

The Meaning of Missions¹

Abraham Kuyper

Christian Courier

April 22, 2002

Translated by Pieter C. Tuit

My message is derived from the word that John spoke in his gospel in chapter 20:21: “As the father has sent me, I am sending you.”

This is the word from Scripture that sanctifies our mission, and it is the law of God for every mission endeavor. We will meditate on it with reverence and deep humility.

Every living human being is a missionary. The exception is those who, like vegetables, are indifferent to everything that happens around them, who are always led by others, who never think or act independently and who do not truly live. But those who truly live, who live in a way worth calling life, have something to live for. Everyone who knows what he wants and strives for is a missionary – a missionary of Christ or a missionary of Satan.

Distance between spirits, not places

Generally we think being a missionary demands distance. This is correct if we do not think of distance in terms of space but in terms of distance in a moral and spiritual sense, a distance therefore not between space and space but between spirit and spirit. Everyone who seeks to propagate his spiritual direction, his moral insight is a missionary to those of a different spirit, even when they are near or live in the same house.

¹Pieter C. Tuit, Transl. *Christian Courier*, April 22, 2002. This article was taken from a speech Kuyper delivered at the 11th anniversary of the Reformed Mission Society at the Scottish Mission Church. It was published from a transcript taken by a reporter and was almost twice as long as the excerpts published here. Pieter Tuit was appointed Professor of Missiology at Calvin Seminary this past summer.

It is in this sense that I say mission is universal. No doubt some want to limit missions to the Christian church. But I tell you that the followers of Buddha in India often put our mission endeavors to shame. They have brought their teachings over the great mountains of the Himalayas. And think of the courage and the dedication of the followers of Mohammed. They have not only spread his teaching with the sword, but have also reached into the heart of Asia, into Africa and even into Europe with superior spiritual power.

Think of Indonesia: who are the most dedicated missionaries? Thousands and millions who once were pagans have been converted to Islam.

Every area of life is a mission field worked by people with different worldviews. Think of the Jesuits; in spite of their teachings, we must respect their dedication, courage and self-denial.

Missionaries of communism

The same is true of the leaders of the French Revolution. The revolution erupted as a deeply felt spiritual conviction. Although it may not elicit our sympathy, we must admit that these were men who knew what they wanted – men who went out to witness to the world, to conquer it. They also came to the Netherlands. In our time, they continue their mission in the spread of communism. We may curse their efforts, reject their speeches and their influence, but we must respect their spiritual power. They will give their last drop of blood for the cause, to propagate their convictions. The commune is their kingdom.

Closer to home, we see the same in the God-hating world in which we all live. Ask yourself: doesn't this world do missions with a dedication that puts us – the Christian church – to shame? Doesn't it have its day-schools and Sunday schools in all sorts of entertainment industries and places of temptation? And aren't many newspapers daily mission magazines for what the world stands for? Isn't everyone a missionary – a missionary for Christ or a missionary for Satan?

Where does this impulse come from? Why does every human being have this urge?

Because our God holds within Himself an eternal counsel which is nothing other than a great mission program. And we are created in the image of God. After the fall into sin, mankind abandoned God and went in an opposite direction; yet, the impulse, the hunger for spiritual victory remains.

Essence of God's love is to send

For the Father of lights, the essence of His love is to send and to keep sending. His angels are missionaries. This is the literal translation of their name. In His revelatory work, God sent first His patriarchs and prophets, and later His Son. When He ascended into heaven, He sent his Spirit. And after the Spirit has completed His work, God will send His Son once more. The Lord speaks of the prophets: "I have sent to you." Of the angels it is said that they have been sent for the sake of those who will inherit salvation. Nothing is better known than the words on the lips of Jesus "who was sent by the Father," and who cannot mention the Comforter without adding, "whom I will send."

This is the reason that mankind always sends, even if it is away from God: it originates with God.

No, the church is not more diligent in this respect than the world. God said to mankind, created in His image: "Multiply and fill the earth." Mankind remains faithful to this command. Even though it fell into sin it will fulfill this command, even if it is in an opposite direction. However, in spite of its most intense efforts, the world can no longer fulfil this mandate. It is powerless. It is empty. It is poor. It cannot fill the world with its spirit.

However, the work it cannot do is restored by God's grace.

In the midst of this evil and fallen mankind God has placed, according to His eternal counsel, a church, and to her the word again applies: "Multiply and fill the earth." To her, the apostle Paul says, "Be imitators of God as beloved children." And Jesus says in the words of our text, "As the Father has sent me, I am sending you." I send you as I have been sent – in suffering, in shame, in contempt, in martyrdom and death. But My life is in you, and this is your true strength; therefore, your witness will not be fruitless.

The words of Jesus answer three questions:

Who has the right to send?

Who should be sent?

What is the goal that alone lends it glory and strength?

Who has the right to send?

He who sends must have the right and the authority to do so. He must be able to say, "Go!" so that the one who is being sent will go. Furthermore, the messenger, the one who is sent, must have the right to demand a hearing wherever he comes. He is not just a messenger, but an ambassador, like someone sent by a king, through whom the king who sent him, as it were, comes himself and speaks with majesty.

So it is with the Father. He sends His son. He says to His Son, "Go," and His Son answers, "See, here am I to do Your will." And the Son asks that mankind honor God as the Father.

'Whoever receives you, receives me'

The Son is just as sovereign in sending out His apostles. He does not wait until His disciples come to Him, but He calls them and sends them out with the words, "Whoever receives you, receives Me."

After the apostles have established the church, this royal authority is transferred to the church, and, note, to the church alone. Because "she is a royal priesthood," she is told: "What you will bind on earth will be bound in heaven." She has the right to say: "Go, who receives you, receives me and who receives me receives the Son of God." She has the right to demand obedience from everyone. To her it is said: "All things are yours."

The answer to the question, "Who has the right to send?" is, therefore, the church. And not just the invisible church; because the work of missions has an external side that demands organization. Therefore, the right to send lies with the Christian church as the visible expression of the Church of the Lord.

That this is true has been realized even instinctively. When a missionary has to be ordained, every mission organization calls upon one or more ministers. But this is not completely right. It is the way of Rome, and this order is not right for our church. If a missionary wants to truly establish churches – and not just organizations – they must be erected as part of the historic Church of Christ.

If we take into account the administration of the sacraments as well as the preaching, then it is clear that no one may do so unless it is in continuity with the order of the church.

The right and also the authority to send lies, therefore, only with the Christian church.

In the work of missions, the believer must also, as the psalmist sings, glorify the Lord in the midst of the “gods.” This means it must be done in relation to the ordinances and powers ordained by God, in realizing the royal and priestly majesty that one has in Christ. When the church again takes up the keys of the kingdom, when she again acts according to the Word that “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven,” then she will also take up the work of missions.

Then she will claim the world for Christ in royal majesty. Then the holy chain will be restored in her five parts: the world to the church, the church to the Apostles, the Apostles to Christ, the Christ subject to the Father. And along that chain flows the stream of holy and eternal love.

Who must be sent?

Here, also, our text answers: as the Father has sent me, so the Lord sends you, and you must send from your heart.

What did the sending of the Father involve? First He sent His messengers, the patriarchs and the prophets. They were just a shadow of the Son – earthly messengers, accompanied by messengers from heaven, God’s angels.

But when the fullness of time had come, He sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law. Hereby He accomplished the work of His mission and fulfilled all that was foreshadowed and prophesied. When He left this earth and

went to heaven, the Holy Spirit came to complete His work. And after the completion of His task, the Son will return.

So first messengers, then the Son, and finally the Holy Spirit.

How do we measure up?

And how do we measure up? We are sending merely messengers. Without wanting to speak evil of what is done well, in the eyes of the church our missionaries are more like hirelings than sons. She gives them her money, but not her love. They are not her children, the children of her spirit.

Those who labor as apostles among the heathen are special. They know they are called and equipped to this mission task and perform wonders in the heathen world. These men are not created by an organization or society. They are born in the bosom of the congregation, the church.

Where did our mission work in the last century come from? From a spirit of general well-being, and what is imperfect in it can be traced back to that origin. We are speaking here of missions in general; there are, of course, positive exceptions. The Reformed Church was asleep: missions did not come from her spirit. No, another spirit had arisen, a sick spirit of brotherhood that preached love for mankind and that wanted to be useful. That spirit infected the part of the church that was still alive, and that spirit, married to the Christian confession, conceived the work of missions.

Along with this tendency towards impersonal spiritual brotherhood, the main need became money. First money, then prayer. That money was used to send out messengers. Money, not the Spirit, provided the impetus. It was a business that compelled men, not a plant that they nurtured. In gifts was her strength.

The church may not remain at this level in sending out her messengers. More needs to be done. Many who support the work of missions are giving a lot, an awful lot. But who of us gives himself, sacrificing all he has? Who gives his Isaac, his son, the only one he loves?

It is to this point that the church has to come. The church must send her sons. The spirit of mission must envelop her as a church and infiltrate and sanctify her

in such a way that she pleads with God to give her children – those exceptional men in whom is found the essence of the spiritual power of the congregation.

Men born for missions

The church must grow in her womb men who are born for missions and who are put in the cradle for that purpose; men who are good for nothing else; men who do not only have the Word of God in their hands but who also have been personally nurtured to be apostolic instruments to a particular people; men who do not have to ask, “Where shall I go?” but who have the conviction in their hearts: “This is where the Lord calls me, for this people I’ve been born.”

Such a mission – such a missionary – grows together with the people where he goes. He does not stay at a distance but enters into their situation, becomes one with them, like Jesus who became man for our salvation.

And if she sends her sons in this manner, the church at the same time sends her spirit. That is, she must include in her congregational life the heathen who have been invited by the word of her sons and who have obeyed. She must pour her spiritual treasure into the churches that have been founded far away, and together with them live the life that is from God and unto God. In this way, comes the communion of the saints. In this way, God’s church is built up and expanded. In this way, God’s kingdom comes.

What is missions really all about?

What is the goal that gives missions its nobility and strength? Here, too, our text provides the answer: “As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you.”

To what has the Son been sent? Paul answers this very clearly when he writes in the Epistle to the Philippians: “He made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness, ... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and [and this is the purpose of it all] every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

The Son humbled and emptied Himself, took on the form of a servant, and in this way accomplished the work of redemption. Now He is glorified and sits at God's right hand and governs with His Word until one day all will be one in worship, living to the glory of God the Father.

Usually when asked what is the purpose of missions, we answer: the conversion of the heathen, the saving of souls. This is beautiful and good, but this cannot possibly be the final purpose that gives mission its nobility and strength.

Church is a means, not a goal

"What else?" one may ask. The expansion of the church, others will answer. However, the church is a means, not a goal.

No, we must return to Him who also in missions, works out His decree. To Him who, also here, says to us: I do not do this for your sake but for My great name's sake." To the glory of God the Father – this is the final goal of Jesus' coming, the final goal of the church, and therefore also the final goal of missions. When the church forgets this, she moves away from the right foundation. Only when she continually keeps this goal before her eyes, will she – as a means – be serious about the conversion of sinners, the saving of immortal souls and the expansion of the church.

In this way she will come to her full strength. What is the strength of the church? This resides in her "being weak." Because, says the apostle Paul, "When I am weak, then I am strong." It is exactly this sense of weakness, this nothingness and smallness, this sense of complete inability, that leads the Christian church to depend on God. Because of this, she enjoys God's help through the Spirit who lives in her.

This is why the Christian church can do nothing to her own glory, but sends to the glory of God. Someone who truly loves his Father in heaven, who has said that he will not give his glory to another – how can such a person stand it that, among the heathen, idols get the honor that belongs only to the Father? Who can stand it that He is unknown by thousands and millions and replaced by false gods?

Idol worship hurts God the most

In the Old Testament it is idol worship that most hurts God and is most severely punished. If we are children of this God, redeemed by His Son, we who once also served idols but are now saved through His boundless mercy, according to the counsel of His love, will we not be moved to pity for others?

The church of Jesus Christ may never forget, that she is like a besieged fort surrounded by enemies. She is called to continuous and uninterrupted battle, and in all her striving the goal must be to take away from Satan what belongs to Jesus.

According to God's eternal counsel, there must come before the throne of God not just a great multitude of people, without regard where they are from, but His elect will be a church divided into generations, nations and tongues, and as such she will sing that new song before the throne.

Jesus said to His church, "You shall inherit the earth." Therefore, as lovely and touching as the conversion of a few souls might be, it is not just about the conversion of a few souls, but about the conversion of people as nations.

What is, then, the calling of the church? It is this: First of all to bear spiritual children and then to send them out. If they are present, then sending them out will happen as a matter of course. Then a voice will ask: "Whom shall I send?" And the answer will be, "Send me because from my mother's womb I have been called for this purpose; the fiery coal from the altar has also touched my lips. I shall witness for You."