



1 Christendom and beyond

¹To understand the significance for us of Jesus commissioning his disciples, it is helpful to look at certain aspects of church history. The book of Acts, while leaving us uncertain as to what will happen to Paul, takes the early church from Jerusalem towards the ends of the world via Judea and Samaria. As far as the vast majority of the early Christians were concerned, the Roman Empire was their world; Rome, where Paul ended up, was for them the centre of their known world.

Despite Christians initially being among the poorest and most marginalised within the Roman Empire, and periodically facing severe persecution, by the beginning of the fourth century Christians formed 10% of the empire's population. This averaged a 40% growth each decade over a period of 250 years! The Christian population included respected citizens; Christian influence was increasing and paganism was waning. Constantine was sympathetic to Christianity and had a vision, before the Battle of Milvian Bridge (AD312), that he should fight under a Christian banner. He did so and won, making him sole emperor of the Western Roman Empire. The Edict of Milan, the following year, took away the risk of Christians being persecuted and gave them new rights. From 324 until his death in 337, Constantine was the emperor of the whole of the Roman Empire. He built Constantinople, modern-day Istanbul, as the New Rome, in 330.

Constantine was deeply religious, and combined his original 'solar monotheism' (sun worship) with his rather poor grasp of Christianity and was baptised just before his death. Constantine was keen to get rid of paganism and Christianity was a vehicle to do this. Gradually Christianity became the imperial religion and, with persecution still a recent memory, Christians could only see this whole process as being part of God's will. Christians and the church received financial inducements and Christian leaders gained status. The initial makeup of the Christian community transcended socio-economic and gender barriers; Christians were good at caring for not only their poor, but also the pagan poor and there was, generally, a return to monotheism. Within 80 years of the Edict of Milan, Christianity had become the imperial religion and Christendom had been established.

An imperial religion demanded unity of belief. Constantine saw ecumenical councils, bringing together church leaders from different countries and traditions, as a way of achieving this. Instead they defined what could be believed in within the Roman Empire and created barriers of belief with Christians outside of the Roman Empire. Although humility and tolerance of other beliefs had been characteristics of the early church, gradually Christians gained a sense of arrogance; inducements, coercion and force were sometimes used to bring people to faith. Those who became Christians were rarely given an effective catechism and Christian teaching was about avoiding heresy, rather than about any sense of ethical transformation or spiritual growth. With church and state so closely tied together, heresy was the same as treason, and was punished accordingly.

St Augustine of Hippo (354–430) developed biblical interpretations which helpfully related biblical teaching to the realities of Christendom, but some of this took the church into, what I believe to be, unhelpful directions. Originally the church was viewed as being distinct from the world, but as the church took on more of the world's values, the church and the world became one. Although the parable of the wheat and weeds (Matthew 13:24–30, 37–43) was about the world, it was now seen to



be about the church which would be divided into wheat and weeds at the end of the age. In the parable of the wedding banquet, the master tells his slave to 'compel people to come in' (Luke 14:23). For Augustine, compelling people to become Christians, by whatever means, was something that Jesus had made legitimate with this parable! The Old Testament was about the nation of Israel, the New Testament was about groups of individuals. Often the Old Testament was seen as being more useful for forming rules and ethical standards within Christendom than the New Testament.

Discipleship became equated with loyal citizenship and maintaining social order became more important than achieving social justice. The Christian focus changed from the coming of God's kingdom to an emphasis upon individual salvation. Loving enemies, and the pacifism of the early Christians, were replaced by the concept of the Holy War and the cross became a symbol of power to be fought under, rather than a symbol of the self-giving love of Jesus. Within the nation state, everyone was considered to be a Christian, so there was no need to evangelise and mission was replaced by maintenance, except some specialist agencies might conduct mission activities. Overseas mission was about transplanting Christendom.

Through the ups and downs of the Roman Empire, and the whole development of nation states and European wars, Christendom became the glue which held society together. Within the English Reformation there was the break from Rome under Henry VIII, the move to an extreme Protestantism during the brief reign of Edward VI and the return to Rome under Mary Tudor before the establishment of Anglicanism under the longer, and more stable, reign of Elizabeth I. All needed to follow the religious choice of the monarch. Obedience and blindly following were what was required to be a Christian. Personal belief and faith might lead to you differing from the norm and might to lead to heresy and martyrdom rather than to being considered as a Christian!

Although the Reformation tried to take the church back to its biblical roots, it still wanted to hold onto the church-state relationship that Christendom provided. Churches were reformed to change doctrinal beliefs and practices, but there was no attempt to evangelise Christendom or respond to the plight of the poor and marginalised. Before the Reformation, the monasteries had been at the forefront of providing medical, education and social care, but this suffered with the dissolution of the monasteries. By the eighteenth century England wasn't the only European country to be morally and spiritually corrupt. In response to huge social inequalities, some European countries experienced revolutions. England experienced an evangelical revival influenced by people like George Whitfield, Charles Wesley and, later, William Wilberforce, the Clapham Sect and Lord Shaftesbury. In the nineteenth century there was also an Anglo-Catholic renewal. Such renewals focused not only on spiritual renewal, but also addressed social evils within an increasingly urbanised society.

Christendom provided security and certainty, as long as you didn't ask questions. It brought whole nations in touch with Christianity and often provided education and medical care and a safety net of social care. However it blurred the lines between the church and the world and blunted the cutting edge of the Christian message, removing the evangelistic initiative and toning down the emphasis upon distinct Christian teaching.

During the last four centuries certain factors have gradually undermined Christendom:

1. There have been a large number of wars between Christian nations, usually with each nation having the belief that God was on their side in the war. Such wars have resulted in growing numbers of casualties with increasing numbers of civilians killed as well as military.
2. The Enlightenment and the beginning of the 'modern era' suggested that everything could be understood through science and philosophy and there was no need to look at the world through a religious prism. Reason was considered more important than revelation and the focus became far more upon this world than on the next with a belief that science and philosophy could solve all of the world's problems.
3. Scientific developments led to industrialisation, which led to urbanisation and the breakdown of traditional rural communities. The seasons of the church year had been affirmed by the natural rhythm of the seasons in agricultural communities; the population of the urban areas didn't make the same connections.
4. Postmodernism meant that there wasn't just the one interpretation of what was going on; we were opened up to different narratives. Teaching moved away from just being didactic, we were opened up to different text books, with different interpretations and, more recently, the internet means that you no longer need any text books but can just google a topic and believe whatever comes up towards the top of your search.
5. Pluralism has come about in various ways. Both the commercial benefits of globalism and the tragedy of refugees and asylum seekers mean that we encounter diversity of views and other faiths have become worldviews that we come across through the people that we meet, not just through hearsay, so need to take seriously.

The word secularism originally meant the divide between church and state, more recently it has been understood as representing an aggressively anti-Christian perspective. All of this comes at the end of an era where the church has forgotten the need, or strategies, for either evangelising or conducting serious instruction of what Christianity should mean to its followers.

Christendom was quite a long time in its making and, similarly, its demise is gradual. As we move from Christendom to what is referred to as post-Christendom, we are in what is usually known as late-Christendom. We need to hold together these three paradigms as we begin to think about the commission that Jesus gave to his followers.

The end of Christendom means the end of the privileged position that Christians have had and the affirmation that the state has given to the Christian worldview, but it is made more confusing because we don't always know whether we are in Christendom, late-Christendom or post-Christendom. We can watch a royal wedding on television, or attend a cathedral service or certain other big Christian activities and believe we are in Christendom. We can listen to those who have given up on Christianity, who know the Christian story and who have given up on church and we experience late-Christendom. We can meet with those who have no understanding of the Christian message and have never been in a church. They may be from another religious faith, with roots in another part of the world, but increasingly they can be indigenous British people. In these encounters we are engaging with post-Christendom.

What are the opportunities and challenges that Christendom still presents to your church?

What are the opportunities and challenges that late/post Christendom presents to your church?

Notes

1. I have been very selective in pulling out some key facts to try to understand this topic. For a fuller understanding I recommend Stuart Murray, *Post Christendom* (Paternoster, 2004).

2 Who is being commissioned?

¹In the final chapter of each of the three synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) we read the story of Jesus commissioning his remaining eleven followers to go and make disciples of all nations. We need to ask ourselves about the relevance of that commission to us today. Who is Jesus really commissioning? Is it just those eleven men, or is it certain individuals who feel that God has called them, or is it the whole church? Luke provides us with a fuller version of this commissioning (Acts 1:6–8). So when they had come together, they asked him, ‘Lord, is this the time when you will restore the kingdom to Israel?’ He replied, ‘It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

Here they were instructed to wait until after the Holy Spirit came upon them. The events of Pentecost, described in Acts 2, brought about a great sharing of the gospel around Jerusalem. The martyrdom of Stephen (Acts 7) led to the persecution of Christians with many moving out from Jerusalem (Acts 8) and Philip sharing his faith in Samaria and with the Ethiopian eunuch. We have mentioned Peter sharing his faith with the Gentile Cornelius (Acts 10–11), but there was a lot of work for the Holy Spirit to do to convince those early Jewish believers that the gospel was for the Gentiles as well as the Jews. Eventually it was taken into the wider world. It certainly sounds as if the first disciples did not think that the Great Commission was aimed at them!

It is interesting to note the attitude of the early Protestants towards the Great Commission. Johann Gerard, who died in 1637 stated that ‘the command of Christ to preach the gospel to all the world ceased with the apostles; in their day the offer of salvation had been made to all the nations; there was no need for the offer to be made a second time to those who had already refused it’.

Robert Bellarmine, a noted Roman Catholic scholar, clearly saw that the lack of belief in mission of the Protestants proved that they were heretical. Writing in the late 17th century, about the 18 marks of the true church, he stated, ‘Heretics are never said to have converted either pagans or Jews to the faith, but only to have perverted Christians. But in this one century the Catholics have converted many thousands of heathens in the new world. Every year a certain number of Jews are converted and baptised at Rome by Catholics who adhere in loyalty to the Bishop of Rome; and there are also some Turks who are converted by Catholics both at Rome and elsewhere. The Lutherans compare



themselves to the apostles and the evangelists; yet though they have amongst them a very large number of Jews; and in Poland and Hungary have the Turks as their near neighbours, they have hardly converted so much as a handful.'

The early Protestants, like the early church at the time of the first disciples, had other issues to worry about. Until 1648 they were literally fighting for their lives, so they interpreted the Great Commission in a limited way. It was only when the western colonial expansion began in the 18th century that the Protestants rediscovered the Great Commission. Meanwhile, there had been Roman Catholic missionary work related to the Spanish and Portuguese colonial endeavours including South America, India and China. We know from the account in Acts that the commission would not come into effect until the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus' words, in Acts 1:8, are a promise rather than a command, a promise which would be fulfilled with the gift of the Holy Spirit. The Acts account tells how one further matter still needed to be sorted out after the Great Commission and before Pentecost. A twelfth apostle would be appointed to replace Judas. The fact that Matthias was chosen, in verse 26, rather than Joseph called Barsabbas, seems immaterial. Neither of them is ever mentioned again in the Bible. What was important was that the apostles were twelve again; within Hebrew tradition this is the number of completeness. There were twelve tribes of Israel and Jesus deliberately chose twelve disciples to show that he represented the fulfilment of Israel.

The completion of Christ's mission is symbolised by the New Creation and the advent of the New Jerusalem, complete with twelve gates, twelve walls and twelve angels (Revelation 21:12-14). The fact that the Spirit did not come until the disciples were twelve again indicated that it was the whole body of Christ, the church, that was being commissioned and not just a group of individuals. The commission given, by Jesus, to those eleven disciples was really given to the whole church; to all of us. But what do we mean by the church? I believe that there are two dangers that we can fall into in trying to answer this question. Some will want to speak of the elect and define the church as being those who are saved; others, in reaction to sense of exclusion that this answer produces, will want to avoid the terms like elect, or chosen people, and feel more comfortable with the blurring of the boundaries, such as happened during Christendom. My starting point is that God loves his whole creation; he loves all people and desires to save all people. So how can terms like elect and chosen people fit into this vision?

In answering this question, we need to have an understanding of what the term 'elect' really means, and not fall into the trap that Israel so often fell into in the Old Testament. When we elect people within a democracy, either politically or within organisations, then what we are really doing is choosing people for responsibility; for specific tasks, not for privilege or status. Sadly, those we elect sometimes feel, and act, as if they have been chosen for privilege, rather than for responsibility! This is the trap that Israel often fell into. Israel assumed that being God's chosen people meant that God had chosen them so that they could be protected and treated with preference.

In his mission to try to save everybody, God chooses certain people for specific tasks. Those that he chooses become his church; they are set aside, to be separate from the world in order to bring God's redeeming love to the world in order that all can be saved. People are not chosen because they are better, cleverer or wealthier than other people and they certainly aren't chosen to be treated better



than other people or especially protected. As mentioned earlier, many who God chose in the Old Testament weren't particularly nice, but he chose them to do particular things for him. God's creation is diverse, people are diverse and the people that God chooses now will be diverse and many will be different from us; it is not up to us to decide that we can only work with those who are similar to us. God commissions those that he has chosen to be his church.

How can we affirm that we are chosen for responsibility, rather than privilege both within, and outside of, our churches?

Notes

1. Much of this section was originally included in Stuart Buchanan, *On Call* (BRF, 2001), pp. 111-12.

3 A Trinitarian Great Commission

¹The early Protestant church ignored the Great Commission until the late eighteenth century; this coincided with the beginning of the great colonial expansion. Just as the early church sent people to share the gospel with the Jews scattered through the Roman Empire, so did the churches of the western colonial powers send clergy to minister to their own people in the colonies. Just as the Holy Spirit used the early Christians to reach the Gentiles, so the same Spirit used these clergy to reach not just the European people, but also the indigenous people in the colonies. By the end of the eighteenth century God's initiative had become a human initiative. For better, or for worse, the Great Commission was linked with the colonial expansion.

This colonial expansion was a time when Britain had decided, 'All authority on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make subjects of all nations; immersing them in the ways of the British, and teach them to observe all the British laws. And know that the Empire will be with you always: yes, to the end of time.'²

The British administrator, overseas, was told: 'You will receive power from the British navy, army and economy, and then you will be witnesses to what Britain stands for throughout Africa and Asia, and indeed to the ends of the earth.'³

In Matthew's account of the Great Commission, those commissioned are sent out with 'all authority in heaven and earth' - the authority of the Father. In Acts it is with 'the power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you' - the power of the Holy Spirit. The missionary endeavour of the colonial era had this same sense of authority and power. But how much did those on the receiving end of the colonial missionary enterprise feel that that the authority and power were of God the Father and the Holy Spirit rather than of the colonial rule?

As the Great Commission has become so caught up with the secular authority and power of



colonialism, and neo-colonialism, it has become very easy to reject the Great Commission as being no longer relevant or appropriate and for it to be viewed as a remnant of a past colonial era which we need to repent of. I have often heard the term 'spiritual imperialism' used with regard to the idea of Christians going to the nations; to those of other faiths or world views. This attitude doesn't just apply to going to the nations; it is also experienced when we consider sharing our beliefs with those who are not Christian within our own country and locality.

While this is a criticism that should be taken seriously, I feel that the answer lies in looking again at our Bibles. Is there no version of the Great Commission to be found in John's gospel? There is: 'After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained"' (John 20:20-23). This understanding of Jesus' commissioning his disciples has been largely ignored. Perhaps the reason it was ignored is because it didn't fit so well with the emphasis upon authority and power that undergirded colonial expansion.

The disciples are sent out as the Father has sent Jesus. But how did the Father send Jesus? Jesus showing the disciples his hands and side - the marks of the nails in his hands and the wound of the sword in his side - summed up his sending. The Son was sent by way of incarnation to crucifixion. He was sent the way of the cross, the way of total vulnerability. Jesus sends his disciples, his church, and us, as part of that church, in the same way.

In Matthew they are sent out with authority - the authority of the Father.

In Acts they are sent out with power - the power of the Holy Spirit.

In John they are sent out with vulnerability - the vulnerability of the Son.

We need to hold these three aspects of the Great Commission together in the same balance as they have within the Trinity. The church is commissioned to go out with the authority of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit and the vulnerability of the Son. If we emphasise one or two of these elements at the expense of the others, we can easily distort the good news that we have to share, and we are not being true to our understanding of a Trinitarian God.

If we emphasise power and authority at the expense of vulnerability, we can, as has already been shown, get confused with the power and authority of our nation, wealth, education or background. If we emphasise the vulnerability and forget about the authority and power, we can easily end up with a crisis of confidence in the whole concept of mission, which seems prevalent in our own era. We can get so caught up in the vulnerability and the authority that we can experience a crisis of confidence in God's ability, because we forget that God does give us the very real power of the Holy Spirit. We can easily over emphasise the power of the Holy Spirit, but forget that God wants it used for his mission, and not just to show off that power for its own sake.

We need to be able to hold together these three aspects of how Jesus commissions his church. To



determine the right balance among the three elements might depend upon our particular circumstances but also be shaped by what has gone before. Has there previously been too much emphasis upon power and authority, without any vulnerability? This, certainly, seems to be the model developed during Christendom. Has the emphasis been too much upon vulnerability at the expense of authority and power? This, certainly, has often been the reaction to the lack of humility and vulnerability that existed during Christendom. Prayerfully we can try to discern the Holy Spirit's leading in a particular situation. If in doubt, my advice is to initially opt towards vulnerability; it allows the Spirit to take the initiative and show his power, and the Father's authority, through our vulnerability.

This rediscovery of the vulnerability of Jesus within Christian mission is encapsulated with the concept of incarnational mission. Often the mission model was one where Christians went to do good things within another area, before returning home to their own area afterwards. Incarnational mission means living within the area where you are involved in mission; it means sharing in the issues faced by those who live in that area. Sharing in the reality and fears as well as the hopes and aspirations and joys and celebrations of that community; working closely with those people, Christians and non-Christians alike, in sharing the love of God within that area.

The 1910 Edinburgh Mission Conference was an ecumenical mission conference that looked at mission to different people groups and different parts of the world that was attended by Christians from Europe and North America. The centenary of that conference was marked by the 2010 Edinburgh Mission Conference; this welcomed Christians from all around the world. I believe that it was at this 2010 Conference that the term '*mission with*' began to be used instead of the traditional understanding of '*mission to*', which had been the dynamic of the 1910 Conference. 'Many feel more comfortable speaking of mission *with* others, rather than mission *to* others. Mission *to* implies a hierarchy within the relationship and that it is the other person who should change, not us. Being involved in God's mission *with* others, acknowledges that God can change both parties through the experience.'⁴

One of my own learning points from being involved with incarnational mission in inner-city areas was that although it was important to be involved in mission *with* others there can be a danger that the word '*mission*' becomes a catchall for everything and the idea of Christian mission becomes watered down. It is essential we hold on to the distinctiveness of the Christian emphasis of mission and, of course, explaining that distinctiveness becomes an opportunity for sensitively witnessing to our own Christian hope and motivation. It also means taking on board the worldview that motivates the actions of others and how that might challenge and broaden our own faith. The story of Peter and Cornelius (Acts 10–11), previously mentioned in part 2, is an example of how Peter has his Christian worldview broadened through the engagement in mission.

Think of aspects of mission that you and/or your church have been involved in. How do you see the balance between the authority of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit and the vulnerability of the Son within these aspects of mission?

Notes

1. Much of this section was originally included in Stuart Buchanan, *On Call* (BRF, 2001), pp. 113-15.
2. Paraphrasing Matthew 28:18-2
3. Paraphrasing Acts 1:8.
4. Stuart Buchanan, *Cross Cultural Christian* (St John's Nottingham, 2010), p. 205.

4 Forgiving and retaining sins

As well as saying that 'as the Father has sent me, so I send you', John describes Jesus as telling his disciples, 'If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained' (John 20:23). I need to be honest and admit that I feel uncomfortable with the responsibility that this verse implies that I should be taking on. I also often feel uncomfortable with Christians, who seem to have no problem with this task. My problem is not so much with the forgiving, but with the retaining of sins.

A difficult text can be ignored, but should be looked at more deeply; identifying what my problem is and what the text is really saying might resolve the dilemma. I think that it is significant that Jesus spoke about forgiving and retaining sins immediately after saying 'as the Father has sent me, so I send you.' The Father sent the Son by the way of incarnation and vulnerability. There are three other factors about Jesus being sent by the Father that relate to sin. The Father sent the Son to die for our sins, be falsely condemned for sins that he did not commit and to forgive our sins.

Modernity meant that the church felt that it had the only valid worldview; it had all of the answers and could speak out strongly about what sin was and condemn sin and sinners. Many would feel that the church got rather too good at doing this and that some parts of the church continue this practice zealously. Post-modernity has made us more aware of other worldviews and that we, in our own time and place, might not have all of the answers. Christians are also more aware of the church's hypocrisy or, as Jesus described it in Matthew 7:1-5, ignoring the log in our own eye and highlighting the speck in someone else's eye. Many Christians have become increasingly embarrassed by being identified with a church that focuses so much on sin and is judgemental. Condemning and retaining sin is something that the church used to do but much of the church has abandoned. We easily give the impression that the church isn't over-bothered about sin anymore and doesn't take sin too seriously.

A very understandable change of perspective; the only trouble is that Jesus took sin very seriously. In fact, he took sin so seriously that he was prepared to die for sin: die for my sin; die for your sin; die for the sins of the world. Jesus came to redeem the world as part of God's initiative to transform his creation so that it would become as he intended it to be. Jesus couldn't achieve this by just ignoring what was wrong. Yes, Jesus will freely offer God's forgiveness of sin, but first of all he needs to identify, name and confront sin. Through his sacrificial life and death he will overcome and defeat sin, but he can't do this by ignoring sin. If we don't name and identify what sin is in our own



day and age and culture, then we are unable to try to address the causes and consequences of sin. After identifying sin, we can then begin to work with God in trying to address the tasks of restoring God's fallen creation. This is why Jesus feels that it is so important to take sin seriously that he is prepared to die for our sins.

But before we rush to identify, name and confront sin, we need to consider the second way in which the Father sends the Son. He is sent to be falsely condemned for sins that he did not commit; it is primarily the religious authorities that condemn him. Jesus was acting out God's will and purposes but the powers that be, particularly the religious authorities, were falsely accusing him of sinful behaviour. While I might feel that this gives the perfect excuse for avoiding passing any sort of judgement, I am not convinced that Jesus would agree with me. I need to try to look at things as Jesus would; with the 'mind of Christ'.

Jesus was speaking into a worldview where sin was defined by an Old Testament perspective. There was the law, and the Pharisees had come up with lots of additional rules that helped create new sins; they created an impossible to keep set of laws, but seemed to totally miss the big picture of what God really expected and wanted from everyone. Throughout much of Israel's history, God had sent prophets. There were two recurring themes uttered by these prophets. These were God's demand for justice and righteousness, which included just and fair treatment of the poor and marginalised; there was also condemnation of idolatry. Of course, we no longer worship idols - or so we think. We can take away the fancy names of the gods the idols represented and we can take away the shapes, forms and materials of these idols, but the underlying values that those idols represented were power, greed and fertility or lust. I think that these idols are often still worshipped instead of the God revealed in the life of Jesus.

I assume that when the church bought into the whole Christendom package, supported by the power and wealth of the state, then certain aspects of power and greed became part of the deal and ceased to be considered idols in quite the same way. At some point, sexual sins became the most easily identifiable type of sin; unless, of course, you had the power and wealth to hide such sins! This was probably also true in Jesus' time, as the story of the woman taken in adultery (John 8:2-11) suggests. Given that it takes two people to commit adultery, why wasn't there also a man taken in adultery? The answer surely lies in the way that society and the religious authorities often view different people's sins; some people are considered sinful and others not.

I find it helpful to consider the story of the woman taken in adultery as three distinct stories; one told explicitly, and in detail, and two that we need to interpret by thinking about what isn't said and why it isn't said. The woman in the story is confronted by Jesus, is not condemned by Jesus but told to go away and 'from now on do not sin again'; she is forgiven by Jesus. Using the gaps, we can create the story of 'the man not taken in adultery'. Here, the man who committed adultery never faces up to his sin, is not confronted by Jesus, is not told that he isn't condemned by Jesus and never gets the instruction not to sin again. But it is only when we allow Jesus to confront us about our sin that we can repent, that is turn our lives around, and be forgiven and are free to move on as someone who is forgiven, told not to sin again and be able to follow Jesus. In this untold story, we are reminded why it is so important that sin is named and confronted; repentance and forgiveness



can only occur when sin is identified and addressed; otherwise, by default, sins are retained.

The third story is the story of 'the religious authorities which are complicit in ignoring certain sin'. Obviously 'the system' had decided who should be identified as potential sinners and whose sin should be ignored. This isn't about forgiving or retaining sin, this is about one rule for women and one for men; one rule for the rich and one for the poor; one rule for this ethnic group or class and a different rule for another ethnic group or class. It is also, as suggested above, about ceasing to define the lack of justice and righteousness as sins, ignoring the idolatry of power and greed which just leaves the sexual sins of others as the predominant sin to focus upon.

It often seems as if we define sin as the things that other people do, which we disagree with. The message that Jesus gives us is that we are all sinners but through Jesus, if we admit our sins we can be forgiven and, with the power of the Holy Spirit, attempt to sin no more. It is from this starting point of humility, aware that we are forgiven sinners, that we should be working with other Christians in trying to work out what Jesus really meant by sin, and how we can help people find forgiveness and new life rather than condemnation.

A dilemma is that sin can be identified differently in different cultures and in different ages. As suggested, it can be easy to equate sin with another three-letter word beginning with the letter 's'. But sin is what enters the world in the story of the fall in Genesis 1—11. This is the narrative that describes the breakdown of the relationships between God and people, people and other people or between groups and nations; the relationship we have with ourselves; the relationship between people and creation. With this understanding we can see sin as anything that is helping to exploit or breakdown any of these relationships and stand in the way of how God wanted his creation to function. Jesus is condemned by the religious authorities for healing on the sabbath (Mark 3:1-6). On another occasion he says that he 'came that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (John 10:10). We are unlikely to find that acts that are life-giving, expressing unselfish love or enrich life are sinful.

Personally, with the Old Testament prophets, I feel that if acts are denying others of justice and righteousness and are exploiting people, we should be naming them as sinful. If acts are helping breakdown our relationships with God, other people, groups or nations or with God's creation, they are likely to be sinful. I believe that we are all made in the image of God and that acts that demean people's humanity, our own or other people's humanity, or cause us to be ill at ease with ourselves, they are likely to be sinful. Again, not everyone will agree in defining what acts are sinful, but I find that this gives a helpful starting point in the debate. It is a debate which needs to be entered into with humility and awareness that we could have got it wrong; awareness of the need to be prayerfully re-assessing scripture and testing our conclusions with the wider body of Christ.

I don't have all of the answers, but I would be very worried if I felt that I did have all of the answers. Despite this, I realise the responsibilities that Christians like me do have in trying to provide a Christian perspective; otherwise sin might become defined solely by Christians who do feel that they have all of the answers. And that really would worry me.



How can you resource yourself for your own role within the tasks of forgiving and retaining sins?

5 Commissioned to where?

Clearly 'Jerusalem', 'Judea and Samaria' and 'the ends of the earth' are three distinct geographical areas. What is not so obvious is that they represent three distinct mission paradigms. Each would present its own challenges and would require different practitioners and different strategies. Despite Jesus' commission, there didn't initially appear to be a human strategy involved; the strategist was the Holy Spirit and the disciples struggled to realise that God's mission would take them outside of Jerusalem. There was a delay between being commissioned, prior to the ascension, and the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, but the feast of Pentecost gave the ideal timing for the beginning of the Jerusalem phase of beginning to fulfil the commission.

Those who gathered in Jerusalem that feast of Pentecost would have been devout Jews; not only from Jerusalem and the surrounding areas, but also many making a pilgrimage to the festival from the Jewish Diaspora. They were people who were familiar with the Jewish scriptures and with the longed for Messianic hope. We do not know exactly what rumours were circulating about Jesus' resurrection but, as the disciples manifested the Spirit, Peter stood up and connected the pouring out of the Spirit with prophecies of the prophet Joel and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus (Acts 2). Peter, a devout Jew, is speaking to other devout Jews who believe the same scriptures and hold the same aspirations and who are able to make the connection between what they are experiencing in front of them, their knowledge of the scriptures, rumours of recent events and their religious aspirations. It is not surprising that 'day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved' (Acts 3:47). Stephen's speech, before he was martyred, again related Jesus' life, death and resurrection within the narrative of Jewish history and Messianic hope.

The mission paradigm of *Jerusalem*¹ is mission to people who are similar to you and have the potential to make the same connections between events and scriptures as you are making yourself. Although the Jerusalem mission continued, the martyrdom of Stephen and the persecution and the scattering of Christians into Judea and Samaria marked the beginning of mission to Judea and Samaria. There is no human mission strategy involved here; the Holy Spirit remains the strategist. The people of Judea were still Jews, but more on the margins and it is likely that their beliefs and practices would have been diluted compared with those who lived in Jerusalem.

Those living in *Samaria* held some common beliefs with Judaism, but had also been subject to very different influences as well and generally there was antagonism between Jews and Samaritans. The mission to Samaria focused a lot on challenging evil forces and magic. We read that it looked as if Simon the magician had come to faith (Acts 8:18-24), but then we realise that there was a whole new depth of understanding, and further repentance, that would be needed before that would occur. Mission in Judea and Samaria is to people who have some similarities of understanding and of religious vocabulary to the disciples, but also many differences. Superficially, it can look as if it will be easy, but can then get complicated when the differences are discovered. It is far harder work

than mission in Jerusalem.

To lead mission to *the ends of the earth*, the Holy Spirit chooses one who initially seems the most unlikely candidate; we first come across Paul when, known as Saul, he is persecuting Christians and present at Stephen's death (Acts 8:1). The dramatic nature of his conversion probably helped prepare him, as did his detailed knowledge of Judaism and of Greek philosophy and also his legal mind and Roman citizenship. A big difference between mission to the ends of the earth, compared with Samaria, is that those you encounter are less likely to have preconceptions about the Christian narrative and beliefs. The story of Paul in Athens (Acts 17:16–34) gives some indications of a possible strategy.

Paul was motivated by his distress at the prevailing idolatry. The Athenians just enjoyed a good philosophical argument (v. 21) with anyone, but Paul was sincere in his motivation (v. 16). Through discussion, he was invited to address a meeting (v. 19). He started by praising how religious the Athenians were (v. 22), rather than trying to condemn or belittle them and their beliefs. He found a starting point by identifying who their unknown god really was (v. 23) and goes on to back this up by quoting from their philosophers, rather than his own scriptures. Paul's starting point lay within the Athenians' religious practices and texts. Mission to the ends of the earth is to people who are very different to us and, obviously, Paul had done a lot of research and preparation before his encounter and, we go on to read that some scoffed, but some became believers (v. 32–34); progress was slow, compared with mission in Jerusalem.

With these three mission paradigms we should notice parallels with terms used in part 1, chapter 1 (The empty tomb), where we mentioned the church, the de-churched and the un-churched and part 4, chapter 1 (Christendom and beyond), where we mentioned Christendom, late-Christendom and post-Christendom.

Mission to Jerusalem is mission to people who are like us, have similar cultural understandings and values and the same understanding of the same texts as us. Every generation needs to be re-evangelised to be convicted of what their faith means to them within their own age and culture. This is mission to the church and to Christendom.

Mission to Judea and Samaria is mission to people who share much of our culture and values but do not share our faith. Usually they will be familiar with some of the Christian story, but perhaps have a very different interpretation of what it means compared to us, and hold on to a sense of folk religion; perhaps they have experience of church, but have rejected it. They may have found church boring, hypocritical or irrelevant; they may have been damaged by experiences of church or Christians, or they may have just drifted away and not followed up. These might be people who will attend church at Christmas, Mothering Sunday or other big events, or seek baptism or other rites of passage within church, but not normally attend. This is mission to the de-churched and to late-Christendom.

Mission to the ends of the earth is mission to people who are different to us. They may be ethnically different to us, they may belong to a different world faith – but they don't need to be; increasingly they are indigenous British people. They don't have any real understanding or experience of



Christianity or of church and won't have had meaningful discussions with practicing Christians. This is mission to the unchurched and to post-Christendom.

As mentioned, for the disciples Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and the ends of the earth were three distinct geographical areas. An added complexity for us is that we may encounter these three overlapping mission paradigms, which require different mission strategies, within one geographical location. As we, and our churches, engage in mission, we need to prayerfully consider which mission paradigm we should be operating within and the best way in which to live out Christ's mission within that particular context.

Think of some different mission opportunities that you or your church are/could be involved in that fit into the three mission paradigms: Jerusalem (Christendom - the churched); Judea and Samaria (late Christendom - de-churched); ends of the earth (post Christendom - unchurched). What are the different mission strategies that are applicable within these different mission paradigms?

Notes

1. The description of these three mission paradigms are taken from *Sharpening our focus on Evangelism and Church Growth: A preamble to the agenda for the February 2011 Anglican Communion Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative (ECGI) Core Group meeting presented by Bishop Patrick Yu on 15 February 2011 in Kuala Lumpur*. Bishop Patrick was then Bishop of York-Scarborough in Toronto Diocese, Canada and Chair of the Evangelism and Church Growth Initiative Core Group.

6 Commissioned to what?

Jesus commissions us, his church, and he commissions us with the authority of the Father, the power of the Holy Spirit and the vulnerability of the Son. He commissions us to our modern-day Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria and the ends of the earth, but what does he commission us to do? The different gospel writers all contribute their part to the bigger picture. We are commissioned to: make disciples, baptising and teaching them (Matthew 28:19-20); proclaim good news to the whole creation (Mark 16:15); proclaim the forgiveness of sins, in his name and be witnesses (Luke 24:47-48); be Jesus' witnesses (Acts 1:8); be sent as the Father sent Jesus and forgive sins (John 20:21-22).

Forgiving sins is a recurring theme, which we have explored earlier in this part and in the previous one; Matthew contributes the threefold task of making disciples, baptising and teaching, but the emphasis of Luke, in both his gospel and in Acts, is witnessing to Jesus. John says this in a different way, as we are to be sent as God sent Jesus. Before exploring this further, it is helpful to comment on the extra dimension that Mark adds; the good news is to be proclaimed to the whole of creation.

The Bible begins with the narrative of God creating his whole creation; the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1). The Bible ends with the New Creation; a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1). The context of the full biblical story is the whole of creation, and so Mark is reminding us that the context for Jesus, and what he sends his church to do, is the whole of creation. Genesis starts with the creation narrative; the final stage of this process, before God rests, is the creation of people, made in God's image, to be stewards of his creation. The Genesis narrative goes on to explain that humankind is disobedient and rebels against God. We describe these passages as 'the fall' and talk of sin coming into the world, but as we read this story (Genesis 3) we see that not only does this lead to a breakdown in the relationship between God and humanity, but other relationships breakdown as well.

As soon as Adam and Eve eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, they feel shame and guilt and try to hide from God; neither is comfortable with self any longer; they experience dis-ease (Genesis 3:8-10). Next, we get the blame game, and they fall out with each other (Genesis 3:11-13). As a consequence, creation becomes fallen (Genesis 3:17-19) and will no longer cooperate fully with humanity. Within these first three chapters of Genesis the narrator is introducing us to God creating the heavens and the earth and concluding that it was, indeed, good; but then, through humankind's disobedience, sin enters the world and we see the breakdown of the relationship between God and people; individual people's relationship with themselves; the relationship between people, and hence between factions, communities, people groups and nations; the relationship between people and creation.

The good news for the whole creation will be nothing less than the restoration of these four relationships. As one of the broken relationships is that between different groups, it is not surprising to find that different parts of the church can sometimes focus upon their own interpretation of mission while denying the validity of other group's interpretation. Some will only want to bring people back to God, but not worry about how people treat each other. Others might want to share God's love with each other, but not question why injustices in society are accepted and never challenged. There might be an emphasis upon caring for creation at the same time as completely ignoring the role in bringing people back into full relationship with God. Anglicans have found it helpful to hold together the restoration of these broken relationships, with the more specific tasks spelled out by Matthew, within the Five Marks of Mission, which states:

The mission of the church is the mission of Christ:

1. To proclaim the good news of the kingdom;
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
3. To respond to human need by loving service;
4. To transform unjust structures of society, to challenge violence of every kind and pursue peace and reconciliation;
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation, and sustain and renew the life of the earth.¹

The Five Marks of Mission helpfully affirm that all of these expressions of mission are part of the totality of God's mission. Not everybody will be called to each of these aspects of mission, but it is



important to recognise them all as valid parts of God's mission and to recognise that those involved in different aspects of mission are co-workers in the tasks of mission.

Statements like the Five Marks of Mission can be very useful tools. Some have found it helpful to reduce each Mark of Mission to a single word: tell; teach; tend; transform; treasure. Although easier to remember, there is always the danger that the words become a checklist so that we try to fit what we are already doing into these Five Marks. God's mission has these different dimensions, but we shouldn't lose sight of the bigger picture; God's mission is nothing less than the restoration of these different broken relationships to help transform the whole of creation back to how God intended it to be.

Luke, in both his gospel and in Acts, has Jesus send the disciples to be his witnesses and John has Jesus saying that as the Father sent me, so I send you (John 20:21). More than the individual parts of the story, we are sent to witness to Jesus in the way that Jesus, himself, was sent. This begs the question, often repeated within the gospels and which Jesus spells out specifically in Matthew 16:13-20, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?' Matthew, writing primarily for a Jewish readership, starts to answer this question at the beginning of his gospel, tracing Jesus' ancestry from Abraham through to Joseph; Jesus is the new Abraham. Luke, writing primarily for a Gentile readership, starts with Joseph and traces Jesus' ancestors back to Adam, son of God (Luke 3:23-38); Jesus is the new Adam.

John begins his gospel with 'in the beginning was the Word'. Making some parallels with the character Wisdom, in Proverbs 8:22-31, Jesus being no less than a co-creator, with God the Father, of all things (John 1:1-5). Paul, among many other explanations, describes Jesus as the first fruit of the new creation (1 Corinthians 15:20-23). The new creation described in the last two chapters of Revelation, is something we will return to in the next chapter; the book of Revelation will also describe Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega (Revelation 22:13); the beginning and the end.

The Bible is God's salvation history. The New Testament writers show Jesus as: creation's co-creator; the conclusion of history; the redeemer of history; the purpose of history. This is the Jesus who commissions us to witness to him. The book of Revelation brings God's salvation story to its conclusion with heaven coming down to earth. Jesus taught his disciples to pray with the words of the Lord's Prayer where we pray, 'Thy Kingdom come on earth as in heaven.' Jesus is the king sent by the Father to inaugurate the rule of the kingdom on earth. Jesus begins the process of conquering and redeeming a fallen earthly realm, but he conquers and redeems through the power of sacrificial love. Through his ministry we see people being forgiven and their relationship with God being restored. We see evil overcome, conquered and cast out; we see people being healed, restored, transformed, returned to wholeness, reconciled with each other and comfortable with themselves again.

We become Jesus' witnesses by accepting him and worshipping him as our king and being citizens of his kingdom, here on earth, by following his example of lovingly living out the kingdom, the kingdom that conquers through self-giving love. We are commissioned by Jesus to work with God in the tasks of healing the broken relationships and helping in the tasks of redeeming and renewing God's



creation through loving action and transforming societies and the world's values; to challenging unjust and dehumanising structures; acting out God's healing and forgiveness to help usher in God's kingdom here on earth. Although our own calling will be to specific tasks, within specific places, it is important that we don't lose sight of how such roles fit into the bigger picture of God redeeming His whole creation. There are many different tasks of mission but, at one level, they are all included within that first, overarching, Mark of Mission mentioned above, of proclaiming the good news of the kingdom. That must be our objective in every aspect of mission that we are involved in.

What mission tasks are you, or your church, involved in? Are there aspects of mission, suggested by the analysis in this section, which you or your church could explore for future involvement?

Notes

1. The Five Marks of Mission were agreed by the Anglican Consultative Council, the three-yearly meeting of representatives from the whole of the Anglican Communion. The first four marks were agreed in 1984 and the fifth added in 1990. In 2012 the fourth mark was modified to include peace and reconciliation.