



Christ, Career, and Concerns: *Missions Chapel Address*¹

Ted Ward

I am convinced that in the years just ahead, the mission establishment of North America will have to become politically much more aware. For many years, mission organizations have assumed that the best posture is one of neutrality, one of total isolation from local issues of politics. But today circumstances are changing. The masses of the world are learning to find their voice, and are becoming convinced that no one, no agency, is truly neutral. Even as Jesus said to his disciples and those who followed after, “You’re either for me or against me,” there are people in this world today who look at North America and say, “You’re either for us or you’re against us”; and there is no such thing as neutrality. I suspect that this is especially true of missions because of its tendency historically to be part of what has become identified around the world as the hated image of North America and particularly the United States—the image of consumerism, industrialization and exploitation. The masses of the world are finding their voices, and some are finding their voices through socialism, and some are finding their voices through Christianity. In fact, some are finding their voices through both, and we need to understand that.

I’ve had to move in the last ten years from an attitude of expecting in country after country to be welcomed and to be treated as a person from a respected position, to being hated and disliked and doubted, held in great suspicion and great disregard. People of the world are asking to be something other than the recipients of donor handouts. The relationship of patron to servant is inhumane. We need in this era to find ways to reciprocate, to work with people in terms of exchanges, in terms of our gaining from them and admitting that we’re gaining from them; at the same time giving to them in terms of needs that *they* define, not just needs that we define.

The church also needs to reject a manipulation of destiny that has so controlled the United States’ role and view of itself as world policeman. The people of the world are rejecting this image and us, and it is time we learn to reject it ourselves. The rejection of Christianity as a purely American religion is a serious problem in missions. It will become more severe unless American Christianity can and does disaffiliate itself with neo-colonialism and the hunger that is characteristic of the secular society.

It is tempting to adopt the position of the mission moratorium argument from Africa and to fold our tents and stay home. It is tempting to believe that missions is an old issue that no longer has any currency. Maybe the age of missions is over; maybe God is trying to do something else. Frankly, I have to reject these viewpoints, because as I see it theologically, the church has a mission to the world. The church *is* God’s mission in the world. But we need to be careful about what that mission really is, and we need to speak again with new clarity and less tendency to look through 19th century filters at what it is that the Book of Acts and the Epistles are telling us about the relationship of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the needs of humanity.

¹ Ted Ward. Christ, Career, and Concerns (Missions). Wheaton College Chapel, May 6, 1975

In our tendency to take the Pauline call as our model in missions and to wait for the mystical experience that says, “Come over and help us,” we may miss the fact that even in the Book of Acts what came before the Macedonian call was church-to-church sharing. I suggest that you adopt a perspective on missions today that is more realistic than sometimes you read and hear about. Even in some of the more recently established missions we read that, for example, there are thousands and thousands of villages in Belgium where God has no witness—a patent absurdity. God is at work in every land today. God *has* his witness, and there are acts of the gospel of Jesus Christ in virtually every nook and cranny of the world.

Our problem is that sometimes we fail to ask, “What is God doing?” An inquiry posture, followed then by a prayer posture that says, “Lord, what can I do to help?” followed then by careful listening, not just to the still small voices of the Spirit but also to the cries of people—in need, in suffering, in hardship as this world has never before known.

I’m glad to speak with reference to the cause and interest of students in mission programs, having been one of the people a few years ago who advocated that short term missions has its place and urging that we consider Barnabas as our point of departure in modern missions; not to reject the Pauline model but to reflect on the fact that Paul himself was brought in as a short term missionary by a man who recruited him and allowed him to share.

It’s fascinating to take the name “Barnabas” and track it through the Book of Acts. You see first of all a man who was totally sold out, totally committed at a time when not everyone was. Do you remember the story of Ananias and Sapphira? In that story we first meet Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement,” and we learn about a man who made it his pattern to always bring in someone else so that they too could share and rejoice in the things that God was doing. He was sent first from the church at Jerusalem to see what God was doing at Antioch, and he rejoiced with the church at Antioch. The “Son of Encouragement,” they called him, a real missionary. As soon as he got to Antioch and verified that, in fact, God was at work, his next recorded act was to leave for Tarsus to find the young convert, Saul. He finds him and brings him into Antioch, not because the church at Jerusalem has somehow ordained Saul of Tarsus, but because Barnabas, within his anointed role, felt it appropriate to bring in a young newcomer.

Later, after the two of them had been teaching for a time at the request of the church at Antioch, they then went out at the call of the church in Antioch, at the call of the Holy Spirit to that church. After the hands of the church had been laid upon them they walked off to their ship, being sent out from the church to head out to places beyond. And as we see them walking toward the ship, we notice that Barnabas has done it again. He’s got his arm around another guy; there are three of them: Barnabas, Saul of Tarsus (or Paul) and John Mark. Sometimes in our enthusiasm for Paul and our conviction that he is a great figure, we forget that he argued with Barnabas over the issue of bringing in the newcomer to participate, to see what God was doing.

But let me speak a little more broadly in the short time we have. The world today is in a situation of great need. I have in my briefcase a sheet of paper that was passed to me a week ago by a remarkable man from Poland. We would say a man behind the iron curtain. We had learned to trust each other in the few days that we were together, and during this meeting we passed notes back and forth. On this note it says in his good English, “The only issue that merits our concern here is survival.” The only issue that merits the concern of the church is survival. I would argue that we need to recognize from our reasonable complacency and our land of plenty that the poor of this world are concerned about

peace and hunger. And I ask you—does the gospel of Jesus Christ say anything about peace? Does the gospel of Jesus Christ say anything about hunger? Is there any answer in Christ? If so, I suspect that this will make Christianity unique, because humanism has had no adequate answers, state socialism has had no adequate answers. If we find answers in Christ then we had better define them, clarify them, and preach them.

The position that you take on missions is important if you are ever to be a missionary. I offer several questions: First, *the mission of the church, what is it?* Is it the culture-bound gospel that simply exports what we have to another country as they did in the colonial period? Emphatically no. Is it the culture-free gospel that somehow sits above all people, toward which we all can aspire, and which will ultimately make us all look alike? Indeed, emphatically no. Such a view is sterile, arbitrary, purely theoretical. It is the culture-relevant gospel that says different things to different people in different situations, and expects the redeemed of the world always to look alike only in those realms of spiritual development, and not likely to look alike in terms of social, cultural, and even psychological development.

The second question I raise is, *what is the motivation of missions?* Is it self-serving? Is it the desire to see new places, to respond to a new challenge, to want a new thrill? If so, it's a pretty dumb way to do it. I could recommend quicker ways. Is it guilt, that somehow we have this tremendous burden of obligation to the world? A faulty motivation. Then there is the unhealthy voyeurism that just wants to go and look in on other people. If these people are desperate we may call it compassion. What is our motivation? To let others in on what could be a better way of life? The motivation for mission that has made sense from the beginning of the church is the compelling love that springs from what Christ has accomplished for all of humankind.

The third question I raise: *how can the church accomplish mission today?* I suspect that we're in a tough period in terms of over-emphasis on methodology and technology. We need more humanity in missions. We need to recognize the demands have changed—nationalism of the church, the local, culturally specific nature of the church, the urbanization of the world, the limitations of mass communication—we need to come to grips with all of this. But in the final analysis, "It's not by all these wisdoms, but my power," says our God.

Finally, the fourth question I would ask: *where am I in reference to missions?* All of us as Christians are involved because the mission of the church cannot be delegated. It cannot be transferred. We're all involved—in going, in giving, and in prayer. We are all involved in terms of our need for perspective and awareness. The Christians of this country ought to be the most world sensitive, the most globally minded of the entire society. As an individual, God may be calling you, and I have urged before from this very platform exactly what I will urge today. If you believe you are called, try to fight it off! I have great faith in the power of the Holy Spirit to convince, and it needs not my simple words to argue you into a commitment.

Let me suggest to you that mission involves three C's. First of all, Christ. Without his work, his church, his mission; indeed, without the person of Jesus Christ alive in your heart motivating you to mission, forget it. Second, the C of career competency. So many missionaries in the past went to the field and became literally orphans from their own society because they had no career competency. A college education while helpful may not be required; but at least have security and confidence in your capacity to maintain yourself, even if it's to make tents. The career competency stage is sometimes left out to the great peril of the missionary. The third C is the C of caring. In biblical language it's

compassion. It's what we find in Matthew 25 when Jesus turned to those on his right, to the sheep in the final judgment, and said, "I tell you what I see when I look at you. I see people who fed me when I was hungry, who clothed me when I was naked, who visited me when I was in prison, who ministered to me when I was sick." And interestingly, he said they had done these things. Perplexed they looked at each other and one of them finally asked, "Are you sure you have us on the right side? We don't remember having done these things." And Jesus said, "You did these things for others—you did them for me." The heart of the true Christian is engaged in compassion toward people, even at the risk of not realizing that we're doing it for Christ. Is this your mission? To heal the sick, to raise up the fallen, to pull down the unjust, and to exalt the poor? A radical message, the mission of the church.