

Mission in God's Dimension

A sermon based on the Book of Acts

In the Sundays after Easter the lectionary replaces the Old Testament lesson with a text from the Book of Acts, which is part of the Gospel of Luke. The Book of Acts tells how the gospel spread. We think that Christianity rapidly and grew and spread.

How did we make such a mistake? How has our thinking gone wrong? Here are five examples showing how and why Christianity did not develop so quickly and successfully.

Example #1. We have the idea that for the first three hundred years there was great expansion and then it was not continued. But that is the Hollywood version. Hollywood has given us this picture of the first three centuries that is not true. Because, although there were those who stood up and witnessed to the cross and resurrection, there were individuals who did not. There were schisms, and problems, and all the ups and downs that are part of life. And what we have forgotten is that Christianity almost collapsed in the second and third centuries because of Gnosticism.

Gnosticism turned the gospel into a good idea. Yes, God came and died in Jesus Christ and rose again for our sake. God is love and love is God. Isn't it lovely? We are all part of God. We can just rejoice in that. You just have to become aware that everything is "godly," an abstraction which, of course, completely destroyed the Christian gospel. It was touch and go for Christianity.

It was touch and go until 313 when the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Toleration, which decreed toleration for all religions. That was both good and bad. It was good because no longer were people publicly persecuted. What was bad was that being a Christian became a good thing to do. If you wanted to get ahead and be respected, get on board with the church.

That went on in the Roman Empire until Rome collapsed in 476. We ask: Lord, what are you doing with this church of yours? And your mission?

Example #2. Then there was the new Rome: Constantinople, which continued until Emperor Justinian II. In 544-45, during his reign, the first great pandemic occurred (the first pandemic in the recorded history of the West). This pandemic (probably the Bubonic plague) went across Northern Africa and the Near East in those regions where the church was strong. It killed at least 40-50% of the people and returned periodically until about 590. Only 40 short years later, in 632 (the year Mohammed died), Islam started. It succeeded not because it was true but because the Christian church had been devastated by the pandemic in Northern Africa and the Eastern Mediterranean.

We ask: Lord, what are you doing? How does this further the mission and expansion of your church?

Example #3. Then between 850 and 1,050 the church in the West became so corrupt that we cannot talk about it in polite society. Academic historians call it "the pornocracy." And we ask: Lord, how could you allow this?

Example #4. Leaping forward, there was the Thirty Years War in the 17th century (1618-48), and as a consequence, because the Christians of Northern and Southern Europe killed each other off, between 40 and 50% of the people in Central Europe died so that by 1683 Islam could come all the way up into

Central Europe and knock on the doors of Vienna. We ask: Lord, what is this about? How does this further the mission and expansion of your church?

Example #6. Skipping the French Revolution (1789), which was another disaster for the church, to 1910. In 1910 there was a world mission conference in Edinburgh, Scotland. Using as its theme a Bible verse, Mark 13:10: "And the gospel must first be preached to all nations," the goal was to bring the gospel to everyone in that generation.

What happened? Four years later World War I broke out. On the one hand, the Ottoman Empire (Muslim) collapsed in 1923. On the other hand, we in the West became thirsty for oil and most of the oil available at that time was in countries that are Muslim. Again, the Christian mission was distorted. Today fracking here and in many other countries, including Siberia, China, Germany, Canada, and others means the power of oil is declining.

What country sends out the most missionaries, not only proportionally but in actual numbers? **South Korea.** They are sending out missionaries and proclaiming the need to do that for everyone's sake. Where is Christianity expanding today? In Africa. In Nigeria. Uganda. Kenya. Tanzania, and Madagascar. Even in China and underground in Iran.

Are we supposed to step up, get together, and make it happen? Remember Luther in the monastery had said: "If they tell me I have to fast for one hour, I will fast for two. If they tell me I have to pray for four hours, I'll pray for eight. If they tell me in the winter time that I can only have two blankets, I'll take only one." I am really going to make it happen.

Today in the mission field they try different strategies and have difficulties of all sorts, with special agendas of their home church, with communicating in a different culture, with limited resources, persecution and war. How does mission expand when there are all these troubles in the church?

We come back to the Book of Acts which is describing how mission goes on. Acts 13:48: "The Gentiles heard the gospel and they were glad and glorified God; and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." That doesn't say there were missionary efforts and then people decided for the gospel. Rather, it was God's doing.

The Book of Acts reports that Jesus was in Jerusalem for forty days after the resurrection. Why didn't massive numbers of people rush to see him? Acts 10:40 states: "But God raised him on the third day and made him manifest; not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead." In Acts 15:7 Peter says: God chose me to do this.

Finally it is God's doing. How does this work? Why do we have this thing called mission? What are we supposed to do?

What is mission in God's dimension? Ephesians 1:4 says: "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world." But then, why bother? After all, it is God's doing. It is God's doing from eternity. God ordains. As Matthew 3:9 points out: God is able from these stones to raise up people who will proclaim the gospel.

We come back to Ephesians 1:4. He chose us in him before the foundation. He chose us in Jesus Christ. That is again to refer to the cross and resurrection and that he comes to us in the proclamation of the Word and in the sacraments. That is the way he has chosen to do mission. He has chosen to do it not

according to our ideas of success and grandeur. He has chosen to say: I am doing it through the cross and resurrection. I am doing it through the preaching of my word, and that is not a general idea. Rather, it is this very thing.

It is spelled out in 1 Cor 1:27-28: "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God." He is doing it through the proclamation of his Word, his way, and it is not the way we think. It is summed up in the Small Catechism in the Third Article of the Creed:

"I believe that by my own reason or strength I cannot believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me through the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, and sanctified and preserved me in true faith, just as he calls, gathers, enlightens and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth and preserves it in unio with Jesus Christ in the one true faith."

That is what the Book of Acts is about, and that is what the Christian church is about: God is the one who is in charge and doing mission in God's dimension. Amen