

Witnessing to the Indiscriminate Love of God The Holy Spirit and authentic witness

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Mission as bearing witness

Witness in word and deed

The aim of this paper is to offer some reflections on the theme of the IAMS assembly. In the introduction to the conference theme Andrew Kirk and Stephen Bevans focus on three principal “integritys”. The first concerns the wholeness of the church’s calling in any age or situation. The second integrity has to do with the relationship of the gospel to the contexts with which it becomes involved. The third integrity has to do with the means of mission.

All three “integritys” point to the comprehensive character of mission that has been underlined by mission theology for some years. At the conference of the International Missionary Council in Whitby in 1947 proclamation (*kerygma*) and community (*koinonia*) were the two key terms for the understanding of mission. In the fifties a third aspect, service (*diakonia*), was added. The conference in Willingen (1952) took over these three aspects, adding “witness” (*martyria*) as the overarching concept (Bosch 1991: 511-512; Holthrop et al.1996: 56; Pachuau 2000: 544). For the next decades witness through proclamation, community and service dominated the missiological discussion as the most comprehensive understanding of what mission is supposed to be. Similarly, in the presentation of the Malaysia conference it is stated that “Witness is through words, through works (signs of the Spirit) and through transformed lives” (Kirk and Bevans 2002: 8).

It is beyond dispute that witness was an important mode of mission among the first Christians. This is evidenced by a number of New Testament writings, e.g. Fourth Gospel (witness and Holy Spirit), the Acts of the Apostles (witness and Holy Spirit), 1 Peter (witness of hope), Revelation (prophetic witness), and Colossians and Ephesians (witness to powers and authorities). The testimony was not merely one of words, but demanded a total engagement of speech and action. “The testimony of citizenship lived with integrity (1 Peter) or even of prophetic refusal to compromise by withdrawing from certain societal functions (Revelations) were considered genuine testimony to the good news of universal salvation” (Senior and Stuhlmüller 1983: 310).

It is worthwhile noticing that witness in word and deed also played a significant role in the second and third century. The love of neighbours was a distinctive factor of the church as a whole; such behaviour was noticed by the Gentiles. It had an effect of recruitment (Hvalvik 2000: 284-285). One of the most probing stories from the early church about a community living in “two worlds” is a famous passage from the letter to Diognetus, e.g. 5:5: “They reside in their respective countries, but only as aliens; they take part in everything as citizens, and put up with everything as foreigners; every foreign land is their home; and every home land a foreign land”.

This passage gives us a picture that is highly idealistic. But it is most helpful in the sense that it reminds churches and Christians to their commitment to witness *in* context, while at the same time suggest that the source of their witness is from *beyond*. As pointed out by Holthrop et al.(1996:59):

“To witness is to proclaim a *different* reality, God’s reality, that is: *this* reality *turned upside-down* as the outcome of *God’s rule*. Today as in the past, it opens up new ways of understanding.”

L. Pachau states that “witness” is a powerful and emotive biblical keyword that captures the Christian understanding of what it means to have faith in Christ. As Jesus Christ himself the Word incarnate, witnesses to what he is and sees (John 3:11. 31-32; 18:37), the disciples are called to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8). Witness, as the all-embracing mode of mission, subsumed within itself the most important themes that emerged in the new era such as “presence”, “liberation”, and “dialogue” (Pachau 545).

The significance of witness in modern missiology is also illustrated by the concept of the *missional church*. D. Guder speaks of being the witness, doing the witness, and saying the witness. *Being the witness* is representing the reign of God as its community. *Doing the witness* is representing the reign of God as its servant. *Saying the witness* is representing the reign of God as its messenger (Guder 1998: 102-109).

Integrity in communicating the gospel: The means of mission

One of the three integrities identified by Kirk and Bevans has to do with the means of mission. They argue that the ends of mission never justify the means used to carry them out. “...Thus, the way mission is carried out demands the highest sincerity, fairness and esteem towards others. The call itself may not be compromised, but the nature of its fulfilment must not demean the personhood of the other”. (p.8).

In any form of communication the receptor of the message has a great role. In communicating interactions, recipients interpret everything that is said and done as part of the message (Kraft 1991: 73). Mission is not just a question of transmitting a message. It is the question of the trustworthiness of the communicator. It is like sending a letter (or e-mail). Before opening it the recipient will try to identify the sender and consider whether or not this person is credible. The Christian community is like a letter from Christ (2 Cor 3:3).

Authentic mission works in a way which is different from manipulation or propaganda. Since it is based on the power of love, it accepts the freedom of the recipient to accept or reject the message, whereas manipulation denotes an attitude which does not respect the freedom of the recipient. Instead he or she is reduced to a mere object of the message (Nissen 1998: 46).

The ecumenical document “Mission and Evangelism” (1982) has a paragraph entitled “Mission in Christ’s Way”. It makes the point that an imperialistic crusader’s spirit was foreign to Christ. Then it continues: “Churches are free to choose the ways they consider best to announce the Gospel to different people in different circumstances. But these options are never neutral. Every methodology illustrates or betrays the Gospel we announce. In all communication of the Gospel, power must be subordinate to love” (Mission and Evangelism 1982: 439).

Authentic mission is not manipulation. Today we would perhaps speak about “the temptation of secularising, of using worldly means and methods, Madison Avenue techniques for selling the gospel. We all know that it works. But we should learn: one does not sell Jesus as one sells toothpaste. There is the cross, there is the mystery. And there is God’s time, the right time”

(Stendahl 1980: 79-80). However, the gospel is not for sale, not because it is not worth anything, but because it is too precious. It is so precious that it cannot be bought or sold. It can only be shared freely (Fung 1989: 8).

Witness in context

Genuine Christian witness is witness in context. The integrity of mission means that there is double faithfulness. On the one hand the bearers of the witness must be faithful to the text (the Bible); on the other hand they must listen to the challenges and questions from the context in which they are. Following Kirk and Bevans we may ask: How is this dual integrity to context and text to be maintained, so that the message remains universal and, yet, can be owned by local participants? (Kirk and Bevans 2002: 8)

Christians are called to be authentic witnesses *within* each culture.¹ From the very early days of the church, the significance of the local congregation has been emphasized. The New Testament always speaks of the church in Antioch, Corinth, Ephesus, etc. These were fully-fledged churches rooted in their cultures. They were not understood as outposts of a mother church located somewhere else. (Duraisingh 1996: 44-45).

The importance of the context can be illustrated by the locations of the dialogues in the Book of Acts. It is told in Acts 19:8-10 that Paul was arguing and pleading with the Jews in the synagogue for the first three months. Then he moved into the “lecture hall of Tyrannus”, which is the physical environment of the Greek philosophers. In Acts 17:17-34 he was in dialogue in a similar way with people on the market place of Athens.

These examples indicate that the dialogue does not take place on Paul’s own terms and in a neutral environment. The agenda and terms of reference of the conversations are set by the other parties to the dialogue. (Cracknell 1986: 27). This is different from our own usual forms of activity. We tend to invite people to come into our structures where they will be able to listen to monologues of proclamation in an environment where we are totally at home. In Paul’s approach depicted in Acts dialogue becomes a venture – almost the same way as the meeting of Peter and Cornelius (Nissen 2004: 70).

Both the content and form of witness are most intimately related to the context. The necessity of a contextual theology is grounded in the nature of God’s incarnating presence. The Triune God is revealed as the One who enters into human history. The incarnation of Jesus reveals the inbreaking of God into the world of space and time and becomes paradigmatic for how God takes on human flesh (Nissan 2003: 81).

The dual integrity means that any cultural expression of the gospel must be *appropriate* to the spirit of the gospel and *relevant* to its context. (Duraisingh 1996: 51). As the history of Christianity shows, not all cultural expressions are appropriate to the gospel. The defence of apartheid is a clear example of this. Theological legitimisation of the exclusion of women from forms of ministry in many churches is another example.

¹ In communicating the gospel we should be aware of the great importance of the context. “Receptors interpret in such a way that the information derived from the context influences the way in which they understand the main message” (Kraft 1991: 130). “There is a communicational difference between an interaction that takes place on our turf and one that takes place on theirs” (Kraft 1991: 136).

Contextualization establishes a meaningful relationship between text and context. It is a process wherein the past experience of the community that is enshrined in the text opens up in the light of the contemporary reality and enables the perception of this reality in a critical way. The context is where and how people live their lives (Holthrop et al. 1996: 67-68)

Towards a cross-cultural missiological hermeneutics

To counteract the absolutizing of our own context it is necessary to stimulate a cross cultural hermeneutics of the gospel that is a dialogue between different confessional and contextual readings of the Bible (Nissen 2000: 189-190). Coming from different church traditions and from different cultural situations we can mutually challenge and correct each other's enterprise. This will enhance our task, but also widen our horizons to hermeneutical possibilities. We need each other – protestants and Catholics, evangelicals and liberation theologians, rich and poor, black and white etc. – as conversations partners in the hermeneutical task. These hermeneutical partners will assist us in hearing countermelodies for which previously we had no ear.

The situation in which we are has aptly been described as “One Bible and Many Interpretive Contexts”. The implication of a global hermeneutic process is that “interpretation of the Bible is no longer just a matter of a community dealing with the Word in its own context. It is now a matter of deliberation among communities *listening to* one another and *correcting* one another. More than ever before, hearing the Word and listening to each other is intertwined” (de Groot 1995: 154-155, italics added).

However, there is a risk that our contexts can develop a life of their own, divorced from the biblical text and its critical challenge. This point is underlined by R. Schreier: “We can create such powerful contexts in which to place Scriptural text that these texts can be muted and distorted” (Schreier 1982: 433). “The only safeguard we have against this (and even that safeguard is no guarantee) is the ecumenical intercultural fellowship of brothers and sisters in the faith, where we learn to listen to each other and begin to see the relativity of our own contexts” (Bosch 1986: 77-78).

In this context it should be noticed that the World Council of churches has initiated a study on ecumenical and cross-cultural hermeneutic. R. von Sinner points out that we need a hermeneutic that takes both tradition and context in consideration in its quest for visible unity. “In fact, there is a hermeneutical circle; it is through our perception of the context that we read the Bible, and it is through our reading that the Bible reads us (and our context) to take up a formulation used by Hans-Ruedi Weber. And on this way of mutual reading, ..., we need the critique from others. These “others” include other Christians and other churches living in our times, as well as our forefathers and foremothers in the faith. It is there that an ecumenical hermeneutics could help us to see whether we are giving enough attention to Scripture, Tradition, context and our hermeneutic community”.²

² Von Sinner 2001: 117. See also Duraisingh 1996: 49-54. The author refers, among other things, to the Jerusalem consultation on Intercultural Hermeneutics of the Gospel (1995) which states: “The church *needs* diversity. We need each other especially when we are different from each other.... Diversity within and among local churches protects them from their blind spots, broaden their vision and deepens their awareness of God's reconciling work throughout the cosmos”.

The bearers of the witness

The sub-theme of the Malaysia conference is “Bearing the witness of the Spirit”.³ The verbal form can be understood both actively and passively: carrying the witness of the Spirit, and being carried by it (Kirk and Bevans 2002: 8). The active form of the verb raises the question: Who are the bearers of the Christian witness?

In a recent article Stephen Bevans points to four kinds of witness: (a) the witness of individual Christians; (b) the witness of the Christian community – the “hermeneutic of the gospel” (Newbigin); (c) the church’s institutional witness to schools, hospitals, orphanages, and social service agencies; (d) the “common witness” of Christians of various traditions committed to common prayer, common educational ventures, common work for justice and the like (Bevans 2003: 50).

In what follows I shall focus on the first two forms of witness. These forms are not seen as alternatives. A consideration of the New Testament evidence confirms that both the individuals and the church had a responsibility for mission.⁴

Individuals as bearers of the witness

a. Missionary discipleship. Discipleship as an important aspect of mission is underlined by all the gospels. For instance, the content and conditions of discipleship in the lifetime of Jesus are illustrated clearly in the mission discourse in Matth 10:1-42. The mandate given to the disciples includes a call for poverty and simple lifestyle. What is demanded from Jesus is an attitude: freedom from acquisitiveness and a trust in providence so absolute that it can wholly dispense with even the minimum of material resources. Poverty and powerlessness are for Matthew an absolutely indispensable part of Christian mission.⁵

b. The poor and marginalized. An important feature of the primitive Gospel tradition is that the disadvantaged – the women, the poor person, the stranger etc. – suddenly take center stage. The poor and the needy came into this world not as mere recipients of gifts from the wealthy, but as those upon whom the future of the world is dependent. A “sinful woman”, a tax collector, and an outsider represent the signs of the “economy of the Kingdom”. This is a “decentering of perspective” and a reversal of the world as it is presently known and legitimised (Halvor Moxnes; quoted in Nissen 1994: 240). Liberation theology insists on seeing the people as subjects of their own history (Ahn Byung Mu, quoted in Nissen 1994: 240).

Choan Seng Song (1996: 31-32) reminds us that Jesus whose body is broken for people marginalized by society and excluded by the religious community, had no bottom line in his

³ The idea of “Bearing the Witness of the Spirit” plays a significant role in L. Newbigin’s mission theology. Newbigin uses the word “bearer” to affirm that “those who are chosen to be bearers of a blessing are chosen for the sake of *all*” (Newbigin 1978: 34). He contrasts that role as “bearers” against the attitude which is the constant temptation: “exclusive beneficiaries”. The Church is the bearer of the work of Christ through history, but not the exclusive beneficiary. The Church is servant and not master. It is appointed to a stewardship on behalf of all, not to a privilege from which others are excluded. Cf. Hunsberger 1998: 93.

⁴ For a more detailed discussion see Marshall 2000

⁵ Cf. Soares-Prabhu 1993: 80-81; Nissen 2004: 26. For a description of discipleship in the Gospel of Mark see Nissen 2004: 41-43.

theology. All the lines drawn by others – lines of race, gender, class or creed - were crossed by him. Moved by the faith of a Canaanite woman, he marvelled and said: “Woman, great is your faith” (Matt 15:28). Impressed by the trust of a Roman centurion in his healing power, he told the people around him “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Luke 7:9). On one occasion he healed ten lepers. Only one of them, who happened to be a Samaritan, returned to thank him (Luke 17:11-18). As to “that strange exorcist”, his disciples tried to stop from “casting out demons in his name”, this is what he had to say to them: ‘Do not stop him... Who ever is not against us is for us’; (Mark 9:38-41).

Are these instances not enough to enlighten us as to what the problem is as we seek to relate ourselves to the people of other cultures and religions? The problem often does not consist in cultures and religions, but in ourselves, in our faith and in our theology. We are not better than those disciples of Jesus who tried to stop the strange exorcist because he was not one of them, that he was not a member of their company. Does not the history of Christian mission tell us that in our zeal for mission we have been more apt to make more enemies than friends with our claims for God’s truth? (Song 1996: 31-32)

c. The women. It is important to notice that the followers of Jesus did also include women. This is evidenced by a number of narratives. An outstanding example is the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42 (Nissen 2004: 87-89). This story illustrates how a marginalized person becomes a witness to the good news. The woman is an example of those people who are rejected by this world. She was an inferior person, an outcast. She had several odds against her. First, she was a woman – a fact that had many implications in the society of her time. She was a Samaritan, which means that Jews considered her to be ritually impure and not to be associated with. Finally, in her own society she was expelled because of the way she had lived. She was a sinner.

It is precisely with such a person Jesus talked about the great existential questions: the living water and the place for the true worship.

Jesus breaks down all three barriers that made the woman to an outcast. He brought the message of love that is boundary-breaking. Following the witness of the woman the townspeople came to the well and many of the Samaritans “believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (v. 39).

John 4 is a Johannine paradigm for mission. In this paradigm Jesus’ method is fundamentally dialogical, following the questions and issues raised by the Samaritan woman and pursuing his revelation purpose to the very end. The climax of the dialogue is Jesus’ self-revelation in 4:26, but the movement of the entire dialogue centres on the woman and her needs (vv.10.13-14).

The whole dialogue which was for Jesus the medium for revelation and proclamation, becomes for the woman a journey of self-disclosure. The astonishing thing is that in the end she becomes a missionary. “Because of her sex, nationality and deplorable history (9.17-18. 27), the woman represents the lowest grad of humanity to whom Jesus’ mission of salvation could be directed. If such a woman, then, can be deemed worthy of Jesus’ self-revelation, then nobody can be excluded from his saving mission” (Okure 1988: 184).

Community as witness

The concept of community as witness is reflected in different New Testament genres.

a. The gospels. Community as witness is important in the Gospel of Matthew. In 5:13-16 the disciples are characterized as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. The ultimate basis of the church's mission is the witness of its community life and praxis. This mission is fulfilled first of all by living visible as the church. The church ought to see itself as Matthew saw it: as a distinct and appealing counter-culture, a city set on a hill that makes visible the reality of God's reign in the midst of the old order, a community concerned not so much to root out the weeds in its midst as to cultivate wheat of such a quality that others will see it and "give glory to your Father in heaven" (Donaldson 1996: 48).

Community witness also plays a significant role in the Gospel of John. As Jesus loved the disciples until the last second of his life, so they are to love one another (13:34-35; 15:12). In and through their love for each other they are called to give public witness to the life-giving power of God's love in Jesus. By this *praxis of agape* all people will know that they are Jesus disciples. "The life of love in the community of disciples becomes the trademark and the credential of the missionary community "if you have love for one another, then *everyone* will know that you are my disciples" (13:35)" (Arias 1992: 93).

b. The Book of Acts. The missionary character of the community is evidenced also by Luke's description of the first Christians in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41-47; 4:31-37). The basic characteristics of this community were the close relationship between the unity in heart and soul, the sharing of goods, and the witness to the resurrection (4:32-33). It is obvious that the transformed economical relationships among the first believers is closely related to the missionary outreach

M.T. Tangaraj speaks of mission as *kerygmatic presence*. "This is one of the earliest models of mission in the history of the church. The church in the New Testament saw itself as just being a community of faith at a given place. Look at the account of the early church at the end of Acts. The life of the church is described as the prophetic way. "Being sent" – the meaning of the term "mission" – was practiced more as "being" than by "being sent". After all, the first few chapters of Acts do not describe much *going* at all. The disciples were where they were in intentional and specific ways. As one notices, the marks of this community were *kerygma, koinonia, diaconia* and *martyria*... Thus I call the mission of the early Christians "kerygmatic presence" because it was their way of living out the kerygma they announced" (Tangaraj 1999: 102-103).

c. The New Testament letters contain practically no explicit missionary teaching. Seldom do we find admonishment to the congregation and their members to actively carry forth the good news. However, the congregation was missionary in its effect simply by virtue of its existence. The congregation is to be "a letter of Christ...acknowledged and read by all people (2 Cor 3:2f.). This corresponds to Matth 5:13-16. Even here the talk is at first strongly indicative: "The city built on a hill cannot remain hidden" (Klaiber 1997: 194).

It should be noticed that the missionary effectiveness of the congregation does not derive from a simple accommodation to the society in which it finds itself, but from creative nonconformity which lets the alternative possibility for living which grows out of the gospel become visible to the outside world; cf. Rom 12:1-2 and especially 1 Peter (Klaiber 1997: 198).

According to Kirk and Bevans the first integrity of mission concerns the wholeness of the church's calling in any age or situation. "It is given a commission to be a reconciling and healing agent by resolving conflict, bringing peace with justice, comforting and empowering people excluded from belonging to families and civil societies, caring for the environment and restoring people to physical and psychological well-being". (Kirk and Bevans 2002: 7-8).

The message challenges the messenger to create a vision of inclusive community, critically engaged in action, questioning the inequality of access to resources and recognizing the positive nature of diversity in a community that is united but not uniform and in which individuals learn how to receive from one another as well as to give (Holthrop et al. 1996: 61).

Reconciled communities as witnesses to God's indiscriminate love

In one of the preparatory papers for the coming CWME conference (May 2005) it is stated that the Holy Spirit calls us to a ministry of reconciliation and to express this in both the spirituality and strategies of our mission and evangelism ("Come, Holy Spirit" 2004: 3). Furthermore, it is pointed out that reconciliation constitutes an important focus and characteristic of the mission of God and therefore of the church's mission: "The church is sent into the world to reconcile humanity and renew creation by calling people and nations to repentance, announcing forgiveness of sin and a new beginning in relation with God and with neighbours through Jesus Christ" ("Come, Holy spirit" 2004: 13; quotation from *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today*, § 14).

The Godhead, the Three-in-One, expresses the very nature of reconciliation we hope for: "The Trinity, the source and image of our existence, shows the importance of diversity, otherness and intrinsic relationship in constituting a community" ("Come, Holy Spirit" 2004: 5; *Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today* § 39). Reconciliation means peace with justice. The vision is to establish community, where brokenness and sectarianism are overcome and people live together with mutual respect and tolerance. Reconciliation results in communication with one another without fear. It implies tolerance of others, inclusion and consideration of them. Reconciled community is where difference can be resolved through dialogue and without resort to violence ("Come, Holy Spirit" 2004: 9).

Mission as reconciliation is an embracing of the other. As Kosuke Koyama notes, the Gospel is essentially "stranger"-centred". An inclusive love for the "other", culturally and otherwise, is at the heart of the biblical faith (Koyama 1993). Similarly, Miroslav Volf underlines that Christian faith is based on the idea of embrace and acceptance of the other person in his or her otherness (Volk 1996). Theo Sundermeier argues that this respect for the other person is in the *missio Dei*, the mission of the Trinitarian God.⁶ Christopher Duraisingh speaks of "mission toward multivoiced and polyphonic communities across difference" (497-499). In the modern world two forces destroy genuine pluralism and democratic way of negotiating difference. On the one hand is the centripetal force of globalization; it destroys authentic difference and local identities by seeking to homogenize diversity; on the other hand is the centrifugal force of ethnicity, religion and culture; it has the same effect, but by insisting on the uniqueness and exclusive right of one's identity at the expense of the right and identity of others (486).

⁶ "Mission cannot help relating to the other, to the stranger. Without the other it does not exist. This relationship is part of its being. In a dual sense it is "eccentric": it has its origin in the inner-trinitarian relationship and mission of God, and relates to the other, unknown person" (Sundermeier 2003: 565).

However, there is a biblical vision of an alternative response to pluralism. Both the tribalist exclusivism and the totalist assimilation are rejected. In their place an interactive and dialogical relationship is established as the foundation of peoples and nations. This biblical alternative can be exemplified by Jesus' table fellowship with those who were pushed to the peripheries of society. The table fellowship is at once an affirmation of plural identities and worth of the marginalized persons and a drawing together of diverse peoples into a new and interactive community of God's love. In a similar way, Pentecost and several other related episodes in the book of Acts suggest creative ways of finding identity and negotiating plurality. A number of passages in the Book of Acts may be interpreted as involving a de-centring, a border-crossing and a building of a multi-voiced or polyphonic community in the power of the Holy Spirit (Duraisingh 2003: 489-493).⁷

Brokenness as a counter-witness to Christ

The gospel of reconciliation is shared with integrity if the church is a reconciled and healing community. However, in some cases reconciliation is not possible, and brokenness is the mark of the church.

To take just one example, if churches are not able to reconcile one with the other, they are failing the gospel call and will lack credibility in witness. "Sent to a world in need of unity and greater interdependence amidst the competitions and fragmentation of the human community, the Church is called to be a sign and instrument of God's love... Divisions among Christians are a counter-witness to Christ and contradict their witness to reconciliation in Christ" ("Come, Holy Spirit" 2004: 15).

The God witnessed to by Jesus as he ate and drank with disciples and sinners has no truck with "safe" distance between Christian and Jew, Christian and Gentile, Christian and Christian. As the Spirit forcefully reminded Peter, this God has *no favourites*. When we reject each other, we are rejecting God. This is the nature of Christian blasphemy, to bear witness *against* the Holy Spirit that we are *not* all children of God. The worst blasphemy of all is to do this in God's name: to call on the God of Jesus Christ to justify our hatred of those we reject (Primavesi and Henderson 1989: 429).

Both formation and malformation can be the result of the encounter of the churches with the surrounding world. As the ecumenical document "Costly Obedience" states: "Instead of being agents of social transformation, churches too often uncritically conform to unjust social and economic patterns within their cultural and national context. The result is moral malformation of the membership of the churches" (Best and Robra 1997: 62)

Witness and dialogue in a pluralistic society

Integrity and openness towards others

⁷ Such a decentred approach to the other, in the words of M. Volf is to "create space in us to receive the other...The Spirit of God breaks through the self-enclosed worlds we inhabit (Volf 1996: 51).

The phenomenon of religious pluralism has become one of the most serious overall challenges to Christian mission for the coming years. In this situation we must ask: How may the Christian commitment to mission and evangelism be affirmed with faithfulness to the gospel as well as love and respect for the other? (“Mission and Evangelism in Unity” 1999: 121).

The San Antonio conference pointed out that “our ministry of witness among people of other faiths presupposes our *presence* with them, *sensitivity* to their deepest faith commitments and experiences, *willingness* to be their servants for Christ’s sake, *affirmation* of what God has done and is doing among them, and *love* for them... We are called to be *witnesses* to others, not judges of them” (here quoted from “Mission and Evangelism in Unity” 1999: 122).

A major problem in any dialogue is how to maintain genuine Christian integrity while at the same time being open to people of other faiths. Integrity is usually defined as being true to oneself. How, then, can a missionary (like Paul) be “all things to all people”? (1 Cor 9:19-23). Only by finding a point of reference outside himself or herself, the basis of genuine Christian integrity, is there a commitment to the gospel. As Paul says: “I do it all for the sake of the gospel” (v.23). Total preoccupation with Christ is the unchanging centre of the missionary’s life (Nissen 2004: 120).

There is no real dialogue if the religious identity and beliefs of the partners are not made clear. In that sense, it can be affirmed that witness precedes dialogue (“Mission and Evangelism in Unity” 1999: 122). In particular, two New Testament writings indicate how the Spirit is tied to witness and dialogue: the Book of Acts and the Fourth Gospel..

“God has no favourites”. Witnessing in the Spirit

In his life Jesus witnessed to God’s indiscriminate love for all: Jew and Gentile, Greek and Samaritan, male and female, the “righteous” and “the sinner”; the “clean” and the “unclean”. After Jesus’ death, the Spirit continued to bear witness to this indiscriminate love, and forced the disciples to do the same (Primavesi and Henderson 1989: 426).

The Book of Acts in a particular way shows this boundary-breaking role of Holy Spirit. Two stories may suffice. In his Pentecost sermon Peter explains what has happened by referring to the prophecy of Joel (Acts 2:17-18). This passage makes the point that participation in the blessings that God is pouring out on the human race is open to all human beings, regardless of age, sexual and social distinctions. Even those on the lowest rungs of society’s ladder will speak prophetically in this dawning of the new age. The Spirit begins to break down divisions, and will not become accommodated to the established structures of authority (Nissen 2004: 56).

The story of Peter’s encounter with Cornelius in Acts 10:1-11:18 in a similar way testifies to the function of the Spirit as crossing borders. Peter realizes that a power greater than his own has broken down the fence which protected devout Jews from the uncleanness of the heathen world. He can do nothing but humbly accept the fact and receive these uncircumcised pagans by baptism into the fellowship of the church (10:47-48). Afterwards Peter was criticized by the other apostles for his acceptance of the Gentiles. However, he defended himself against this charge: “The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make any distinction between them and us” (11:12). Those who had criticized him were silent, and then praised God by saying: “Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life” (11:18). The catalyst for this expansion of the kingdom was Peter’s sharing of table companionship with the “unclean”. Had the decision been otherwise,

the primitive Christian community would have remained a Jewish sect (Primavesi and Henderson 1989: 427).

An appreciation of the Spirit's universal and active presence encourages an inductive approach to mission. The task of the missionary is not to bring God to those who do not have God. Rather it is to discern with others the action of the Spirit within a particular context and culture. This permits the emergency of contextual missiologies (Smith 2001: 105)

Mission changes not only the world but also the church. Leslie Newbigin notes that it is not as though the church opened its gates to admit a new person into its company, and then closed them again, remaining unchanged except for the addition of a new member.⁸ Mission is not just church extension. It is something more costly and more revolutionary. It is the action of the Holy Spirit who in sovereign freedom both convicts the world and leads the church toward the fullness of truth (cf. John 16:8-15). "Mission is not essentially an action by which the church puts forth its own power and wisdom to conquer the world around it; it is rather, an action of God, putting forth the power of his Spirit to bring the universal work of Christ for the salvation of the world nearer its completion" (Newbigin 1978: 66).

Text, Spirit and community

The work of the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles can be compared with that of the Fourth Gospel. Two points are of special interest. A dynamic understanding of the Spirit is reflected in both writings, cf. John 3:8: The Spirit blows wherever it pleases.⁹ Witness, Spirit and mission are seen together in both books.

In John's Gospel, the Paraclete sent from the Father by Jesus will "bear witness" to Jesus just as the disciples, too, will "bear witness" (15:26-27).¹⁰ The Paraclete confronts the power of evil in the world, just as Jesus had done and just as the community must do (16:8-11; 17:14-18). The "greater work" (14:12) done by the community and its more penetrating understanding of Jesus' teaching are also tied to the community's mission experience (Senior and Stuhlmüller 1983: 287). Taking the gospel from Palestine to the "end of the earth" and reinterpreting the teaching of Jesus for the Hellenistic world were bold steps for the post-Easter missionary church. Luke sees this creative development – a development far beyond the horizons of Jesus' own ministry – as guided throughout by the power of the Holy Spirit. Could it not be that John works out a similar conviction? (287-288).

The Spirit should not be conceived of as a comfort for the already comfortable or as belonging primarily to the realm of warm religious experience of grace and forgiveness. It seems an

⁸ For Newbigin witness is first of all the Spirit's work. It is important to recognize that the gift of witness – which is a promise, not a command (cf. Acts 1:8) – corresponds to the "news-bulletin" character of the gospel and establishes the nature of the Christian's manner of relationship with people of other faiths. See Hunsberger 1998: 196-197.

⁹ There is the need to liberate church traditions that domesticate the Spirit, and to encourage an awareness of the Holy Spirit as present in loving actions; cf. Holthrop et al. 1996: 62.

¹⁰ It has been argued by many exegetes that the witness of the Paraclete (15:26) and the witness of the disciples (15:27) are not two separate witnesses. This is in harmony with Matth 10:20 which envisions the Spirit through the disciples. The coordination of the witnesses in v.26 and v. 27 resembles that of Acts 5:32 when that verse is interpreted in the light of Acts 5:10.

indispensable function of the Spirit to make our witness for Christ and the Kingdom of justice and peace on earth bold enough to confront and rattle the powers that be (Stendahl 1990: 32).¹¹

The Paraclete is called the “Spirit of Truth” (15:25; 16:13). People often act as if consolations fostered precisely by avoiding the truth. Confused with easy optimism, consolation is reduced to the level of deceitful, false or hypocritical talk. But in relation to the world the mission of the Spirit is to convince, to admonish, to illuminate and to judge (16:7-11).

In 16:12-15 John indicates the dialectic between the present Spirit and the original gospel. The Spirit “will guide you into all the truth”, which is balanced by “he will not speak on his own” (16:13). Again, “he will declare to you the things that are to come (16:13), which is balanced by “he will glory me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (16:14). The dialectic of the Johannine concept of revelation is summed up in the word *anangellein*. For it can have the force of *re-announce*, *re-proclaim*, but in 16:13 as in 4:25 it must include some idea of new information, new revelation, even if new revelation is drawn out of the old way of reinterpretation (J.D.G. Dunn, quoted in Nissen 2004: 80).

The function of the Holy Spirit is to lead the community in *all* truth. There is the prospect here of coming into a new understanding beyond what the group has already reached. The promise in 16:13 is a remarkable one. We are plainly told that there is more to be learned than can be found in the recorded teachings of John to his disciples during the years of his ministry (cf. 14:12). We might tend to think of the Bible as a book containing timeless truths. This, however, is not how John sees the work of the Spirit.

The sayings about the Spirit in John 14-16 throw light on the relationship between text, Spirit and community. The community under the guidance of the Spirit is given guidance on the meaning of Scripture for new historical situations. The Spirit enables the community to perceive sense of the biblical text that had previously remained hidden. The Holy Spirit makes Christ more present, more comprehensive, more transforming. In its Spirit-prompted mission to the world, the church discovers the true meaning of the Word made flesh (Senior and Stuhlmüller 1983: 288; Nissen 2004: 93).

The witness of hope

The words of 1 Pet 3:15-16 in a particular illustrate the integrity of mission: “...Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you. Yet, do it with gentleness and reverence...” As noted by Kirk and Bevans, the text also says something about the means of mission. “The way the mission is carried out demands the highest sincerity, fairness and esteem towards others. The call itself may not be compromised but the nature of its fulfilment must not demean the personhood of the other” (p. 8).

In this passage, then we have a demand for an authentic witness. At the same time it puts the Christian hope at the centre of the mission of the church (Nissen 2004: 153-154). The importance of this passage was underlined by an ecumenical study process in 1970’s: “Giving account of the hope that is within us”. Christian groups and communities were asked to consider in which way Jesus

¹¹ At this point we might compare the witness in Colossians and Ephesians. For a more detailed analysis see Nissen 2004, chapter 7 (“Proclamation and confrontation: The witness to powers and authorities – Colossians and Ephesians”)

Christ is to be experienced, interpreted and communicated in different cultures. It was maintained that giving account of the Christian hope can occur in many different ways: in liturgies, in situations of conflict, through proclaiming the gospel, through involvement in society, as the community of men and women etc. (Giving Account 1975: 25-26).

The study document states that a mission of hope embraces the entire life of the community with all its sufferings and all its activities. Four aspects are pointed out (Giving Account 1975: 46-47). First, *the proclamation of the gospel of hope*, especially to the poor, is considered to be the most important part of the all-embracing mission. Secondly, *the new community in Christ* made up by Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, masters and slaves, men and women (Gal 3:28; Col 3:11) is itself a witness of the hope of Christ in the world. Thirdly, to complete the mission of hope, as well as proclamation and fellowship, *service* is required. Finally, the mission of hope is attested to be the *glorification* of the Triune God.

H.-R. Weber rightly notes that the passage of 1 Pet 3:15 is like a little window, through which we can see how early Christian evangelism took place. (Weber 1981: 257-259; Nissen 2004: 153-154). The author admonishes the Christians to be ready for a conversation with their non-Christian neighbours and fellow workers.

The usual way of perceiving evangelism is that Christians go out and tell non-Christians about the good news. In 1 Pet 3:15, however, it is the non-Christians who begin the conversation. The readers are told that they will be questioned and challenged by their non-Christian neighbours and that they have to give account of their hope.

The hope of the early Christians was that Christ is Lord and that his cause would win. This hope became visible in their daily life. Their priorities obviously differed from those of the people surrounding them. They were even ready to suffer and die for that hope. Such a visible hope astonished and irritated their neighbours and colleagues.

In the early church mission was thus not only an organized activity by especially gifted persons such as Paul. It was much more the spontaneous and non-aggressive “gossiping of the gospel” by ordinary Christians in the course of their daily life. And the secret of it all was the hope that had become visible in the life of the Christians.

The model of mission in 1 Peter is a challenge to contemporary forms of mission. As we go back into our daily neighbourhoods and jobs we must ask: “How today can our Christian hope become visible in our lives?” (Weber 1981: 259). To answer this question we must be ready to live out the story of Christ – each in our particular situation.

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