

Mission Theology Begins with a Sad Message

Today's Thursday theologian is Agne Nordlander, my colleague a few years ago at the Mekane Yesus Seminary in Addis Ababa. Agne's a missionary from the Swedish Evangelical Mission [SEM], a Lutheran agency for mission both within Sweden and overseas. Founded in 1856, the SEM started mission work in Ethiopia 1866 and is one of founders of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus. Before coming to Ethiopia 6 years ago Agne served for 21 years as principal of Johannelunds Theological Institute for training pastors and missionaries in Uppsala, Sweden. For his Doctor of Theology degree he wrote a dissertation on the theological anthropology of Helmut Thielicke. Thielicke happens to be my own "Doktorvater." So Agne and I were not total strangers when first we met. Our friendship and theological appreciation of each other has grown. As you read his words, you'll understand why. His article originally appeared in Swedish in the "SEM Messenger" earlier this year.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

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At the meeting of the EFS workers in Umeae in 1998 Soeren Ekstroem expressed the hope that the EFS could help those responsible at the Church House in Uppsala to answer the question: "What is mission?"

Every new generation must devote itself to the biblical answer to that question. No one has answered it better than Paul in his

Epistle to the Romans. According to Paul, mission means going out with a sad message and a glad message, or, to use Luther's terminology, to preach law and gospel.

The sad message means, to use medical terms, a diagnosis of the human being's sickness; the glad message offers medicine which can heal and cure. [Ed's comment: Crossings' favorite word for this is "Pro-gnosis," which in the N.T. does indicate a "GLAD message."]

So what is wrong with the human being according to Paul?

First, her behavior is twisted and distorted. She misses the goal and commits sinful deeds. Second, her attitudes are destructive and anti-socially egoistic. Third, the human being has turned away from Life's source and cause. And God reacts with wrath and judgment, to use the biblical terms. This, God's reaction, is the biggest problem for the human being, worse than her bad behavior and mentality.

To be evil, destructive and egoistic is bad. To have God, Life itself, against one is even worse. Then the course is short and completely hopeless.

What then can solve my three-fold problem?

Behavior therapy can, in a small way, change my behavior. We don't need to draw God into that. Psychodynamic therapy can, in a small way, change my attitudes and my way of thinking. We can keep God and the biblical word outside of this process.

But how do we solve the problem of God-against-us?

Here is where the glad message comes in. It is here where the message of a crucified and risen Savior and Redeemer becomes relevant and necessary.

The glad message doesn't consist primarily of Jesus Christ as a good example who teaches us to live rightly. It doesn't consist primarily of the fact that Jesus Christ can change our negative attitudes. It consists of the fact that [through Jesus' cross and resurrection] God's judgment and wrath over my twisted and misdirected life have been taken away, and that I find access to God's grace, love, and forgiveness, to God's fellowship, life, and light.

Words are not enough, whether they be the biblical or the modern, to express God's overwhelming message of gladness. When I fix my trust in the glad message, it changes my thinking and attitudes, better and more deeply than any other religion, ideology, or psychology. It leads also to a different life-style and behavior.

The four evangelists express the sad and glad messages in a somewhat different way from that of Paul, but it is always the combination of the sad and glad message that is the focal point for rescue, freedom, and rehabilitation.

Mission can be compared to raising a tent. The sad and glad messages make up the two bearing poles. Then there come the smaller stakes: education, care of the sick, emergency help, water, agricultural and forest projects, changes in attitudes relating to politics, attitudes toward women, leadership, and sexuality.

The biblical view of mission is holistic. The Gospel has to do with the whole person. The order in which the tent-stakes are raised can vary, depending on country, culture and conditions. But there can never be a New Testament Christian church without the two bearing tent poles, the sad message and the glad message.

Our biggest weakness today is that we are not willing to present

the biblical diagnosis of human sickness. We don't want to present the sad message, because we are ashamed of it, of we don't really believe it any more. That is a mortal sickness in today's mission theology. We pride ourselves instead in having dispensed with the dark view of the human condition in favor of one that is bright and optimistic. The seriousness of eternity is accordingly disappearing. When did you last weep over the fact that people can be eternally lost?

Where today is that type of Christian who, like the Good Shepherd, goes out and seeks for the lost sheep? Aren't we Christian preachers becoming like a doctor who thinks that there are only headaches, for which an aspirin is enough? I know for a fact that there are no doctors like that, but I am afraid that there are all too many such pastors and missionaries today. That is why a conscious theology of mission must begin with the sad message and its serious content.

Agne Nordlander