Present and Future Realities For Anabaptist Mission

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INTRODUCTION

It has been my privilege in recent years to observe the increasing relevance of the Anabaptist vision for contemporary missiology. I have followed it from my Latin American perspective, in which an Anabaptist stance developed as the only possible way to understand theologically the identity and role of an Evangelical minority in a Christendom situation. This was not only a theological stance in open conflict with Roman Catholicism, but also the social stance of a minority whose very existence questioned the claims of an established Church. In this regard my perception is different from that of liberation theologians who operate on the assumption that Latin America is a "Christian" continent, "Christian and poor," as Gustavo Guiterrez would say. As an Evangelical my stance is a missiological one. In spite of all the external signs of Christendom in society, Jesus Christ and the gospel have not shaped life in the continent in a significant way. Consequently there is a definite need to proclaim the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ, to invite people to follow him in the path of a costly discipleship. This means a distinctive presence as well as a clear proclamation.

From this vantage point I have observed how the notion of disestablishment of the church has become a presupposition of theological work, evident in some European theologians who had to go through the experience of political and social developments that acquired a demonic intensity. Dietrich Bonhoeffer is the one who most clearly shows the theological consequence of disestablishment. His reading of the Sermon on the Mount in The Cost of Discipleship as well as his proposal of a "Spirituality" of exile in Life Together, are evidence of this acquisition of an Anabaptist stance on the basis of his Lutheran background. Another significant example is Jacques Ellul, whose theology defines the Christian mission as "presence," the presence of the kingdom in the midst of a world which is hostile to God and the kingdom. His Reformed background has thus acquired an Anabaptist stance.

My third example comes directly from missiology. The following paragraph from Lesslie Newbigin is typical of much of his missiological teaching, forged in the experience of post-imperial missionary involvement in Asia and participation in the ecumenical movement. Notice the definite Anabaptist "ring" in his words:

> The real triumphs of the Gospel have not been won when the church is strong in a worldly sense; they have been won when the church is faithful in the midst of weakness, contempt and rejection. And I would simply add my own testimony, which could be illustrated by many examples, that it has been in situations

where faithfulness to the Gospel placed the church in a position of total weakness and rejection that the advocate has himself risen up and, often through the words and deeds of very "insignificant" people, spoken the word that confronted and shamed the wisdom and power of the world. (The Open Secret, p. 69)

The following observations and suggestions, therefore, come from a firm conviction about the relevance of the Anabaptist stance. But this relevance has to be worked out from the ground of new missionary experiences and in light of a fresh reading of Anabaptist tradition and Scripture. First, I would like to list some of the challenges of the immediate future, then to refer to the relationship between practice and theology for Anabaptists in mission, and finally to suggest some New Testament patterns that may be worth considering. All these points are presented as suggestions for debate and further elaboration.

1. Post-Christendom situations

This is the way Europe (both Eastern and Western) and North America can be described to a certain degree. Christianity was influential in its development and it was part of the "establishment" in society. In church, as well as in society, there are now evidences of the waning of that influence and significance. In this situation three types of "Christianity" would constitute a "mission field."

a. Nominal Christianity, where there is religious practice of some kind, but the gospel does not shape or affect significantly the daily life of these church-goers. It is simply the continuation of institutional routine and inertia with no clear sense of purpose or mission.

b. Worldly Christianity, where there is a higher degree of religious practice and participation, but elements of Christian truth and practice are at the service of a world directed by values and principles totally different from the gospel. From an Anabaptist perspective this would really be a new form of Christendom, exemplified by "civil religion."

c. Defensive Christianity, developing especially in places where pluralism has brought non-Christian religions and ideologies to a competitive position in society. Examples of this can be seen in new "crusading" militancy against Muslims in England, against minorities in defense of WASP supremacy in North America, or against "sects" from Roman Catholic conservatism in Latin America.

These forms of Christianity, especially b. and c., could become a decisive factor in the development of new

totalitarianisms of the Fascist type. Economic crisis, or the worsening of the global North-South imbalance could create the conditions for that development. The manipulation of popular religiosity through the use of the media is an ominous Orwellian kind of warning, be it in the form of the eight-million dollar computer system that allows the Vatican to inform every Roman Catholic bishop of Latin America against liberation theologians, or in the form of the electronic empire of American TV preacher-politicans.

Anabaptist life and message, with its emphasis upon costly discipleship and the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, should look at this post-Christendom world with a clear sense of mission. This is the part of the world where Anabaptist forces are more numerous, and where in some way or other they have managed to keep a distinct presence. Some of the dynamism of the 16th century forefathers could be recuperated and put to work in an evangelistic way. The dialogue with other Christian traditions should be followed more intensely and intentionally, without triumphalism, but with a clear sense of identity. This dialogue should include not only the denominational families that originated in Europe, like the Reformed, Lutheran or Anglican traditions, but also the Black churches, the Pentecostals, the churches of Korean and Hispanic expatriates in North America. The pioneer missionary thrust should be recovered or acquired, because Europe and North America are mission fields and many pagans have to hear the gospel as truly good news, for the first time.

In spite of the critical situations outlined above, there is a way in which post-Christendom societies continue to cross new barriers in science and technology and the cultural ferment derived from them. Due to social mobility and globalization, Anabaptists with their rural past and their counter-cultural stance are also pressed into new social roles that they could face with a missionary mind. Much theological creativity would be necessary to explore new territory on the basis of the classical heritage.

2. Southern forms of Christianity

Here is referred to the thriving and growing churches of the Third World, churches of the masses of poor people or of the rising middle classes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Their forms of living the newly-found faith, their ways of thinking their faith and doing theology, their dilemmas in relation to the role they should play in the boiling ferment of the societies, are increasingly setting the theological and missiological agenda of the future. Following is an outline of some aspects of their missionary task which may constitute a definite challenge for Anabaptist missions.

a. Evangelistic Responsibility

In spite of their vigor and enthusiasm, some of these churches in the Third World are tiny minorities within a non-Christian majority. The solidarity and cooperation of Christians from the North may be necessary in the accomplishment of their mission. Partnership becomes indispensable in tasks like Bible translation, theological education, missionary formation, and adequate use of technology. The great challenge here is how to develop a partnership that will be free from colonialist and imperialist traps, and will not hinder indigeneity. Missionary forces which are more keen about evangelism are also in many cases the most insensitive at these points. Some way or other, their massive quantitative weight should be balanced by the qualitative presence of missions that practice a servanthood style.

b. Social Responsibility

There are many cases in which relief and development are necessary in the South, just for the physical survival of Christians. The increase of poverty and oppression, especially in Africa and Latin America in recent decades, has created urgent demands for material help of various kinds and for new forms of social participation. There are cases of social disintegration where the Christian churches are the only forms of community life and human solidarity that can be a base for social action. In addition to the constant flow of material help that is necessary, there needs to be a whole new style and a new spirit in the way help is given.

c. Global Responsibility

Interdependence on a global scale is a fact of our times. There is a growing awareness about its reality and about the way in which the powerful nations set the rules of that game. Solidarity with southern Christians and missionary presence among them, have turned missionaries into agents of global awareness and global dialogue. There is a necessary missionary agenda for the mutually enriching dialogue among Christians as well as for the tasks of advocacy, education of the people about globality, struggle for basic human rights and a compassionate stewardship for churches in the North.

A way of life after the pattern of the Servant-Messiah has been a distinctive mark of Anabaptist practice and message, and it is precisely this basic missionary stance that is demanded by the situations we have outlined. It is important to stress the vigor and dynamism, as well as the sacrifical form of presence that is the frame for the needs

mentioned. Paternalism and imperialism will not work for long term success. This gives Anabaptist missions a unique opportunity to cultivate and exercise a missionary style consistent with their tradition. An important dimension of this will be the "eucharistic pattern" of sharing material goods, taught by Paul through his practice and his teaching in 2 Corinthians, chapters 8 and 9. Fraternity and reciprocity are the basis of such giving, not a sense of guilt nor a patronizing form of alms giving.

A costly form of presence that opens the way for the proclamation of the message is the only missionary road open in some parts of the Third World. More than the marketing techniques of evangelism, which are so frequently packaged in North America and sent to southern churches as panacea, the hour demands missionaries, persons formed after the pattern of the servant Jesus. Churches that have emphasized that pattern in their Christology as well as in their lifestyle will produce that type of missionary.

It would be a misunderstanding of the present situation if, as a result of a wrong sense of "ecumenism," Anabaptists would deprive churches in the North or in the South of their distinctive Christological emphasis, which is at the heart of the type of missionary ethos that has become necessary. The experience of Pentecostals in Chile and of some Korean churches, shows that young Christian communities are not free from Constantinian temptations as they figure out their role in society. A different and outspoken kind of Christian presence, that would combine evangelistic zeal with a clear sense of social responsibility is an important missiological challenge for our times.

3. Practice and Theology in Anabaptist Missions

By observation, the kind of lifestyle that is ground out of which the Anabaptist tenets have developed, is not a lifestyle that happens by chance. Neither is it a kind of scholarly application of subjects learned in class. The ground in which Anabaptist distinctives have developed has been a particular historical experience, a development within the frame of community, a heritage transmitted from parents to children. A spirit of service and a disciplined and simple lifestyle, or a sense of identity and history, are not learned in books. They are cultivated in the community of faith. And it can only be reproduced and transmitted within such a frame.

Anabaptist mission will not complete its tasks if it limits itself to sending volunteers that exercise their gifts in the four corners of the earth, without taking seriously the task of planting communities that will be the foundation from which to raise people like themselves. It is important to ask whether some of these marks of the Anabaptist

heritage are so culturally or ethnically conditioned that Anabaptist missionaries should not reproduce them in other lands and among other cultures. To the degree that such traits of character can be related to a particular Christology, and I think they can, we are dealing with something which is part and parcel of the gospel that missionaries have to pass on faithfully. It seems that Anabaptist missiology has not dealt adequately with these questions. It would benefit greatly from posing such questions with the utmost clarity and sincerity and then examining Anabaptist missionary experience thus far, and reading Scriptures anew, from that perspective.

Earlier in this reflection it was mentioned the dialogue across traditions that has become part of the theological scene today. Let me mention a significant development of a type of ecclesiological alliance that is taking place. This example has the limitation of being new and has not yet proved its validity completely, it is just a promise. The Christian Century (October 19, 1988) reports about the Antiochian Evangelical Orthodox Mission, in which the evangelistic zeal of Campus Crusade for Christ has combined with the liturgical richness and wealth of tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church. The missionary possibilities of this fusion seem to be very promising. There are in history other significant cases, like that of the decisive influence that Moravian Pietists had on John Wesley and consequently on a spiritual revival that shook English church life and English society. These cases are more than theological debate and a generous exchange of ideas. There is an alliance of lifestyles and patterns of ministry which acquire relevance at a given moment. Why should not Anabaptist missions explore the specific contributions they could make, along these lines, in some of the most challenging missionary situations of our time? How would a sense of mission work out in intentional efforts to develop similar alliances?

4. The new relevance of New Testament patterns

It seems that in the history of missions there are cycles in which we see the return of a search for New Testament patterns of mission. In recent times we are going through one of them. It may have started with Roland Allen, but it is interesting to see it in studies and reflections as different as those of Michael Green, Wayne Meeks, or Leonardo Boff. These men are representative of different backgrounds, practices and denominational traditions. Let me outline some New Testament patterns that have acquired special significance in our time.

a. Mission involves all of God's people in a variety of ways.

The key role of lay people has been rediscovered in the life of southern churches and is now being explored in the spontaneous expansion of the New Testament church. China and some Muslim countries will be "laboratories" for the new shapes that "tent-making" will take in our century. In the case of mission within the tensions of North-South confrontation, tent-making will demand fresh ways of thinking about the relationships between the Church and the world.

b. Relevance of the House-church model.

The initial expansion of popular Protestantism in Latin America, the missionary possibilities of small groups in de-Christianized Europe, the rise of Base Christian communities within Roman Catholicism in Latin America, and the survival and expansion of the church in China, have brought back to missiological reflection the relevance of this New Testament pattern. Anabaptist ecclesiology can well match the missiological questions that are being raised.

c. Power Evangelism

In recent decades that has been a revision of some presuppositions about the true extent and nature of the secularization process. Experiences as different as the worldwide growth of Pentecostalism or the rise of new forms of religiosity in the West have forced missiology to search for an understanding of the spiritual confrontation in mission. This is something which is much deeper than the marketing of an idea through "courses" and techniques.

d. Non-imperial patterns of mission

As a result of the ongoing anti-colonial reaction and the examination of alternative models of mission in history, there is a new awareness of the possibilities for a non-imperial approach.

In all these patterns we are faced with aspects of what has been Anabaptist missionary practice, and the Anabaptist vision in the past. So the task is one of recovery as well as creativity in the new forms of application.