



THE FIVE MARKS OF MISSION AS SPIRITUAL FORMATION REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

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In this article I will suggest that the so-called ‘Five Marks of Mission’ are useful conversation partners for us to draw on as we reflect on our spiritual formation. Spiritual formation is an important aspect of Christian life that is essential for us if we are to grow as missionally active disciples of Christ. Arguably, the starting point of all spiritual formation is based on experiencing the real presence of the Spirit of Jesus within the depths of our beings. Mary Sue Dehmlow Dreier comments: ‘there is a recognisable reality of the Spirit that clearly mediates God’s power and presence to us’ [1].

In terms of my own journey, I attempt to allow a sense of God’s guidance and presence to precede efforts I make to participate in missional activities. I have found Lesslie Newbigin’s trinitarian theology helps me to concentrate on seeking to discern the work of the Holy Spirit as the guiding agent of my spiritual and missional life [2]. I suggest we need to develop a listening posture to hear the guiding voice of the Spirit, so we might participate in the ongoing mission of Jesus [3]. In what follows we will explore how the Five Marks of Mission can positively

concentrate our attention on reflectively discerning, and then participating in the mission of God.

Proclaiming the Good News of the Kingdom

Proclamation has been an enduring feature of communicating the gospel message to people. However, what we focus on in that proclamation is an important question to consider. This is especially so if we are to reflect on whom God wants us to communicate with, and what we are to say. Evangelical practice has generally been conversionist – making personal salvation the focus of its evangelistic enterprise. However, if recent New Testament scholarship has taught us anything, it is that Jesus never simply had a gospel of personal salvation in mind [4]. Jesus’ mission concentrated on the good news of the in-breaking reign of God.

In terms of the Jesus of the synoptic tradition, his version of the gospel of the kingdom did not assume that we are saved so that God can serve our needs. Rather it called disciples to become spiritually formed as completely allegiant followers of Christ the Lord [5]. Discipleship

was a call to serve the king, and the values of the kingdom of God. It was based on a transformed life, lived out as a lifestyle of faithfully loving God and one's neighbour as oneself (Matthew 22:37; Deuteronomy 6:5). Theologically central to the good news of the kingdom is that Christ's followers' lives narrate a story of what it looks like to place God as king in everything. I believe it is this kind of understanding of the 'Good News' that needs to help us reflect on what we are being spiritually transformed to become.

Teaching, Baptising and Nurturing New Believers

Evangelical and Protestant discipleship formation has focused very much on a cognitive gospel [6]. We try to address complex intellectual questions raised by a post-Christian society [7]. Hence, disciple-making practices have been focused on helping people to obtain a cognitive reasoned faith. Against the backdrop of this cognitive predisposition, has been the emergence of a rapidly growing Pentecostalism, and the associated developments of an experiential faith. This 'experiential faith' seeks to find much deeper fulfilment with a sense of God's inner presence, than in a faith based solely on a rational gospel [8].

I believe that where we can get satisfying answers to challenging questions we should, to help new and longer term believers make sense of their faith. Yet at the same time, it is important not to let our cognitive abilities become an excuse not to turn to Christ wholeheartedly when God does not seem to make sense. I have found deep-lasting fulfilment in seeking for the intimacy of God's presence to shape my deepest longings for communion

with God, most often when my rational faculty has exhausted the limits of what I can know. I believe a dual horizon of a cognitive and experiential faith are required as conversation partners, when we seek to join with the Spirit in nurturing the spiritual capacities of new and longer term believers.

Responding to Human Need by Loving Service

The Lausanne Congress of 1974 began as an Evangelical reaction to the World Council of Church's ecumenism, which seemed to have jettisoned a conversionist missional agenda, towards emphasising a social gospel [9]. It was argued that without emphasising the gospel of Christ social action would descend into a social work exercise. Lausanne redefined mission as 'Holistic', suggesting that it required gospel conversionism *and* social action to work in tandem [10].

It is this kind of missiology that has proved to be attractive to many Evangelicals. Vatican II also did much to address the church's role in attending to human need for the gospel, as well as to meaningfully engage in social action. In key documents like, *Lumen Gentium*, and *Ad Gentes*, emphasis was placed on the church as the people of God, called to be the compassionate face of Christ to the world [11]. I suggest it is this dual kind of holistic mission that needs to be a reflective conversation partner in our spiritual journeying [12].

Transforming Unjust Structures, Challenging Violence and Pursuing Peace

A tension has always characterised evangelical and Protestant eschatology (i.e. theology about the end times). It is best described as a 'Now' and 'Not Yet' tension [13]. In the present context (i.e.

'Now') the new world of the in-breaking kingdom of God has 'Not Yet' fully arrived. Hence, we could say we are living in a 'Between Times' tension. In this 'tension', the questions may be asked, 'Should we seek to transform unjust worldly structures because it is evidently impossible to fully do so in a fallen world?'; and 'Should we try to broker for lasting peace because human power structures continually succumb to evil?'

This is where a scholarly movement within theological circles, known as the 'Fresh Perspective', has sought to provide some answers [14]. For example, it is suggested that what we do in this world to broker change for the common good may well be part of the Spirit's renewal process, which will lead to a final tipping point, with the return of Christ and a new world order [15]. Liberative action was evidently always part of Jesus' kingdom of God theology - described and enacted as releasing captives to sin, sickness and evil, giving sight to the blind and restoring balance to a fallen creation [16]. This kind of thinking would seem to represent a useful conversation partner as we reflect on what God might be calling us to do, in cooperation with the Spirit's liberative work today.

Striving to Safeguard Creation and Sustain and Renew the Earth's Life

We obviously have heard much about the ecological crisis that our world faces. We will have varying degrees of understanding of what impact humanity is having on the ecosphere. We also probably realise that there are small things each of us can do to mitigate causes of climate change, and larger scale issues beyond our control. Hence, we probably try to do what we can to minimise negative impacts on the environment.





Part of safeguarding creation, and sustaining and renewing the earth's life, is related to our creational image (Genesis 1:26, 27). Genesis characterises the role of humankind to be stewards of the earth (Genesis 2:15). The Hebrew word for 'stewardship' comes from the root word meaning 'to serve'. I believe the idea of humans as servants called to care for creation, calls for a counter-cultural shift in understanding our position related to how we live out our lives in the Western world. Our consumer culture places customer rights centre-ground. Consumerism is a selfish cultural expression that emerges from a me-first individualistic ideology. Ecotheology has arisen as a discipline to help us reflect on how we might respond to the abuse of a fragile earth [17]. A servant-centred mindset challenges egotistic self-absorption. It reorientates my outlook to reflect on how I can be part of renewing the earth's life, and sustaining its fecundity. Perhaps we should reflect with Paul, on the day when the climax of a new creation will witness the end of nature's birth pangs, when its expectancy is realised because of the full eschatological revelation of God's daughters and sons (Romans 8:19-23).

End Notes

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