

Spiritual Hope

Part 3: Mission

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Part 3: Mission

I remember a story related to me by my mentor, Bill McConnell. Bill and his wife, Beth, raised their family in Brazil, where for fifteen years they served Alianca Biblica Universitaria, an evangelical, Brazilian university student movement. Bill loved growing flowers and vegetables and had great affection for his garden. One day during planting season, his five-year-old daughter came bounding outside as Bill was working in the garden. "Daddy, can I help you?" she asked him. He paused and thought for a moment. He knew that if he invited her to join him in planting the garden, the rows would be crooked, the seeds might get planted too deeply, and besides, she would certainly get dirty and tired! At this point in telling the story, Bill's eyes filled with emotion as he confided, "But oh, what fellowship we had planting that garden!"

God certainly doesn't need us in his mission. If he chose, he could implant the message of forgiveness of sins through Christ's death and resurrection into our genetic code, along with exactly how to right all the wrongs that exist in the world. He could use dreams and visions to communicate, quite apart from any human agent. Better yet, he could come personally in the skies and shout the message so all could hear at once. In fact, there is something in our genetic code that causes us to reach out for God. Humans do have some innate knowledge of right and wrong. Some people do have supernatural experiences that encourage, guide, and inform them. And make no mistake, Christ will come again to set things right. But Scripture is clear that the central vehicle for establishing God's dawning kingdom is his church—weak, fallible, and self-centered though it may be.

It's a little like the way in which salvation comes to Middle Earth in the epic book *The Lord of the Rings*. The future of Middle Earth hangs in the balance as evil grows in power, consuming more and more of the world. Salvation lies in the destruction of a single ring. It is not to the fair elves or the brave dwarves or the valiant men of Middle Earth to whom this dangerous task falls but to the child-like, comfort-seeking race known as Hobbits.

As unlikely as it seems, God has entrusted the greater part of his mission to his people. Like my mentor Bill, God is delighted for the fellowship of joy and suffering that comes as he works together with his people in the garden of his kingdom, despite the frailty and fallibility of his followers. Leslie Newbigin defines mission as simply God's people wanting to be where he is, and he dwells in the lonely places where his kingdom has yet to be established.¹

The following readings explore the role of the church in working to accomplish the mission of God. The reading excerpted from *Mission as Transformation* is an attempt on the part of Christian men and women from all parts of the world to describe Christian mission. It is a cry of repentance for our failures and a call to renewal in our quest to love God and neighbor as we pray, "Thy kingdom come."

In "*Planting Covenant Communities of Faith in the City*," Richard Gollings looks at the communal aspects of the church's mission. Part of our mission is expressed in covenant relationship with one another and with God. Our covenant is a calling to worship God and to serve the world with justice and compassion. As individualistic North Americans, too often we view mission with a program-centered, task-oriented mentality. Gollings urges us to move from a contract view of mission to a covenant view of mission that includes our responsibilities to one another.

The mission of the church must be seen in its internal, transformative power to change the missionary and to mature the church as well as its external quest to confront evil and bring a knowledge of the glory of God to the whole earth in both word and deed.

Notes

1. Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989).