

Reflections on “Mission and Power”

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As a whole, the document “Mission and Power” makes the necessary and valid point of critiquing the misuses and abuses of power in mission work. All Christians – indeed, all human beings – should condemn and critique the kinds of Colonialistic enterprises so well documented in these case-studies and personal narratives. It simply is the case that for too long [a] time Christian mission uncritically and in denial of the Gospel of equality and love, continued the agenda of Colonialism of the West which led into the subjugation of peoples, particularly those among the First Nations of the lands.

That said, one also has to make the important observation that – although not to be approved – the attitude of missionaries of former generations is understandable. It hardly differed from the mindset of the wider society at the time. Furthermore, there was a number of cases in which, in the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, self-sacrificial, altruistic, and noble enterprises were carried on. It is a skewed reading of missions history which too easily paints a picture of only, or in many cases, even primarily, a Colonialistic, oppressive approach.

The main challenges of the document have much less to do with what is said. They have to do rather with what is left unsaid. There are significant and essential facets to the complicated question of “mission and power” which are totally lacking in the document. Those have to do with three main areas and topics, namely biblical hermeneutics, the issue of “spiritual power,” and the positive aspects of power/ empowerment in Christian communities and their work. These are all interrelated themes and are therefore best treated together.

I have been asked to offer reflections on the document specifically from a Pentecostal-Charismatic perspective. In that outlook, the biblical texts cited or alluded to in the document, namely from Ez 37, Acts 1:8, and 1 Cor 12 resonate well with Pentecostal-Charismatic spiritualities. However, the hermeneutics of those passages does not accord with their stated purpose which is to speak of the powerlessness of human beings apart from God (Ez.), the spiritual power given by God to enable the preaching of the Gospel to all nations (Acts), and the empowerment of the church, the Body of Christ, for the work of missions in the spirit of unity (1 Cor). In other words, although the document appropriately condemns the abuse in Christian mission of “earthly” power structures, it also fails to give any attention to the much-needed empowerment by the Holy Spirit of the church and Christian workers.

At the same time, the document is completely silent about the issue of “spiritual powers” (sometimes called just “powers” in contemporary discourses) such as the

“demonic,” however one understands that complicated question. In all cultures of the Global South (Africa, Asia, and Latin America) and in many contexts of the Global North, not only among Pentecostal-Charismatic communities but among all Christian churches, significant issues have to do with deliverance, healing, and similar “power encounters.” The fact that there are undeniably gross misinterpretations of some of these issues among some Charismatic leaders (e.g., “territorial spirits”) does not justify the lack of discussion of those issues. Neglecting the topic of “spiritual power(s)” not only makes missiological discourse irrelevant in many contexts but also continues the Enlightenment-based modernist reductionistic discourse. Whereas in the Bible, both in the Old and the New Testament, as well as in early Christianity, the issue of spiritual powers loomed large in the theological and spiritual life, in the Enlightenment epistemology and worldview those realities came to be marginalized and ostracized. After all, the Gospels present Jesus whose mission the contemporary church is continuing, not only as an itinerant preacher and teacher but also as a healer and exorcist!

I would be less concerned about these omissions in case there were other themes which would have taken up those neglected issues; but they have not. Furthermore, when we speak of power in mission, it should not be only about its misuse (and therefore, of the need to repent) but also of the opening up of hearts and minds of Christians to the reception of “the power from on high” and the conquest of all powers by Christ in his suffering death, glorious resurrection/ascension, and the pouring out of the Pentecostal Spirit.

It seems to me Christian mission in the beginning of the third millennium, differently from the past generations whose work has been under critical scrutiny in this document, suffers way more from the lack of divine empowerment than of the abuse of worldly powers; at least, that is the case in some forms of mission from the Global North.