

Millennials, Missions, and Missio Dei: Bridging the Conversation (Part 1)

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Abstract: Each generation is compelled to find new solutions to the problems of its time. Renewal of society, Christian or otherwise, is the result of new solutions created for tough challenges. Today, the apparently intractable challenges confronting the world are an opportunity for the Christian movement to find new ways of engaging in mission, thus to mobilize global millennials into mission. Such a task will require a reassessment of locus from practices driven by geographical territory, into thinking of problems born of modernization as the new mission frontier. Such an understanding is not new, but there is a shift required in how the conversation is framed in missiological discourse. A shift is required from territorially framed mission thinking, to allow for a Missio Dei missional theology, affirmed by the fact of World Christianity to create the framework for that discourse.

Echoes for heroic quests in our world today

The branding office of the Michigan State University Magazine frequently runs an ad that reads something like this,

Who will protect Michigan's natural resources? Who will partner with state agencies to keep aquatic ecosystems healthy and balanced? Create sustainable solutions to manage invasive species? Who will work for our common good with uncommon will? Spartans Will.¹

To the keen observer, the ad, accordingly accompanied by images of the famously brave Spartans, gestures at the effort to link the business of the school with the sort of bravery born of humanity's determination to overcome intractable odds. In times past, heroism was linked to the formation of personal and group identities at certain junctures of socialization, from apprentice chores of early childhood, to rites of passage in puberty, to initiation in adult responsibilities. Social duties that required significant personal investment and sacrifice distinguished the commoner from the true hero at moments of crisis. The modern world changed all of that, first by taming harsh nature, second, by reshaping the developmental life cycle through formal education, and third, by transforming the means of production from hard physical labor to mechanized and technological skill. Each of these changes inspired its own brand of hero, of which only faint echoes are heard in novels, superhero movies and documentaries of our time.

¹ The ad is posted on the school's website, but I first came across it in an inflight magazine while flying from East Asia in November of 2015. The inflight ad was targeting East Asian students, a region that has become prime recruiting ground for students to join North American and European institutions.

But the world generates new problems with every new era. In our day we are acutely aware that the world is out of joint; just what is wrong eludes easy analysis. Yet looking at a good deal of contemporary activism driven by popular media—think twitter hashtags on politics, environment, race, gender, migration and so on—the fervor of participation in the social movements attempting or promising to change the world suggests a desperate effort to resolve the angst of our times. Underlying this zeal is a quest to identify with the heroic deeds that distinguished earlier generations. By and large, it is millennials, the latest generation to come of age, that are unhappy with the world as it is. Think of the massive Arab spring, the Bernie Sanders phenomenon, the global Women’s March, or the latest the #Metoo movement against sexual harassment, plus a host of numerous local and regional events on all sorts of issues. A cause, any cause framed in dialectical opposites of oppressed and oppressor will do to rally masses to the streets in pursuit of whatever is imagined as justice. Leaders on opposing sides of the political divide understand this impulse, which is why they assume the kind of grandiloquence that mobilizes large followings despite polarizing outcomes. So do radical and fundamentalist movements that rally young people into destructive anarchy around the world. It is not just those with self-serving interests, it is also those trying to find long-term answers to current human crises. Virtually every institution of higher education understands this primal quest to solve the problems of the world and thereby find significance. Their mission statements, subtly couched in marketing language, powerfully appeal to something real and deep.

Christian millennials are yet to find their enduring place in mission

Driven by belief that alienation from God is at the heart of the problem, Christianity is a religion that seeks to transform the world. The global generation of millennials who were raised into faith through student movements such as InterVarsity, its partner movements affiliated with IFES, similar ones like Navigators, Scripture Union, and Cru, or were somehow rooted within a vibrant Christian community are familiar with this primordial call of the soul to reach the world for Christ. Statistics of *ethnes* that have yet to hear the gospel, images of children in need, and nations grounded by violence, conflict and human trafficking are the subjects of periodic mobilization conferences and fundraisers.

While the idea of going out to change the world used to belong to the church, it seems there is a lull and a lag in mobilization participation. The falling numbers in church memberships (Pew 2015), declining financial support for long-term missionaries (Wuthnow 1997), as well as enrolments in seminaries are indicative. Consequently, the mainstream evangelical world has been attempting to sort through dense missiological vocabulary to find the most contextual ways of reengaging. For instance, recently trending topics such Business as Mission (BAM), Mission and Health, Mission and Church Planting, Mission and Leadership Development are all pursuing a more integrated understanding and practice of mission that would bring greater participation and effectiveness. High-powered conference conversations around these phrases make for appealing discourse but when subjected to practical, grassroots questions, they offer little by way of new insight. For instance, to do business so that it rakes its profits and effectively serves communities, one not only needs the clout, ideas and capital found in [secular] business, but also

a degree of long-term experience. Thus, after decades of developing successful companies, some wealthy people turn their success and experience to support mission work, and this is making the idea seem newly influential. On the other hand, if one thinks of business as mission in terms of cottage industries, table banking and small enterprises such as those started by women's groups and funded through Christian NGOs and FBOs, these have been the run and mill of mission for at least half a century. Think of health as another case. One must have the right kind of training, certification and experience. Missionaries such as Hudson Taylor used medical work as footholds in frontier territory. While one can argue for the scaling up of these efforts, they are nothing paradigmatically new and thus do not feed fresh energy into the cause of missions. Equally with leadership development as mission, what is crucial for leading well remains as it has been for generations of mission work, the consequence of long and hard years of background work in spaces of any real responsibility. The same can be said of technology, arts, and advocacy work. To their credit, these conversations are putting flesh on ways that Christian missionaries have been doing preexisting mission, thereby improving efficacy. But by and large, terminological appeal circulates the discourse among converted mission practitioners and missiological scholars, preaching to the choir as it were.

The real gap is how to engage the largest generation now coming of age, global millennials. They are now at the end of the school pipeline, entering real adult responsibilities and seeking their place in the world. For Christian millennials, a primary lens of experience, and response to world problems has been through short-term mission trips (regional and global) that last anything from a week to several months. However, it is rare for short-term missions to mature into deep and meaningful engagement beyond the trips. (See Priest 2008) Yet, just as their large participation in homemade social movements suggests the millennials' willingness to confront emergent problems, the substantial numbers of short term mission recruits suggest that the problem is not lack of awareness, enthusiasm or desire to engage. I believe the problem is one of a lag in perspective on what is "mission" to the modern world. Not strangely, colleges with a historical sense of continuity, that are in touch with millennial students, and whose education structures are designed to invent solutions to new problems have put their finger on something that can help Christians to bridge the lag between understanding of mission and the praxis of it in the modern world. But such a rethinking requires that we tune into how we got here.

The disconnect: a lag in perspective on "mission" in the modern world

The idea of *mission* as inherited from the eighteenth and nineteenth century pointed to mission as the sending of missionaries to proclaim the gospel in designated geographical territory occupied by non-Christians. By and large, the early missionary movement cultivated the energies of young men and women when they were finding their place in the world. Once they got going, they were compelled by circumstances to cultivate strong skills to survive in hostile territory and establish their work against then impossible odds. Many missionary biographers point out that the missionaries moved from being nobodies back in their home countries to heroes and heroines by becoming leaders in the mission fields. Thus, not only was the mission field a place to preach the gospel, but also to forge, say, an identity as a man who can hold his

own in the court of men. Inspiration to venture out came from a mélange of antecedent sources, including myths and legends of national origins, as well as stories of the conquest and taming of faraway lands. Not least, the theme of the hall of fame in Hebrews 11 wrapped in Pauline language of self-abnegation runs like a scarlet thread throughout missionary biographies.

By and large, the days when the self-sacrificing young man packed up his new family to spend long years in foreign territory are long gone. Modern living has not only changed conditions of living in former mission territories, but more significantly there is no more territory to conquer because the success of the eighteenth to twentieth missionary movement is the fact of “World Christianity.” The church is to be found on every continent, and missionaries originate from everywhere as well as go to everywhere. Of course, in typical fashion of paradigmatic transitions, many still venture into remaining pockets of unreached people groups, while others reinvent themselves into new roles. But the engine that mobilized large numbers, that is, the frontier territory, ran out of steam in the first half of the twentieth century with the end of the empire. The vestiges of missionary work – institutions of education and healthcare, and social care turned-into-development work and their umbrella agencies – sustained mission work in the second half of the twentieth century. The exiting generation of long-term missionaries reinvented themselves into new roles of social development, theological education and advisory capacities in mission organizations, although visa restrictions present a further *cul-de-sac* for these reinventions. On the other hand, with maturing educated populations, churches all over former mission territory raise their own leaders in what were once missionary roles.

The dilemma of the young person once recruited into mission, the current millennial, remains. If the substantial numbers of those who go on annual short-term trips and engage in home-square movements suggest a pool of socially “awakened” young people, the question is how to *socialize* new generations to find their place in the world by solving its problems, not exacerbating them. That conversation properly belongs with the rethinking of *mission*. But while the rethinking does not exclude the reworking of terminology we use to describe or frame mission, the key is not in the language as communication. Rather the key is with the theology.

Again, this theological rethinking has also been taking place for at least a generation, in what is known as a turn to *Missio Dei* missional theology. (See Bosch 1991, 333; Wright 2006) At its heart, *Missio Dei* is suggesting that the whole created order is the arena of God’s mission. The church in all its diversity exists within that framework of God’s mission in the world, as God’s tool for mission in the world. To borrow a phrase that pastors often use, *the local church is the hope of the world*. Everything, every arena of human activity including business and economy, politics and government, health and environment, media and arts, family and education is part of God’s activity in the world, thus of the Christian commission. This is contrasted with the primary drive of the 18th century missionary movement whose primary goal was soteriological. Then, conversion was the goal and *raison d’être* of mission; a great deal of this was driven by an apocalyptic expectation of a disruptive end to the world. Naturally, this issued into the gathering of the converted into churches, thus all the activity that goes into church planting became a corollary of mission. In time, social development work came to be seen as a necessary appendage to the soteriological sort of mission work, although “social” kind of work

has always accompanied Christian mission. It is the apocalyptic break with the enlightenment that had led to the unfortunate bifurcation of the two. Now, granted the convulsive events of the early to mid-twentieth century (world wars, end of the empire, cold war, western cultural revolution and the liberation theology movements), missiological thinkers shifted towards *Missio Dei* as the framework within which we are to configure the church's mission. The logic and clarity of *Missio Dei* missional theology is now given its full significance by the fact of world Christianity, the rise of the majority world church. We will discuss this in part two of this article in an upcoming issue.

Renewed call for millennials: Mission towards the whole created order

For now, let's zero in on millennials and missions. It was easy to focus on paradigms of territorial missions as long as there were unreached people groups and easy access to them. Now, engaging millennials in missions means acknowledging what secular educational institutions have recognized, that the problems of the world continue to evolve, and new solutions are needed. It is that search for solutions, the mistakes along the way, and yes, eventual victories that make men and women. That's why the world is fixated on heroism, a legitimate quest of its own, but no generation can find its place in the world through the methods of its forebears. As Eugene Peterson puts it, each generation has to confront the world's problems afresh, because each is unwell in a new way. (Peterson 2009) Millennial Christians must wisely discern the challenges of their time and bring the gospel to fresh significance with the tools of their time. There are the obviously stated challenges, such as over-exploitation of the environment, economic inequality and poverty, political polarization and racism, neo-slavery of human trafficking and broken systems of social cohesion. There are those taken for granted, such as prevalence of all sorts of physical and mental diseases, escalation of drug abuse, crime and family breakdown. Then there are newly-evolved sets of technologically generated problems, such as social disintegration through media, crimes of the web, pornographic addiction and related sexual exploitation. All these and more, contributing to a general sense of hopelessness and homelessness in the universe, (See Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1974) are the shadow sides of otherwise good human progress driven by modernization processes.

Throughout Christian history, solving newly evolved social problems is how every generation feeds energy into Christian mission. It has never been otherwise. (See Stark 1997; Ortberg 2012) To cite a familiar example, the powerful seventeenth to mid-twentieth century missionary movement, to which 21st century world Christianity is heir, was necessarily a geographical response to the massive wave of human migration precipitated by the European Industrial Revolution. Far from venturing out in a vacuum, missionaries were part of a colossal movement of forty to sixty million people across all the inhabited world. (See Hanciles 2009) Now, while geography and movement will remain significant to a globalized world, the larger *Missio Dei* framework—God at work in the world through the church—must take into account how the world has changed. Although post-modernism (alongside a good deal of Christian polemic) decries modernization, we cannot reverse the wheel of modernization. This means, especially for the millennial Christian, that problems generated by modernization (think

consumer capitalism, urban social crises, contemporary politicking and corruption of government bureaucracy, and excesses technology) rightly are the mission new frontier on which to bring the witness of the Spirit to bear. The problems generated by the shadows of modernization not only require Christians to practice advocacy on behalf of the down-and-outs of the system, but far more significantly, engage the biblical canon, Christian history and anthropological inquiry to *think Christianly* about what are tending to appear like intractable challenges for the Christian movement. Further, Christians should locate themselves in these arenas not as polemicists but with actual, trained and real-world solutions to the crises. If the church is God's hope for the world, then the world's problems are not intractable and the crippling hopelessness among Christians is unwarranted. "Nothing is impossible with God," said Angel Gabriel to Mary. The world just needs compelled believers to face up to the *unwellness* of the 21st century and offer solutions that point to the Holy Spirit's work in the world. (Part 2 to follow).

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