



Impact of the Reformation on Mission

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Abstract: From its very inception, the Reformation had an enormous impact on mission. For various reasons, the Reformers did not see the need for mission. The “Great Commission” was considered to be limited to the Apostles. Belief in predestination rendered mission superfluous. Preoccupation with the Reformation in Europe, together with political and military struggles, led the Reformers to be inward looking. Protestants lost a massive pool of full-time personnel, in the form of dedicated monks and celibates. Also the scandal of division and competition proved a great obstacle to mission. However, thanks to pioneering thinkers and the ecumenical movement, all these obstacles to mission began to be addressed, so that the situation today is vastly different.

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The Reformation had an enormous impact on mission, from its very inception. Strange as it may sound, it resulted in the loss of a sizeable part of Christian Europe from engagement with mission. The conduct of Protestant missions in India is formally dated from 1706, when Ziegenbalg and Plütschau of the Danish-Halle mission landed at the Danish colony of Tranquebar in present day Tamil Nadu. The few chaplains attached to the centres of the British East India Company in the seventeenth century ministered to the English residents and

did not engage in missionary work. Meanwhile already from the early sixteenth century, Roman Catholic missions were fast spreading in South America and Asia. Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621), who considered missionary activity as a mark of the true Church, reproached the Protestants for their lack of it: “Heretics are never said to have converted either pagans or Jews to the faith, but only to have perverted Christians. But in this one century the Catholics have converted many thousands of heathens in the new world.”¹

The reasons for the tardy entry of the Reformation churches and communities into mission are manifold.

1. Denial of the Missionary Obligation

For one thing, they believed that the “Great Commission” in Mt 28:18-20 was limited to the apostles. If it were admitted that it was inherited by their successors, one would have to admit that other mandates given to the apostles, e.g. that of binding and loosing, had also passed to their successors. The extremely meagre quotations available from the writings of Luther do not warrant the conclusion that he had a vision for world mission. The flip side of exclusive insistence on justification by faith is pointed out by Bosch (1991: 242): “since the initiative remains God’s, and God is the One who sovereignly elects those who will be saved, any human attempt at saving people would be blasphemy.” The fact that Luther expected the Parousia in the year 1558 did not help. He ignored the whole idea of foreign mission. He felt that the Apostles had already preached the Gospel in the whole world. To this, the teacher Johann Comenius (1592-1670) retorted: “The apostles preached all over the *then known* world.” Melancthon likewise saw the mission command as valid only for the Apostles; it was the *civil* authorities who had a missionary obligation towards their non-Christian subjects. The church authorities remained passive about

it. The theological faculty of the University of Wittenberg took a formal position on the issue through a publication in 1652, stating that missionary responsibility lay with the state, not with the church. They explained that God had revealed himself sufficiently to all people through the preaching of the apostles. The Calvinist doctrine of predestination acted as a further dampener on any missionary zeal. The well-known Lutheran theologian John Gerard (1582-1637) held that unknown missionaries had brought Christianity to the inhabitants of Mexico and Brazil; the same must be true of the Peruvians, Brahmins and others, because their religions bear so many similarities with Christianity. Thus it was left to the colonial authorities, like the Dutch East India Company, to send missionaries to their colonies abroad. It was not that the Protestants lacked colonies overseas to provide them with a goad to develop their missionary obligation. The first English colony in Virginia was founded in 1584. The Dutch ruled a colony in Ceylon from 1640-1796.

2. Forerunners of Change

Nevertheless, there were a few Protestants who may be considered pioneers and forerunners of a theory and practice of mission. Among them should be mentioned **Adrian Saravia** (1531-1613), a Dutch theologian and contemporary of Calvin. In a treatise written in 1590 he argued that the mission command given to the apostles is inherited by the bishops who clearly stand in the line of apostolic succession. He further held that the promise of Jesus in Mt 28:20 is applicable to us, provided we fulfil the commission to which it is attached. He thereby maintained that the commission is meant to be fulfilled “to the end of the age”. Not surprisingly, his views met with severe opposition from many, including Theodore Beza, Calvin’s successor in Geneva and from John Gerard. Also meriting special mention is **Gisbert Voetius** (1589-

1676), professor at the university of Utrecht. He visualized three goals of mission, each subordinated to the next: the conversion of non-Christians → planting churches → the glory of God. He eschewed coercion in religious matters and rejected the distinction of ‘younger’ and ‘older’ churches, for he saw them as equals. His pupil **Johannes Hoornbeeck** (1617-1666) made an interesting application of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Reformation Christians were like the priest and Levite who “passed by on the other side” (Lk 10:31-32), when presented with missions to non-Christians. The Roman Catholics were like the Samaritan in their missionary zeal. Hoornbeeck also visualized a Protestant organisation like the Roman Catholic “Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith” and comprising international membership. The example of Roman Catholic missions undoubtedly exercised an influence on a re-thinking of the mission imperative among Protestants and is reflected in their early missiological essays. The New England Company, the first of its kind, was founded in England in 1649 to foster missionary activity in the north American colonies.

A huge change in the attitude towards missionary activity came about with the rise of **Pietism**. This was a movement whose earliest protagonists were P. Spener (1635-1705) and A. Francke (1663-1727). They stressed, among other things, personal conversion, lay initiative and the duty of the Great Commission. Halle (Germany), where Francke taught, was the centre of this movement. It exercised a profound influence on missionary thinking among Protestants, whether Calvinist, Lutheran, Anglican, or Methodist, and resulted in the founding of missionary societies and works. The king of Denmark, Frederick IV, could not find missionaries in his own country, so he sent to Tranquebar the two Germans, Ziegenbalg (1682-1719) and Plütschau (1677-1752). Both were moulded by Pietism and were paid a salary by the Danish king. In sending them out, he met with opposition from Denmark’s

state church. The first baptisms took place in 1707 and by the turn of that century there were an estimated 36,970 converts (Neill 1964:160, 679). The Pietist movement brought to the fore the missionary enterprise of ordinary Christians.

Another important figure marking a shift to a missionary outlook was **William Carey** (1761-1834), a Baptist pastor. In a publication² in 1792 he challenged the Calvinist position, that it was not necessary to engage in missionary activity. That same year, thanks to his efforts, there was founded the “Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen”. Carey came to India as the first missionary of that Society and was later joined by two other Englishmen, J. Marshman and W. Ward.

Late though it was, the 19th century was the great century of Protestant missionary endeavour. The way had been prepared by the above mentioned pioneers. The number of Protestant missionaries grew from only 190 in 1792 to 29,188 in 1923.³ **Gustav Warneck** (1834-1910) is generally regarded as the founder of modern missiology; his five-volume *Evangelische Missionslehre* was published between 1892-1903. He founded a missiological journal (*Allgemeine Missionszeitschrift*) in 1874 and became the first German professor of missiology at Halle in 1896. He fostered fellowship among the various missionary societies in Germany. His *Sketch of the History of Protestant Missions from the Reformation to the Present Day* (1892) went into ten reprints!

3. Local Preoccupations

While the great reserve towards accepting the “Great Commission” remains the chief reason for the lack of missionary endeavour on the part of Protestants in the early centuries of the Reformation, one may adduce additional factors which contributed to that situation. The *preoccupations*

of the Reformers with the Reformation in Europe caused them to be inward looking. Each new Reformed church or community was preoccupied with defining itself over against the others. So while the Reformers did expend their energies on re-Christianizing Europe as they understood it, they did not focus their gaze on the wider missionary task. Yet the fact remains, that similar difficulties experienced by the Catholic Church did not hinder it from engaging in missionary activity. Exceptional for the Protestants was the evangelization of the Lapps of Scandinavia, the last remaining non-Christians in Europe, by Swedish Lutherans in the sixteenth century. This mission was promoted by King Gustav Vasa of Sweden and was partly motivated by political considerations.

4. Inward looking

The Reformation also resulted in a huge *political and military struggle* between Protestants and Roman Catholics, of which the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) was a notable example. The whole of Europe was drawn into the conflagration. While all this contributed to making the Protestants so much more inward looking, it led the Roman Catholics to stress that the Roman form of Christianity was the best and only one. This contributed to the biggest shortcoming in their missionary endeavours, namely the near total lack of inculturation.

5. Short on Personnel

With the Reformation, Protestants *lost a massive pool of full-time personnel*, like the dedicated monks and celibates, who would form the pioneering vanguard of the Roman Catholic missionary movement.

6. Stress on Differences

Differences were stressed, not similarities. Furthermore, the hostilities and polemics which were nurtured in Europe were exported to distant mission fields. Thus it was that Blessed Inacio de Azevedo (†1570) and his 39 companions were massacred by French Huguenots near the Canary islands on their way to Brazil. Catholic and Protestant missionaries could not evangelize in colonies belonging to the other. ‘Sheep stealing’ caused a lot of heartburn on all sides.⁴ American Protestants, for example, considered South America and the Caribbean region as mission fields, because they felt that many Roman Catholics were only nominally Christian. On the other hand, Roman Catholic missionaries made much effort to win over Protestants in the Pacific islands. As far as India is concerned, S. Neill notes: “Some of the great Christian families which had spread throughout the whole of the Tamil area found themselves by the accident of geography divided up among half a dozen Christian confessions, some of which did not permit intercommunion with those of other forms of the Christian faith.”⁵ Rajkumari Amrit Kaur (1889-1964), one of only two Christians in the first Cabinet, wrote to Mahatma Gandhi: “The warring sects of the various Christian churches have each formed their own communities in India, with the result that the seed of those very dissensions which have been the cause of strife within the Christian Church in the West has been sown here regardless of the fact that this in itself was a stumbling block to the people whom they wished to convert to a ‘better’ religion.”⁶

7. Scandal of Division Hampers Mission

The 19th century witnessed some important steps being taken to remedy this situation. One was the introduction of ‘Comity’, which referred to the mutual division of territory “to prevent wasteful duplication, competition, and presentation of

variant forms of worship and polity which might confuse non-Christians and hinder communication of the gospel” (Neill 1964: 123). Apart from this, colonial governments themselves sometimes assigned separate areas to Protestant and Roman Catholic missions. **World Missionary Conferences** (WMC) marked another initiative towards growing cooperation between the churches in their missionary activity. Indeed we might say that the ecumenical movement traces its origins to these Conferences. During the century beginning in 1860 (Liverpool), there were ten such conferences upto 1963 (Mexico); thereafter, up to 1996 (Brazil) there were ten more. In the WMC held in Mexico City in 1963, Roman Catholic observers and Orthodox members were present for the first time. Since then, there has been no turning back. Out of the WMC of Edinburgh (1910) grew the “International Missionary Council” in 1921, which was integrated into the World Council of Churches in 1961. Theologically, the ‘Great Commission’ came gradually to be placed in the broader context of the purpose of the Triune God.

It is particularly in the mission field that the negative impact of the division of Christians is felt most keenly. Cardinal Tatsuo Doi of Tokyo, spoke about this at Vatican II, in the name of the Japanese bishops. In an intervention on an earlier draft of the Decree on Ecumenism, he said we must mitigate the scandal of division. The problem of ecumenism must be seen from its missionary aspect. Namely the vast non-Christian population do not understand the reasons for divisions among Christians; it is a great impediment for the diffusion of the gospel.⁷ In his intervention, Cardinal Rugambwa of Bukoba (Tanzania) observed: “In the missions, where the separation is daily lived as a drama, we have also suffered the effects and the damage as a kind of new original sin”.⁸ These interventions had their impact on the final draft of the Decree on Ecumenism which states in the opening paragraph: “Without doubt, this discord openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling

block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the gospel to every creature” (N. 1).

The polemical attitude often endured into modern times in the former mission churches, even though the mother churches in Europe had long since embraced an ecumenical spirit. Echoes of this situation are found in No. 15 of Vatican II’s Decree on Missionary Activity. A section here which aroused strong reactions from the Council Fathers was the one which develops the assertion, that “The ecumenical spirit should be nurtured in the neophytes”. It went on to explain: “...they can make before the nations a common profession of faith in God and in Jesus Christ. They can collaborate in social and in technical projects as well as in cultural and religious ones.” Fifty-eight council Fathers wanted this whole section to be suppressed or completely changed, because of the special conditions of the missions. The neophytes, they said, are generally uneducated and “understand nothing about ecumenism”. They have to cope with the sectarianism of the separated Christians. The deletion is necessary, to avoid indifferentism and confusion. Three council Fathers wanted suppressed the exhortation to collaboration in Christ’s name, not only between individuals but also between Churches. They felt it favours a euphoric ecumenism, and in no wise the propagation of the Catholic faith. One council Father felt that the entire No.15 seems to contain the danger of syncretism and indifferentism and to confirm the doctrine to be found in India, that all religions are good and ways to God.⁹ All these concerns explain why the final text is hedged with exhortations to prudence and cautions “insofar as religious conditions allow”. Thanks to the intervention of a Protestant observer at the council, Lukas Vischer, the final text explicitly bases collaboration between individuals and among Churches/ ecclesial communities on Christ: “Let them work together especially for the sake of Christ, their common Lord. Let his Name be the bond that unites them!”

Conclusion

The Reformers probably did not foresee the long-term effects of the movement they had unleashed: the divisions among the Protestant churches/communities themselves (apart from the separation from the Roman Catholic Church) and the scandalous effect this would have in mission areas. As the reality of this scandal began to sink in, there grew the ecumenical movement, with a view to healing the rift. In 1947 several churches, episcopal and non-episcopal, united to form the Church of South India. This was a “first” of its kind since the Reformation and was motivated very much by the needs of mission. A similar effort resulted in the formation of the Church of North India in 1970. There has also been wide-ranging collaboration between the churches in India, including the Roman Catholic Church. The “Fellowship of Indian Missiologists” was formed in 1991; its membership is inter-denominational and includes Roman Catholics. One of its purposes is to relate the message of Jesus Christ to the Indian context. To date, it has published fifteen volumes which are widely used by scholars and students. In our times, the ecumenical movement has brought forth some important results for mission, as for instance the Statement on “The challenge of proselytism and the calling to common witness”, by a Joint Working Group of the RC-WCC in 1995 (*Information Service*, 1966, N. 91, pp 77-82). Also the long standing dialogue between Roman Catholics and Pentecostals has produced statements on evangelization, proselytism and common witness.¹⁰

We have certainly come a long way in this ongoing journey of healing the discord of the Reformation, which “openly contradicts the will of Christ, provides a stumbling block to the world, and inflicts damage on the most holy cause of proclaiming the gospel to every creature” (Vat. II, Decree on Ecumenism, N. 1).

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Notes

- 1 Quoted in: S. Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, Penguin Books, 1964, p 221
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