

The shape of mission strategy

As a technical military term, *strategy* speaks about the deployment of people and materiel in order to defeat and force capitulation of the enemy. In the context of the mission of the people of God, the term is loaded and its use is fraught with danger. There is first of all a built-in notion of conquest, of triumphal imposition, of imperialism. But in it also inhere the ideas of planning, structuring, and commissioning of “special forces” for the jobs of conquest. It seems that although God works in history through a comprehensive people-nation, and strictly speaking not through a missionary army, the latter must be organized for the avant-garde work of the total people.

This second danger is illustrated by Christian history and by our own times. That history is replete with the exploits of Christian crusaders and their conquests, proof abundant of an effective strategy. Whether the results were those sought by the servant of the Lord who is to “bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa. 42:1; see also Matt. 12:18) cannot be examined here. The subtle dangers inherent in the term, however, lead us to expect distortion, and amply justify a new look at the shape of strategy for Christian mission.

How does one avoid distortion? What precedents are valid for today? To what do we turn for criteria? What is the understanding that governs our discernment of a strategy?

The cross as strategy as well as message

The Abrahamic pilgrimage of faith was fulfilled in the lordship of the life-giving Spirit released through the crucial ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. From his ministry emerged a new people from and in the midst of all nations. Through that strategy of persuasion through his suffering servant, God created a like-minded people who are servant to all peo-

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ples for their blessing and salvation. The strategy of Christian mission is nothing more—or less—than participation in carrying out God’s own strategy. Its shape is that of a cross.

Paul’s appeal to “Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2) is essential to the missionary thrust. Even more basic as a clue to strategy is the apostle’s appeal to the mind-set of the crucified one. Any note of triumph or conquest or empire based on the essential and primitive confession of faith that Jesus is Lord must be seen in the light of that prior mind-set which conditioned that lordship and shaped its strategy.

The shape of strategy that you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had: He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God. Instead, of his own free will he gave it all up, and took the nature of a servant. He became like a man, he appeared in human likeness; he was humble and walked the path of obedience to death—his death on the cross. For this reason God raised him to the highest place above so that in honor of the name of Jesus all beings will openly proclaim that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5–11).

The persuasive appeal continues to be addressed to the church of Christ in the world today as the *sine qua non* of mission strategy. If, as Emil Brunner once wrote, “The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning,” we can add—with 2,000 years of history to substantiate the apostolic word—Christian mission is shaped by the cross as both strategy and message. The lordship of the life-giving Spirit is the same as the incarnate servanthood of the self-denying, obediently humble, crucified one. Our strategy should also be shaped by the same understanding. The Johannine great commission parallels the Pauline appeal: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (John 20:21, AV). The appeal addresses the whole people of God, both in the Philippians letter and in the resurrection word given to the disciples. The whole people of God is the special force to accomplish God’s mission by the cross strategy.

The elements of a cross strategy

Self-denial, the prerequisite

The normal mind-set behind the strategy of the individual, the social group, the institution, the religious body, the nation, is fundamentally: What do I get out of this? How will this enhance my existence? How does this participate in my sense of fulfillment? How will this permit a

more perfect self-realization? How shall I use privilege for my development? But all these questions are in contradiction to the cross mind-set of Jesus, who “always had . . ., but of his own free will he gave it all up.”

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” “And he set out, not knowing where he was going. . . . For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Gen. 12:1; Heb. 11:8–10). Abraham’s faith was the self-denial of pilgrimage, not the adventure of self-fulfillment. This is the place where the Babel confusion of primeval history opens into the strategy of a new people. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves . . .” (Mark 8:34). The people of God learn to renounce privilege. Being “baptized into his death” (Rom. 6:3) is their point of departure.

The call to renounce and give up what constitutes a basic cultural identity (country, family, home) leads to the disturbing cross-cultural experience of discovering new identity. This new identity comes through faith in God who promises the creation of a universal family of those with a faith like that of Abraham. The test of that faith through the sacrifice of Isaac—the denial of his identity and continuity in the future descendants—is evidence of his reaffirmation of that mind-set, his readiness for God’s newness and mission.

The evidence of that readiness in God’s people will always be their no to legitimate privilege. Without that strategic denial, their mission will always be haunted by the specter of a smothering paternalism. “Look what I gave up for you” really means that nothing was given. “Why don’t you appreciate what we are doing for you?” is always blurted from a standpoint of privilege. As is “bringing them up to our level.” The greater the apparent sacrifice—giving without giving up—the greater will be the paternalistic follow-through. The imperialism is to be found in the attitude.

The kingdom will break through the mission of God’s people in the faith discovery of new life in new forms, not in a reproduction of the false absolutes of human privilege that have been renounced, whether economic systems, ideologies, political institutions, nationalism, racism, ethnic religions. The posture of Abraham is completely opposite that of the people of Jacob who are his descendants, when the latter said to Samuel, “We will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles” (1 Sam. 8:19–20, AV). The apostle Paul—the greatest of the church’s missionaries in the Abraham-Jesus tradition—ex-

pressed the cross strategy when he wrote: “Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ” (Phil. 3:7). This is the cross in life, where the medium is the message.

The basic strategy is a no to privilege, without which all other strategies become expressions of a betrayal. It is not a once-for-all denial. As with Jesus, the tempter returns ever again seeking a more appropriate season.

Servanthood, the stance

Without a fundamental no to privilege, the self-giving yes leads to self- (group, institution, nation) exaltation and lordship. But the self-denying no opens the door to a yes of servanthood. It was to this that Abraham’s descendants were called as a light to the nations. The prophetic word in the Isaiah Servant Songs points to that intention. But this servant is always seen first as the servant of the Lord. Without the relationship to the Lord of justice and peace, the servant to the nations would only serve the nations’ own self-exaltations, ambitions, and lordships. The oft-quoted phrase “the world writes the church’s agenda” is a faithful reading only when the church—in the steps of Jesus—is the suffering servant of the Lord. With this important condition laid down, servanthood is best understood, it is true, in terms of availability, the second important element of mission strategy.

Servants allow others to dispose of them; they turn themselves over to the ones being served. In this they are completely vulnerable. The ones being served define the situation, the condition, the need, the ambitions. They write the agenda for the servants of the Lord who serve with the Lord’s strategy. “I am a free man, nobody’s slave; but I make myself everybody’s slave in order to win as many as possible” (1 Cor. 9:19, Good News Bible). The basin and towel of the servant who washes the other’s feet is without doubt a foretaste of the cross and an essential part of its strategy.

Now it is clear that the doctor is not a crippling master but a true servant when she performs an appendectomy on the patient who pleads with her for a laxative. But even where doctor knows best, the diagnosis is based on the patient’s complaint, a thorough examination of the patient, and a thorough consultation with him. Such a parable helps us see how servants of the Lord are clearly oriented and qualified by him in their service to the nations. But this orientation does not make them ipso facto experts with all the answers to every situation. In the service of the church to the world, it is expert only in that in which

it is the most vulnerable—in its own faith, hope, and love expression which it maintains only as it gives them away as servant.

Another parable? The maidservant from Israel who attended Naaman's wife, and the prophet of God, Elisha, give an image of a people who are servants of healing to the leadership of one of the nations, because they are first of all servants of the Lord. The leper Naaman provides the agenda, the servants are available—in the Lord. The leper refuses the word of the Lord's prophet and dictates his own terms in the light of his own understandings. The servant is still available, but he has shown that that availability is not subject to the personal whims of the leprous master. Other servants will persuade the Syrian officer to listen to the prophetic word; his obedience will bring the Lord's healing through his servants who served him. This is what men and women saw in Jesus of Nazareth, who took the nature of a servant. The apostle Paul who said that he was nobody's slave will unashamedly call himself the slave of the one who reoriented his service. This is elementary to all of the people of God.

Identification, the risk

The servant-Son of God put himself in the human situation and “became like a man.” Thus by virtue of this identification with humanity, the strategy of the people of God is also defined as putting oneself in the other's place. For Jesus it meant experiencing Zealot ambitions to reestablish the Davidic kingdom, violently struggling with Pharisaic desire for purity that could choke out the human, and knowing the Sadducean appeal to compromise and conformity as his own. This could be a risky thing, but Jesus was the servant of the Lord.

“Sitting where they sit” will be fundamental to mission strategy if it is a cross-strategy. We never have a guarantee that the risk will not fail! Israel was a part of God's risk when they settled in Canaan and lost out in the midst of the land's national Baals. The artist Vincent Van Gogh took the risk as an evangelist in the mining area of the Belgian Borinage, and lost. The worker priests of the Paris Mission took the risk, until the Roman hierarchy intervened and said the risk was too great. But precisely this risk makes servanthood possible. Identification with the ones being served, living faith, temptation, and love in this context and from their perspective is the hallmark of service. The writer to the Hebrews understood incarnation as meaning that we have “one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb. 4:15). This kind of servanthood is at the heart of God's strategy.

One of the classical heresies with regard to the incarnation was docetism, which taught that Jesus appeared to be a man, that for all practical purposes he seemed to be a man, but he was not really human. The doctrine presented Christ as one who was only “playing man.” In a similar way we must face the fact that much of what we have traditionally called missions has been heretically docetic. Missionaries seemed to want to identify, but they didn’t really. Often by definition they were structured into the place of privilege from which they came. Factory workers in Paris told the worker priests that they were just playing being workers, because at any moment they could decide that they had had enough of a life of a laborer and return to parish church or convent. For true workers in Paris this was not possible, for they had no other place to go.

This docetic missionary stance—apparently almost inevitable—only points more clearly to the way the total body of the people of God is called to mission. In fact in the deepest sense of the word it is the Everyman of the church that is in true identification—in the shop and factory, in the school and classroom, in the office and business. It is the so-called special forces sent into new and strange and other-cultured contexts that are docetic. This is the reason they work as rapidly as possible to create a new people of God in this place, so that there will be authentic identification. It is the docetic character of this pattern that should more than ever make missionaries suspicious of automatic transfer of their own cultural values to other people. It reduces the people’s identification with their own milieu, and thus reduces the heart of God’s strategy—incarnation—to a docetic, nonredemptive mission.

Naaman said to Elisha, “For your servant will no longer offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god except the LORD. But may the LORD pardon your servant on one count: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there, leaning on my arm, and I bow down in the house of Rimmon, when I do bow down in the house of Rimmon, may the LORD pardon your servant on this one count.” [Elisha] said to him, “Go in peace.” (2 Kings 5:17–19).

And what if the risk should fail? It is no worse than that of refusing to take the original risk Christ took in identifying with humanity. At the same time the docetic threat is always there. As a mobile and flexible missionary, the apostle Paul was aware of this threat, yet he worked hard at overcoming it. “To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law.

To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some" (1 Cor. 9:20–22).

Was Paul "playing" Jew or Gentile or weak? He was anxious to see that the bridges of God in cultural identification not be absolutely broken through cultural transfer. "This is my rule in all the churches," he wrote. "Was anyone at the time of his call already circumcised? Let him not seek to remove the marks of circumcision. Was anyone at the time of his call uncircumcised? Let him not seek circumcision. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing; but obeying the commandments of God is everything. Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called (1 Cor. 7:17–20).

We always risk failure, docetic or otherwise, when we seek to identify with others. Yet the people of God take the risk. "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds" (Matt. 11:19).

Humble obedience, the contradiction

The servant of the Lord is characterized by obedience to the Lord. The servant in the midst of the nations is characterized by humility—submission to the human context of need, learning from it, and obedience to that situation. The description of the servant stance has already pointed out in passing what is here underscored—the contradictory situation of the person who commits himself or herself to people in their situation. Yet in spite of identification with them, the servant obeys the Lord in another Spirit, with another word, with another means, with another strategy. And this latter can often be interpreted as being the opposite of humility.

We must admit that docetic missions have often—and this is the perennial problem—confused the "will of the human context from which I come" with the will of the Lord. Thus what has been honestly discerned as "obedience to the Lord" by the servant has often been "obedience to my own points of reference." The people of the nations often correctly discern that this is not a humble obedience but a proud imposition of the foreign.

Yet, taking into account this serious distortion, a true obedience to the Lord, the life-giving Spirit, can and will still be interpreted as a proud intrusion of the foreign. This foreign element of Spirit and word

is, however, the real reason for being and has ultimate meaning. This contradiction is built into the heart of mission; it can be no other way. Docetic missionaries, because of the possibility of these facile distortions, will therefore do their “sorting out” *with* the new people of God and not *for* them. It may be that the missionaries’ sense of identity and integrity will require of them that they cannot accept for themselves that discernment. Nevertheless, they will not impose their commitment to their own sense of identify on those of the new people of God who have discerned otherwise, even in a learning process. One can be a true servant of the Lord, fully respectful of his other servants in mutuality and humble obedience.

The cross, the consequence

This built-in contradiction leads to the cross—the consequence of faithful obedience to the Lord. Those who are still moving in the stream of self-fulfillment, rather than the fulfillment of the Lord’s purposes, oppose God’s servant. Their opposition may take forms of mistrust, rejection, persecution, or liquidation. This rejection is not in any sense to be confused with a false cross of bearing up under necessary deprivation, or with the lot of suffering humanity (war or famine), or with the consequences of a bad character and temperament or national identity. The cross is the consequence of obedience in identification, particularly when obedience is revealed in the refusal to use self-fulfillment and its offensive and defensive tools as a strategy—either for the servant’s sake or by “profiting” from that stream in others “for the sake of the gospel.”

The servant announces and works for the salvation of justice and peace—reconciliation in community—that Christ gives, in the way that he did, as a suffering servant. Results and effectiveness must always disappear in the dust behind the movement toward faithfulness and the cross, experts on church growth notwithstanding.

Final remarks

A strategy of the cross is fundamentally personal and derives meaning through personal commitment. It explains the personal character of this description. “Israel” is a personal reality; “the servant” is a personal reality; the “body of Christ” or the “new person in Christ” is a personal reality, even when they imply collective personalities. The individuals who symbolize or represent such collective reality, even though plagued by the contrast of their personal cross strategy with

that of the rest of the group, can resolve the conflict only by putting that too in the light of the cross. For this the Spirit is given—but that would be another chapter. And should the strategy mean failure before men and women—well, that too is another chapter, also written by our Lord, a chapter called Resurrection.