

Frontier Missions: the Apostleship of the Abnormally Born

David Fraser

Formerly responsible for the Unreached Peoples project at World Vision, David Fraser is now Associate Professor of Sociology at Eastern College (St. Davids, Pennsylvania, USA).

The following remarks were first presented February 27, 1987 as an address to the annual meeting of (U.S.) Theological Students for Frontier Missions in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

n 1 Corinthians 15:8 Paul compares himself to a fetus that has been prematurely miscarried or aborted.¹ His is the Apostleship of the abnormally born. The picture is a difficult one, and there are a variety of ways in which it can be understood, but the metaphor offers helpful insights to those concerned to understand Paul's commission and make it their own.

Some have taken Paul's metaphor to refer to his acceptance of the charges of his critics, who viewed him not only spiritually but even physically as somewhat of a freak (2 Cor. 10:10). They saw his claims to Apostleship as deficient and perhaps compared him to "an unformed, undeveloped, repulsive, and possibly lifeless fetus" (Barrett 1968:344). Paul agrees with their assessment of his person, but says nonetheless, astoundingly, the grace of God has made him an Apostle! This much is certainly true: Paul did see himself as hopelessly deficient in himself and yet marvellously sufficient in Jesus Christ.

If we view this text in the light of his biography, we see him confronting the risen Christ on the road to Damascus. There he sees himself as nothing more than a dead, aborted fetus in the presence of Christ. Judaism and Pharisaism had miscarried him spiritually, and he was revealed to be a spiritual monstrosity, even persecuting the Church of God (Vines 1979:234).

Taking these things into account, I think we can begin to understand the sense he had of how astounding was his Apostleship. He was not born at the right time for the ministry to which he was called. He had not served a period of apprenticeship and discipleship with the earthly Jesus. He was not there on the Sermon on the Mount. He had not seen Lazarus come from the grave; he had not drunk the new wine at the wedding feast at Cana; he had not heard the hammer pounding the nails into Jesus' hands. In fact, he had been a murderous persecutor of those who *had* been with Jesus. His calling to the Apostleship was a wrenching, unexpected event.

Also, he encountered the risen Christ long after the resurrection appearances had been terminated by the ascension. The Damascus appearance was by all reason far removed from its expected time frame. The net result was that he was not as acceptable as the other Apostles. His commission was not an ordinary, organic process like theirs.

Hence, humanly speaking, he was no better than an aborted fetus. If there was anything about which to boast, it was the grace of God that had taken so useless and untimely a character and set him about the business of the Kingdom of God.²

THE IDENTITY OF THOSE CALLED TO FRONTIER MISSIONS

In defining frontier missions, the first thing that must be defined is the *human identity* of those called to engage in such mission. Paul is the great exemplar of frontier missions in the New Testament. What he shows us is that we who come after the Twelve are along with Paul miscarried, monstrous births with little hope of normal life as God created and commissioned it. When we stand in the presence of the risen Christ, we suddenly realize the titanic inability, the dreadful deathliness, the pervasive inexperience, the profound ignorance that we bear in the flesh. To think soberly of ourselves is to realize that we can "speak of nothing except what Christ has accomplished through us in leading the Gentiles to obey God. . ." (Romans 15:18).

We gather at this conference as a group of spiritual miscarriages. There can be no triumphalist self-righteousness, no invidious comparison with our fellow seminarians who are absent, no smug criticism of

complacent church leaders. We cannot put our finger into the pie of missions and, pulling out the plumb of frontier mission, say,

Of all those alive to the Spirit's missions
We are of all people those with the highest commissions!

What Paul teaches us is that frontier missions is for the absolutely “useless,” for those so out of sync with the timing of others in the Kingdom of God that we must be given extraordinary commissions, outside the normal rhythm and sweep of salvation history.

The astounding thing is that, having received that grace and commission, Paul then says, “His grace to me was not without effect. No! I worked harder than all of [the other Apostles]—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). The commission to frontier missions comes as a crucifying hammer, nailing the pretensions and pride of life to the cross so thoroughly that those who hear its call have no more to boast in themselves and their accomplishments than an aborted fetus does in itself. Imagine a person standing before a group twenty years after his birth and saying, “I was born three months premature and weighed only a pound and a half. But you should have seen what I did: performed aerobic exercises, ate health food, jogged two miles a day, and got good sleep. In two months I was able to go home!” Rubbish! That’s how silly self-righteous attitudes are for those who encounter the Christ who commissions frontier missions.

APOSTLESHIP: COMPLETED OR CONTINUING?

Now that we know who we are as we stand in the same place as the great Apostle of frontier missions, we are ready to catch a glimpse of what that commission means. Peer with me through the centuries of fog, created by the schisms and skirmishes of church history, to that time when Apostolic work was sharply and clearly defined, before it got caught in the polemics between Roman Catholics and Protestants.³ How is it that Paul defines *the heavenly imperative* which reached him as one “abnormally born”? What is the nature of his Apostolate to the Gentiles? Is that Apostleship completed, or do we still stand in the light of the Damascus road?

Apostolicity is one of the four creedal marks of the true Church. It is accepted virtually universally by Christian denominations,⁴ but it is understood in very different ways. The more liturgical Churches tend to see it as an actual, historical laying on of hands that goes physically back to the first-century Apostles, representing unity through time with the *tradition and authority* of the earliest disciples. Protestants have tended to stress unity with the *message and spirit* of the Apostles, including their doctrinal emphases and evangelical fervor.

I will not try here to begin to unravel that tangled and instructive history. Let me instead take up the summary of the Apostolate given by Herman Ridderbos. He argues that the Apostolate is distinguished from all other gifts and ministries because it bears a foundational and once-for-all character (1975:448-50). He claims that the early Apostles were distinctive and unique in that they were the originating witnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Christ. “From the significance of the apostolate understood in this way,” says Ridderbos, “it is clear that the apostles, unlike those invested with other ministries in the church, do not come forth from the church, but the church rather owes its genesis to them . . .” (1975:450).

Ridderbos goes on to deduce that the Apostolate is unrepeatable and untransferable in that the early Apostles gave the normative preaching by virtue of their special position in relationship to Christ. Their word has absolute authority in the Church, and they lay claim to an obedience which cannot be echoed with the same accent by later witnesses to Christ. In one respect he is absolutely right. Their witness is normative and authoritative for all times and all parts of the Church. In the Scriptures alone does God constantly and regularly speak in new and life-forming ways. There may well be extra-Biblical words God speaks to the Church, but we recognize them only through the prism of the Apostolic word in the New Testament.

But Ridderbos says something else about the Apostolate which is most tantalizing: “Their significance for the upbuilding of the church, . . . in addition to being unique and unrepeatable, is in part exemplary as well, directed toward imitation and succession. . . .” (1975:450). In Romans 15 Paul pulls back the veil of privacy, reveals a glimpse of his understanding of his own heavenly imperative, and gives us something for imitation and succession. In the light of what he says, I would suggest that the relatively traditional, Protestant analysis given by Ridderbos is simply not sufficient.

The error of the analysis of Ridderbos and the Reformation lies in supposing that the *foundation-building activity* of the Apostolate is exhausted by the completion of the normative witness, written and passed on to us as authoritative. That is to make of their commission and their communication a static, historical “there-ness.” Apostolicity is not something that *happened* and ended, becoming a permanent possession of the Church to be trotted out in polemical discussions. Apostolicity is, instead, something which *happens*—in the present tense.

Paul connects his commission to the task of first evangelization.⁵ He says, “My ambition has always been to preach the gospel where Christ is not named in Christian worship” (Romans 15:20). He speaks of this as foundation-building and connects it to *the fulfillment of prophecy*. Look back at verses 8-12 of this chapter where Paul connects the mission of Christ to his mission to the Gentiles:

For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God’s truth, to confirm the promises made to the patriarchs *so that* the Gentiles may glorify God for his mercy

Paul then cites a number of prophecies indicating that the Gentiles will rejoice in the Lord with the Jews. The prophecy of Isaiah 11:10 is cited as the climactic sign:

The root of Jesse will spring up,
one who will arise to rule over the nations;
the Gentiles *will* hope in him.

This is what Paul’s Apostolate is about: living within the dynamic of salvation history’s promises that “all peoples” (vs. 11) are to praise the Lord. That is why he claims that his “job description” is given in Isaiah 52:15 (cf. Romans 15:21): “Those who were not told about him will see, and those who have not heard will understand.”

If we agree with Ridderbos that the church comes *from* the Apostolate’s activity, then it is a task that is not yet completed. There yet remain Gentiles (peoples) which do not name the name of Christ in praise and worship, who do not yet hope in him, where the foundations laid by first evangelization have yet to be constructed. There yet remain places and peoples where the church must have its initial origins. The great sweep of salvation history is still in the process of fulfillment and still requires the Apostolic ministry of first evangelization and foundation-building.

THE DISTINCTIVE APOSTOLIC OFFERING

Note that Paul also sees this as *the forging of priestly service*.⁶ God had given Paul grace to be an Apostle to the Gentiles, grace “to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:16).

American churches focus so much discussion and energy on the “offering.” We have stewardship campaigns and groups of trustees who weekly tally the money dutifully collected on Sundays. We have budgets and re-budgets, and at the annual meeting we can tell where every penny came from and went to. Sometimes I want to stand up and scream: we have been taken over by Mammon! My own denomination has elaborate machinery for receiving, transferring, investing, counting, and reporting money, yet we cannot tell the whereabouts of a million members who have vanished from our rolls over the last 20 years!

The Apostolic offering was a group of new Gentiles who once were not God’s people, but who had become God’s people and who named the name of Jesus Christ in their praise and worship. Paul’s priestly service wasn’t a preoccupation with the niceties of consubstantiation or the necessities of worship service liturgy. It was a preoccupation with peoples who needed to hear the gospel of God for the first time and to experience the sanctification of the Holy Spirit. Our churches don’t have a ghost of an idea about *this* sort of Apostolic offering—yet there it is in the very center of Paul’s vocational ambition growing out of his encounter with the risen Christ.

THE APOSTOLIC PLAN

Finally, Paul outlines *his pursuit of a long-range plan*. When Paul took up his pen to write the book of Romans, he was on the threshold of a new opportunity. Mission work in the eastern provinces of Rome, on the northern arc from Jerusalem to Illyricum, was completed. His strategy was that of a great circle, beginning with Jerusalem and going around the Mediterranean to Spain, then down through North Africa

and back to Jerusalem.⁷ He viewed Rome not so much as a field of evangelization as a base of support from which he would have provisions, prayers, and maybe even partners to cross into areas which were new frontiers for the gospel. Spain was to experience first evangelization after Paul took an offering from Gentile Christians to poor Jewish believers in Jerusalem.

Note the dialectic between word and deed that runs throughout Romans 15. Paul was convinced that the Romans were full of goodness (character expressed in deeds) and complete in knowledge (understanding of the sound pattern of words that constitute the gospel and the wisdom of God, cf. vs. 14). Paul sees the obedience of the Gentiles as the result of “what I have said and done” (vs. 18). His ministry of proclamation was tied to a compassionate service of relief for the poor. The two were integral partners and outcomes of his commission and ambition to be an Apostle to the Gentiles.

What I want to underline is that Paul had a considered strategy that was congruent with his commission as an Apostle. Wherever he could find Gentiles still without a community of worshipping Christians, who did not name the name of Christ in praise and hope, he strategized to go there to fulfill prophecy and forge a priestly offering to God. Notice he says that he had “often been hindered from coming to Rome” (vs. 22). His plan to go to Spain had been in his mind for some time. Only the completion of first evangelization in the eastern provinces had stopped him, but now that task had been accomplished.

He isn't saying everyone has heard. He isn't saying there is no more need for edification of the believers. All he is indicating is that there were finally congregations of Gentile (and Jewish) Christians who named the name of Christ in all the regions where he had preached. They had become strong enough to build on the foundations Paul had laid and to become a permanent missionizing and evangelizing presence in their own context.

FRONTIER MISSIONS: A CONCLUDING DEFINITION

This brief study has approached frontier missions Biblically rather than theologically or missiologically. I will now venture a definition: frontier missions is the continuation of the mission of the Apostle who was abnormally born. It is that Apostolic and foundational activity of first evangelization which establishes a community of people who name the name of Christ in their praise of God and hope in the world. It is an ongoing fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament, looking toward the Messianic outcome of Gentiles being incorporated into the people of God as a result of the person and work of the Christ. It entails the fostering of ties between these new communities and older, apostolically derived congregations.

To be more precise, frontier mission happens whenever an apostolically commissioned person crosses over geographical, cultural, and spiritual boundaries and encounters a culturally and socially distinctive people group who as yet do not have a viable community of worshipping Christians in their midst. Strategically, it is that part of first evangelization in a new Gentile group which builds the *foundation*, the *initial* phase of a church able to evangelize throughout its own socio-cultural network of human interrelationships. It is *frontier* in that it requires the crossing of new boundaries, going where the gospel has not successfully gone before, activating a new priestly service to acceptably offer a new people to God. It is *mission* in that it continues the commission of the Apostolate, sent to originate the church among all peoples.

Author's address:

NOTES

1. *Ektroma* is found only here in the New Testament. See Kittel, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II (Eerdmans, 1964), pp. 465-7; Colin Brown, *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, (Zondervan, 1975), pp. 182-4.

2. Karl Barth (1933:155) argues that Paul means to indicate by this what it means whenever the risen Christ encounters human beings in their natural state. It expresses the utter humiliation of the alienated and fallen flesh. What is true of Paul is symptomatic of us all.

3. See Hans Kung, *The Church* (Sheed and Ward, 1967); Charles Van Engen, *The Growth of the True Church* (Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1981).

4. These are expressed in the Nicene Creed: “And we believe *one holy catholic and apostolic* church.”

5. Vincent Donovan (1971) uses this felicitous phrase for what frontier missions is really all about.

6. Note Cranfield (1979:754-757), who argues that what in view is the subordinate, levitical service which is auxiliary to the primary office of the priests. In this case Paul's preaching is auxiliary and subordinate to the priestly work of Christ, who himself is offering the Gentiles to God.

7. J. Christiaan Beker argues this in agreement with John Knox: "'From Jerusalem and *in a circle* [kuklo] as far as Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ' (Rom. 15:19) suggests, as John Knox has shown, that Paul is a world apostle with a specific strategy. . . . He does not haphazardly missionize the Roman Empire but conceives of his mission in terms of a 'circle'" (1980:71).

REFERENCES

Barrett, C.K. *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Harper & Row, 1968).

Barth, Karl. *The Resurrection of the Dead* (Hodder and Stoughton, 1933).

Beker, J. Christiaan. *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Fortress Press, 1980).

Cranfield, C.E.B. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, ICC (T. & T. Clark, 1979), Vol. II.

Donovan, Vincent. *Christianity Rediscovered* (Orbis, 1971).

Ridderbos, Herman. *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Eerdmans, 1975).

Vines, Jerry. *God Speaks Today: A Study of I Corinthians* (Zondervan, 1979).