

# MISSION, CULTURE, AND THE REIGN OF GOD

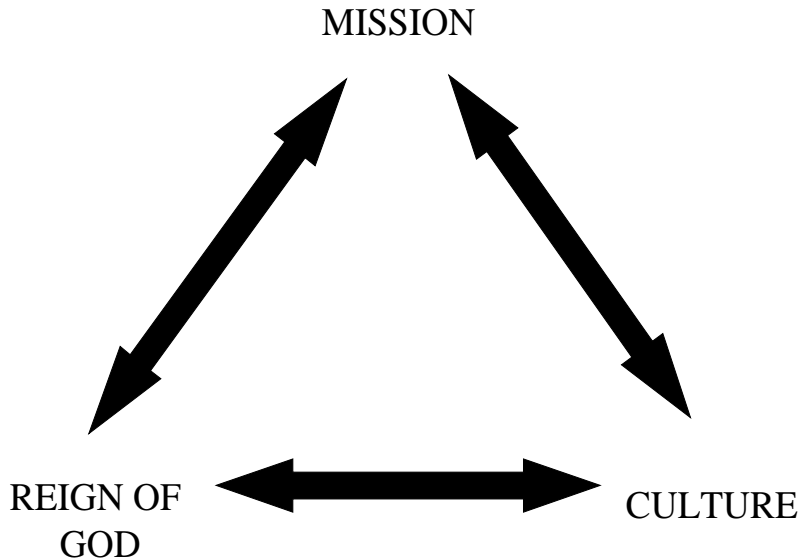
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Stephen Bevans, SVD

## *Introduction: A Diagram of Mutual Relationships*

My topic this morning is “Mission, Culture, and the Reign of God,” and I must say I pondered long and hard about how to develop what I want to share with you in regard to this topic. For a long while I simply couldn’t get my head around all three elements of the topic. I certainly recognized a relationship between “Mission” and the “Reign of God;” and I certainly saw how “Mission” and “Culture” fit together. I even realized after a while how “Reign of God” and “Culture” might be related. But I just couldn’t see the connection among all three.

Then it hit me. Every one of these elements are related to the others, and vice-versa. I had started to play with a kind of diagram, and all of a sudden things became clear, and the outline for this presentation instantly became clear. Here is the diagram:



In this diagram, Mission is related to the Reign of God, and the Reign of God is related to Mission. Mission is related to Culture, and Culture is related to Mission. Finally, the Reign of God is related to Culture, and Culture is related to the Reign of God. What I’d

like to do this morning, therefore, is to explore each of these relationships, expressed in this way:

- There is no Mission without the Reign of God
- There is no Reign of God without Mission
  - There is no Mission without Culture
  - There is no Culture without Mission
- There is no Reign of God without Culture
- There is no culture without the Reign of God

I know that some of these ideas will sound a bit strange at first—they certainly did to me—but I think there is a whole theology of mission packed into these six phrases, and what I'd like to do this morning is to unpack them a bit for you. We'll take one at a time.

### ***I. No Mission without the Reign of God***

First of all, and I hope this is something familiar to you already, there is no mission without the Reign of God. Mission begins with God reigning: God's rich life of communion overflows into creation. Creation is God's first act of Mission, as God sends the Spirit to permeate the universe and begin God's work of calling all creation—according to its capacity—into the community and communion which is God in God's self. God's Spirit, I like to say, is God "inside out" in the world. She is God fully present, fully active, able to be experienced and felt, and yet illusive, mysterious, free. When the Hebrews spoke of this felt but mysterious presence of God, they used words that were themselves able to be felt and yet still mysterious: breath, wind, fire, water. In the Old Testament, this mysterious yet creative presence points to how God is working in the world and calling creatures to the communion where God reigns. We read, for example, how God breathes life into human beings (Gen 2:7), how God calls them to service (Ex 35:30-36:1; Num 11:16-17; Jdg 3:10, 11:29; 1Sam 10:1), how God calls them to prophecy (Mic 3:8; Is 61:1-2), and brings healing and new life (Is 61:1-2, Ez 37:1-14; Ez 47:1-12).<sup>1</sup>

In the "fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) that mysterious, illusive presence of God in mission became flesh, a human being. As Elizabeth Johnson puts it so beautifully, "the Spirit who pervades the universe becomes concretely present in a small bit of it."<sup>2</sup> Jesus' ministry is summed up in a phrase that links it to the Reign of God: "This is the time of fulfillment. The Reign of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the Good News" (Mk

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<sup>1</sup> For more on the Spirit in the Old Testament, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing the Holy Spirit through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 150.

1:15). These words appear in the Gospel of Mark, and represent what scholars today believe are or are very close to Jesus' own words. Luke's version of Jesus' first words in ministry have him reading from the prophet Isaiah. The Spirit that anointed Isaiah for prophecy now anoints Jesus. Jesus continues the work of the Spirit to bring glad tidings to the poor, proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind, freedom for the oppressed (see Lk 4:18-19). Jesus never defines what the Reign of God is, but when we listen to his amazing parables of God's mercy, love, justice and inclusion, when we witness his healings and exorcisms, and when we recognize his habit of including the excluded and marginalized, we get more than a hint of what the Reign of God is.

But like the prophets of old, Jesus' message met opposition. It was regarded as blasphemous by the Jewish leaders, and even considered so subversive that they decided that he needed to die for the sake of Israel's safety (see Jn 11:47-50). So they killed him. But, of course, you can't kill God. You can't stop the overflowing mission that despite any opposition continues to call creation into the communion of God's Reign. And so, soon after his crucifixion, Jesus' disciples experienced him alive, and in the wake of the Pentecost experience gradually began to realize that they themselves were called to continue Jesus ministry of preaching, serving and witnessing to the Reign of God. But now this was not just within Judaism, this was to the ends of the earth, and until the end of time. Jesus had continued the Spirit's mission that was operative from the first moment of the world's creation. Now that mission was to be carried out by Jesus' disciples, the church. Vatican II's language about this is perhaps a bit stodgy, but it does say it pretty clearly:

The Church, consequently, equipped with the gifts of her Founder and faithfully guarding His precepts of charity, humility, and self-sacrifice, receives the mission to proclaim and to establish among all peoples the kingdom of Christ and of God. She becomes on earth the initial budding forth of that kingdom. While she slowly grows, the Church strains toward the consummation of the kingdom and, with all her strength, hopes and desires to be united in glory with her King (LG 5).

The Church is *not* the Reign of God. It gets its identity from its mission to preach, serve and witness to that Reign. Without the Reign of God, the church is nothing. Without mission the church is nothing. There is no mission without the Reign of God.

## ***II. No Reign of God without Mission***

But, amazingly, I think, the opposite is also true. In God's amazing grace, there will be no Reign of God without the church. In other words, in the order of creation, God actually needs us. This is, I think, the deepest meaning of the old phrase "outside the church there is no salvation." It doesn't mean that people can't be saved if they are not members of the church. It means that in some amazing way, the church—human beings, you and I—are an integral part of God's plan to bring the world into the communion in which God alone reigns.

The various images of the church—especially the three most important ones: People of God, Body of Christ and Creation/Temple of the Spirit—point to this reality. The church is first of all imaged as the People of God, a community marked by Baptism

to be “a people for God’s name” (Acts 15:14), “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people of God’s own” to announce the praises of God who called them out of darkness into wonderful light (see 1Pet 2:9). The church is the very Body of Christ, the way that he continues his presence in the world, preaching, serving and witnessing to God’s Reign. Christians, as Paul writes, have been crucified with Christ, and live no longer as themselves but as Christ living in them (see Gal 2:20). As God sent Christ, so he sends us (Jn 20:21). The church is the great sacrament of Christ, a sign and instrument of Christ and of God’s Reign (see LG 1). Finally, the church is the creation of the Holy Spirit, the visible presence of the Spirit’s presence in the world. It was the Spirit who called the church into being at Pentecost and in the earliest days of its existence, pointing to the fact that it was more than a Jewish sect or brand of spirituality. It is the Spirit who equips the church for mission through the various charisms that are lavished upon Christians. And it is the Spirit who continues to challenge the church by pushing it beyond its comfort zones.<sup>3</sup>

God needs us. The salvation that God has worked for since the first instant of creation—what we call the Reign of God—could not exist without our cooperation. This is not a weakness on God’s part, as it must seem. It is part of God’s perfection. God is so personal, so constituted by relationship, that our cooperation in mission is part of God’s plan, part of the very fabric of reality. That there would be Reign of God without mission is a hint at what it means that God reigns—it means the participation in a community where every person, every creature has worth and meaning, and to which all can contribute.

### ***III. No Mission without Culture***

People count. People matter. The Reign of God can never be preached, served and witnessed to in a vacuum. As Pope Paul VI beautifully said, “what matters is to evangelize human culture and cultures (not in a purely decorative way as it were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots). . . .” (EN 20). And, in the famous words of Pope John Paul II, “a faith that does not become culture is a faith which has not been fully received, not thoroughly thought through, not fully lived out.”<sup>4</sup> The gospel of the Reign of God is something that calls women and men to their deepest dreams and desires. It must connect with who they are, with their everyday reality and personal identities. This is why any missionary work must always address culture. As a friend of mine, Darrell Whiteman, wrote, we need to attend to culture when we evangelize so that if people do reject the gospel, they do it for the right reasons!<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Stephen Bevans, “The Church as Creation of the Spirit: Unpacking a Missionary Image,” *Missiology: An International Review*, XXXV, 1 (January, 2007): 5-21.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Address to the Italian National Congress of the Ecclesial Movement for Cultural Commitment, January 16, 1982, *L’Osservatore Romano* (English Edition), June 28, 1982, 7.

<sup>5</sup> See Darrell L. Whiteman, “Contextualization: The Theory, the Gap, the Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 21, 1 (January, 1997): 2-7, esp. 3.

What is culture, however? It's not that easy to grasp or define, and my colleague Bob Schreiter speaks of it as a "notoriously slippery concept."<sup>6</sup> There are certainly ways to approach it, though. Schreiter himself, citing the work of Lens Leonhoof, speaks of three aspects or dimensions. First, culture is "ideational," providing a grid by which life can be lived—including beliefs, codes of conduct, and values. Filipinos, for example, live in a very "socio-centric" world, and never like to be alone. Second, culture is a "performance," that is, has rituals that celebrate and define it. Mexicans, for example, celebrate Cinco de Mayo. Americans celebrate Thanksgiving Day or Fourth of July. Germans shake hands in greeting; Japanese bow. Third, culture has a "material" dimension to it—a distinctive language (e.g. Indian English), particular kinds of food, clothing, and music.<sup>7</sup>

New Zealand anthropologist and theologian Gerald Arbuckle, however, has cautions that culture should not be understood as something fixed or static, but porous and fluid. Culture is always something in the making, and while it is certainly something good (we'll reflect on this later) it often contains assumptions of political, racial and gender power that needs to be unmasked.<sup>8</sup> Arbuckle proposes a "postmodern" working definition of culture as a pattern of meanings within a "network of symbols, myths, narratives and rituals" that is created as a particular group struggles with its identity in a world or situation that threatens it. In this way, culture provides ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that is considered proper and correct behavior.<sup>9</sup>

I personally find it helpful to speak rather about *context* than culture. As I understand it, context has at least four dimensions. It consists of personal and social experiences (e.g. a death in the family, the recent earthquake in Haiti), the complex aspects of culture that we talked about above, one's or a group's social location (male or female, rich or poor, young or old), and the various changes that are taking place in one's world (the Internet, the economic situation).

The point is, Mission is done in interaction with all of this. It used to be believed—at least by some—that the gospel was something above or beyond culture that needed to be presented to women and men always and everywhere in the same way. Theology was always the same. It could be taught the same in Cairo, Chicago, Rio de Janeiro, or Abuja. What we have come to realize is that "universal" quality of the faith and of theology was an illusion. It was actually a "universalizing" content that was the product of one culture, and in the Roman Church that was the culture of Europe.

In fact, the best missionaries have always been women and men who took culture or context seriously when they evangelized. Starting with Jesus himself, we see a real sensitivity to the Jewish culture of which he was a part, and a real effort on his part to speak in terms that ordinary people—laborers, fisherfolk, village people—could understand. Those unnamed evangelizers in Antioch were women and men who recognized that one did not need to be a Jew to be a follower of Christ, and allowed the Gentiles there to keep their own customs. Paul spoke in the language of Greek

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<sup>6</sup> Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 29.

<sup>7</sup> Schreiter, *The New Catholicity*, 29. Schreiter cites Lens Loenhoff, *Interkulturelle Verständigung. Zum Problem grenzüberschreitender Kommunikation* (Oplade: Leske und Budrich, 1992), 144.

<sup>8</sup> Gerald Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians: A Postmodern Critique* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2010), 10.

<sup>9</sup> Arbuckle, *Culture, Inculturation, and Theologians*, 17.

philosophy to the people of Athens, Origen of Alexandria used philosophy to explain the doctrines of the faith, Alopen used Chinese ideas to talk about Jesus, Cyril and Methodius expressed the gospel in the language of the Slavs, the anonymous ninth century Saxon monk told the story of Jesus in terms of a Saxon warrior, Matteo Ricci, Bartolomé de las Casas, Alexandre de Rhodes—these are part of a long litany of missionaries who recognized that there is no mission without culture. As hard as it is, we need to work to do the same.

#### *IV. No Culture without Mission*

I know at first that not everyone would agree with the statement that there is no culture without mission. In fact, it is not exactly completely true. Just like the history of the church, the history of Christian mission is, in the words of Evelyn and James Whitehead, shot through with both “grace and malpractice.”<sup>10</sup> We can laud the anonymous Saxon author of the *Heliand*, but he (most likely a monk at the monastery of Fulda) wrote in the wake of terrible practices of cultural destruction by Fulda’s founder, Boniface, and the soldiers of Charlemagne. We can praise the courage of Bartolomé de las Casas in defending the indigenous peoples of Latin America and their cultures, but he was often a lone voice within the context of Spanish *tabula rasa* policies of evangelization. Novelists like Nigerian Chinua Achebe or American Barbara Kingsolver have written heartbreakingly of the insensitivity of missionaries to African cultures in such a way as to make “things fall apart.” As Native American theologian Tink Tinker writes, “Given the disastrous history of euro-western mission practices—to the cultures and the peoplehood of those missionized—it would seem that there are no missiological projects that we might conceive that would have legitimacy of any kind.”<sup>11</sup>

That being said, however, it *is* important to note that in many ways, and quite significantly, Christian Mission—albeit sometimes unwittingly—has actually worked to preserve and promote the cultures of peoples. Missionaries were often strongly opposed to strongarm tactics by the European colonizers to take peoples’ land and denigrate their cultures, as evidenced by records about Moravian missionaries in Australia’s state of Victoria and missionaries in New Zealand.<sup>12</sup> Gambian church historian Lamin Sanneh, in his groundbreaking book *Translating the Message*, wrote powerfully about the fact that an inbuilt “translatability” of the gospel motivated missionaries in Africa (and by implication, in other parts of the world) to make the scriptures available to local people in their own languages. This fact not only allowed local people to understand and eventually interpret the Christian message in terms of their own experience. It also preserved languages that may have been lost in the acids of modernity and globalization, and subsequently preserved whole cultures as well.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> James D. and Evelyn Eaton Whitehaed, *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, Revised Edition (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1995), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Tink Tinker, “The Romance and Tragedy of Christian Mission among American Indians,” in Amos Yong and Brbara Brown Zikmund, eds., *Remembering Jamestown: Hard Questions about Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2010), 26-27.

<sup>12</sup> See Robert Kenny, *The Lamb Enters the Dreaming: Nathanael Pepper and the Ruptured World* (Melbourne: Scribe Publications, 2007), 17-19.

<sup>13</sup> See Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Revised and Expanded (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009 [first edition 1989]).

In the same way, missionary commitment to education formed many of the early leaders of independence movements in Asia, Africa and Oceania. Even if some of these leaders, like Kwame Nkruma in Ghana, declared themselves no longer Christian, their Christian education was the basis of their strong nationalism and insistence on a clear cultural identity. Perhaps to say “no culture without mission” is not completely true, but there is a real truth in it. After all, the mission is God’s, and while God does not and cannot work without missionary cooperation, God’s influence through such earthen vessels is greater than we might imagine. God’s Reign does not always move through the expected channels.

### *V. No Reign of God without Culture*

Christian theology has sometimes given the impression that, in the end, this earth and all that is in it will not matter. When the Reign of God is finally established, theology has often implied, we will exist in a non-cultural, super-cultural or spiritual state, where we will all be the same. “For the world in its present form,” wrote St. Paul, “is passing away” (1Cor 7:31).

Of course, none of us knows what will happen to us after our death, let alone when the Reign of God is finally fully established. Indeed, eye has not seen, ear has not heard and hearts have not imagined what God has prepared for us (see 1Cor 2:0). Nevertheless, at the core of our faith is the doctrine of the resurrection of the *body*, and it seems to me that whatever that means it means that we will live in this world, however it is transformed. Once again, people matter. Bodies matter. Material matters. And if there are bodies and material, however transformed, there is a good chance that there will be cultures. I’m sure they will be purified cultures, I’m sure people will at last be able to communicate across and through cultures, but we will still have them and perhaps even be developing them, because culture is what makes us who we are. Culture is not something accidental that can be sloughed off at will—or even by God’s power. Just like our sexual identity—being men or women—is an integral part of our personal identities, so is being Indian, or Mexican, or Rumanian, Polish or U. S. American.

I know we can’t take the scriptures literally here, but there is something powerful and true about Revelation’s description of the inhabitants of heaven as “a great multitude, which no one could count, from every nation, race, people and tongue” (Rev 7:9). A wonderful essay by Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore cites a passage by Thomas Breidenthal about the communal nature of salvation: “Paul is fond of calling the church a household, a temple of God, a commonwealth—all images drawn from the Hebrew scriptures, and all suggesting that the kingdom of heaven is a crowded place, thronged with worshippers and noisy not only with the sound of prayer but with conversation.”<sup>14</sup> If salvation is indeed a participation in trinitarian communion—if that is the essence of the Reign of God and what we proclaim in Mission—that communion, we may hope, will be one of unity in difference, difference in unity, a communion of cultures.

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<sup>14</sup> Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Contemplation in the Midst of Chaos: Contesting the Maceration of the Theology Teacher,” in Gregory L. Jones and Stephanie Paulsell, eds., *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 67. Citing Thomas E. Breidenthal, *Christian Households: The Sanctification of Nearness* (Boston: Cowley, 1997), 5-6.

One of the tasks of mission is be ourselves a community that offers a foretaste of such a communion of unity in difference. As church, we witness to the world what salvation is like, what real human living is like, what the destiny of humanity and indeed the entire world can and will be. The Reign of God is no McHeaven. There is no Reign of God without culture.

## ***VI. No Culture without the Reign of God***

The great Anglican missiologist Max Warren expressed the basic attitude that anyone who engages in mission needs. We need

a deep humility, by which we remember that God has not left himself without a witness in any nation at any time. When we approach the man of another faith than our own it will be in a spirit of expectancy to find out how God has been speaking to him and what new understandings of the grace and love of God we may ourselves discover in this encounter.

Our first task in approaching another people, another culture, another religion, is to take off our shoes, for the place we are approaching is holy. Else we may find ourselves treading on men's dreams. More serious still, we may forget that God was here before our arrival.<sup>15</sup>

God needs us to preach, serve and witness to the Reign of God, but that does not mean that God's hands, as it were, are tied. God, through the ever-present and ever-pervasive Spirit, is present and active outside the bounds of the church. It is the Spirit who "sows 'the seeds of the word'" (RM 28) among all peoples, cultures and religions, so that rays of the Truth that enlightens all might be discerned in them (see NA 2). This is why those who engage in the church's mission "can learn by sincere and patient dialogue what treasures a bountiful God has distributed among the nations of the earth" (AG 11).

Maybe there are a few exceptions (e.g. Nazi culture, or what Pope John Paul II called the "culture of death" in his encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi*), but basically there are no neutral or evil cultures. Every culture has some goodness in it, some sparks or seeds of God's Reign. This is why the Asian Bishops have spoken so clearly about the fact that Mission must be carried out in Asia (and I think in other parts of the world as well) in terms of a "triple dialogue"—with culture, with religions, with the poor.<sup>16</sup> Such dialogue must certainly be a "prophetic dialogue,"<sup>17</sup> in that the treasures of culture and religion need to be illumined "with the light of the gospel, to set them free, and to bring women and men under the dominion of God their Savior" (AG 11). But the fact is that the treasures are there. A marvelous image for those who engage in mission is that of a "treasure hunter," one who helps the men and women of a particular culture dig deep into

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<sup>15</sup> Max Warren, Preface to John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision* (London: SCM Press, 1963), 10.

<sup>16</sup> This idea appears very often in the documents of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences. For a good overview of the notion of the "triple dialogue," see Jonathan Y. Tan, "Missio Inter Gentes: Towards a New Paradigm in the Mission Theology of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC)," *Mission Studies*, 21, 1 (2004): 65-95.

<sup>17</sup> See Stephen B. Bevans and Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).



their culture to find what has always already been there.<sup>18</sup> There is no culture without the Reign of God.

### *Conclusion*

As I mentioned in the beginning of this presentation, the interaction among these three elements—Mission, Culture, and Reign of God—forms a basic theology of mission. In the first place, the Mission begins with God, but it is shared with us. The mission has a church. Second, while the point of the church is not to be about the church, it nevertheless is necessary in God’s plan. There is no salvation without the church. Third, since the Mission is about cosmic and human flourishing, it meets creation where it is—in its materiality, in its cultures. Fourth, at its best Mission is about saving cultures, not destroying them, and even when it has bungled things the “infinite translatability” of the gospel has actually worked to save and preserve cultures. Fifth, the church is witness to the social, bodily and concrete nature of God’s Reign, not an escape from it. And finally, while Mission does bring the gospel in many ways, it does not “boldly go where no one has ever gone before.” God has been there first, and reigns through the dynamics of local culture and religion. John Paul II once spoke of mission as a “single but complex reality” (RM 41). The interaction among Mission, Culture and the Reign of God is one more way of pointing to such radical unity and yet multifaceted complexity.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert T. Rush, “From Pearl Merchant to Treasure Hunter: The Missionary Yesterday and Today,” *Catholic Mind* (September, 1978): 6-10.