as God the Father sending the Son, and God the Father and the Son sending the Spirit [is] expanded to include yet another 'movement.' Father, Son, and Holy Spirit sending the church into the world . . . mission is not primarily an activity of the church, but an attribute of God. God is a missionary God . . . Mission is thereby seen as a

movement from God to the world: the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission . . . There is church because there is mission, not vice versa (David Bosch as quoted in Guder, 2000, 20).

Therefore, it is with this background that a clear and concise delineation of the *missio Dei* as it pertains to the church is posited, accompanied by leadership models, applications and practices, and a personal reflection regarding the *missio Dei* and the church.

Ecclesiology: The Nature and Mission of the Church

Witness/Example- A Contrast-Society

One aspect of the Church's nature is as an example to the rest of the world of the people of God in relationship to Him. God conceived this concept within Himself as He designated blessings through various covenantal relationships such as the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the New (Renewed) covenant. In each of these, God, through grace, chose to engage in covenantal relationship with a specific, chosen people. In each covenant, as an opposition to mankind's rebelliousness, God was establishing relationship with select humanity in such a way that He would bless them, and they, in turn, would walk in obedience and faithfulness (Driver, 1997, 24). Typically, in each covenant, these select humans, the Hebrews and eventually the Church, were to be seen as recipients of God's special favor simply because of their relationship with Him. Regarding this, the Bible states, "But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A royal PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God's* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY" (1 Peter 2:9-10 NASB). John Driver writes regarding the church with concise wording, "The unambiguous identity of the early church is the prime ingredient in the fulfillment of its mission. This contrast-society is both the context in

which God's mercy is experienced and the instrument of God's mission to the peoples of the earth" (Driver, 1997, 35). It is in this concept of the contrast-society that the Church is, as ancient Israel was, afforded an opportunity to truly impact the world with the difference that God can make when a people fully trust Him. It is also in this concept that the Church, again like ancient Israel, fails miserably. By following so many of the world's leadings, the Church, too, has often become just like the others around them. Perhaps it is time to change back to God's designated way of doing things and to walk in obedience and covenant relationship. Then, and only then, can the Church fulfill that God-willed design for His people.

The Way

Another aspect of the Church's nature is as people of the Way. Of the many titles which the Church has been known throughout the years, "the Way" must have been one of the Christian community's earliest self-designations" (Driver, 1997, 46). Through this designation, a clearer picture of the Church and its nature in the *missio Dei* comes into focus. Paul, in his letters, clearly established "the calling and formation of the Christian Church as a community" of the Way (Guder, 2000, 57). The image of 'the Way' draws its meaning from Jesus' life and death and further reveals the Church as the 'community of the passion of the Father's love expressed supremely by Jesus the Way" (Driver, 1997, 53). The 'Way' is also an image that faithfully communicates the authority of a Church in conflict with evil powers, the humility of a Church under the shadow of the cross, and the patience and anticipation of a Church of suffering witness (Driver, 1997, 55). It is in this designation that the Church is given impetus to live that identification out before the watching world. In addition, a necessity for power, miracles, and words of authority is mandated by this identification; to be known as a powerless people of the

Way is not only an oxymoron but is equal to blasphemy. This must be unacceptable to the contemporary Church as it seeks to carry out the *missio Dei* before a watching world.

Evangelism

A third aspect of the Church's nature is as a vehicle of evangelism. Evangelism is defined as "communication in the form of preaching, bringing, telling, proclaiming, announcing, and declaring . . . the Gospel so that people might respond and become followers of Jesus Christ" (Guder, 2000, 12, 23). Evangelism must be understood as it pertains to the *missio Dei*. Darrell Guder suggests, "the [very] center or core of *missio Dei* is evangelization" (Guder, 2000, 49). If that concept is true, then a parallelism is that evangelism is a core function of the Church, and not some 'elective' that can be engaged in by a select few but not by all. Evangelism then, becomes the specific task of the entire church of making known, witnessing to, and inviting response to the Gospel (Guder, 2000, 24); it is the entire Church's function and calling. "If evangelization is the heart of mission, then evangelization must be the heart of ministry" (Guder, 2000, 150). "When evangelization is divided from the incarnational witness of God's people in community, the danger is very great that the Gospel will be reduced to the minimum of personal salvation and private faith" (Guder, 2000, 191). Guder has further suggested that "the only way for the Church to carry out its calling to be Christ's witnesses is to seek . . . to incarnate the Gospel of Jesus Christ" (Guder, 2000, 206). It is part of the *missio Dei* that evangelism finds the Church as the *proclaiming* AND *living* witness of Christ to the watching world.

The Models of Leadership for the Church and their Roles as Leaders of the Church

As the Church begins to comprehend its place within the *missio Dei*, it must also recognize and examine the leadership examples that have been set before it. Although many models are found in the book of Acts with regard to the way the Church fellowshiped and grew,

these examples are mentioned elsewhere within this writing and will not be dealt with here. Instead, attention will be given specifically to the modeling role of the Pastor.

The ministry giftings are clearly designated in Ephesians 4: “And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:11-13 NASB). It is from these giftings that examples for and leading of the Church are posited.

Specifically, the ministry gift of the pastor should be considered regarding his/her role in contemporary Church leadership and modeling. The pastor is the individual who is generally looked upon as the one who both leads a local congregation and who stands as an example for that congregation and the surrounding community. “Congregations commonly see the pastor as the quality control engineer in the factory” (Peterson, 1992, 81). Certainly, s/he is an example to those whose lives s/he speaks into on a weekly basis. This ministry of exhortation and example, however, is fraught with one key downfall; it is a work wrought among frail and fallible men and women by frail and fallible men and women. It, thus, becomes the responsibility of the pastor to recognize his/her limitations as an example to the Church.

A certain pitfall for the pastor is that which author Eugene Peterson simply labels *success*: “When [they are] being obedient and successful pastors [they] are in far more danger than when [they] are being disobedient” (Peterson, 1992, 31). Certainly, the susceptibility of the pastor is recognized, yet the example is not negated regarding the *missio Dei* and how the Christian life should be lived out before and among the world. The pastor IS the most apparent example to the contemporary Christian walk.

Ministry Application and Ethical Practices

The Church as It Interacts within Itself

The Gospel of Matthew speaks very clearly regarding the *missio Dei* and the Church: “And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age’” (Matthew 28:18-30 NASB). The difficulty with this passage is that, throughout Church history, the Church has had a tendency to decrease its effectiveness by minimizing these designated tasks to directed, intentional deeds. In fact, more is done involuntarily and accidentally as a witness than is willfully and intentionally. Of course, these tasks are those that are lived out in the simple day-to-day efforts of Christian humanity: communion with one another, passionate acts of worship, and daily interaction with fellow Christians. “The watching world must [be able to] see a community of people who love the God they are addressing, who love each other, and who desire to carry their God’s love into the world” (Guder, 2000, 158-159). Regarding this same issue, Guder has further suggested that “everything we say and do is a witness to the good news” (Guder, 2000, 157). That means that all Christian actions and institutions are witnesses to God. Professor George Yancey has suggested that when Christians worship together in multicultural settings, that can be and is a powerful witness to the world (Yancey, 2003, 47).

It must be observed, however, that the negative of these proclamations is also true. When Christians argue and demonstrate dissension among themselves, it is a poor witness to the world. When Christians exhibit racism among themselves and especially within their churches, it is a negative witness. Guder has stated, “Where there is competition, rancor, and mutual

renunciation, the Gospel witness is diminished profoundly” (Guder, 2000, 185). With this understanding, it has been suggested that the church itself must participate in a continual introspective change; “the essence of the church’s credible witness is its own ongoing evangelization” (Guder, 2000, 144). John Howard Yoder has aptly summarized this concept

“To be human is to be in conflict, to offend, and to be offended. To be human in the light of the Gospel is to face conflict in redemptive dialogue. When we do that, it is God who does it. When we do that, we demonstrate that to process conflict is not merely a palliative strategy for tolerable survival or psychic hygiene, but a mode of truth finding and community building. That is true of the Gospel; it is also true, *mutatis mutandis*, in the world” (Yoder, 1994, 13).

Certainly, there are difficulties that are common to all humankind, including conflict. It is through the resolution of these conflicts in a godly manner that a Gospel witness is given and in which the *missio Dei* is fulfilled. Yoder has suggested that the practice of such “would radically restructure the life of churches” (Yoder, 1994, 6-7). Guder has said, “disagreeing Christianity is one of the most powerful forms of incarnational witness the church can practice” (Guder, 2000, 165). Truly, such would not only restructure the life of the Church, but it would also revitalize the world’s concept of the people of God and perhaps, God Himself. After all, “the watching world must see a community of people who love the God they are addressing, who love each other, and who desire to carry their God’s love into the world. . . [in doing so] they will witness the difference that the presence of God makes in the midst of this community” (Guder, 2000, 158-159).

The Church as It Interacts with the World

There is also an onus upon the Church to watch the way it interacts with the world. Too often the Church has followed the ways of the world and yet, the Word of God calls the Church to be “a contrast society, a company of resident aliens, and a new covenant community” (Guder, 2000, 130). This means that the Church is to avoid the draw of the world to follow in the world’s

footsteps and is, instead, to beckon the world to follow in the Church's footsteps. Only as the Church follows God and sets the example is the world to be given an impetus to be drawn into the Kingdom of God. This is in keeping with the intention of the *missio Dei*. Extending beyond the simple fact of being an example, God has also purposed the church to be an avenue of His grace to the world. "God's missional intention was that all the world should be blessed: in you [Abraham and the posterity God will give him] all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Guder, 2000, 33). These interactions of the Church with the world can and will provide the godly vehicle that God has designated for both blessing and example so that the world should be compelled to enter into relationship with Him.

The Breaking of Segregation

A third aspect of the Church in action is the Church as it deals with racism, both in the world and in the Church. Racism is in direct opposition to the concepts of Biblical Christianity and godly love. The attitude of racism is defined by Trevor Huddleston as that whose "motives and forces ... are anti-Christ, denying that man is made in the divine image." (*Draper's Book of Quotations for the Christian World*, 1992, 1488). Although racism is a world-wide phenomenon, and although it is found within the church as well, it is contrary to the intentions of God; how the Church deals with racism presents an excellent opportunity for a godly witness to the world. Regarding this issue, Guder says that "God's presence is irreducibly multicultural" (Guder, 2000, 87). It is in the celebration of diversity that the multicultural Church is at its best and that it best reflects God's creative purpose in His contemporary Church. Yancey has stated, "The Multiracial Church is the Church for the future of the United States" (Yancey, 2003, 36). It is Yancey's hope, and that of many others that "an environment may develop within multiracial churches where racial understanding can emerge" (Yancey, 2003, 41). Further, through such

integration of cultures and through such celebrations of diversity, proclamation is given to principalities and powers that the Kingdom of God is truly at hand (Yoder, 1994, 29).

Personal Reflection and Formation

There are several things that have deeply affected me in my reading and meditation. First, it is and has been very clear to me that God has positioned the Church with a definite intention. The depth of that intention, however, has been somewhat elusive. For instance, I understood the Church as a vehicle for evangelism, but I did not comprehend evangelism as being a task of the entire Church nor did I identify the life and interactions of the Church as vehicles for evangelism. It is from this realization that I grasp a new understanding that the Church is not simply an organization designated for ‘doing,’ but instead is an organism purposed for ‘being.’ By this I mean that the simple existence of the Church should be a testimony and witness to the world of a people in relationship with God. That testimony and witness should come before the first words of the Gospel are uttered.

Secondly, I realized the truth of what Peterson was stating when he wrote, “the pastor’s primary task is not communication but communion” (Peterson, 1992, 192). It is very important for a pastor to communicate life, hope, and healing through the words s/he speaks; however, it is more important that his/her actions communicate a depth of love, communion, and relationship. S/he must preach good news to the poor, bring healing to the sick, administer the sacraments, and perform all the other expected duties of a pastor, but, if these tasks are performed simply out of duty and are devoid of relationship and communion, they amount to nothing. A pastor must walk in communion and relationship with his/her community and with God.

Thirdly, I have seen a viable, written alternative to overcome the sin of racism. On a personal note, my lack of racism has been dramatically challenged. Although I am Caucasian, I

have a son-in-law of Mexican-Indian descent. I also have another son-in-law who is African-American. I love these two men as if they were my own flesh and blood. In some ways they are. Neither of them refer to me as Dad or as 'Jim'; instead, I am 'Pastor' because I raised both of these young men through their teen years by being their pastor. My daughters love them dearly. When we gather together, we do not see one another as white, or black, or red/brown; instead, we see one another as family. Each of us is uniquely gifted; together, we complete each other. In like manner, that is how the Church should function: diversely gifted but together in Him, whole. This is how family should be. This is how the body of Christ should be. This is how the local congregation should be. Because of this, I am doing everything within my ability, and further, calling upon God's ability, to create within my congregation a multicultural environment wherein we celebrate one another's diversity. Again, this is the way God's kingdom should be.

Finally, I realize that there is no shame in 'not having it all together.' Just as Guder has suggested that the Church needs to ever be in a state of being evangelized and converted, so too must I as a pastor and as a child of God be ever in a state of being evangelized and converted. This means not only that I should not try to act as if I have it all together, but instead, I should continually be in state of repentance and change, allowing God to mature me and biblically perfect me so that I might be pleasing unto Him and that I might be a living witness to the world around me. As I experience this change and challenge, then I, too, can experience that which Guder was speaking of when he wrote, "God's people may respond to His role and actions with their love" (Guder, 2000, 32). Then, I will respond to God's role and actions with my love.

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