

18. The Eternal Mission to Planet Earth

A summary image is required for all the foregoing considerations about being the visible Church in history and choosing appropriate methods, theologies and institutional forms for that Next expression of Christianity. Many decades ago I saw the following image used to promote creative thinking about local church mission.

Suppose that you and I and others are on a space ship arriving to Earth from planet Wywang. On the side of our space ship is printed these words "Mission Earth."

This picture can help us understand the radicality of being an expression of the true Church – of seeing in broad relief the task of creating that Next Christianity being described in this book. Indeed, being the true Church is even more challenging than being such an interplanetary mission: we are The Eternal Mission to Planet Earth. The word "Eternal" in this instance does not refer to some location beyond the stars, but to a trip we have taken without ever physically leaving planet Earth. We have died to our bodies, our emotions, our mind, our ego, our personality as well as to our continent, our planet, our cosmos and visited Eternity. No, we have not visited Eternity, we have come home to Eternity, to the profound humanness that is rooted in Eternity, a humanness that is just as mysterious as the entire cosmos is mysterious. We are breathing the final dread, fascination and courage of a state of Awe that is just as Awesome as the Void out of which all things come and into which all things return. We are still Earthlings, but Earthlings who have died and come back as resurrected Earthlings. By "resurrected" we mean having an Earthly embodiment that does not differ from every other humans' Earthly embodiment with this one exception: we are coming to every temporal experience from an experience of Eternity. We see every experience as an encounter with the Eternity that is our home, our true residence, our deep rest, our deep bliss, our deep roots of unconditional love for all beings among whom we dwell.

Here is another helpful story about this strange Eternal mission to planet Earth. I attended a musical many years ago entitled "Stop the World I Want to Get Off." The gist of the story was about a man who in his ordinary life encountered a series of overwhelming challenges. When the going got roughest, he would cry out, "Stop the World I Want to Get Off." The stage curtain would then close on his ordinary life and the man would reappear in a podium in front of the closed curtain. He would address the audience about his life, his feelings, and thoughts about it, and his considerations about what to do next. We, the audience, were aware that the real world never stops, yet I could identify with this man's desire to Stop the World, and more profoundly I could identify with his need to return to his ordinary life with a "having-stopped-the-world" perspective. Implied in this play is a radical perspective, a perspective derived from having the entire cosmos stop and then re-begin. This is another clue to the meaning of the "death-and-resurrection" symbol.

Jesus did not use the metaphor of stopping the world, and he certainly would not have recognized the metaphor of a spaceship arriving from outer space. But Jesus did use a metaphorical language that is just as strange as that to most of us. In order that you won't think that I am making this up, here is a quote from the premier New Testament scholar, Rudolf Bultmann:

The dominant concept of Jesus' message is the *Reign of God*. Jesus proclaims its immediately impending irruption, now already making itself felt. Reign of God is an eschatological concept. It means the regime of God which will destroy the present course of the world, wipe out all the contra-divine, Satanic power under which the present world groans – With such a message Jesus stands *in the historical context of Jewish expectations about the end of the world and God's new future*.¹

¹ Bultmann, Rudolf; *Theology of the New Testament* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York: 1951) page 4

Bultmann shows how every teaching of Jesus implies this context of understanding. Furthermore, Bultmann insists that the earliest Christian community saw itself as an eschatological community, the community of the end time. He insists that every word of Paul implies an eschatological context. Paul saw himself calling his followers out of the old eon of Satanic living and finding standing in the new eon of the humanity of Jesus that had already come and was yet to come in its fullness. Indeed, every major Christian concept in Bultmann's 20th Century theology is an eschatological concept. "Faith" is an eschatological state of being. "Love" is an eschatological state of being. "Freedom" is an eschatological state of being. What does this mean?

Bultmann interprets the eschatological metaphor existentially. He claims that "eschatological" can mean something that we can understand. I mean dying to the world with all its evil and all its temporal limitations. It can mean dying to death itself, and being raised up to newness of life as a gift from the very same power that created us and that is killing our clinging attachments to this world. The entire meaning of the healing event we call "Jesus Christ" can mean leaving this world, joining Eternity and returning to our ordinary lives in the world as new born beings.

It is easy for our all-too-rational minds to protest against these stories with the observation that our clinging to the world is perhaps never completely interrupted – that no matter how deeply we detach from select aspects of our lives, other aspects, perhaps deeply hidden ones, still manifest a tight cling.

But the omnipresence of such clinging does not negate the possibility of dying to our temporal lives, including our own deaths. This results in a state of being that is beyond death, beyond the cosmos, beyond time. And this astonishing state of being can then manifest here on Earth as a force in real human history. We do not properly understand and honor heroic persons like Martin Luther King Jr. unless we see in their living this profound detachment being manifest. Indeed, King may have had hope for living a long and celebrated life, such as the one granted to Mandela, yet both of these men knew that they might not enter the Promised Land for which they were risking their lives. Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Sojourner Truth, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony and millions of other women and men of all races, cultures, places, and times have manifested this eschatological-detachment style in their everyday temporal living. We can never be sure who is and who is not manifesting such saintly living. We can, however, suspect the presence of such a life even in the accessible, modest, humble, but premier scholar Rudolf Bultmann who lived rather happily and honored until a ripe old age of 92. He certainly described the eschatological life thoroughly enough to make it likely that he knew what he was talking about.

Whatever be the best description of eschatological living, we can assume that Christian ethics is about viewing historical time from the perspective of Eternity, understanding that our mission as the People of God means being "sent from Eternity to planet Earth."

Being a Contrarian Presence

The life style and the work of People of God is inherently contrary to the majority views and trends of living. There are awakenings of judgment upon the obsolete and evil practices in which the majority are enmeshed. There are rivers of new life being forged by courageous and creative people in all sorts of unlikely places. All of us who rejoice in these realistic judgments and in these rivers of creative newness – all of us who seek to join them, will experience ourselves as a contrarian presence. We may be surprised at the transformation toward realism that can take place in response to us. And we may also be surprised at the extent of the stubborn opposition that can rise against us. But in general we need not be surprised. This is the way it has been and will continue to be. Contrarian Presence is the long-haul experience of the People of God.

I have long been enamored with the last chapter of the Gospel of John in which Peter and some other disciples, having experienced the crucifixion of Jesus, decide to return to fishing. But their fishing is not going well. Then the resurrected Jesus appears on the beach and called out them to throw their nets on the other side of boat. The do and the fish caught are so numerous that cannot pull the net on board. They have to drag it to shore. Peter cries out, "It's Him!" and jumps in the water and swims to shore. As Peter is sitting next to the resurrected Jesus eating fish, Jesus asks him if he loves him. Peter insists that he does, but Jesus responds, "Then feed my sheep." This same conversation is repeated two more times, and Peter is getting upset over being asked three times. Then the gospel writer makes plain what "feeding my sheep" entails. The food entailed is Peter's body and blood. Peter still resists with a question about John's longevity. Jesus responds, "If it should be my will that he should wait until I come, what is that to you? Follow me." Then the gospel writer with his characteristic humor adds this parenthesis:

(That saying of Jesus became current in the brotherhood, and was taken to mean that that disciple would not die. But in fact Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If it should be my will that he should wait until I come, what is that to you?")²

The tradition is that Peter did die rather early and that John lived to an old age. This reminds me of Martin Luther King dying early and Nelson Mandela living to a very old age. We never know what our destiny will be when we choose to feed sheep in the sense meant by this clever story.

Thinking Comprehensively

One of the contrarian aspects of a true Christian life is thinking outside the boxes in which most people comfortably dwell. There is a universal craving to keep life as simple as possible. But our lives in real history are not simple. Any picture we attempt to draw about the real challenges we face is a simplification. Nevertheless, we can move toward comprehensive thinking. On the following page I am sharing a chart about how to save the planet and humanity from the horrors of a decaying imperial civilization and usher in a viable and flourishing humanity on this planet. Preposterous as that may sound, that is exactly what comprehensive thinking means.

The background for this chart is a model of all the essential social processes that make up any whole human society. Each society institutionalizes these social processes differently, but must give some measure of attention to all these basic topics. Obviously, this is a model, and all models can be improved. Nevertheless, this is a pretty good model, certainly the best one I have drawn in my lifetime.

Then upon this general model I have picked out seven specific arenas of social process where our contemporary societies are most open to radical change. I have used the metaphor of "*whistle points*" that can cause an "*avalanche of change*." Perhaps you recall how an avalanche can start on a mountainside of gathered snow by the mere sounding of the relevant tone. A few flacks begin to vibrate, setting in motion other flacks that continue this exponential growth of disturbance until a huge flow of snow is happening. On the following chart I have listed seven places where skillful "whistling" has avalanche potential for social change.

Obviously, this chart is complex, raising hundreds of questions that an entire book could not fully settle. My intent here is to signal what I mean by "comprehensive thinking." My intent is to overwhelm both you and myself with considerations that we could spend a life time in further understanding. But I also intend this challenge to be utterly serious: these are possibilities that a comprehensive openness to 21st century history reveals.

² John 21:23 The New English Bible

See the separate file of Seven Current Whistle Points

Organizing our Local Parish

The global, continental, and national perspectives inherent in the chart just cited is not the end of the story. We also face selecting tactical actions in our local places. Below is another chart that gives a sense of the sort of comprehensive ethical imagination the People of God need in order to manifest love for the local place where they live.

This chart assumes that the Christian Resurgence Circles mentioned in the last chapter are one of many organizations that we could create in our local places or Parishes. I am using the word “Parish” in the sense of the mission area of a specific body of Christian servants. I am enamored with the concept of “*Interfaith Parish*” in the sense that we are not talking about Christians caring for Christians or Muslims caring for Muslims, but all the Awed Ones in the Parish caring for everyone who lives there. I am also enamored with the concept of the “*Bioregional Parish*” by which I mean defining my area of local service as a specific piece of the planet defined by planetary features. The service to be done in that Parish is service not only to humans, but to all the species of life who live there and all the inanimate features and resources that make living possible and fruitful.

Also, the following chart suggests that we have two types of tactics to carry out. One set has to do with the more secular fundamentals and the second set has to do with organizations that are more inward or “religious” in focus. The Christian Resurgence Circle in one such organization, but there are others that members of that Circle might promote. Obviously, this specific list of things is incomplete and may not apply to every Parish. This chart is aimed at expanding our minds relative to thinking through comprehensively what local Christian service includes.

I am suggesting that members of a CRC think of themselves as *community organizers*. In his first run for president, Barack Obama suffered ridicule for his “credentials” as a community organizer. I am suggesting that CRC members wear “*community organizer*” as a badge of honor.

Suggested Tactics for Local Community Action			
	Cultural	Political	Economic
Some Local Community Tactics	Local Theater House Concerts Ecological Celebrations Womens’ Support Group Men’s Support Group Social Ethics Courses Imaginative E-magazine Newspaper Items Communal Nodes	Democratic Party Enhancement Social & Ecological Education & Lobbying Key Protests on behalf of the 99%	Organic Gardens Community Gardens Food Cooperatives Energy Efficient Architecture, Equipment, & Transport Innovative Businesses
Some Next Christianity Tactics	Theological Courses Church School Classes Meditation Circles Spirit-Life Groups	Christian Resurgence Circles	A Christian Resurgence Service Fund

Transforming our Home Continent

Our local “Parish” work is a lifetime operation and is so demanding that we will be tempted to think that it is all we are called to do. But local parish work will be without final success if that is all that we the People of God do. We are also called to do our Parish work in the context of serving the continent and the globe. And we are called to put forth direct energy toward actions that are directed toward national and continental issues that are happening in the planetary context. This includes electoral politics on a local, state, national, and global level of concern. This includes protest marches, demonstrations, and pioneering actions that turn tides of change on various widespread issues. Obviously, each of us cannot do everything; we will end up choosing specific things that we are, or feel we are, most qualified or passionate about. BUT ALL THESE TOPICS ARE ON OUR PLATES. Any topics we choose is chosen in the context of serving everything that needs serving. What we don’t do still needs doing, and we are responsible for inspiring or encouraging someone to do it. The People of God respond to God, and God’s Demand is inclusive. We are called to love all our neighbors in all parts of the planet as we love ourselves. We are not called to love only people like ourselves, or people that we like, or people that we think we can help. All neighbors are the responsibility of the People of God. The impossibility of this Demand is its Eternal quality. There is boundless forgiveness available to make up for our failure to fully respond to this inclusive Demand. So, we have no need to cut down the Demand to some supposed human size.

Inviting Others into Eternity

Also the Demand includes a depth dimension as well as an expansive dimension. We are called to invite others into this state of Eternity in which we the People of God are functioning. This is the essence of the witnessing love described earlier. We are out to release other people from their Earth-bound clinging and assist them to also hear the Call to the return to Earth in the Demanding service described above. Actually, massive and radical social changes only come about when millions of people hear this Eternal Call and obey it.

Rebuilding the Cities of Judea

This cryptic heading refers to creating the new institutions of the People of God – in this case a Next Christianity. That was what was happening when some of the Judeans exiled in Babylon answered the call to return to Judea and rebuild the institutions of peoplehood that could house and sustain the mission to humanity that they knew themselves called to be. This was not a pretty calling. Almost everything in Palestine was in ruins or decaying, and the people living there were not entirely agreeable to the “rebuilding” that these returnees had in mind. A desert had to be crossed, a livelihood invented, and unwelcome work commenced and carried out with little or no clarity about what the final consequences would be. This should sound familiar to those of us who have already begun to build a Next Christianity.

Looking back we can give thanks to those who rebuilt the Cities of Judea, for without their hard work there may not have been a Jesus, a Paul, an Augustine, a Mohammed, and so on. As we look forward, we do not know if there will be generations of humans in the far future who will give thanks to us. But we do not need to know. We only need to do what we are called to do. We can count on God to work out the consequences in whatever way it all must come to pass. Our fragmentary deeds are forgiven before they are done or even conceived. Such confidence in Reality rather than in ourselves is the power that bends history into something that may one day be called “progress.”

The Cost of Discipleship

We know that the humanity that we are inviting to join us in Eternity living and in Eternity's tasks are in dread *flight* from such realism. Some are in an angry *fight* with such realism. They may be willing to defend their *flight/fight* pattern to the death, perhaps our death rather than their death. But we know that what they are defending is an illusionary substitute for Reality, and that Reality is an unavoidable wrath toward all such substitutes. It is, therefore, true that all we "substituters" are headed toward despair. The most unfortunate among us are those who make it to their deaths without experiencing our inherent despair. Despair is the door to life. We (some of us) know that because we have been there. If so, we also know that our mission to this Planet may cost us our lives at the hands of the still despairing. At the same time we know that our integrity, our realism, and our "Eternal" quality of life is preferable to the despair of returning to the qualities of fallen humanity, among whom we dwell and with whom we still participate as a daily grievous discovery of the extent of our estrangements. So the final cost of discipleship is the Demand to stay awake and press on toward the full stature of our primal hero, Jesus, the Anointed One – the Awed One who knew personally the Awesome and was filled with Awe.

And we can maintain this hope because we see the potential in every human being that we are discovering in ourselves. Every human being is, beneath all their flight, fight, and unconsciousness, the profound humanness of Jesus. So our hope is to be Jesus, to call out the Jesus in others, and together with millions of others to live out this Eternal mission to planet Earth.