

Formation for Mission

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I have been asked to reflect some on formation for mission, and I promise to do that. I fear, however, that I will be engaging in what Dr. Elaine Heath termed “impractical theology” when she addressed us two days ago. Worse yet, I find that I’m not entirely comfortable with the notion of formation for mission. I think I can get there, but here’s my problem.

Formation for mission suggests that mission is something we do, an activity we can train people for. But as we are constantly reminding ourselves these days, mission is something God does, and we are invited or perhaps sucked up into it. Mission befalls us, and we either give ourselves over to it or are tossed along uselessly within its flow.

We can, of course, talk about what mission looks like, and how to be more effective instruments of God’s agenda. If I were to summarize the whole scope of that agenda, as it is revealed in the story of Israel and in the work of Jesus Christ, I would say, with Paul, that God’s mission is the ministry of reconciliation. “God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18). On this view, formation as it relates to mission would mean becoming people who have the character of reconcilers, and gaining the skills to carry that ministry out.

But here again we need to be careful. When Paul talks about the ministry of reconciliation, he is referring specifically to the reconciliation, that is, the one Jesus has brought about between the Holy One and sinful humankind. If we translated the Greek literally, we would say we have been given the ministry of *the* reconciliation. So mission is not primarily about us being reconcilers. We must take in the good news that we have been reconciled to God before we can pass that

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reconciliation on. We can only do mission if it has been borne in upon us that we are loved whether we deserve it or not, freed by grace for grace. God's mission grabs us first, and we only start serving that mission because we are no longer our own, and find ourselves hurled forward into a new relationship with the neighbor, with whom we want to share the reconciliation that has claimed us.

Most stories of conversion display some version of this pattern. "It hit me that God loved me, and I was immediately on fire to share that love with others." On the one hand, the logic of grace demands that we love others as graciously as God has loved us. On the other, being loved by God can so free us that we are full of desire to do good to others. Thankfulness and good will toward God yield good will toward the neighbor.

But since this is the case, it is hard to see how we can talk about formation for mission at all. If mission is what we are always thrown into when we least expect it, if it is something God co-opts us for or drafts us into, simply because to be loved by God is to be gathered up by him into his purposes, then how can we prepare for it, or be trained for it, or grow into it?

I am thinking here of the typical small county town Episcopal church in southern Ohio that used to have wealthy patrons and social status and a full church on Sunday morning, but now is struggling to continue in its old ways while it deals with loss on every side. There are countless opportunities for this little band of Christians to minister God's reconciling, innovative love, and to exercise bracing leadership out of their own unaccustomed poverty, if only they will stop focusing on survival and start focusing on being the church. But how will that switch be flipped? God has to do it, but until the light goes on, there is very little we can do to form that congregation for mission. Before that corner is turned, everything, whether it be outreach, ecumenical partnership, or evangelism, is immediately transformed into a strategy for survival.

This is not to say that we cannot encourage congregations that are stuck to engage in practices that may help them to be more receptive to God's mission. As I will discuss a bit more later on, the shape of the eucharist provides a kind of blueprint for this. For instance, the Liturgy of the Word invites us to become familiar with the drama of salvation, and to find our own place in that story. More importantly, it invites us to share our own faith journey with others. This kind of sharing is key to our congregations rediscovering themselves as

intentional communities focused on God's will rather than just making it through another year.

We can pursue communal spiritual practices that prepare us to be ready when missional lightning strikes, and we should be energetically encouraging this pursuit, which we could call formation in the expectation of mission. But this in no way implies our producing mission out of our own efforts.

So let's return to the notion that mission is something that happens to us, and explore how we might think about formation on the other side of the mission event.

When we approach mission as something that happens to us because God has claimed us as God's own, we are approaching the domain of baptism. Baptism is the outward and visible sign of our reconciliation with God in Christ. We practice infant baptism because we believe that this reconciliation is entirely at God's initiative, so that, even if we are baptized as adults, we understand our decision to be something God has made possible by choosing us beforehand. Thus, whether we are an infant or an old person, baptism is about utter grace. As I suggested earlier, mission must be understood as arising out of this moment of grace. So getting clear about baptism will help us get clear about mission, and how we might be formed in relation to it.

In the New Testament baptism is not only about being washed from sin (that's the grace part); it is also about new birth, being born again. When Jesus tells Nicodemus he must be born from above or born again, Nicodemus goes with the "again" aspect of the pun and asks whether he must crawl into his mother's womb and emerge a second time (John 3:1–4). But his unspiritual and sexist interpretation of Jesus' claim actually brings home the force of Jesus' metaphor for resurrection life. To be reconciled with God is to be expelled out of a place of apparent safety into a world of exposure. Baptism is expulsion—expulsion out of anything that shields us from our connection with God or our connection with the neighbor.

There is a deep link between baptism as expulsion and how salvation works in the Bible. The children of Israel are expelled from slavery in Egypt into the wilderness, where they are forged into a people dedicated to God's purposes. Viewed negatively, the wilderness is a place of danger and potential failure. Viewed positively, it is the place where a new way of relating to God and to the neighbor can be explored.

We are most familiar with the negative aspect. No sooner does Moses ascend Sinai to receive the Torah but the people forge the golden calf—not as a substitute for God but as their way of claiming allegiance to him. Their blasphemy is to make the Holy One the object of their own aspirations, but this is a blasphemy that would have been unthinkable if they had not experienced God in the first place as savior and Lord. In Egypt they had no notion of themselves as a people with a destiny, and no memory of a God who had chosen them for his own. Prior to the exodus, they had no opportunity to misunderstand God's glory because they had not encountered it.

Expulsion into the wilderness can increase our tendency to colude against God, to exclude outsiders, and to indulge in spiritual pride. But it can also be the opportunity to begin experiencing paradise. Why? Because, along with the spiritual dangers it poses, the God-inspired embrace of more community not less can yield a foretaste of the reign of God. There is an old Rabbinic midrash that during their forty years in the wilderness the Israelites enjoyed an idyllic life in a kind of lush water park—and Psalm 23 is cited to prove it! The point is most definitely not that the disaster of the golden calf and the unpleasantness at Meribah did not happen. The point is that the ensuing delay in entering the promised land brought its own blessings, as the people of Israel learned to rest in the Lord they could not control but could surely trust. Even as we speak, and as Rabbi Steve Gutow reminded us yesterday, our Jewish brothers and sisters are celebrating *Sukkot*, the nostalgic reliving of Israel's time of homelessness in the wilderness. It is said that when the Messiah comes, it will be while the Jewish community is reliving that time of blessed exposure to God and neighbor.

This is the basic logic of exodus: we go out from oppressive and destructive community to embrace community all the more, but at the risk of sinning all the more. At the same time, because we do sin, we arrive at a more mature understanding of ourselves as an exodus people whose exodus is far from over.

Acts tells us a parallel story about how following Jesus can expose us to temptations we otherwise would not have. Very early in the narrative, we learn of the three thousand people baptized on Pentecost. These new Christians spent every day praying and praising God in the Temple, and they were so sure they had crossed over into the perfect fellowship of the reign of God that they pooled all their resources and

distributed them to everyone equally, so that no one would have too little and no one would have too much. But one couple, Ananias and Sapphira, sold their property and contributed only a portion of the proceeds to the common pot, secretly keeping some of the money for themselves. For this they were struck dead—although I would rather say that they collapsed under the weight of shame. The bar had been set too high for them, and they were unable to behave in a manner consistent with what they had agreed to (Acts 5:1–11).

But, as it turns out, the whole community was also incapable of meeting the high standard it had set for itself. Within a very short time it was reported that the widows of the Jewish Christians who were foreigners—who spoke Greek instead of Aramaic—were being overlooked in the daily distribution. The fledgling Christian community was not such a perfect fellowship, after all! They were like any other human community, prone to forget the stranger and not to see the people on the margins. But the amazing thing is how they responded to this discovery. They did not deny it as untrue, or shrug it off as unworthy of notice, and they did not blame the victim. What they did was to invent the diaconate, ordaining seven men from the aggrieved party to ensure that no one in the community would ever be overlooked again (Acts 6:16). More profoundly, they acknowledged that they were an imperfect body in constitutional need of internal self-correction. So they created the ordained ministry as an instrument of self-criticism, to keep them moving forward in exodus.

I want to focus on the significance of this self-critical move, because it suggests a way in which we might more fully and properly embrace the notion of formation for mission. Mission is not our doing, it is God's—we are simply catapulted into it. But the spiritual dangers into which it catapults us are legion, since mission is about the redemption of community, and community is the context for all our sin. So we must learn how to embrace community without allowing it to drag us down.

Essentially, the church takes on the work of being a redeemed and redemptive community in full knowledge that embracing community will expose it to temptations which it will probably fall prey to, but which it can learn from. In other words, it embraces the time of trial as its permanent state until the eschaton.

So our way forward is to take on the huge risk of embracing community as an essential dimension of the reign of God. There has

always been a tension within Christianity between valuing community and being wary of it. This tension runs through the desert fathers. It is a major question for Augustine, who moves from viewing the neighbor as a useful but dangerous resource to seeing heaven as a place where we will fully enjoy the neighbor along with God. It surfaces again in nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, with its stress on individual conversion uneasily—and impermanently—coupled with its zeal for organized social reform.

The Anglican tradition came down strongly on the side of community when it grounded itself in a *Book of Common Prayer* and in the ancient community-embracing ecclesiology that produced it. Cranmer envisioned the entire English nation as a Benedictine monastery turned inside out, with every aspect of ordinary life becoming an occasion for the work of sanctification of our common life.

The habit of self-criticism should make us ask whether Cranmer was just trying to sacralize the Tudor establishment, and should alert us to how the Prayer Book was later able to function as a tool of colonialism. But that might prove my point that the genuine embrace of community as a kingdom value always risks the abuse of community as a theater for collusion, exclusion, and oppression.

Yet, thanks be to God, this argument also works in reverse. Cranmer's vision, however he intended to use it, is a true reflection of a deep Christian conviction, namely, that Christ came not to rescue us from the spiritual dangers of community, but to redeem community and draw us more deeply into it. At our most graced, we are a tradition that regards the church as a school in which we are being formed to be open for mission, both through the discipline of a common life and through the conviction that society as a whole is a laboratory for reconciliation.

So what are the practices that form us for humble, open community in Christ? The eucharist is a rich source of layered Christian reflection on this question.

There are four moments in the eucharistic liturgy that reflect four essential practices (you may think of others):

- (1) I mentioned the first one earlier on. The Liturgy of the Word directs us to communal engagement with scripture, and thus to shared reflection, theological debate and personal witness. This kind of free and open discourse, informed by serious

study, allows for difference and opens space between us for Jesus. This practice militates against the confusion of community with conformity. One possible translation of Hebrew's great definition of faith places holy debate at the very heart of the church's life. We usually hear that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." But the second half can also read as "debate about things unseen" (Hebrews 11:1).

- (2) The Prayers of the People are in fact an expression of the priesthood of all believers, as we join with Jesus in his high priestly work of intercession. (By the way, this is why it is important that we stand to pray these prayers.) It is harder for us to turn in on ourselves if we know ourselves to be participating in the prayers of the whole church in union with Christ. Also, as we pray deliberately for other people and other communities, we enter into the economy of grace—every good thing coming by way of someone else. It also moves us from the mindset of outreach to the mindset of partnership.
- (3) The exchange of the peace is the ritual enactment of the ministry of reconciliation. As such, it follows naturally from confession and absolution, as we share with others the peace we have with God in Jesus Christ. But this liturgical act also highlights an element of the ministry of reconciliation which is easily overlooked. The exchange of the peace forces us to acknowledge the presence of the other—and especially to pay attention to those who might otherwise remain unseen. This may be the most important exodus practice of all. When we force ourselves to see the stranger, or to see the strangeness of those who are familiar to us, we see that our community really has no edges.
- (4) The people's offering of bread, wine, and money is about generosity. As in the Prayers of the People, we are invited to acknowledge our connection to people and communities that may be far away from us geographically or ideologically. But the offertory is more particularly about offering ourselves, our souls and bodies, to God. We do this in the trust that this offering, however flawed, will not be rejected. In fact, we will be returned to our collective self as the body of Christ. Here we see clearly the Jewish and Christian conviction that

community is not to be escaped but redeemed. But here again this commitment requires trust and courage, for we should not assume that what we receive back will not be experienced at first as loss. The practice of offering up is the daily practice of being willing to let go what must be let go, even if it feels like death.

All these threads are woven together in the Great Thanksgiving: remembrance, intercession, forgiveness, self-giving. What binds them together? (Since it is not obvious that they should be bound together.) The resurrection of Jesus, which heals our memories, backs up our prayers, assures our forgiveness, and stands beside as we are birthed into that mission that is not ours, but God's.