Mission Is Ministry in the Dimension of Difference: A Definition for the Twenty-first Century

Titus Presler

Mission is ministry in the dimension of difference. This definition of mission assists reflection in a number of ways. It makes explicit the distinctive character of mission that is implicit but unacknowledged in many discussions of mission that focus on particular theological or practical emphases. By articulating an empirical category—difference—rather than theological content, the definition provides a relatively neutral criterion of analysis and comparison in the practice of churches and in mission thought. Yet the criterion of difference has substantial biblical warrant and theological import. Furthermore, the definition provides a measure for assessing and comparing mission emphases across a range of religions.

The proposed definition distinguishes mission as a particular kind of ministry and thereby clarifies a common confusion of these two concepts. It is a simple formulation, rather than complex and esoteric. Members of Christian churches readily understand it, for it focuses a commonplace impression about mission, namely, that it concerns engagement with the other. It provides a marker for types of ministry in local and global settings alike, for it applies equally to work around the corner and to work across the world. It applies equally to churches based on all continents in distinguishing their mission work, whether in Caracas or Cameroun, Cambodia or California. In highlighting difference as the marker, it connects missiology with postmodern discourse in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Difference Implicit in Mission Thought

The term "difference" in this essay has ordinary meanings: a state of unlikeness, a point of dissimilarity, or a distinguishing characteristic.[1] This commonsense understanding has empirical referents, yet difference is itself relative in two senses: it subsists in the relation between phenomena, and it depends on observers' perception and assessment of distinctions in that relation. This relativity alerts us to the inherent subjectivity of judgments about difference, for ability to perceive distinctions, especially social differences in the world addressed by mission, is shaped, limited, and extended profoundly by personal experience and social formation. Moreover, understandings of identity may depend on prior perceptions of difference: we may not know ourselves until we know the other as well. This epistemological dynamic resonates with the postmodern philosophical intuition that difference may also be ontologically prior to identity.

Historically, it is ironic at this juncture to suggest difference as a clarifying criterion of Christian mission, for much mission thought and practice in the Global North from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries was premised on the view that

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mission, itself a new concept as applied to the church's work rather than simply to the life of the Trinity, had everything and only to do with those in cultural groups different from one's own. From the North Atlantic standpoint, "mission" designated ministry with people groups in Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania, where the principal tasks were thought to be Gospel proclamation, church planting, infrastructure development, and, most ambitiously, the formation of religious cultures envisioned by the churches' emissaries to be Christian rather than pagan or heathen. The emissaries were designated as missionaries, a term understood to apply to persons who ventured beyond their home societies to initiate, continue, or extend the church's work in societies other than their own. Missionaries were people who engaged difference in the name of Christ.

Many mission societies were premised on the understanding that mission concerned Christian work in other places in the world. "Domestic" and "home" appeared in the names of some mission societies and boards for work within a church's national borders, but this still referred to outreach among groups beyond a church's historic constituency, such as, in the case of the United States, frontier settlers, African slaves, and Native Americans. Whether at home or abroad, mission addressed the not-us, the different, the other. The common plural term "missions" designated both such missionary-sending groups and the multiple institutions they established on frontiers at home or in other parts of the world. Thus the dimension of difference was constitutive in the understanding of what mission was.

After the 1910 World Missionary Conference in Edinburgh, a high-water mark in missionary confidence, a number of factors broadened missional understanding in the twentieth century, the century of self-criticism in the mission of Global North churches. The barbarity of World War I and the genocide perpetrated by the Nazis during World War II prompted European and U.S. Christians to realize that their own cultures were sources of evil as well as good and that there might be good to be discovered in other cultures that had different roots. Long-standing distinctions between the civilized and the uncivilized were undermined as gifts were both received and conferred across frontiers of societal difference. Links between Christian mission and the colonial expansion of Europe and the United States undercut the positive connotation of mission's reaching over boundaries of cultural, ethnic, and geographic difference. Increased world exposure accelerated a theological trend toward considering that differing religions were valid disclosures of the divine, which undermined positive assessments of Christian mission's concern with conversion. Transformation of "the missions" in the Two-Thirds World into indigenous churches—self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-theologizing—brought those Christian communities into peer relationships with Global North churches. Here liturgical, musical, theological, and even ethical differences were phenomena to be explored and celebrated, rather than obstacles to be overcome and suppressed.

The new environment for mission thought prompted significant shifts in the understanding of difference. Missiology's grounding became theocentric rather than ecclesiocentric. The churches' mixed record helped to push mission reflection back

to God as the source and author of mission. God's mission in the world became determinative theologically, with the church's mission regarded as derivative. God was on mission in the world, and the church's role was to discern that mission movement and participate in it. Correlatively, mission thought became more comprehensive, reflecting on the whole of God's intention and action through the church and in the world. From midcentury onward, missiology incorporated such foci as J. C. Hoekendijk's triad of proclamation, community, and service (*kerygma, koinonia, diakonia*); the conciliar movement's summary of these in witness (*martyria*); economic and infrastructure development as integral to societal wholeness; Christian presence as articulated by Max Warren and others; holistic evangelization as recovered by Vatican II, the World Council of Churches, and the Lausanne Movement;

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Gustavo Gutiérrez's theology of liberation and its elaboration by many in Latin America, Asia, and Africa; reconciliation and its implications for ethnic and political conflict; and the Millennium Development Goals as a practical urgency in the twenty-first century. All these emphases have been articulated as grounded in the nature and action of God and therefore framing the church's work in the world. The church's mission—what it is sent by God to be and do in the world—is seen as comprehended by such emphases and therefore encompassing the church's work both at home and abroad, both within itself and beyond itself.

The phenomena of human difference tend to be backgrounded in such comprehensive characterizations of mission. For Euro-American mission activists, this has served to assuage widespread unease and guilt about the ignorance, insensitivity, and arrogance with which the Euro-American mission movement sometimes responded to the cultural and religious differences it encountered in other parts of the world. For mission activists in the Two-Thirds World, comprehensive themes mark a theological coming of age that transcends wounds that could otherwise be fixating. A subtext implicit in comprehensive reinterpretations of mission has been: "We need to get beyond us-them thinking. And we certainly need to get beyond mission as concerned with the exotic. God's mission is to all of us, to all human groups equally, and to the planet. All of us need God's mission." Some particular comprehensive emphasis—such as development, evangelization, interfaith dialogue, or liberation—is often seen as the mission priority for all human groups equally, and particular human differences are considered a minor theme in such a mandate. Moreover, human difference is relativized in a polycentric world, for in itself every human group is equally different from every other. Tying mission to the experience of human difference can seem a vestige of the rightly discredited worldview in which Euro-American peoples saw themselves as the standard human beings and others as the different ones who needed to see how they should conform to the standard.

The advance of secularism in the West has prompted a similar leveling of historic assignments of difference in the area of evangelization, especially as Christian profession receded radically in Europe. The missionally important difference between Christian and non-Christian remains, but historic associations have been scrambled when Christian commitment in many African countries far exceeds that of many European countries, signaling that the geography of mission as understood historically in the Euro-American tradition has been relativized. "We in the West shouldn't be evangelizing the rest of the world," goes an emerging European and North American refrain, "Instead, we need *them* to send missionaries to *us!*" Indeed, not only are traditionally missionary-receiving parts of the world recognized as potentially missionary-sending, but some have actually become so, with Korea, India, and Nigeria leading the way. Shifts toward mutuality in mission have evoked nuanced approaches to human difference, as the progression of Anglican mission slogans illustrates: "mutual responsibility and interdependence in the body of Christ" (1963), "partnership in mission" (1971), and "companionship in mission" (1999), this last similar to the accompaniment promoted by Lutherans and Roman Catholics.

In all these conceptualizations of mission, however, the fact of human difference—religious, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, social, and so on—is an irreducible premise, even if particular formulations do not highlight it. *Missio Dei* theology, for instance, is premised on the self-projection of God into the temporal and material, a dimension of difference, that culminates in the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ. Witness is premised on Gospel testimony in word and deed to a world that is different in needing such proclamation. Mission as Christian presence proposes a way of encountering and living with difference that may diverge from other modes of mission, but it is no less premised on the fact of difference. Evangelization assumes differences in religious profession. Liberation addresses differences in the distribution of power, and reconciliation responds to differences that have provoked alienation and enmity. Current emphases on mutuality in partnership and companionship propose that difference be explored and embraced in community rather than accentuated by competition and effaced by domination.

Difference is a premise in the thought of recent and current mission theologians, among whom a few instances must suffice. Stephen Neill's history of Christian expansion is framed as the story of how a local faith became a universal religion through crossing cultural and national boundaries of difference. David Bosch's distillation that mission is the participation of Christians in the liberating mission of Jesus is based on biblical analysis of Jesus' mission as one of crossing boundaries, a model premised on difference. Anthony Gittins's postulation of the missionary as a stranger is based on difference as the missionary's fundamental environment. The kingdom-centered missiology of the Missional Church Project for North America is centered on evangelism and church nurture in a cultural context understood as essentially different from the reign of God. Andrew Kirk defines mission more loosely in terms of God's purposes in the world, a view premised on the difference between church and world. Carlos Cardoza-Orlandi defines mission generically as "the participation of the people of God in God's action in the world" but clarifies that God's missionary activity is beyond the church's institutional limits, outward to areas different from its own. In its focus on the "frontiers" of secularization, pluralization, and globalization, David Smith's *Mission After Christendom* is premised on phenomena of difference. Francis Oborji understands mission straightforwardly as evangelization and church-planting where the Gospel has not been heard or accepted and thus assumes a quite traditional understanding of difference.[2]

The now vast missiological literature on inculturation, which includes historical, theological, and anthropological approaches,

is premised on encounters with difference: peoples' interactions with Gospel proclamation and the many differences encountered between missionaries and receiving peoples. Numerous models for those encounters have been proposed, such as adaptation, indigenization, and contextualization; local theology, as developed by Robert Schreiter; translatability, as developed by Andrew Walls, Kwame Bediako, and Lamin Sanneh; and appropriation and transformation, as developed by the present author.[3] All these assume an encounter with difference. Appropriately, formation programs for missionaries preparing to serve cross-culturally tend to focus chiefly on how missionaries should perceive, understand, adjust, and respond to linguistic, economic, political, racial, and cultural differences in their places of service.

In sum, difference is an explicit condition in many mission concepts, theologies, and programs, and in others it is an implicit and integral premise. Difference is foundational.

Grounding in Comprehensive Definitions

The concept of mission as ministry in the dimension of difference is grounded in more comprehensive definitions of religious mission and Christian mission. The concept of religious mission is important for comparative interreligious missiology, and it may be defined as the spiritual vision and the practical means through which communities project their religious faith and work, and through which they invite the participation and adherence of others. Sociological rather than theological, this formulation describes human social behavior directed toward presenting religious faith to communities wider than the originating religious community and thereby to the other and the different. An environment and criterion of difference is implicit in the verb "project" and explicit in the concluding phrase "of others," that is, those not part of the missional community. This definition may apply equally to the Hindu Ramakrishna Mission, the Woking Muslim Mission in England, the Guru Ram Das Sikh Mission of America, the Brampton Buddhist Mission Centre in Ontario, and any particular Christian outreach.

Building on the pan-religious definition, Christian mission may be defined as the activity of sending and being sent, by God and by communities, across significant boundaries of human social experience to bear witness in word and deed to God's action in Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. The claim embedded in the phrase "across significant boundaries of human social experience" is that mission involves crossing boundaries that are significant by virtue of being sociologically identifiable. The boundaries are religious, cultural, linguistic, racial, ethnic, sexual, economic, political, national, educational, professional, and geographic—any one of these, any combination of these, and others as well, so long as they are major and socially identifiable. The inherent relativity and subjectivity of assessments of difference and identity mean that they are always fluid and that they should not be reified in rigid and static categories. Yet their provisional and powerful validity at any particular point of time is verified by the fact that the great oppressions within the human community are grounded precisely in such differences, readily evident in racial discrimination, gender violence, sexual slavery, tribal warfare, ethnic cleansing, interreligious conflict, and, as ever, war between nations. The definition asserts that Christians and our communities are engaged distinctively in mission when we are reaching out beyond who and where we are to encounter and form community with people and communities who are different from ourselves. Ministry to and with the other who is different—that is the hallmark of Christian mission.

Implications of the Difference Definition

In light of the comprehensive definition of Christian mission, the short definition—mission is ministry in the dimension of difference—achieves its full effect, for it asserts a single distinctive rather than multiple criteria, and it does so in simple nontheological language that sharpens the point. It is a *functional* definition that specifies mission's nature as a type of religious activity. It invites theological definitions of mission to be articulated, suggesting simply that they be consistent with the criterion of difference.

The phrase "dimension of difference" invites reflection on difference as a category of human experience. It prompts the hearer to reflect not only on specific differences but also on difference as an existential and social experience and on questions of perspective and identity that it raises. How do I experience and define my social location and the group or groups of which I understand myself to be a member? What assumptions about identity operate in our experience? What particular privileges and disabilities do we experience in our group, relative to other groups? How do our concepts of difference relate to our concepts of commonality with other human groups? What anxieties and fears do my social group and I experience as we engage the prospect of encounters with people who are different from us in major ways? What joys and discoveries do we anticipate as we engage such difference? The concept of the dimension of difference invites historical, sociological, and philosophical reflection on difference within one's society and on the world stage.

The definition affirms the common impression that mission concerns initiatives and activities of religious communities beyond their own boundaries, defined by membership and particular characteristics the membership may have. For example, one Christian asking another about his or her congregation may be told how fulfilling the worship is, that the Sunday school has

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good teachers but a mediocre curriculum, and that adult formation forums are excellent but poorly attended. If the inquirer then asks, "And does the church have a mission program?" or "Is your church mission-minded?" the listener is likely to understand immediately what is being asked: Does your congregation reach out beyond itself to others? Is the church involved in the life of the wider community in the town or city? Does the parish have connections in other countries and cultures? The term "mission," in sum, is widely understood by church members to refer to the church's engagement with the other who is different from whatever characterizes the social group of the church itself. Thus "outreach" is the most commonly used synonym for mission, and "reaching out" is the verbal phrase most commonly used to signify mission activity.

There is also a common negative association of mission with difference that the proposed definition engages straightforwardly. The most prevalent critiques of Christian mission concern ways that missionaries responded to the religious and cultural differences they encountered in other societies. It is commonly thought that missionaries condemned wholesale the different religions

they encountered in the Two-Thirds World and in North America, and that they insisted that the peoples they found become Christian and adopt the missionaries' own particular Christian brands. It is likewise commonly thought that missionaries condemned wholesale the different cultures they encountered and insisted that the peoples they found adopt the missionaries' languages and ethics, styles of dressing, eating, housekeeping, and the like. The charges are often inaccurately universalized to include all missionaries in all times and places, but their substantial truth in many instances has prompted the missionary movement to critique itself thoroughly along these lines, especially since 1900. The point here is that differences among human groups and how to approach them are the issues at stake. Rather than shifting mission's definition to another criterion in order to evade critique, the proposed definition accepts the encounter with difference as the pivotal criterion of mission, with an agenda to discuss how the different is encountered and what the response to it should be.

Several current uses of the term "mission" cause confusion about the common linkage of mission with difference. Mission-of-God theology has associated mission with the full breadth of God's action in the world, which is useful in summing up God's intent in interacting with humanity. More problematically, the full breadth of action to which God calls the church and the human community is said to derive from the mission of God. God's action is summarized under one theme—reconciliation, for instance—and then everything to which God calls the church is subsumed under that theme, all worship, education, nurture, and proclamation. But is there truly no missional difference between a men's prayer breakfast and prayers the evangelism team offers in door-to-door visitation? Between Sunday worship in the sanctuary and a liturgy offered at the local psychiatric hospital? Between the youth group's weekly meetings and its summer trip to paint houses of the elderly in Appalachia? Between Sunday school in the church and a parishioner spending three years teaching former combatants in a postwar setting in Africa?

It is the criterion of difference that marks the cutting edge of

mission and sustains the challenge always implicit in mission. Christians are well aware that their community life is fulfilling for members as networks of relationship develop among those who pray, worship, eat, and study together in a congregation. Christians are equally aware that their community life is intended to strengthen them to reach beyond their community in mission to others. A self-critique in many congregations is that their prayer, worship, education, and fellowship are flourishing but that, because the community is not reaching beyond itself to encounter others, it is becoming complacent and self-absorbed. Here the congregation is identifying a failure to cross the boundaries of difference that are peculiar to mission and intuiting that vitality arises from ministering "outside their comfort zone." A less common self-critique is that a congregation is so engaged in outreach, in difference-engaging mission, that it is neglecting its mutually supportive community life, with the result that members are fatigued and jaded. In fact, community and mission are symbiotic: community without mission dies out, and mission without community burns out. The distinction between community and mission is clear, and it is grounded in the criterion of difference.

A related dynamic is the aspiration that many North American church institutions express that they become more diverse, a term used to connote racial diversity especially, but also cultural, national, linguistic, and economic diversity. This aspiration expresses an intuition that fulfilling the mission of the congregation, denomination, school, or seminary involves engaging difference and drawing in people different from the existing majority group. If the congregation or school is monochrome—whether white, black, Asian, or Hispanic—there is a nagging sense of a neglected mission frontier. Conviction that the whole people of God should include all available local ethnicities prompts conversation about outreach to the groups not represented. Conversely, a congregation that includes an ethnic, international, and linguistic rainbow often exults in the fulfillment of its mission because it has succeeded in crossing boundaries of difference and drawing in a diverse range of people. Again, people realize intuitively that

difference is the cutting edge of mission and that it is integral to the community's health and fullness.

The distinction between community and mission relates to the distinction between ministry and mission. One result of refracting God's comprehensive mission into the existing spectrum of the church's activities is that the phrase "the church's mission and ministry" appears often in church leaders' sermons and publications, with no differentiating explanation of the two terms. Everything is comprehended in mission, but ministry still

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seems relevant, so the two are thrown together as a convenient catch-all, lest anything be left out. Often latent in such usage is the notion that mission is the full range of God's vision, whereas ministry is the operationalization of God's mission through the church's work: worship, education, proclamation, justice, and so on. What God is up to is mission, and what we do in participating in God's mission is ministry. This terminology, however, short-changes ministry, for it disregards deep traditions of biblical, historical, and theological reflection on ministry, as well as the churches' contemporary discourse about ministry. It also tends not to be implemented in practice. Churches continue to highlight as mission outreach such initiatives as baskets for the needy at Christmas or a collection for famine victims, and they continue to designate as missionaries their members who minister in other cultures.

It is more useful to encompass within *ministry* the full range of service to which God calls the church. Ministry thus includes both the work that builds up the community within itself and the work that extends the community's initiative beyond itself. It is this latter kind of ministry, ministry in the dimension of difference, that is the community's *mission* work. Likewise, particular kinds of ministry are found in both the work of the community within itself and in the difference-engaging work that is mission, whether these be prayer, worship, proclamation, education, health care, elder care, or administration. A church is on mission when it is ministering in any of these ways beyond itself, with people and communities that are different from its own. Visiting parishioners in homes and hospitals is inreach, whereas visiting inmates of the local prison is outreach. A church member's work as a physician at the local hospital is her ministry, but when she joins a parish group in offering a two-week clinic in Haiti, she is on a mission. And a few ministries—evangelization, church-planting, and justice work—are intrinsically and always missional in their import and impact.

Yet another confusing contemporary use of the term "mission" is found in the mission-statement exercise that corporations, service organizations, and government agencies undertake and that has now become common in congregations and church judicatories as they seek to focus on what God is calling them to be and do in their contexts. Microsoft Corporation, for instance, says its mission is to "create seamless experiences that combine the magic of software with the power of Internet across a world of devices."[4] The perhaps over-caffeinated mission statement of Starbucks Coffee is "to inspire and nurture the human spirit—one person, one cup, and one neighborhood at a time."[5] The word "mission" as used about such statements is synonymous with the word "purpose," and the formulations could just as well be termed "purpose statements."

This blurring of purpose and mission characterizes some churches' adoption of the mission-statement exercise. For instance, St. Mary's Episcopal Church in Laguna Beach, California, articulates its mission statement as follows: "to be open to God's love and guidance, to embrace all in the name of Jesus Christ, to be free to use God's gifts for the daily expression of our faith, to work in the power of the Holy Spirit."[6] With such fusing of the concepts of purpose, mission, and sometimes vision as well, it is natural for the term "mission" to become vague and diffuse as well as comprehensive.

Some church mission statements, by contrast, are clear in distinguishing purpose, ministry, and mission. Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California, says: "Its purpose is to lead people to Jesus and membership in his family, teach them to worship the Lord and magnify his name, develop them to Christlike maturity, and equip them for ministry in the church and a mission in the world."[7]

Here one of the largest congregations in the United States states not its mission but its purpose, not surprising for a church led by Rick Warren, author of two popular "purpose-driven" books.[8] Within its purpose statement, once the missional activity of making disciples is articulated, the congregation's community life is elaborated as the environment that prepares them for *ministry*, which is termed as set "in the church," and for *mission*, which is set "in the world." Such conceptualization accords well with defining mission as ministry in the dimension of difference. The definition, in turn, grounds the particular use of "mission" in this purpose statement, for "in the world" is an environment different from the church community itself.

In contrast to comprehensive uses of the term "mission" in mission statements, its practical uses in secular discourse are premised clearly on encounters with difference. "Space mission" came into common usage because astronauts were being sent to explore the radically different environment of outer space. A "diplomatic mission" involves sending a nation's representative to negotiate with a different nation, or it denotes the permanent quarters used by such representatives in a foreign country. "Trade missions" involve sending representatives to other countries to discuss international trade. A "military mission" involves sending armed forces into combat against those of a different nation or nonstate entity. In all these uses, encounter with difference is what prompts use of the term "mission," a premise consistent with the understanding of religious and Christian mission suggested here.

The difference definition affirms the now-commonplace relativizing of the geography of Christian mission. A frequent critique of preoccupation with "overseas mission" or "foreign mission" is the observation, "Well, mission is not only over there but here in our backyard too." This is true, so long as the criterion of difference is fulfilled. A congregation may be very missional while never venturing beyond the county line, because it is reaching out to, say, the unevangelized and unchurched, or an immigrant group, or victims of an apartment building fire, or a particular addiction group. In practice, however, missional congregations tend to reach out both locally and globally, because they find that mission in one context stimulates mission elsewhere, and multiple and diverse mission experiences inform and enhance each other. The difference criterion applies to both the local and the global, and it privileges neither.

Similarly, the difference definition applies to the work of churches based in all contexts, among all cultures and ethnic groups, in all parts of the world. It is the criterion of reaching across boundaries into difference that marks the specifically missional work of churches. Thus the definition does not smuggle in assumptions from any particular part of the world, nor from any particular geographic directionality—except outward. The ecumenical Friends Missionary Prayer Band, for instance, calls its work mission because it sends missionaries, currently more than 1,000, from its base in Tamil Nadu in South India to evangelize and plant churches in North India, where its personnel must learn languages very different from their own and make cultural adjustments similar to those encountered across national borders in western Europe. The Church Mission Society of Nigeria sends missionaries to evangelize in northern Nigeria and in countries such as Mauritania, contexts that are different in both religion and culture. Korean church groups now have almost 13,000 missionaries on all continents, the vanguard of the growing Majority World mission movement.[9] Many U.S. congregations that sent teams to minister in New Orleans after the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 called them mission teams because they were being sent to minister to and with people very different from themselves and in circumstances very different from their own. The criterion of difference supports the World Council of Churches' 1963 slogan "Mission in Six Continents," as well as Michael Nazir-Ali's phrase "From Everywhere to Everywhere."[10] It is not that any and every ministry in any place is mission. It is rather that, when people from one setting are sent to minister in a different setting among people who are different in some major way—that is mission.

Defining mission as ministry in the dimension of difference responds to the needs of the conflicted world as we know it. The world is dying of difference, for millions of people die on account of socially constructed differences to which life-and-death valuations have been attached. The successive genocides of Jews, Cambodians, Bosnians, Rwandans, and Darfuris since 1940 are instances, as are the wars in Korea, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Liberia, Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Israel/Palestine. Discrimination and violence based on race, ethnicity, gender, age, national origin, sexual orientation, and religion are responses to perceptions of difference. Discrimination and violence are equally though more subtly active in the world's continued toleration of abject poverty and its many attendant ills. As Christian mission seeks to participate in God's healing of the world, understanding itself in terms of engaging difference is a crucial starting place.

Biblical Warrant in Sending

Sending and being sent are constitutive of Christian mission, and encounters with difference prove to be foundational in signal biblical instances of sending and being sent.

The call of Abram articulates God's promise to and blessing on Abram in the context of a sending in which leaving the familiar and going to the new and different are intrinsic: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you." The world of difference becomes explicit in the promise's conclusion, where God assures Abram that he will make a difference in a world defined by difference: "And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:1–3).

Israel is defined throughout the Old Testament as God's chosen and holy people, in contrast to the surrounding peoples, whose different religious loyalties and moral practices are to be avoided (e.g., Deut. 7). Missional outreach to the peoples is

minimal, but the Old Testament testifies often to a confidence that ultimately "the nations" will acknowledge the sovereignty of the God of Israel.[11] The contrast between ministry among one's own and ministry among the peoples is sharp in the Second Servant Song of Isaiah: "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). Sending persons into the pagan world is not in view, but the witness of the faithful servant is conceptualized as lifted up so that it radiates out to the nations, those who are other and different.

Jonah was sent into an environment of difference, Nineveh, a major Assyrian city where Jonah expected that Yahweh's call to repentance would be greeted with the contempt worthy of a local deity with no sway beyond local borders and certainly not in the Assyrian temple cults. The fear that encounter with difference evokes in the prospective emissary is spelled out in one of Scripture's more vivid narratives, the marvel of which is that a people so different are said to have repented immediately (Jonah, esp. chap. 3).

Jesus' proclamation of God's reign was shared with all equally, but a disproportionate number of the stories of specific encounters with individuals are devoted to those he had to cross a boundary to reach: the Gerasene demoniac, the Roman centurion's servant, the anointing sinful woman, the Samaritan woman, the woman caught in adultery, Zaccheus the tax collector, numerous lepers, and others.[12] The Synoptic Gospels record that this boundary-crossing ministry was so intrinsic to Jesus' ministry that he developed a reputation for consorting with tax collectors and prostitutes, people whose Jewishness was compromised by the moral failings of enemy collaboration and sexual promiscuity.[13] From Jesus' standpoint, his difference-engaging ministry was extending and redefining God's covenant community, but the religious authorities believed his boundary violations compromised community purity and faithfulness to God. In defending his outreach in parables—the good Samaritan,

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Missional congregations tend to reach out both locally and globally.

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the Pharisee and the tax collector, the lost sheep—Jesus portrayed God as reaching people over differences, so that salvation was accessible in faithfulness to that outreach, not in inherited identities and purity codes.[14]

In his account of the Canaanite woman's faith in the district of Tyre and Sidon, Matthew records Jesus confining his sentness to Israel—"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"—but this understanding of a purely local calling is challenged immediately and successfully by the foreign woman's importunity. Matthew characterizes her identity as different not only ethnically and nationally but also by the term "Canaanite,"[15] which in Israelite history evoked religious abhorrence and national enmity (Matt. 15:21–28). The woman expanded Jesus' understanding of his calling to include a sending to the Gentiles. Looking to the future, Jesus saw God's reign culminating in a judgment over all the nations (Matt. 25:31–46) and consummated in an embrace of human differences at the messianic banquet: "Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

Sending is explicit in Luke's account of Jesus dispersing the twelve disciples: "He sent them out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal" (Luke 9:2). No geographic extent or limitation is mentioned, but it is understood that they will be arriving as strangers, albeit as Jewish strangers, in presumably Jewish villages. In Matthew's account the disciples become apostles in the act of being sent. Their initial trajectory, like Jesus' own, is "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matt. 10:6), but the elaborated instructions envisage proclamation to nations beyond Israel, for the disciples will be "dragged before governors and kings because of me, as a testimony to them and the Gentiles" (Matt. 10:18). By gospel's end, Jesus says to the disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19). Luke reiterates this sending to "all nations" in closing his gospel (Luke 24:47), and his second account of the ascension extends it "to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was a harbinger of the church as a Mediterranean entity beyond Palestine by virtue of people of different languages and nationalities being present to hear about "God's deeds of power" (Acts 2:11). This

Sending is intrinsic to the concept of mission of any kind.

vision was fulfilled initially not so much through explicit sending as through the geographic dispersion of the Jesus movement in the persecution that began with the stoning of Stephen (Acts 8:1–4). Yet the initiatives of Peter and John in Samaria and Philip with an Ethiopian official, each incident on a frontier of difference, resulted from explicit sendings by the community or by the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14, 26, 29).

The boundary-crossing initiative of the early Christian community that was both its greatest challenge and its lifeline to survival was the incorporation of Gentile believers into the body of the faithful without the intermediate step of entering Judaism. Peter's venture with the Roman centurion Cornelius at Caesarea emerged from sendings by the Holy Spirit as Cornelius sent servants to Joppa and as Peter accompanied them home (Acts 10:5–8, 17–22). The commission Paul received through Ananias at his conversion explicitly affirmed proclamation to Gentiles: "He is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel" (Acts 9:15). In defending to the Galatians his work among Gentiles, Paul characterized both Peter's errand to Jews and his own to the nations as prompted by God's sending: "He who worked through Peter for an apostolate for the circumcised worked through me also [for an apostolate] for the Gentiles" (Gal. 2:8, author's translation). "Apostolate" here represents the Greek *apostolēn*, a "sending," or "mission" (so RSV).[16] Clearly Paul saw himself as sent to the Gentiles, an understanding that grounds the historic association of the word "mission" with Paul's outreach and supports the association of mission with engaging difference. When toward the end of his ministry Paul summarized his mission, it is clear that crossing geographic boundaries and their associated ethnic and cultural boundaries was central: "from Jerusalem and as far around as Ilyricum," as was the crossing of religious boundaries: "not where Christ has already been named" (Rom. 15:19, 20).

Sending is intrinsic to the concept of mission of any kind. The biblical data indicate that major developments within

Scripture related to the extension of God's work in the world are closely associated with depictions of God, Christ, or the Holy Spirit sending individuals to undertake particular initiatives. The more major of these sending initiatives concern encounters with persons and groups who are different from those who are sent, different in ways that are sociologically identifiable. Indeed, environments of difference seem to evoke narratives of sending and being sent. It is around this dimension of difference that historically the term "mission" has gathered, so that it has long been customary to speak of "Jesus' mission," "the disciples' mission," "the early church's mission," "Paul's mission," "the Gentile mission," and so on. Such terminology not only is appropriate, but it is also quite precise in designating specifically as mission those ministries that engage the dimension of difference. In this way, the difference-based definition of mission clarifies a long-standing practice in biblical exegesis and theology. Conversely, the definition has solid biblical warrant in Scripture's association of sending with encounters with human difference.

Difference in Contemporary Thought

Defining Christian mission as ministry in the dimension of difference connects missiology with the philosophy of difference in contemporary thought. In his seminal 1968 work *Difference and Repetition*, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze asserted the ontological priority of difference over identity. "Conceiving the same on the basis of the different" makes identity secondary to and derivative from difference.[17]

Michel Foucault elaborates how difference must be liberated from abstraction, concept, representation, and dialectic, and celebrates the fruit of such liberation:

> The freeing of difference requires thought without contradiction, without dialectics, without negation; thought that accepts divergence; affirmative thought whose instrument is disjunction; thought of the multiple—of the nomadic and dispersed multiplicity that is not limited or confined by the constraints of similarity; thought that does not conform to a pedagogical model . . . but that attacks insoluble problems—that is, a thought that addresses a multiplicity of exceptional points, which are displaced as we distinguish their conditions and which insist and subsist in the play of repetitions.[18]

So central has difference become that the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines postmodernism itself in terms of difference: "Postmodern thought means the appeal to differences—differences in theories, differences in formulations, differences in identities. Postmodern thought rejects hierarchies and genealogies, continuities and progress, resolutions and overcomings."[19]

Writing with urgency to mitigate the clash of civilizations evident in the attacks of September 11, 2001, Jonathan Sacks calls for a shift away from a Platonic view that true knowledge is to be found in universals that generalize from particulars. Instead, knowledge and wisdom are accessible from the particulars of human communities. Historically universalist cultures, including contemporary global capitalism, he argues, have viewed particularities as "imperfections, the source of error, parochialism and prejudice" and have therefore marginalized and diminished difference in favor of universal categories and goals. Sacks declares: "We need . . . not only a theology of commonality—of the universals of mankind—but also a theology of difference: why no one civilization has the right to impose itself on others by force: why God asks us to respect the freedom and dignity of those not like us."[20]

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Sacks thus puts a different twist on classic philosophical debates about the relative reality of universals and particulars, debates that have involved George Berkeley, David Hume, Bertrand Russell, A. J. Ayer, and others. Where past stress on the reality of the particular, as opposed to the universal, has entailed religious skepticism, Sacks argues instead for the integrity of the particular and the different in God's revelation and work. Certainly a theology of difference would stem from the diversity intrinsic in God's creativity and would analyze the ways in which humanity has distorted God's abundance of difference to create a virtual taxonomy of sin, of which the urge to suppress difference is one expression.

The Christian mission enterprise is the world's most extensive and longest sustained engagement with human difference, and it has reflected thoroughly on that engagement. Recent philosophical insistence on the integrity and autonomy of difference calls on Christian missiology to articulate yet more precisely its stance toward difference, given that mission's errand in a world of difference is founded on a revelation that celebrates both universality and particularity. It may appear incongruous to suggest that missiology can be enhanced by postmodern and deconstructionist perspectives that dismiss the possibility of universally valid revelations and therefore oppose all universalizing projects, including religious ones. Yet postmodernism's exploration of the possible priority of difference over identity may help explain the perennial Christian conviction that engaging the other who is different is intrinsic to Christian faithfulness.

The other who is different presents a frontier over which the journey of understanding is both outward and inward, both exploratory and reflexive. Knowing the other authentically requires mature self-knowledge, yet such maturity is not accessible to the isolated self, or to the isolated society or the isolated culture—or the isolated church. We do not and cannot know ourselves truly without knowing the other as well. Similarly, the Gospel understanding that Christians of any particular setting have (and the setting may be a region, culture, or church) is intrinsically and inevitably partial and incomplete. Every Christian community, wherever it is located, needs the perspective and insight about the Gospel that other communities can offer from experiences and worldviews that are differently shaped. The truth of what God has done in Christ Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit is ultimate, universal, and final, but our apprehension of it is limited, contextual, and provisional. This provisionality draws us into a pilgrimage into difference, through which we hope to see less darkly, toward that place where we will see face to face.

Mission is ministry in the dimension of difference. This understanding identifies the distinctively missional element in the history of the Christian movement, and it clarifies missiology's theological reflection on it. It is grounded in Scripture's witness to the sending activity of God, which typically catalyzes God's people to engage difference. The definition connects missiology with contemporary philosophical and theological discourse about difference. Finally, it provides a criterion of analysis and comparison in the missional lives of the churches, in mission scholarship, and in interreligious discussions of mission in a world of difference.

Notes

1. *Random House Webster's Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Random House, 2001), s.v.
2. Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Penguin, 1986), pp. 13–15; David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991), pp. 519, 28; Anthony J. Gittins, *Gifts and Strangers: Meeting the Challenge of Inculturation* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1989), pp. 111–36; Darrell L. Guder, ed., *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), pp. 247, 18; J. Andrew Kirk, *What Is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p. 21; Carlos F. Cardoza-Orlandi, *Mission: An Essential Guide* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002), pp. 45–48; David Smith, *Mission After Christendom* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003); Francis Anekwe Oborji, *Concepts of Mission: The Evolution of Contemporary Missiology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), pp. 3–14, 210.
3. Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986); Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996); Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis; Edinburgh: Edinburgh Univ. Press, 1995); Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1989); Titus Presler, *Transfigured Night: Mission and Culture in Zimbabwe's Vigil Movement* (Pretoria: Univ. of South Africa Press, 1999), pp. 215–48.
4. http://counternotions.com/2008/09/22/mission.
5. www.starbucks.com/mission/default.asp.
6. www.stmaryslagunabeach.org.
7. www.saddleback.com/aboutsaddleback/index.html. Many congregations define their mission outwardly, among them First Methodist Church in Seattle, which declares, "We're out to change the world," and then clearly distinguishes ministry from mission; see www.firstchurchseattle.org/who-we-are.html.
8. Rick Warren, *The Purpose-Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995); *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002).
9. *Christianity Today*, March 2006; www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/march/16.28.html?start=2.
10. Michael Nazir-Ali, *From Everywhere to Everywhere: A World View of Christian Mission* (London: SCM, 1990).
11. E.g., Pss. 67, 97; Isa. 62; Jer. 46–51; Joel 3:18–21; Amos 9:11–12.
12. Mark 5:1–20; Matt. 8:5–13; Luke 7:35–50; John 4:1–42, 8:3–11; Luke 19:1–10; Mark 1:40–45; and Luke 17:11–19.
13. Luke 15:1–2.
14. Luke 10:25–37, 18:9–14, 15:3–7.
15. Mark identifies her as "a Gentile, of Syro-Phoenician origin" (Mark 7:26).
16. The NRSV represents the sense, though not the syntactic form, of the Greek: "He who worked through Peter making him an apostle to the circumcised also worked through me in sending me to the Gentiles."
17. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 50–51.
18. Michel Foucault, "Theatrum Philosophicum," in *Language, Counter-memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, trans. and ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1977), p. 185.
19. Hugh J. Silverman, "Modernism and Postmodernism," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Donald M. Borchert (Farmington, Mich.: Macmillan/Thomson Gale, 2006), 6:318. See also David Ingram, "Postmodernism," ibid., 7:730.
20. Jonathan Sacks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*, rev. ed. (London: Continuum, 2003), pp. 19, 21.