

“I am gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29)

Mission and power

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Setting the problem

One of the main tasks of the centenary celebrations of the Edinburgh mission conference is to look back and discern for what in the last 100 years to thank God, for what to ask God and humans for forgiveness and then to move towards a vision for mission in the future. I believe that one of the main problems raised around Christian mission has been the way churches and missions have attempted to enlarge their influence by domination, and by alliances with political or economic powers, resulting in crusades, inquisition and forced conversions.

It is not an easy task to address the question of mission and power, in particular because of the ambiguity of the terminology. There is indeed no unanimity among social scientists as to a definition of power¹. According to Stephan Skyes, the most commonly used definition, although much criticized, goes back to Max Weber: “The term *power* will be used to refer to every possibility within a social relationship of imposing one’s own will, even against opposition, without regard to the basis for this possibility”².

If we refer to a more neutral definition, that by Steven Lukes who wrote that “to have power is to be able to make a difference in the world”³, then Christian mission is in some way necessarily associated with power, because of its witness to a God who wants to make a difference. The most radical critiques of mission do precisely attack it on this point. They consider the pretension to make a religious difference in the world as unacceptable, although many of them would accept and defend social and economic transformations. To follow these critiques implies to confess an impersonal or passive God. It is not the purpose of this paper which is based on a *missio Dei* theology.

The second critique, which is to be taken very seriously, denounces all attempts, conscious or unconscious, of “imposing” God’s or the church’s will, even against opposition, according to Weber’s definition. A response to it calls for a fine distinction between different terms associated with power: “The term is plainly one of a group of words, including violence, force, domination, manipulation, influence, authority, persuasion, and others which the English language has at its disposal for speaking of how agencies, both personal and collective, make a difference in the world”⁴.

¹ “When we turn to contemporary views of power within sociological literature the general reader is immediately struck with two features of the situation: the sheer quantity of the literature, and the lack of unanimity about the subject....there is no unity of treatment of power in the sociology of the last three decades.” Stephan Skyes, *Power and Christian Theology*. London & New York, Continuum, 2006, p. 93.

² Skyes, *op.cit.* p. 5

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8

An analysis of biblical terminology will not help to distinguish between acceptable influence and alienating domination, since the same term *exousia* refers to both authority and power and to their use for the good or for evil⁵.

This paper can only concentrate on few questions, which seem important to a Swiss Reformed ecumenical missiologist in the dialogue with Pentecostal and charismatic theologians. It will also make choices: On almost every question, the biblical authors reflect at least some ambivalence, and the main task of theology in specific times and contexts is to clarify its own hermeneutical key approach⁶ when formulating an interpretation of mission. I will thus emphasize certain elements and dynamics of both *missio Dei* and *missio ecclesiae* which seem important to me for dealing with the theme of mission and power today, aware that I may somewhat neglect other aspects.

I Missio Dei: the paradox of a “powerless” God

In my view, God doesn't seem to be primarily interested in religious success as the contemporary culture understands it.⁷ After 2000 years of mission, statistics indicate that the maximum number of Christians (including all nominal ones) has reached a third of the world population⁸. It was the same in 1910. Since then, Christians growth has mainly matched the growth of the world population.

There is no easy explanation to that “failure” of mission – it relates of course to the unfaithfulness of Christian churches and the influence of anti-Christian spiritual and earthly powers, or of human sin in general.

What if it was not just a “failure”, but the necessary consequence of God's way to manifest God's power to save? There is an unresolved tension between God's revealed intention that all humans come to know him, the proclaimed objective of God being all in all at the end of time⁹ and the counter-cultural approach of the cross, challenging human pride, ethics and religion.

Two biblical authors with rather different emphases seem to agree that the Christ event points to a paradoxical election strategy by God, which is to deliberately choose despised

⁵ François Vouga: *Politique du Nouveau Testament. Leçons contemporaines*. Genève, Labor et Fides, 2008, p. 48.

⁶ “What the New Testament has to say...is remarkably varied, yet contains tensions which cannot be resolved and even contradictions which exegetical interpretations cannot simply harmonize or cast aside. Taking the Bible as a whole, a fundamental hermeneutical decision has to be made, in the light of which individual texts are then read and interpreted.” Christine Lienemann: “The biblical foundation for a feminist and participatory theology of mission”, in *International Review of Mission (IRM)*, Vol 93, No 368, Jan. 2004, p. 21

⁷ I am aware that Luke may be understood differently, although he likes to refer to formulations which are to be taken symbolically (« all have heard », Acts 19:10)

⁸ Updated statistics in each January issue of the *International Bulletin for Missionary Research*

⁹ Cf. I Tim. 2:3-4 and I Cor. 15:24-28.

and marginalized people to receive and announce salvation to the whole world. Writing to the churches in Asia, James denounces their admiration for the wealthy and powerful persons and points to God's election of the economically poor (James 2:1-7). He develops a spirituality of mercy and solidarity with the outcast and of prophetic denunciation of the rich and powerful.

In debate with a deeply divided Corinthian church, suffering from excessive admiration of powerful manifestations of the Spirit, Paul who is himself a charismatic preacher, proclaims that God communicates to the world the message of the *crucified* Christ¹⁰. The only power that matters for life is the "word of the cross" (I Cor. 1:18), in other terms, salvation by grace. Paul relates this core of God's mission to the unexpected characteristics of bearers of the gospel, in several ways: First, God has elected as his messengers mostly weak and despised people, those who are "nothing" in the world¹¹. Second, those called to an apostolic ministry encounter powerful opposition, even persecution and sufferings of all kinds. The plight of these agents of mission confirms that God's saving power shines through their vulnerability (as "clay jars"). Third, he himself, Paul, has been personally imposed by God with Satan's agency a lasting sickness to prevent him from boasting on the basis of his extraordinary spiritual experiences (II Cor. 12:1-12)¹². The message of God's grace is in itself powerful enough to save those who have been called to follow Christ and respond to him in the Spirit.

Needless to say, such a communication strategy will only result in partial success, because it doesn't build on the religious and cultural needs or popular expectations of the audience. "If Christ is the true image of God, then radical questions have to be asked about the nature of the God who is imaged. At the heart of Christian theology is a critique of success, power and perfection, and an honouring of weakness, brokenness and vulnerability".¹³

¹⁰ In the NT, this is never de-linked from resurrection. However, the emphasis is clearly on the cross and the way of suffering.

¹¹ Many Pentecostal communities, as well as the basic ecclesial communities, are contemporary embodiments of such divine strategy.

¹² There is a huge debate in the commentaries as to the character of the thorn in the flesh to which II Cor. 12:9 refers. I agree with many, among them also John Christopher Thomas and Keith Warrington – but against Pierre Bonnard, my former professor – that the most probable is to think of a physical sickness, rather than to interpret it as another way of referring to the opposition and suffering encountered by the apostle. Both interpretations have however strong arguments. The one emphasizing the physical sickness increases the paradox of Paul's argumentation by adding a particularly intimate suffering for the apostle. As to the definition of that sickness, Ulrich Heckel's hypothesis of a headache or migraine would make sense to me. Pierre Bonnard : « Faiblesse et Puissance du Chrétien selon St Paul », in : *Id., Anamnesis. Recherches sur le Nouveau Testament*. Genève, Lausanne et Neuchâtel, Cahiers de la Revue de Théologie et de Philosophie, 1980, 159-167. Ulrich Heckel : *Kraft in Schwachheit. Untersuchungen zu 2. Kor. 10-13*. Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 1993, p. 81. John Christopher Thomas: *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance. Origins of illness in the New Testament*. London, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 61-73. Keith Warrington: *Healing and Suffering. Biblical and Pastoral Reflections*. Bucks, Paternoster Press, 2005, p.142-45. Unlike what some sentences of Thomas and Warrington could imply, I understand the promise that grace suffices as more fundamental than just the capacity to bear the suffering. God's grace is the only power that matters.

¹³ "A church of all and for all – an interim theological statement", WCC Central Committee 2003, § 28. in: Arne Fritzon and Samuel Kabue: *Interpreting Disability. A Church of All and for All*. Geneva, WCC, 2004, p. 72. The interim theological statement had been prepared in common by the Ecumenical Disability

God is so different from the world that God's mission and ways to intervene in the world always risk to be misunderstood. This is particularly relevant in the way to deal with power. The horizon of God's mission is the final triumph of God's power over evil and all ungodly powers, a triumph already gained at Golgotha and effective through word and action where the Spirit blows. However, resurrection did not erase the scars of crucifixion, and the Trinitarian God chose to continue to reign in a paradoxical way "from below" during the time of remaining history¹⁴. In *missio Dei* the "already" of God's victory, creative, healing and saving power must be related to the "not yet" of God's refusal to impose the kingdom, to the point that the cross as radicalization of incarnation remains the guiding principle for a reflection on power for *missio ecclesiae*¹⁵.

Some additional remarks are needed here:

The edification and multiplication of churches on the basis of such a mission strategy can be considered a miracle, a manifestation of God's creative and resurrecting power. In his writings to the Corinthians, Paul refers to the existence of their churches as a wonderful result of God's mission.

History seems to indicate however that in cases where mission had too much "success", faithfulness to the core of God's mission vanished. Most if not all forms of Christendom – past, present and future¹⁶ – run the risk to unbalance Christian witness in favour of worshipping a powerful pantokrator Christ to the neglect of the suffering servant. As Reformed theologian, I must here point to the damage done to God's mission by the way most of the major Reformers made use of the political sword to defend their theology and churches and silence opposition. As we just celebrated in Geneva 500 years since Calvin's birth, we have been painfully reminded of forms of Protestant inquisition. It is true to say that it affected primarily other Christians and was less used as a "mission strategy" towards Turks or Jews¹⁷. Still, in a more holistic understanding of witness, Calvin's and his successors' relation to political power in matters of religion must be challenged. Most mainline churches bear in this regard a heavy heritage, and one can only hope that Pentecostal or charismatic churches will be able to avoid the same pitfalls, in particular because they themselves – together with the radical Protestants – suffered immensely from it¹⁸.

Advocates Network and the Faith and Order Commission and commended for study to the churches by the Central Committee of the WCC at its 2003 session.

¹⁴ "The limits of conceivable paradox are transcended when the return of the Son of Man is described in Luke 12:37 as analogous to the feet-washing in John 13." Ernst Käsemann: "The eschatological royal reign of God" in: *Your Kingdom Come. Mission Perspectives. Report on the World Conference on Mission and Evangelism, Melbourne, Australia, 12-25 May 1980*. Geneva, WCC, 1980. p. 64.

¹⁵ For *missio ecclesiae*, see below. The main trend is celebrated in some of the major hymns of the NT, such as Phil. 2, John 1, 1 Peter 2:22-24 and re-interpreted in texts such as 1 Cor. 1, 2 Cor. 8:9 and James 2:5.

¹⁶ Philip Jenkins points to new forms of emerging Christendoms in the global South. His position is not unchallenged, but may be mentioned here as pointing to a new risk for Christian witness in the future. See *The next Christendom. The coming of global Christianity*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹⁷ In the first edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin rejects the use of force against non Christians.

¹⁸ In bilateral dialogues, there have been first attempts at healing of memories in this regard, leading to forms of repentance and forgiveness, cf. e.g. the Confessions of a Catholic and Pentecostal Ecumenist in:

The relation to power is not only a question of faithfulness in mission. It relates to one's salvation. The more authority, influence or institutional power one has, the greater is the risk to forget its relative character and one's dependence on God and to boast of one's own capacities. The major human sin is to attempt to be (like) God, thus cutting oneself from communion in Christ. According to Paul who refers to Jer. 9:22 ff, human self-glorification is directly opposed to the honor to be given to God alone¹⁹. Because then, in the last resort, God's grace is not needed.

To come back to the starting point, mission in future may still not lead to as much "success" as the participants at the Edinburgh 1910 conference had imagined, but by its relative "failure" in worldly terms may be nearer to a sound biblical perspective. So, perhaps, in 2110, Christians will still amount to a third of the world population.

II Missio ecclesiae

II a) make disciples of the One who is "gentle and humble in heart"

Matthew carries the mission commission which has been most carefully edited. The venue and the language of the passage indicate that it addresses the theme of power for the time following Christ's resurrection²⁰. Another text, put right at the beginning of Jesus' ministry, deals with the same matter and eliminates misunderstandings. The temptation to which Jesus is submitted is to assume his messianic ministry through a "power mission". Power mission is denounced in Matt. 4: 1-11 as being Satan's strategy, the one leading to success. Jesus chose the way to the cross. Matthew 28 must be read in view of this essential clarification. The text proclaims *that* "all power/authority" has been given to the resurrected Crucified, but also *how* it will be manifested through the mission of the church. This is indicated by the repetition of the word *panta* (all). Christ firstly empowers his followers to make disciples and build ecclesial communities from "all" peoples, i.e. Jewish *and* "nations" and not only among Jews²¹. It's the power which breaks the most sacred theological barrier, the one between the people of God and Gentiles, enlarging forgiveness of sins to impact people of all nations. Second, Christ's power confirms the continuing validity of all of the earthly Jesus' teaching collected in the first Gospel. This refers in particular to the Sermon on the Mount and other main speeches. Resurrection results in discipleship qualified by the beatitudes. Those sent by Christ are called to be and multiply disciples who are poor in spirit, mourning, gentle, in search of righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, yet persecuted for Christ's

IRM, Vol. LXXXIX No 355, Oct 2000, p. 568-71 (Kilian McDonnell, Frank D. Macchia, with introduction by Walter Hollenweger).

¹⁹ The same verb (pride oneself of, boast) is used by Paul for both attitudes, cf. Heckel, *op.cit.* p. 144-214.

²⁰ In the first Gospel, Jesus is on a mountain when power is at stake, mainly in three forms during his earthly ministry: power to teach, heal and forgive.

²¹ « all » means Christians of Jewish *and* Gentile origins. Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, the distinction is between the Jewish people and "nations". Now all are included. Cf. J. Matthey, "The Great Commission according to Matthew", in: *IRM*, April 1980, p. 161-73.

sake. Matthew 28 thus confirms the mission strategy discerned in writings of Paul and James. A last consequence of Christ's omnipotence results is his promised presence among these small disciples for every day until the end of time. It's a pastoral power, encouraging steadfastness and hope. One could almost equal it with the power of the Spirit²². At the end of the first Gospel, God's strategy of presence as "Emmanuel" is confirmed. After resurrection, mission remains "mission in Christ's way"²³.

It is one of the most tragic misunderstandings of Christianity that it was precisely this text that was misused to justify a conquering mission.

II b) Bold, but soft evangelism

"'Evangelism', while not excluding the different dimensions of mission, focuses on explicit and intentional voicing of the gospel, including the invitation to personal conversion to a new life in Christ and to discipleship."²⁴ Churches are the only existing bodies whose mandate it is to share the story of Christ as God's incarnation and offer of salvation to the world²⁵. It is the privilege of the church to share the Gospel. If churches do not share the Gospel, who will? A principle refusal to be involved in sharing the Gospel amounts to unfaithfulness to one's calling²⁶. I think this needed to be strongly reaffirmed before entering into a more critical reflection. There is no meaningful mission without evangelism.

Evangelism however is a form of mission in which the question of power is particularly at stake. When the passion to share the Gospel is uncritically combined with undue influence on or domination over others, God's strategy may be turned upside down, because then, we have the situation that a wealthy and powerful person or group evangelizes a weaker or more vulnerable addressee. As the means to share the message usually speak louder than the content of the message, the risk of counter-witness is enormous. It is well-known that the debate on proselytism started already in the preparations for 1910 between evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics²⁷. In terms of power, the danger of proselytism lies in the pretension of one's superiority in terms of belief, theology, ecclesiology, ethics, coupled with a denigration of other traditions and the use of political alliances to effect conversions, the offering of economic incentives for

²² This would be a reflection in biblical theology. Matthew seems in general reserved as to an emphasis on the Spirit, which could explain the absence of the Spirit from Matt. 28.

²³ Formulation often used in the World Council of Churches after its first appearance in: "Mission and Evangelism – an Ecumenical Affirmation" (1982). Cf. *"You are the light of the world" Statements on mission by the World Council of churches 1980-1995*. Geneva, WCC, 2005, p. 19

²⁴ Commission on World Mission and Evangelism: "Mission and Evangelism in Unity Today", § 7. In: *"You are the light of the world"*, *op.cit.* p. 64.

²⁵ How this is organised, in particular in terms of institutions, is not the question here. The sentence should not be understood as arguing against the existence of specialized mission or evangelism bodies.

²⁶ Again, this is not an argument against the discernment of charisms within the church. One can well accept not to be particularly gifted as a person for such a communication, but still hold to the principle affirmed here.

²⁷ Brian Stanley: *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2009, p. 49-72.

attracting people and manipulating fear through apocalyptic narratives of God's judgment²⁸.

We touch here the delicate matter of the distinction between God's power and human agency. Theologies and practices of power evangelism²⁹, in particular among neo-charismatic circles, reflect more the world's methods than Christ's. John Wimber is a case in point and can stand here as example for many others. Power evangelism has been defined as follows by Wimber himself:

“ I call this type of ministry that Paul had in Corinth power evangelism: a presentation of the gospel that is rational but also transcends the rational. The explanation of the gospel comes with a demonstration of God's power through signs and wonders... It is usually preceded and undergirded by supernatural demonstrations of God's presence....The early church was effective because it understood evangelism from this same perspective – power demonstrations!³⁰”

In such a perspective, mission primarily works through “power encounters”, in which there is a demonstration that Jesus Christ is more powerful than other gods or spirits in a “war” to rule the world. I agree with Martyn Percy that the problem lies less in the affirmation of the ultimate power of God than in the ways in which people receive or perceive it and what effects it has³¹. Nor do I think there is a problem to consider that the biblical world-view includes a frame of major conflict between God and opposed forces, or that God is as Spirit an empowering transformer³². And as Werner Kahl demonstrated

²⁸ WCC: “Towards Common Witness. A Call to Adopt Responsible Relationships in Mission and to Renounce Proselytism. In: *“You are the light of the world”*, *op.cit.* p. 39-58 with bibliography. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen: *Ad Ultimum Terrae. Evangelization, Proselytism and Common Witness in the Roman Catholic-Pentecostal Dialogue (1990-1997)*. Frankfurt/M., Peter Lang, 1999.

²⁹ This paper does not pretend to analyze charismatic missiology, but only refers to Wimber as an example of a mission position on power. Cf. Martyn Percy: *Words, Wonders and Power. Understanding Contemporary Christian Fundamentalism and Revivalism*. London, SPCK, 1996.p. 17-18. Perspectives including other charismatic theologies in Peter Zimmerling: *Die charismatischen Bewegungen. Theologie, Spiritualität. Anstösse zum Gespräch*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2001. Andrew Lord: *Spirit-shaped Mission. A holistic charismatic missiology*. Paternoster, 2005. Pentecostal critiques of charismatic excesses are referred to in many places, including Walter J. Hollenweger: *Pentecostalism. Origins and Developments Worldwide*. Peabody, Hendrickson, 1997, pp. 228 ff. In this paper, “neocharismatics” will mainly refer to “participants in independent, postdenominational, nondenominational, or indigenous groups or organizations” cf. Introduction, in: Stanley M. Burgess, ed., and Eduard M. Van der Maas, ass. ed., *New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*. Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002, p. xxi.

³⁰ Wimber, quoted by Percy, *op.cit.* p. 17-18.

³¹ Percy, *op. cit.*, p. 19

³² The language of fundamental spiritual conflict between God and counter-forces, goes through the NT writings, with unequal emphasizes. The terminology appears in the hymns celebrating Christ's victory, in apocalyptic texts and in the exorcism narratives of Jesus and the apostles. It is remarkable however how this is applied to the church's mission in the Pauline tradition. The military symbolism in Ephesians 6 emphasizes a defense strategy, not an attack (v. 11). The image of the vigilant guardian in 1 Thess. 5:6-11 also insists on defense and protection. A different emphasis is however found in II Cor. 6:7. One should never absolutize any trend in biblical traditions. Among the most creative understanding of the reality of counter forces is Andrew Lord's concept of “multidimensionality of the demonic”. Lord, *op.cit.* p. 72-73.

with intelligence in reference to Africa, there are world-views which show similarities to the first century world-view in that people expect religions to have the power to bring solutions to the sufferings of life³³. “The success of charismatic Christianity in Africa has lain largely in its ability to propagate itself as powerful and efficacious in enabling people to be set free from the dangers and troubles of life.”³⁴

The problem lies in the fact that important biblical authors do *not* respond with power solutions to such expectations. In Corinth, Paul felt obliged to refer to the “signs and wonders” manifested through his ministry only to defend himself against unfair attacks. But when he refers to the real *dynamis* of God, he doesn’t mean supernatural power manifestations. He affirms that God’s power is God’s free saving grace, communicated by the “word of the cross” through the Spirit, transforming people and building communities. That is what really makes a difference in life, both present and everlasting³⁵.

It is also worth meditating that rarely - if at all - do the epistle writers exhort Christians of the newly founded churches to evangelize with power demonstrations. The technical evangelization terminology is practically absent from the exhortative parts of the epistles³⁶. Most biblical authors use the technical terminology of evangelism only when referring to Jesus or the first apostles. The mission of the next generation is coined in a different terminology, as Acts 20: 17-35 and Col. 4:2-6 show.

The new disciples and communities were expected to give witness to their faith and share the gospel with others³⁷. As soon however as churches had been established along the most central communication lines of the empire, the gospel was considered as having been at least symbolically proclaimed everywhere (Rom. 15:18f). The emphasis switched from itinerant preaching to the radiation of the local communities, from world

cf. also Gordon D. Fee: *God’s Empowering Presence. The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*. Peabody, Mass., Hendrickson, 1994.

³³ Werner Kahl: *Jesus als Lebensretter. Westafrikanische Bibelinterpretationen und ihre Relevanz für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*. Frankfurt/M., Peter Lang, 2007.

³⁴ Emmanuel Y. Lartey quoted by J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu, “Mission to ‘set the captives free’” in : *IRM*, Vol. 93, Nos 370/71 July/October 2004, p. 393.

³⁵ Stefan Alkier has worked out how in Paul’s writings, the really “miraculous” is God’s creative and redemptive power. Cf. Stefan Alkier: *Wunder und Wirklichkeit in den Briefen des Apostels Paulus*. Tübingen, Mohr/Siebeck, 2001.

³⁶ The verb *euaggelizesthai* appears 54 times in the NT (of which 25 in Luke-Acts and 21 in Paul’s letters, incl. Ephesians). The only use in the gospels outside the specific Lukan material is in the parallel passage of Matt. 11:5 and Luke 7:22 (i.e. Q). In Paul’s writings, *euaggelizesthai* refers to the absolute first official proclamation (such as the announcement by a herald) of the new *kyrios*, the resurrected Lord. Paul himself considers this task as his personal mission and towards the second part of his life, he pretends to have accomplished it (cf. Rom. 15:18-21). Other verbs of proclamation, such as *kerussein* also seem limited to the activities of the first apostles (cf. e.g. 1 Tim. 3:16).

³⁷ They were called to “imitate” Paul as he imitated Christ (I Cor. 11:1). He also clearly commended evangelistic activities by Philipppians. And the pastoral letters as well as the book of Acts know of a ministry of “evangelist” It must be said, however, that it is not clear from the use of the term whether it refers mainly to an “inner-church” ministry or also to an outreach ministry.

evangelization to the life and witness of missional churches, marked by what I call “bold, but soft evangelism”, which is characterised by a combination of personal ethics of peace and respect, membership in healing communities and the sharing of the gospel of Christ’s cross and resurrection, as both offer and challenge³⁸. Christians are to be ready to respond to enquiries about the fundamentals of faith raised because of their individual and communal life-style (1 Peter 3:13-17). They are exhorted to share a word that embodies grace while having the critical potential and interest of salt (Col. 4:5-6). This is evangelism in respect of the addressee, a testimony with gentleness, reflecting Christ’s own way of being in mission. In Romans 12:14, the sharing of the message is envisaged as blessing of those who persecute the Christians. One cannot imagine a “softer” approach to evangelism when the bearer of the message has influence, but no power, having to fear for his or her life³⁹. “Soft” however is not equal to meaningless. The message remains both a promise and a challenge, dealing with the fundamentals of life.

According to such a mission paradigm, the Spirit empowers Christians to become living “icons” of Christ who alone has the potential of influencing the world for its salvation. Icons do only make sense if they point to what they represent: God the Spirit’s transforming power and love to give life in fullness.

It seems to me that in the present situation of a Christianity that needs to overcome a heavy legacy since Edinburgh, the *normal* or *ordinary* witness shall be that of such a clear, but gentle approach to people of other or no religion.

II c) Healing mission

As staff of the World Council of Churches, I want to start this chapter by affirming personally what stands in a recent text on the healing mission of the church⁴⁰, namely that healing charisms, including divine healing and prayer for the sick, are part of capacities the Spirit is giving to churches as signs accompanying mission. It is thanks to the dialogue with Pentecostals that the question has been addressed again within WCC, although still too hesitantly in my personal view.

A strong affirmation of the healing ministry must however be accompanied by a warning as to the misuse of power. Excesses leading to counter-witness and almost divine-like adoration of self-appointed healers call for a critical response. There is a huge difference between the emphasis on healing in mainly neo-charismatic circles and a strange reserve in the Bible. In my understanding, this is linked with a different approach to power in mission.

³⁸ Cf. Romans 12:1-21, Colossians 4:5-6 and 1 Peter 3:13-17. For the more intentional forms of evangelism, see Philippians 1:3-18.

³⁹ Rom. 12-13 is a passage which clearly distinguishes between three levels of power: God’s eschatological power of judgment (12: 19-20); the state’s power (Rom. 13), and the influence of the Christian church’s witness (12:1ff).

⁴⁰ “The Healing Mission of the Church”, in: “*You are the light of the world*” *op. cit.*, p. 129-162.

Inspired by inputs in particular from Keith Warrington⁴¹, I became interested in the use of healing language in NT texts which refer neither to Jesus nor to the first apostles, but to the task of Christians of new churches. Although the vocabulary of sickness is frequent in such passages, the most frequently used verbs for healing in the Gospels⁴² are practically absent. In Acts, most of the (frequent) therapeutic terminology refers to Paul and his companions, not to actions of the new churches.

The healing terminology is also lacking in the various forms of the Great Commission, as has been observed by many scholars. The only clear exception is the longer ending of Mark, a text evidently added later to that Gospel⁴³. As far as Jesus himself is concerned, the synoptic Gospels present him as reluctant to be hailed as a healer or exorcist. With limited success, he tried to prevent people from starting mission on the basis of their experience of healing miracles. As the gospel narratives progress, they increasingly switch to the significance of the coming cross and resurrection events, and once Jesus reached Jerusalem, no healing is reported any more. The drama concentrates on the essential, the way to the cross. The core of mission is not healing or exorcism, but Jesus' suffering and death, vindicated by his resurrection.

Divine healing is clearly attested, both at the time of the NT and in contemporary world Christianity. The intention of focusing here on the well-known "messianic or mission secret" is an attempt at interpreting its significance in terms of the use of power. Biblical authors – and probably Jesus himself - wanted to prevent the glorification of human agency and the misuse of power granted by God. This matches the way Paul dealt with charisms in I Cor. 12-14 and of course the temptation story.

Proposal for a dialogue on the use of power in divine healing

What distinguishes then an acceptable from an unacceptable use of healing power in mission? In 2005, the document on healing produced by the WCC affirmed the need for

⁴¹ Keith Warrington : *Jesus the Healer. Paradigm or Unique Phenomenon?* Carlisle UK, Paternoster Press, 2000.

⁴² *therapeuein, iasthai and hugiainein*

⁴³ Of the three manifestations of power by Jesus in Matthew's Gospel, preaching/teaching, forgiving and healing, only the first is emphasised in Matt 28:16-20. Indirectly, the reference to Jesus' healing power may be considered included in his teaching, but it is not particularly highlighted. Mark's first ending emphasizes the weakness and fear of the women, very similar with the reaction of disciples and followers in 10:32 and could be interpreted as a Mark's parallel to Paul's affirmation that God's power manifests itself in weakness. The sending texts in Luke and John carry general mission terminology and an insistence on the role of the Holy Spirit. As such, this has connotations with healing in Luke and with "signs" in John. But one cannot say that there is a particular emphasis on healing. The only commission text directly referring to healing is the added longer ending in Mark. However that sending is exclusively addressed to the Eleven (unlike the other gospels) and is a text on evangelism leading to belief or unbelief, accompanied by signs not only for the first, but also the next generations of Christians. That text has clear mentions of exorcism and healing through imposition of hands. With some nuances, I agree with several authors on such an analysis of the sending texts, although I would insist more than others on the significance of the indirect references to healing which one can discern. Cf. Keith Warrington: *Jesus the Healer, op. .cit.*, p. 144 ff

round tables on the future of health, spirituality and healing⁴⁴. This must be followed up, and work should rely on existing codes of conduct for healing ministries⁴⁵. The following affirmations intend to stress some theologically important points in the dialogue on divine healing and power which is needed between Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical and mainline Christians.

1

Publicity glorifying the healing power of humans is not acceptable. I plead for a renewed form of the “messianic secret” as far as public information on divine healings in today’s media-dominated globalised world is concerned. It is particularly unacceptable for a church or a preacher to announce in advance that miraculous healings will take place. Mission by attraction should not be artificially boosted by promises of “success stories” of cures⁴⁶.

2

The *central message* of every healing event must point to the core of God’s revelation which lies in the gospel of salvation by pure grace in Christ confirmed by the Spirit. To be authentic, a sign which accompanies mission must lead to acknowledge Christ as the wounded healer. Since God is the one who “gives life to the dead and calls to existence the things that do not exist” (Rom. 4:17), God can cure instantly, today as in Christ’s time. But “to pretend that God wants in every case physical curing would be in total contradiction with the Spirit who is also the Spirit of the resurrected *crucified* one”⁴⁷. It is God’s exclusive privilege and mystery to cure some and not cure others, to liberate some from evil influences and by his grace to console others to stand firm in hope or even to empower them to assume a particular mission, as people living with illness or disability.

3

Persons who have experienced God’s healing power should be encouraged, but also *trained* by their church to share with other people in a spiritually appropriate form what happened to them and what it may mean for them and for others. The way this has to happen must be biblically and culturally sound⁴⁸, with respect for the persons to whom one speaks – so as not to hurt, but to edify. It needs formation. In charismatic circles perhaps to warn against too enthusiastic insistence on the miraculous, in mainline

⁴⁴ “The healing mission of the church”, § 86, in: “*You are the light of the world*” *op.cit.*, p. 161

⁴⁵ Numerous ethical codes of conduct for professional healers can be found on Internet. Remarkable for church circles is the document published in the year 2000 by the Church of England. See: *A Time to Heal. A contribution towards the ministry of healing*. A report for the House of Bishops on the Healing Ministry. London, Church House Publishing, 2000. A code of good practice appears on pages 293-327

⁴⁶ How many physical cures really happen may be subject of discussion. Cf. Ernest Lucas (ed), *Christian Healing. What can we believe? Doctors and theologians reach a unique consensus*. London, Lynx communications, SPCK, 1997. Dale A. Matthews and Connie Clark: *the Faith Factor. Proof of the Healing Power of Prayer*. New York, Penguin Books, 1998.

⁴⁷ Peter Zimmerling: *Die charismatischen Bewegungen. Theologie, Spiritualität, Anstöße zum Gespräch*. Göttingen, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 2001. p. 155 - 56. Draft summarized translation.

⁴⁸ Paul refrained from using the wonderful revelations he experienced until forced to do so reluctantly to justify his apostolate, according to II Cor. 12: 1-6. cf. Heckel, *op.cit.*

churches to encourage people to overcome rational scepticism. Formation could be done by these Christian traditions together!

4

Love is the lasting consequence of our adoption as children of God and our empowering by the Spirit. Love, *the* fruit of the Spirit, manifests itself in the edification of a healing community between sick and healthy members. If exclusively aiming at curing, prayer for the sick may lack the necessary *ecclesiological* dimension: God's offer of communion has validity independently of the result of such prayer.⁴⁹ In such a church, priority is to be given to the weaker or less honourable parts of the body (I Cor. 12:24). The ones to be particularly honoured in mission should not be those cured by divine healing, but those who continue to suffer. Communities should in every case offer a safe space for each to share both positive and difficult experiences related to healing and illness.

Love also leads to respect the particularity of each person. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul exhorts them to "admonish the idlers", to "encourage the faint-hearted" and "help the weak (or sick)", summarising it by asking to be "patient with all" (1 Thess. 5: 14). A wrong discernment of the distinction between "idlers", "faint-hearted" and "weak" ones can have disastrous missionary consequences. It happens too often that faint-hearted and weak ones who need encouragement are wrongly admonished, because of dogmatic assumptions of leaders eager to affirm their power.

5

In James 5 – the most detailed narrative related to healing in early church life – the request for a healing intervention comes from the sick person (5:14) and is not imposed on him or her. This parallels many encounters of Jesus with people in need. One could formulate it as a rule of thumb: The *initiative* has to come from the person in need rather than from the missionary, preacher or healer.

These reflections shall not be considered fixed dogmatic points. They are an attempt to discern how to respond to God's healing power. Divine healing may well be together with evangelism the most critical form of mission, because potentially the most transforming and challenging. But also the one where the risk of manipulation is greatest.

Mission "in Christ's way"

Time doesn't allow to address other questions similarly linked to mission and power. To summarize, my main point is that the right dealing with power, authority and influence is perhaps the most important missiological question and lies behind almost all major problems in theology of mission, because ultimately it is a question of faithfulness to the identity of the triune God and to the way this is to be embodied in the church's mission.

⁴⁹ Inspired by Zimmerling, *op. cit.*, p. 156. A similar conclusion resulted from a consultation of the United Evangelical Mission on the charismatic movement and healing: "there should be a genuine acceptance and appreciation by the congregations for those who are sick, e.g. those suffering from HIV-AIDS or cancer etc." UEM, consultation on healing in Accra, Ghana, in November 2003, §24.

How Christians understand and relate to power influences their mission methods, but also partnership between churches and so ecumenism, sharing of resources including money, church-state relations, healing and pastoral care, ecclesiology, ministry and authority, but also attitudes to people of other religions. In a certain sense, addressing the question of power relates to all the main items on the agenda of the 2010 Edinburgh conference.

Mission must be “in Christ’s way”, in the sense that it doesn’t prioritize efficiency and success, keeps distance from powerful structures and people in the world and respects the fact that often, God calls small, weak, sick and meaningless people to bear His message. Jesus did not even hesitate to refer to a small and powerless child as the focus of the kingdom of God. God as the all-powerful Creator and Lord of history wants to make a difference in the world. But God chose – as a general rule - to reign “from below”, relying on the authority of the word of the gospel and the action of the Spirit only, leaving space for personal and communal response and spiritual growth as appropriate. Faithfulness to such *missio Dei* implies for the church not to seek power for itself or over others, but to witness to Christ who has declared to be gentle and humble in heart. May Christian mission in future better correspond to that and no other image of God.

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