Christian Mission and Human Transformation: Toward Century 21

For Christians in mission the issue of human transformation is inextricably linked with the work of Christ and our faith, by grace, in Christ. The testimony of Scripture is that “if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17; cf. Gal. 6:15). Paul admonished, “Put off your old nature . . . and put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph. 4:22 – 24). That “likeness of God” is Jesus Christ, the measure and model of new humanity. To be like him requires that we “be transformed” so that we “may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God” (Rom. 12:2).

To be transformed, Jesus said, “You must be born anew” (John 3:7). Nicodemus, the perplexed Pharisee, asked, “How can a man be born when he is old?” Jesus responded, “The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes; so it is with every one who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). A combination of commitment to Christ as the source of human transformation, along with the openness and humility about the ways in which the Holy Spirit works, should characterize our attitude and approach to the task of Christian mission. And that task encompasses not only human transformation, but cosmic transformation — the redemption of God’s whole creation. According to Scripture, Christ is “the first-born of all creation . . . in him all things hold together . . . for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (Col. 1:15 – 20). It is this conviction that led the author of the book of Revelation to affirm the vision of “a new heaven and a new earth” where God says, “Behold, I will make all things new” (Rev. 21:1, 5). Christians in mission are summoned by God to participate in this task: to redeem, reconcile and restore “all things” and all peoples into a unity of love and purpose with God’s will and way as revealed in Jesus Christ.

As we view our calling to Christian mission and human transformation I want to lift up several issues that will increasingly characterize, confront, and challenge our task as we approach the 21st century. There is a great array of issues, of course, and any selection for discussion is to some extent personal and arbitrary. So these are not the only issues, but only some to which we need to give special attention.

1. Threat of nuclear war

The first issue I would mention may be surprising to some, but if we do not relate the Lordship of Jesus Christ to this issue, there may not be any other issues by the year 2000. I am speaking about the threat of nuclear war. The idea of a nuclear holocaust is now widely accepted as a likelihood. Shortly after the showing of the TV film
“The Day After” in the United States (which depicted what life would be like on the day after a nuclear bomb dropped in Kansas), I drove my car into a parking lot in Atlantic City and asked how long they would be open. Without hesitation the parking attendant replied, “We’re here till the bomb drops.” Some observers are suggesting that at best there is only a 50/50 chance that by the year 2000 there will be any human life left on the face of the earth, if the superpowers in East and West continue on their present course of nuclear escalation. Under these conditions an optimist is one who believes that the future of the world is in doubt. These concerns led the students at a major university in the United States recently to petition the school administration to maintain a supply of cyanide pills for use in the event of a nuclear war.

In a world of atomic economics and radio-active politics, living under the threat of nuclear annihilation, certainly the Christian world mission takes on a new sense of urgency. For all those who believe that the gospel of Jesus Christ is the source and solution for peace and reconciliation with God and among nations, we have a tremendous responsibility to “save the world” from self-destruction brought on by human sin and alienation. Dr Philip Potter, as General Secretary of the World Council of Churches, said in 1984, “War, and especially nuclear war, is contrary to the will of God.” The Sixth Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Vancouver in 1983 asserted that “the nuclear weapons issue is, in its import and threat to humanity, a question of Christian discipline and faithfulness to the gospel.” The Assembly also affirmed a statement of a WCC public hearing on nuclear arms and disarmament:

>We believe that the time has come when the churches must unequivocally declare that the production and deployment as well as the use of nuclear weapons are a crime against humanity and that such activities must be condemned on ethical and theological grounds.²

In 1983 the Catholic Bishops in the United States issued a national pastoral letter on war and peace in the nuclear age in which they said,

>We fear that our world and nation are headed in the wrong direction. . . . In the words of our Holy Father, we need a “moral about-face”. The whole world must say no to nuclear conflict; no to weapons of mass destruction; no to an arms race which robs the poor and the vulnerable; and no to the moral danger of a nuclear age which places before humankind indefensible choices of constant terror or surrender. Peacemaking is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith.”³

Here is a point at which the personal and social dimensions of the Christian mission coalesce and cause us to place peacemaking high on the agenda for human transformation.

2. The Axis of Christianity Tilts Southwards

A second factor that increasingly characterizes the global reality of our mission endeavour is the fact that the center of ecclesiastical gravity in the world is shifting from the northern to the southern hemisphere. The noted Swiss Catholic missiologist Walbert Bühlmann, in his book The Coming of the Third Church, observes that