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CARIBBEAN MISSIONS IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE KINGDOM

by

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Introduction & Thesis

I have been assigned the task of articulating a biblical theology that might assist in the discharge of the missionary mandate in the context of the Caribbean. The task is daunting for at least two reasons. In the first place, no biblical theology of missions can be presented in the confines of a few pages. Secondly, the Caribbean is culturally diverse, hence, the requirement of contextualization, which is assumed in the title of the paper, is bound to reflect a degree of superficiality.

These limitations led me to narrow the scope of the assignment to something much more manageable and less ambitious. I will be offering a "primer" or a framework that might aid in the development of such a theology. In light of this, I prefer to title the paper: Caribbean Missions In The Perspective of The Kingdom. It will present some concepts which are judged to be foundational for a theology of missions for the modern day Caribbean.

Traditionally, soteriology and ecclesiology have been the theological handmaidens to missions. The call for the proclamation of the Gospel is often seen to rest on the conviction that such an activity is necessary for the salvation of the lost and the expansion of the church. In this perspective, the winning of converts and the establishment of churches constitute the chief purpose of missions. According to J. Herbert Kane, the end of missions is "the emergence of strong, self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating Churches," (Kane 1977,7). George Peters understanding of missions conveys a similar idea. Missions for him entails the

sending forth of authorized persons beyond the borders of the New Testament church . . . to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Gospel-destitute areas, to

win converts . . . to Jesus Christ and to establish functioning, multiplying local congregations who [sic] will bear the fruit of Christianity . . . (Peters 1977, 2).

These goals are certainly legitimate. There is ample scriptural evidence to support them. My contention, however, is that while they constitute part of the purpose of missions, they do not exhaust the whole burden of missions. As I see it, the experience of salvation and the establishment of churches constitute the penultimate goals of missions, but not its ultimate goal. The ultimate purpose of missions is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God in the historical domain. The point of the proclamation of the Gospel is that its acceptance will result in the recognition of the rule of God over all of reality. In light of this contention, it seems more appropriate to relate missions to eschatology. I submit that missions which seeks to advance the overall purpose of God for the world should be called Kingdom missions. I further suggest that missions conducted from a Kingdom perspective would have a greater impact on the Caribbean than missions conducted in any other mode.

Fall And Redemption In The Perspective Of the Kingdom

Properly understood the Fall has affected both God and humanity. If for humanity it meant the end of an era of innocence and bliss, for God it signified the interruption of a period of unchallenged rule. The new reality introduced by the Fall was not only the degradation of the human condition but a defiance to God's dominion.

Redemption is God's response to the Fall (Gen. 3:15). It seeks to counteract the effects of the Fall. As such it is designed to fulfill a two-fold function: the restoration of humanity (and the created order) to its prelapsarian condition, and the universal acknowledgement of God's absolute dominion over all of reality. The aim of redemption, in a sense, is to take history back where it all started: the subjection of all to God and the recognition of God as "everything to everyone" (1 Cor. 15:27).

The Kingdom In Jesus' Preaching

The main task of missions is the spread of the good news concerning God's redemptive purpose. If the culminating point of the redemptive process is the restoration of God's reign, then that eschatological expectation must be the force which motivates, directs and orients the missionary endeavour.

A study of the Synoptic Gospels reveals that Jesus took an eschatological approach to missions. His missionary praxis should serve

as an instructive paradigm to any attempt to develop a theology of missions in a Kingdom perspective. Our study will therefore focus on the Synoptic Gospels. It will be a recital of the material contained therein. Our method will consist in a succession of textual exposition and contextual theological reflection.

The Synoptic Gospels which relate most of the data about the missionary practice of Jesus put the Kingdom at the centre of his proclamation. According to Mark, Jesus began his ministry by proclaiming the Gospel of God by saying "the time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand: repent and believe in the gospel" (Mk. 1:14-15). Matthew summarizes the ministry of Jesus by saying "He went about all Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom" (Mat. 4: 23).

The Galilean manifesto (Lk. 4: 14-19) which serves as Luke's introduction of Jesus' ministry does not mention the term Kingdom but the idea is there. The passage is a quotation from Isaiah 60-61 which is a prophecy about the Kingdom. Jesus claimed, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing" (Lk. 4:21).

Foundational Concepts Of A Theology Of Missions For The Caribbean

Jesus' concentration on the Kingdom is pregnant with ideas for a theology of missions. In this paper five key concepts are selected for our reflection. They are christocentricity, grace, commitment, wholism and transformative witness.

Christocentricity

Any authentic theology of missions must be christocentric. It must affirm the uniqueness, centrality and finality of Christ. When one reads the Synoptics a close identification between the Kingdom of God and Jesus is immediately noted. Scholars believe it is this identification which constituted the new and distinctive element in Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God and the person of Jesus are inseparable. Jesus not only brought the Kingdom; his person and ministry embodied its presence.

This observation is borne out in various ways in the Synoptic material. We have already seen that Jesus made the Kingdom the central theme of his proclamation. He was the preacher of the Kingdom. Furthermore, Jesus' praxis and lifestyle exemplified the values and principles of this long awaited eschatological order. At the coming of the Kingdom the hungry are to be filled and the sad comforted (Mt. 5:3-10; Lk. 6:20-21);

so Jesus feeds the multitude, goes to the poor and invites the weary to come unto him for rest (Mt. 11:28). Isaiah had prophesied that peace, reconciliation and fellowship would be among the characteristics of the Kingdom; so Jesus seeks the company of the outcast, engages in table fellowship with them, and offers them forgiveness for their sins. In the reign of God humility and servanthood describe the mode of interpersonal relationship (Mt. 18:1-2; Mk. 9: 35). Jesus actualizes this by emphatically declaring that he did not come to be served but to serve. He gave credence to that statement by washing the feet of his followers (John 13:4). The parable of the prodigal son and Jesus' intercession on the cross on behalf of his killers are supreme examples of the spirit of love and forgiveness which characterizes life under God's rule. Moreover, Jesus was keenly aware that his ministry reflected the sign of the presence of the Kingdom. In the Beelzebub controversy Jesus answered his accusers saying that far from showing that he was in league with Satan, his miraculous deeds were a sign that the Kingdom of God has come: "If I drive out demons by the spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you." (Mt. 12:28).

From this brief survey of the biblical data it follows that for the evangelists, Jesus and the Kingdom are bound up together. This explains why in some instances, Jesus is used in the place of the Kingdom. For example, the disciple must be prepared to forsake his family for the sake of Jesus or for "the kingdom of God" (Mk. 10:29, Lk. 18:29). Jesus said that his generation would see the arrival of "the kingdom of God" (Mk. 9:1; Lk. 21:31) or the arrival of "the son of Man coming in his kingdom" (Mt. 16:28). Along the same line, the expressions "Kingdom of Christ" and "Kingdom of God" seem to be descriptive of the same reality. John tells us that at the end, the Kingdom of this world will become "the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ" (Rev. 11:15). Thus to stress the proclamation of the Kingdom is not to remove the spotlight from Jesus, or to play down the importance of other portions of the New Testament which may seem to have a different emphasis. New Testament scholars believe that there is sufficient linguistic evidence to show a sequential relation among the kerygmatic themes presented in the New Testament. They extend "from Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom to the christological kerygma and the Pauline doctrine of justification" (Brown 1979, 2:387). For example, some scholars detect in the Pauline corpus a "consistent and legitimate extension of Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom of God, although he (Paul) has adapted this to the post resurrection situation as regards the cross and resurrection," (Brown 1979, 2:388). In making the adaptation it was assumed that in preaching Christ, the Kingdom of God was also being proclaimed. After analyzing the linguistic evidence, J Klappert, as quoted in Brown, concludes:

The phrase "basileia of Christ" and the equivalent of the "Kingdom of God" with Jesus Christ are thus seen to be the result of the change-over from an implicit to an explicit christology. They make it clear that Jesus' proclamation of the Kingdom of God was in no way displaced in the early church by the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The post resurrection Christology, in which Jesus Christ is the centre of the kerygma, is rather the outcome of the realization that the Kingdom of God is present only in the person of Jesus Christ, so that one can only properly speak of the Kingdom of God by speaking of Jesus Christ. Since the Kingdom is bound up with the person of Jesus, the good news, which Jesus preached of the dawning of God's Kingdom becomes, after Easter, the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the proclamation of his Kingdom (Brown 1979, 2:387).

The point of the foregoing discussion is this: a theology of missions articulated from a Kingdom perspective must necessarily be christocentric. It must affirm the centrality and the uniqueness of Christ. In the context of the Caribbean this affirmation is not superfluous. The wind of religious pluralism and religious relativism which is blowing in other latitudes has not bypassed the Caribbean. The Caribbean is a religious marketplace. Although in many of the contending faiths Jesus Christ is misrepresented, downgraded, marginalized or completely absent, we are being asked to affirm their salvific significance. On this basis we are further being asked to view missions in terms of inter-religious dialogue, the ultimate goal of which is to be mutual understanding and appreciation.

Now socially, pluralism is valuable; it contributes to religious tolerance and discourages religious bigotry. Dialogue, too, has its value, and is to be encouraged. It can result in mutual understanding and the discovery of bridges and common ground among religious contenders. But however appreciative we may be of pluralism we must be firm in our stand that since the Kingdom can only be understood christologically, no faith which does not attribute primacy of place to Jesus Christ is to be accepted as a sufficient approach to God. In conversation with such faiths, therefore, we must go beyond mutual understanding and appreciation to invite full commitment to Christ, who alone personifies the Kingdom.

Grace

Grace is another foundational concept for a theology of missions that wishes to speak to the Caribbean context. According to the synoptics,

the Kingdom whose presence is embodied in the person of Jesus is a divine gift. It is the result of a divine initiative, not the outcome of human effort. In the parable of the "seed growing by itself" (Mk. 4:26-29), Jesus compares the Kingdom to seed time and harvest. Humans can sow, but the earth's capacity to bear and the seed's power to produce cannot, in essence, be manipulated (Ladd 1974, 102). The Kingdom is like that. Its coming is the act of God alone.

Because the Kingdom is God's alone, only he can give access to it. Hence, entry into the Kingdom is by divine invitation only. But God shows no reluctance in extending his gracious offer to human beings to become participants in the Kingdom. He is portrayed in the Synoptics as the seeking and inviting God. In Lk. 15, the divine initiative is expressed in terms of a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, a woman sweeping a house in diligent search of a lost coin, or a father longing for the return of a prodigal son. The underlying message of these parables is God's reaching out to sinners, inviting them to enter the realm of messianic blessing. A positive response to God's invitation is the only condition for entry into the Kingdom. The Kingdom therefore is a gift which is to be received in a child-like manner (Lk. 12 :32; Mk. 10:15; John 3: 3). To respond to God's invitation not only opens the doors to the Kingdom, it brings the respondent under the fatherhood of God. There is, therefore, a close link between God's Kingdom and God's fatherhood. The potentially universal fatherhood of God becomes actual only through participation in the Kingdom.

This notion of grace contains at least two ideas which speak relevantly to the Caribbean context. The first concerns the "outgoingness" of the God of the Kingdom. The idea of a seeking and inviting God is foreign to many Afro-Caribbean religions. For example, as far as I can tell Vaudou, Santeria and Shango have nothing of this sort. In these systems one finds a supreme deity who is totally removed from the affairs of humans. The care and concerns of human beings are delegated to lesser deities such as the loas, the powers, and the saints. Another idea closely related to the first has to do with the free admission of sinners into the Kingdom. Again, Afro-Caribbean religions are systems of self-salvation. Initiation into these faiths and continuation in them require elaborate and costly rites. For example, securing the goodwill of the intermediate deities is a burdensome task. On both counts, the message of the Kingdom comes as good news. Admission into the Kingdom is a free gift which requires no prior qualification except a positive response to God's gracious invitation.

Commitment

A third concept which a Caribbean theology of missions needs to explore is commitment. After so much talk about grace this may sound paradoxical, but it is not. The Kingdom is a free gift, but it is not worthless or cheap. It is like a treasure hidden in the field or an expensive pearl for which all else is to be exchanged (Mt. 13: 44-46). Because of its value it is to be sought above all else (Mt. 6:33), and be given precedence over all else. Although entrance into the Kingdom is free, participation in it is demanding. Those who belong to the Kingdom must be ready to accept sacrifice for its sake. Denial of self and the forsaking of possessions and family are demanded (Mt. 10: 37; Lk. 14:26).

In view of this, a response to God's call is a radical decision requiring serious, cool, and sober consideration. Just as the architect who plans before building or the king who considers his strategy before going to war, so one must weigh the matter carefully and consider the implications soberly before accepting God's invitation to become part of the Kingdom. Failure to do so is to behave foolishly, in the manner of the man who builds his house on sand (Mt. 7:24-27; Lk. 6:47-49). This of course is self delusion which in the end will prove tragic; for it is "not every one who says 'Lord, Lord' who will enter the Kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 7:21).

The point of this analysis is this: while admission to the Kingdom is free, a genuine response to the divine call entails a resolve to radical obedience. Commitment to the values and principles of the Kingdom is necessitated. This emphasis is needed in the Caribbean. Caribbean Christianity evidences a great deal of superficiality and shallowness. It is plagued with nominalism, syncretism and opportunism. For a large number of Caribbean church-goers, "conversion" involves no serious commitment to Christ. For some, being a Christian comes by way of cultural assimilation not the result of a conscious spiritual decision. For others, the Gospel is adhered to solely for what it can offer, not for what it requires. In many instances persons profess Christianity because they see in it an avenue to meet a particular need or resolve a given crisis. When such opportunism serves as the overriding reason for "conversion," commitment must be lacking. For regardless of the outcome one will find a reason to abandon the faith. On the one hand, if one's problem is solved, one may no longer feel the need to remain a Christian unless there is an overwhelming sense of gratitude. On the other hand, if one feels disappointed because the result expected has not materialized, one may abandon the faith in search of more promising alternatives.

In this context missions must stress depth evangelism. While pointing out the benefit of the Gospel, it must emphasize its demand. There is a need to make it clear that conversion to Christ not only involves acceptance of salvation, avoidance of hell, or the acquisition of a ticket for heaven, but first and foremost entrance into God's Kingdom (Col. 1:13)—a decision which entails a commitment to live in submission to God's rule. When the church consists of people who are conscious of the nature of their commitment to the Kingdom to the point that they are prepared to exemplify its principles and values in the here and now, then the Church will truly be the Community of the Kingdom. It will be a sign of the Kingdom's presence among men and women. Since the Kingdom is absolutely above the present order of things and qualitatively distinct from it, a church which reflects the Kingdom will not be an assimilator of culture but an entity which is constantly involved in a culture critique (Rom. 12:1f). As the church exemplifies the values, concerns and principles of the Kingdom, it will play a paradigmatic role in society—a model of righteousness.

Wholism

Kingdom theology provides a fourth concept which is essential to an accurate understanding of the scope of missions. It is the concept of wholism.

In our time, the question as to what constitutes proper missionary activity has been a controversial one. Some contend that bona fide missionary activity must be restricted to the saving of "souls." In sharp contrast, others argue that the burden of missions is the social well being of human beings. Somewhat in the middle we find those who opt for a hierarchical ordering of missionary activity. First things must come first, they insist.

The missionary activity of Jesus as presented in the Synoptics does not seem to reflect any of the aforementioned patterns. If there is a word which describes it, it is the word "integral." Jesus saw the missionary mandate from a wholistic perspective. His outlook on the missionary task was comprehensive. For him missions was a means to restore wholeness where alienation and estrangement reign, and as such it has to be all-inclusive. He confronted people with the reality of their sins and urged them to turn to God in repentance for salvation. He cured diseases and helped the sick regain physical health. He cast out demons and restored sanity to those who were caught in the grips of demonic powers. He taught the truth, seeking to rescue people from the bondage of ignorance and lack of understanding. He befriended the outcasts and in so doing increased their self-esteem and brought to them a measure of social emancipation.

Among the evangelists, Matthew seems particularly keen in underscoring Jesus' integral approach to missions. Twice in the first nine chapters of his gospel, he pauses to summarize Jesus' missionary activity, taking pains to stress its wholistic thrust. He explains that "Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness among the people" (Mt. 4:23; 9:35). The text emphasizes that the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom took place in both word and deed. In sending his disciples off to proclaim the Gospel, Jesus commanded them to follow the same pattern: "As you go, preach this message: 'The Kingdom of heaven is near.' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse those who have leprosy, drive out demons" (Mt. 10:7; Lk. 9:1-2; Mk. 3:14-15).

It is important to note that the primary motivation behind Jesus' integral approach was his awareness of the reality of the presence of the Kingdom. If Jesus helped the people it was primarily because he felt that the Kingdom was here. It was predicted that the Kingdom was to usher in an era of wholistic blessing. The in-breaking of the Kingdom in history, therefore, must be marked by the initial enjoyment of these eschatological blessings here and now. It is in this light that the instances of exorcism recorded in the gospels are to be understood. Jesus saw his casting out of demons as an indication of the dawning of the new age (Mt. 12:28). Since the Fall there has been an antagonism between God and Satan and over the human soul. The freeing of people from demonic powers was an indication of the conquest of Satan's Kingdom by Jesus. As the bearer of God's Kingdom, Jesus invaded Satan's territory and bound the strong man (Mt. 12:29).

Missions which sees its task as the announcement of the arrival of the reign of God in the person of Jesus Christ will not concern itself solely with the proclamation of salvation. Salvation is certainly a blessing of the Kingdom and as such must be proclaimed. But salvation is not the only blessing. Peace, justice, wholeness, fellowship, righteousness are all part of the package. While bringing people under the purview of God's rule must be the primary concern of missions, the performance of any other activity which is characteristic of the rule is to be regarded as an authentic missionary endeavour.

The Caribbean Church exists in a context of human wretchedness. It ministers in an environment where oppression, helplessness, hopelessness and despair abound. It operates in a milieu where some feed themselves from garbage dumps; where others resort to demeaning practices in an attempt to survive; where millions are open to abuse and exploitation due to ignorance; where millions are slaves to destructive habits. Despite its limitations, the church must find creative ways to both

proclaim and demonstrate the Gospel. It must find ways to make people hear and see the Good News of the Kingdom.

Transformative Witness

A fifth and final concept which bears mention in this discussion is that of Transformative Witness.

So far my reflection has been slanted heavily on the side of C.H. Dodd's notion of "realized eschatology." This, however, neither means that I fully concur with his conceptualization, nor that I reject wholesale Albert Schweitzer's concept of "thoroughgoing" or "consistent eschatology," which stresses the absolute futurity of the Kingdom. The truth is that both views are right in what they affirm and wrong in what they deny. There are texts in the Synoptics which lend support to both positions, but neither position can claim the totality of the synoptic data without resorting to exegetical gymnastics. At times the Synoptics speak clearly of the presence of the Kingdom (Mt. 12:28; Lk. 17:20; Mt. 11:11ff). At other times it is clearly the futurity of the Kingdom which is in view (Mt. 3:2, 16:28, 24:37, 25:1-13; Mk. 1:15; Lk. 12:39). The crux of the matter is how to relate these ideas. There are some who seek to reconcile these apparently antithetical trains of thought by confining the "presentness" of the Kingdom to the inner recesses of the Christian's life. Now Christ reigns only in our hearts. It is the future Kingdom which will be historical. This is true but not adequate. Even if it is argued that the present Kingdom is not visible in the world at large, it must be admitted at least that it should be evident in the corporate church. But the church is a historical reality!

In the light of this it seems to me that the most satisfactory interpretation of the data is offered by dialectical eschatology. This approach preserves both the element of fulfillment, and the element of futurity. In the person and ministry of Jesus, the Kingdom has dawned, but that dawning does not mean full realization. It is an inauguration which still awaits future consummation. As Oscar Cullmann has put it, we are living in an era caught in the tension between the "already" and the "not yet" (Cullmann 1967, 32, 174). The "already" is a sign, indeed a guarantee, that the "not yet" will in fact be fully realized.

As the sign of the Kingdom, the church is now the primary theatre for the enactment of the change that the new order seeks to bring about. But the church exists in the midst of the old order. Its mission is to project the realities of the new order so that they may be reflected, however dimly, in the old order. By so doing, the church seeks to bring the old order into greater conformity with the will and purpose of God. But as it was with the prophets of old, this stance is likely to put the church on a collision course with the old order.

While the Caribbean church has been very diligent in bringing people into the Kingdom, it has not been equally active in confronting the status quo with the reality of the presence of the Kingdom. Our response to a system which openly challenges the rule of God has often been silence, apology and even accommodation. The result has been an increasing dimming of the light of the Kingdom and corresponding increase in the volume of darkness. There is a need for the church to appropriate the strength of the Holy Spirit and declare with holy boldness: **THOU ART THE MAN.**

If, on the one hand, the truth of the inauguration of the Kingdom arouses prophetic witness, on the other hand the truth of its futurity inspires hope. Missions conducted from a Kingdom perspective ought always to promote hope. For in spite of the present configuration of present reality, the future belongs to God. Because of this, despite the prevailing situation of gloom, the proclamation of the Kingdom will always contain an optimistic note. This is no illusion, no wishful thinking, since the expected eschatological consummation has already been foreshadowed in the proleptic fulfillment of the past.

Currently the Caribbean is facing serious challenges. Now that we are in a post colonial era, many of the islands are faced with the mammoth task of nation building. Yet the political and economic infrastructure inherited from the colonial past proves incapable of supporting the new nations. As economic hardship sets in, serious social problems arise: criminal activities, drug abuse, violence. Additionally, we face a serious identity crisis. Who are we? Where are our roots? Where are we going? These are questions on which there is no consensus.

Our predicament has led many to adopt a pessimistic attitude vis-a-vis the Caribbean. There are those who take the view that the Caribbean experience was a waste, an accident of history, a tragic event to which no meaning can be attached. Therefore, it can neither be the basis for self-definition, nor the foundation on which to build for the future. Hence, some Rastafarians advocate repatriation as a means to rectify the historical accident.

We are admonished to come to terms with our rootlessness. We have no other starting point than the void itself. Africa is inaccessible and the new world is irrelevant. In this context, missions need to zero in on the hope contained in the message of the Kingdom. It needs to be emphasized that the course of history is not left to the whims of blind forces. All of history is moving towards the end envisaged by God. Although not sanctioned by God, the "middle passage" did not escape his providence and sovereignty. Under God, the Caribbean may well become the Joseph of the New World. Fantastic thought? Remember, the transformation of reality is the aim of God's redemptive purpose.

Conclusion

It is difficult to read the Gospels and fail to notice the transforming impact the missionary praxis of Jesus had on reality. The reason for this lies in part in his awareness that his missionary endeavour was an activity of the Kingdom. Kingdom concerns and ideals motivated and guided it. I believe such a paradigm would serve the Caribbean well. It has the advantage of addressing traditional concerns while being meaningfully attentive to other legitimate challenges.

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