

The Nothingness of the Church under the Cross:

Mission *without* Colonialism

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“Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth — as in fact there are many gods and many lords — yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist” (1 Cor. 8:5–6).

The theme of mission is not merely one subset of theology — it is related fundamentally to all aspects of theological inquiry and Christian practice. This is so because to seriously reflect theologically and practically on the theme of mission is to be confronted with the question of the very truth of the gospel itself. On the one hand, this is simply a way of emphasizing what has been the constant refrain of many missiologists over the past half century or so, which may be best summarized in the phrase “mission is the mother of theology.”² On the other hand, in this article I want to suggest that when one begins to reflect theologically and practically on the theme of mission, one is confronted with questions that run much broader and deeper than what one is perhaps initially prone to see on the surface of things. This is especially true given the current

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² This phrase comes from Martin Kähler. See especially his *Schriften zur Christologie und Mission* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1971). For a helpful overview of theology of mission in the last century see David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991).

“post-Christendom” context of missiological inquiry.³ To address the theme of mission in a post-Christendom context is not merely a matter of changing missionary “tactics” or “strategies” in the face of a new modern or postmodern situation. Rather, what is especially crucial for theologians and Christian churches to come to terms with today is the way in which the modern history of Christian mission is in many significant respects inextricably linked with the modern history of Western colonialism.⁴ This is not a point that can be easily overcome or sidestepped. For what is at stake in this history is the question of the truth of the gospel itself and the extent to which the coincidence of Christian mission and Western colonialism marks nothing less than a denial of the gospel.

It is not enough to merely acknowledge, confess, and repent for the violent colonial history of Christian mission. The pressing task of theology is rather to critically interrogate the theological conditions by which the gospel itself became bound theologically, ideologically, and practically to established powers. Theology is to interrogate how and why the gospel became so bound to established powers to the extent that Christian mission became almost inseparable from the expansion of the Western Christian religiopolitical apparatus which included the colonial propagation of Western sociopolitical, cultural, racial, economic, and ethical norms, practices and institutions. To reflect critically and honestly about this history and the theological conditions that made it possible is central to what it means to think “mission” faithfully today.

All of this is to simply underscore *how much* is at stake theologically and practically when one confronts the question of mission in a post-Christendom context. Never again can theologians, pastors, and missionaries allow the gos-

3 See Darrell Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); and Darrell Guder, *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000).

4 Of course much of twentieth-century missiology has been preoccupied with this very question. For the classic study see Stephen Neill, *Colonialism and Christian Missions* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966). See also Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989). See also the important work of John G. Flett, *The Witness of God: The Trinity, Missio Dei, Karl Barth, and the Nature of Christian Community* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010). More recently see the collection edited by Dana L. Robert, *Converting Colonialism: Visions and Realities in Mission History 1706–1914* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008). For a helpful discussion of the ongoing significance of the work of Edward Said for contemporary missiology, see Deanna Ferree Womack, “Edward Said and the Orientalised Body: A Call for Missiological Engagement,” *Swedish Missiological Themes* 99, no. 4 (2011): 441–61.

pel of Jesus Christ to become captive to the ideology of colonialist and imperialist expansion. In this light, the task of theological reflection thus becomes a matter of asking after the ways in which the church continues to conceive of and even carry out “mission” within the framework of these deeply rooted theological assumptions.

In this article I seek to re-situate the question of mission theologically within the context of early Christian apocalyptic. This is, in part, a way of taking up and extending David Shank’s claim that “the eschatological kingdom orientation of the Anabaptists remains the essential mainspring of mission — of Christian messianism.”⁵ Drawing on the theology of Ernst Käsemann, I argue that whenever one finds this eschatological kingdom orientation moving into the background of theology and practice — what Käsemann calls early Christian apocalyptic — the church as an institution comes to the foreground as that community which sacramentally mediates and dispenses the gospel and salvation. What is of particular interest here theologically is the way in which apocalyptic expectancy and hope for the imminent coming of the Parousia and the kingdom of God has radically slackened, even vanished, over the course of Christian history, and the connection this has with the theological shape of Christian mission in relation to the kingdom of God and the world. The first contention of this article is that the slackening of apocalyptic expectancy and hope is, in significant respects, the theological condition for the possibility of a Christendom model of the church. The second contention is that the history of Christian mission *as* colonialism is bound up with what John Howard Yoder called “Constantinianism.” Indeed, the combination of the slackening of apocalyptic expectation and the rise of Constantinianism is the condition of possibility for the equivalence of mission and Western colonialism.⁶ Building on Martin Kähler and J. C. Hoekendijk before him, David Bosch rightly highlighted the ways in which Christian mission within such a framework can all too easily take the form of *propaganda*. As Bosch defines it, “propaganda is

5 David A. Shank, “Anabaptism and Mission,” in *Mission from the Margins: Selected Writings from the Life and Ministry of David A. Shank*, ed. James R. Krabill (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010), 293.

6 To be sure, a certain kind of apocalyptic expectation has not been absent from the history of the Western colonialist imagination. When apocalyptic is divorced from its christological basis and no longer takes shape as a mode of expectation under the signum crucis, it runs the risk of becoming supremely ideological. For more on this point, see Christian T. Collins Winn and Amos Yong, “The Apocalypse of Colonialism: Notes toward a Postcolonial Eschatology,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, eds. Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha, and L. Daniel Hawk (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 139–51.

always the spreading of ‘Christianity’, that means: the gospel plus culture; the gospel plus confessionalism; the gospel plus a set of moral codes; the gospel plus some feeling of ethnical superiority, always resulting in reproducing exact replicas of the sending church.”⁷ Furthermore, as Hoekendijk claims, the essential characteristic of mission as propaganda is precisely a “lack of expectant hope and an absence of due humility.”⁸ The constructive section of this article thus seeks to re-situate Christian mission within the framework of apocalyptic expectancy and hope in a way that fundamentally challenges propagandistic and colonialistic theologies of mission.

Despite David Shank’s insistence that an eschatological orientation has historically been the “essential mainspring” of Anabaptist theology and practice, there remains a relative dearth of constructive Anabaptist theological engagement with a specifically *apocalyptic* approach to a theology of Christian mission.⁹ Thus one of the underlying motivations of this article is to encourage a retrieval of an apocalyptic theological imagination for Anabaptist and Mennonite theology and practice, especially in relation to ongoing theological reflection on the church and its mission. While all the specific theological implications of such a retrieval for Anabaptist and Mennonite theology cannot be wholly determined in advance, in its expectancy for a future that is discontinuous with the present configuration of things, it is my hope that apocalyptic theology will continue the work of problematizing the tendency in Anabaptist and Mennonite theology to stabilize the contours of what constitutes Anabaptist and Mennonite ecclesial identity. Indeed, if Chris Huebner is right to note that Mennonites are in the midst of a “full-blown identity crisis,” a retrieval of apocalyptic theology will probably do less to *resolve* this crisis of identity than to call for the validity of its theological permanence.¹⁰ Such a remark is not meant to encourage perpetual ecclesial “navel-gazing” so much as it is a way to emphasize the sense in which the apocalyptic gospel is always *destabilizing*

7 David J. Bosch, “Systematic Theology and Mission: The Voice of an Early Pioneer,” *Theologia Evangelica* 5, no. 3 (1972), 183.

8 J. C. Hoekendijk, “The Call to Evangelism,” in *The Church Inside Out*, trans. Isaac C. Rottenberg (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 23.

9 The most important work on the theme of apocalyptic and Christian mission is Nathan R. Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008). The Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder is of pivotal constructive significance in Kerr’s genealogy of apocalyptic in modern theology.

10 Despite his critical remarks of a certain tone in contemporary apocalyptic theology, this article resonates deeply with Huebner’s insistence that the peace of Christ is “radically unstable and risky precisely because it exists as gift.”

of claims to identity, especially attempts to establish the boundaries of *ecclesial* identity. Apocalyptic theology thus serves to challenge the perennial Anabaptist and Mennonite theological temptation to all too readily mark off the visible contours of the faithful ecclesial body vis-à-vis an unbelieving world. The goal of this particular article is to show how apocalyptic theology challenges claims to stable ecclesial identity and in so doing serves to reconfigure and recast Anabaptist and Mennonite theologies of Christian mission.¹¹

The Slackening of Apocalyptic and the Rise of the Church as Christendom

Ernst Käsemann famously argued that early Christian eschatology is characterized by the apocalyptic expectation of the imminent coming of God's kingdom, of the Parousia of Jesus Christ, and the dawn of the new creation.¹² For Käsemann this view is especially characteristic of the theology that governs Paul's letters. Yet, within the New Testament itself, Käsemann noted, one can already discern a modification of eschatology, which eventually ends in the "final extinction" of apocalyptic from the dominant forms of Christian theology and practice.¹³ With the disappearance of apocalyptic expectation there arises the establishment of the "great Church which understands itself as the *Una Sancta Apostolica*."¹⁴ Käsemann describes this shift polemically in terms of a

See Chris K. Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, and Identity* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2006), 36. For his recent criticisms of apocalyptic theology, see Chris K. Huebner, "The Apocalyptic Body of Christ? Reflections on Yoder and Apocalyptic Theology by Way of David Foster Wallace," *Pro Ecclesia* 23, no. 2 (Spring 2014): 125–31.

11 "Apocalyptic" is, of course, a slippery term. While there has recently been a renewed interest in "apocalyptic theology," what constitutes its general emphases and concerns is far from clear. In this article, I seek to extend the tradition of biblical exegesis and theology represented by Ernst Käsemann and the so-called "Union School," which includes such figures as Paul Lehmann, J. Louis Martyn, Christopher Morse, Nancy Duff, Beverly Gaventa, and James F. Kay. More recently, David Congdon, Halden Doerge, Nathan R. Kerr, and Philip G. Ziegler have made notable contributions to this ongoing conversation. For a volume bringing together a diversity of voices on the theme of apocalyptic, see Douglas Harink and Josh Davis, eds., *The Future of Apocalyptic Theology: With and Beyond J. Louis Martyn* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012).

12 While Ernst Käsemann makes this argument most famously in two important essays, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology" and "On the Subject of Primitive Christian Apocalyptic," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969): 82–107, 108–37.

13 Käsemann, "Paul and Early Catholicism," in *New Testament Questions of Today*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1969), 237.

14 *Ibid.*

transition from apocalyptic to “early Catholicism.” And while there is no doubt that Käsemann formulates the issue in terms of a polemical opposition between the “Protestant view” and Roman Catholicism, such clear-cut and confessionally loaded designations cannot be so easily sustained. Rather the issues are deeply internal to Christian theology itself, arising no less in Protestant and even radical Protestant theological traditions than in Roman Catholic circles.¹⁵

At issue is the way in which the slackening of apocalyptic expectation coincides with the rise of the church as an established institution viewed within a salvation-historical schema, which sacramentally mediates and secures the salvation of its members. While an eschatological framework is not entirely lost from view in this transition, the priority and singularity of Jesus Christ as Lord becomes overshadowed and even submerged into an ecclesiological construct. Consequently, according to Käsemann, the meaning of faith is no longer determined by an apocalyptic expectancy for the Parousia of Jesus Christ but becomes centrally oriented around incorporation into the church community, which is now statically conceived as that state of being in which one becomes an elected member of the Christian religion. Revelation is no longer that action of God which encounters the world as a dynamic event, but is now treated as a “piece of property which is at the community’s disposal,” which is to be safeguarded and preserved through a traditioned process of handing down orthodox doctrine and practice. Apostolicity is no longer understood in its original missionary sense as the Spirit’s sending of messengers of the gospel but is now viewed as the historical source and arbiter of the church’s doctrinal tradition. As Käsemann puts it, “The messenger of the Gospel has become the guarantor of the tradition, the witness of the resurrection has become the witness of the *historia sacra*, the bearer of the eschatological action of God has become a pillar of the institution which dispenses salvation, the man who is subject to the eschatological temptation has become the man who brings *securitas*.”¹⁶

In the midst of this eschatological shift, characterized most acutely by the slackening of apocalyptic expectation and the loss of a christological basis

15 The point is made not merely out of a concern for good ecumenical manners. The reality is that such a designation simply fails to do justice to the deeply apocalyptic elements of much Roman Catholic theology, perhaps especially highlighted in Roman Catholic liberation theologians of the twentieth century. See especially the contributions of Johan Baptist Metz, Jon Sobrino, Gustavo Gutierrez, Leonardo Boff, and, more recently and forcefully, David Tracy. Moreover, these developments may be judged as legitimate outworkings of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

16 Ernst Käsemann, “An Apologia for Primitive Christian Eschatology,” *Essays on New Testament Themes*, trans. W.J. Montague (London: SCM Press, 1964), 177.

for eschatology, the imminent future now becomes re-situated *within* a salvation-historical process with the established church at the center, becoming the safe-house for the righteous and godly set over against those outside its sacramentally and doctrinally guarded walls.¹⁷

The priority and singularity of Jesus Christ is submerged into ecclesiology, and discipleship becomes identified with adherence to an objectively given tradition and a “Christian way of life.” According to Käsemann, all of this has drastic consequences for Christian mission. The person of Christ is transformed into a mere cipher for an “ideal picture” of human achievement; now the Christian is depicted as “a gladiator in the arena of virtue.”¹⁸ The telos of discipleship is to become virtuous, to enter into the glory of God, and to partake in the divine nature by way of deification. The whole of early apocalyptic eschatology is transferred into a Hellenistic dualism which reinterprets the world as split down the middle into the “ungodly” and the “corrupt,” on the one side, and the “godly” and the “incorrupt” on the other. The telos of the human in Christ is thus to emigrate from one world to the other by way of the building up of virtue. To have faith now means to be incorporated into the church as an institution, and Christian mission becomes a matter of territorial expansion.

Constantinianism as a Misunderstanding of the Confession “Jesus is Lord”

The slackening of apocalyptic expectation thus coincides with the rise of the established church and an ecclesiology is developed in order to support and preserve the integrity of the church as a community of virtue. This becomes the condition of possibility for a Christendom model of the church, or the settling down of the church with the powers of this world. Such a shift is also closely

17 On the issue of salvation history see especially Ernst Käsemann, “Justification and Salvation History in the Epistle to the Romans,” in *Perspectives on Paul*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 60-78. Käsemann does not seek to play justification and salvation history against each other but to insist on the “right co-ordination” of the two. Käsemann is concerned to emphasize that salvation history is only properly understood as a matter of God’s faithfulness to the ungodly. In other words, salvation history is “paradoxical” because it occurs “under the sign of the World and in the face of Sarah’s justifiable laughter” (70). He writes, “Will the crucified Christ which Grünewald painted ever lose its frightfulness? . . . Christianity has long told a story of salvation which justifies the institution of the church as the community of ‘good’ people. The muted colors of our church windows transform the story of the Nazarene into a saint’s legend in which the cross is merely an episode, being the transition to the ascension — as if we are dealing with a variation of the Hercules myth” (71).

18 Käsemann, “An Apologia,” 179.

related to what John Howard Yoder called “Constantinianism.” Constantinianism is, for Yoder, not merely a reference to the fourth-century emperor, but a term that refers to a decisive shift in early Christian eschatology.¹⁹ Yoder’s description of Constantinianism parallels what Käsemann identifies as the roots of “early Catholicism,” or what may better be called a Christendom model of the church. According to Yoder, the earliest Christian confession — “Jesus is Lord” — is an eschatological, even apocalyptic, statement of faith and hope. Such a confession stands in a directly subversive relation to all visible, established powers, whether cultural, economic, or sociopolitical.²⁰

But here we must go further still, for the confession “Jesus is Lord” is not *only* a politically subversive confession, it is also an *apocalyptic* confession that is *cosmic* in scope.²¹ In other words, for the early Christians to confess “Jesus is Lord” meant not *only* a refusal of the lordship of Caesar, but also a refusal of the lordship of the powers of sin and death — of the rule of Satan.²² As Käsemann put it, the apocalyptic confession “Jesus is Lord” is an *answer* to the question,

19 John Howard Yoder takes up the theme of Constantinianism at a number of different points in his work. It is not uncommon for him to articulate Constantinianism in terms of a historical eschatological shift in the Christian community. See, for example, John Howard Yoder, “Peace without Eschatology?” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998).

20 John Howard Yoder rightly notes that the problem of Constantinianism is not this or that identification of the gospel with this or that established power, but rather the more basic structural error of identifying the gospel with any established power. “Should we not rather,” as Yoder helpfully puts it, “question the readiness to establish a symbiotic relationship to every social structure rather than questioning only the tactics of having allied itself with the wrong one?” See John Howard Yoder, “Christ, the Hope of the World in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 202.

21 Beverly Gaventa argues that what motivates Paul theologically in Galatians is not first of all his interpretation of the gospel’s relationship to the law, but the singularity of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the sense in which this gospel marks a sharp antithesis — indeed a crisis — between the new creation and the cosmos enslaved by the anti-God powers of Sin and Death. See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Singularity of the Gospel,” in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 103.

22 Of course John Howard Yoder does acknowledge the ways in which the confession “Jesus is Lord” is a crisis to the powers and principalities. At times, however, Yoder is overly concerned to suggest that the confession is reducible to a merely functional significance as that which serves to distinguish the church as an alternative visible political body vis-à-vis an unbelieving world. Further, his appropriation of New Testament eschatology and the powers relies much too heavily on the work of H. Berkhof and O. Cullmann.

“Who owns the earth?” And so, drawing on Käsemann’s insights one might push beyond Yoder to say that what is at stake is not merely a recognition of the directly ethical or political import of the early confession, but rather the extent to which such an apocalyptic confession indicated nothing less than the subversion of *the enslaved world*, and so also positions itself polemically against the immanent framework upon which the ethical and the political as such still trade.

To apocalyptically confess “Jesus is Lord” did not amount to the confirmation of established power but rather, we might say, it announced the apocalyptic *crisis* of every established power. Indeed, it was and is the apocalyptic crisis of the world insofar as it is a world enslaved to anti-God powers. What is especially important to grasp here, however, is that this *crisis* was not exactly “visible to all” in any obvious way — indeed, it was visible only under the sign of the crucifixion (*signum crucis*). The confession was a statement of *faith* and of *hope*. While the early Christians believed that the cross and resurrection of Jesus fundamentally and decisively changed reality — importantly, this was based not in the visibility of an objective change in lordship but *in* faith and so was not visible to all. Rome continued to reign, the power of sin continued to hold sway over people’s lives and the world generally, and death had pretty clearly not ceased. “Jesus is Lord,” then, was an invisible, eschatological reality — it was not any less *true* or decisive for the Christian life, but it was still that for which one stood in hope and in which one believed in faith by the Holy Spirit under sign of the cross. The coming kingdom of God, the new creation, the objectively visible lordship of Jesus Christ was in a very important sense *not yet*, which is why Paul will speak of a creation that still *groans* for the coming new creation (Rom. 8:18–25).

What is perhaps most important to emphasize at this point is the sense in which Constantinianism is a theological misconstrual of this basic Christian confession, and it is a misconstrual that is deeply intertwined with the slackening of apocalyptic expectation, viz., the slackening of faith and hope that the kingdom of God is *at hand* but not *in hand*.²³ Constantinianism is the transposition of the confession “Jesus is Lord” into a process that is now taking

While the powers cannot be “restored” to some pristine origin, for the former, they can most certainly be “Christianized” for the common good; for the latter the powers are part of a larger providentially construed salvation-historical dramatic battle. See H. Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1977), 58–65.

²³ See Christopher Morse, *The Difference Heaven Makes* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010).

place visibly, objectively, and publicly in the course of historical events. It is, we might say, a forcible attempt to bring the future into the present — and to identify what is now emerging visibly with the triumphant realization of the kingdom of God in history. But Constantinianism is also marked by a particular way of viewing God’s providence in and through the historical process as such — specifically and concretely, it is the belief that the transformation of the Roman Empire into a *Christian* Roman Empire was the action and expression of God’s will, the making visible what had only once been believed in faith and in hope (namely, that “Jesus is Lord”).

It is precisely at this point, however, that one must critically interrogate the way in which the critique of Constantinianism is too often taken up by Yoder as a way to *prop up* the church itself as a visible political body that is missiologically set over against the world. In Yoder’s view, the dire consequence of Constantinianism is that it renders invisible the church–world distinction. For Yoder, this is problematic insofar as it winds up in a fusion of church and world allowing early Christianity to lose sight of the fact that “the meaning of history is in the work of the church.”²⁴ While Yoder is right to characterize “the world” theologically as “structured unbelief,” he is wrong to view the church community itself as the bearer of the meaning of history. Such an account radically fails to grapple with the extent to which *structured unbelief* runs through the heart of the church community itself.²⁵ Indeed, the critical apocalyptic point forcefully made by Käsemann is that Jesus is Lord over both church *and* world, and so “visibility” as a theological category for the church’s self-definition is quite wrongly understood if it assumes the place of an unquestioned predicate of the church community itself. Even more problematically, it is precisely this visible church–world distinction, for Yoder, which becomes the theological condition and basis for Christian mission.²⁶ Within such a framework, mission cannot help become a matter of the socio-political propagation of the church’s own visible life, even if that propagation is strictly qualified as a *minority* posi-

24 Yoder, “The Otherness of the Church,” in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical*, ed. Michael Cartwright (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 61.

25 For more on this, especially on the extremely problematic shape John Howard Yoder’s theology has taken in the theology of Stanley Hauerwas, see Ry O. Siggelkow, “Toward an Apocalyptic Peace Church: Christian Pacifism after Hauerwas,” *The Conrad Grebel Review* 31, no. 3 (2013): 274–97.

26 See, for example, John Howard Yoder, “Church Types and Mission: A Radical Reformation Perspective,” in *Theology of Mission: A Believers Church Perspective*, eds. Gayle Gerber Koontz and Andy Alexis-Baker (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 159.

tion within society. Indeed, what is at stake here is the question of a theologically faithful account of the church's visibility vis-à-vis the world.

By way of a critical alternative to Yoder, we might say that the church is visible just to the extent that it witnesses *not* to its own life as the meaning of history, but to the eschatological *life to come* under which both church *and* world stand in permanent, apocalyptic, crisis. The issue is wrongly put when it is posed as a question as to the location of the meaning of history — for the church is not the answer to the question of the *meaning* of history; rather, we might better say that it is the apocalypse of Jesus Christ that is the crisis of meaning in history as such. Thus, we would do well to critically ask after the ways in which there is still yet a latent realized — even *triumphant* — eschatology in Yoder's thought, which plays itself out most problematically in his definition of the church as a sociopolitical body that visibly bears the marks of the life to come and contains within itself the meaning of history.²⁷

Mission as Colonialism

The above is, I think, the central logic of Constantinianism and it is this logic which is, in combination with the slackening of apocalyptic expectation and the emergence of a Christendom doctrine of the church, the theological vision that shapes and sustains the modern collusion of Christian mission and Western colonialism. In Constantinian Christendom, and in the theology that undergirds and sustains its vision, the apocalyptic kingdom of God no longer represents a fundamental crisis to established power; far less does the kingdom of God pose any real crisis to the established church. For the kingdom is now triumphantly pulled into the present age, becomes strongly identified with the structures of the institutional church and its tradition as well as the dominant established powers, and Christian mission is transformed into the *churchification* of the world.²⁸ Such a theological vision of mission is rooted in the theological presumption that the gospel can be neatly aligned with establishment

27 John Howard Yoder consistently interprets the doctrine of the invisibility of the church as a way to allow for the possibility of faith outside of visible church boundaries. But this is a very narrow understanding of the doctrine, especially the version developed during the Reformation. For a helpful clarification of this doctrine and its importance, see John Webster, "The Visible Attests the Invisible," in *The Community of the Word: Toward an Evangelical Ecclesiology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 96–113.

28 See Ernst Käsemann, *Jesus Means Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1972), 99. See also, Hoekendijk, "The Call to Evangelism," 25. "Evangelism and *churchification* are not identical, and very often they are each other's bitterest enemies" (italics original).

political and cultural power without losing its very substance. The historico-political arrangement that we have been calling Christendom grows out of this decisive shift in eschatology, and the slackening of apocalyptic. Consequently, the early Christian apocalyptic hope for the imminent coming of the Parousia of Jesus Christ no longer stands as a “crisis” to every established order; rather it is the church *as* Christendom, identified as a sign and outworking of God’s providence in history, which bears within itself the very destiny of the world.

Within this context Christian mission becomes integrally bound up with the continuation, the maintenance, and the colonial *propagation* of a particular sociopolitical, ethical, economic, and cultural order. It is bound up with the maintenance of these orders in a variety of ways: most violently, through “crusades” against that which threatens the integrity of the politicized body of the church, through the excommunication or execution of “heretics,” and through the outright annihilation of any and all otherness, anything that would pose a threat to the integrity of Christian cultural and political identity and territory. As Christendom seeks to expand outward into new lands in modern history, there emerges the deadly combination of Christian mission with colonialism, or Christian mission *as* colonialism — once again, the continuation and propagation and also the maintenance of a particular sociopolitical, ethical, economic, and cultural order — what we now call “the West.”

Mission *without* Colonialism

As I have stated above, to reflect on mission is to be confronted with the very substance of the gospel itself — part of this confrontation is to honestly view the history of Christendom and the ways in which the logic of Constantinianism has made possible a theological imagination that would carry out crusades and a violent colonial project under the banner of “mission.” What is important to realize is that such colonialism is in many ways made possible by deeply rooted theological failures. So, how are we to understand mission in a way that is theologically faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ? How are we to understand mission in a way that refuses the ideological capture of the gospel by powers that seek to enslave and destroy? In short, what might it mean to rethink Christian mission *without* colonialism?

Because mission is not merely one subset of Christian theology the task is not rightly understood as simply a matter of rethinking mission. Rather the task is to rethink the relationship between kingdom, church, and world

in light of a more faithful hearing of the gospel of Jesus Christ.²⁹ Of course this rethinking does not mean we simply throw out the Christian theological tradition altogether — one must maintain a dialectical relationship to the theological legacy of Christendom.³⁰ But this does not relieve us at all from the task of rethinking important elements of our theology. In fact, it makes that work much *more* pressing and laborious because it arises out of a deeper and more serious engagement with the Christian theological tradition and the legacy of Christendom. But the reason why we *must* rethink the *whole of it* is precisely because mission is not one subset of theology just as it is not one element of church life. It is a question of rethinking mission apocalyptically as a dynamic *event* which is inseparable from the activity of the sending of the Holy Spirit *in* and *for* the world.

What takes priority in an apocalyptic theology of mission is decidedly *not* the church as an established order that needs to be maintained in order for it to be territorially and politically replicated, propagated, and expanded, but rather the in-breaking activity of God in Jesus Christ in and for the reconciliation and redemption of the *cosmos*. And so it is not so much that the church itself *has* a mission but rather that God is a *missionary* God, a God-in-Action, a God whose face is always turned to the world in grace and judgment — and a God who in the power of the cross and resurrection, calls forth *witnesses*.³¹

To rethink mission in this way is to see the connection between mission and witness as constitutive of *ekklesia* — of church — of the community of those who are called forth to be disciples of the living Lord Jesus Christ and whose lives are precisely as such given over for the sake of a world in bondage to the powers of sin and death.³² But what does it mean to be so given? What does the church “have” that the world does not have? The answer, it seems to me, is *nothing*. For the church does not possess the gospel! The missionary church that

29 For some provisional theses in this direction see Nathan R. Kerr, Ry O. Siggelkow, and Halden Doerge, “Kingdom-World-Church: Some Provisional Theses,” from the blog *Inhabitatio Dei*, posted on June 8, 2010, <http://www.inhabitiodei.com/2010/06/08/kingdom-world-church-some-provisional-theses/>.

30 I am indebted to Darrell Guder for helping me to better understand this point.

31 As Jürgen Moltmann puts it, “Mission does not come from the church; it is from mission and in the light of mission that the church has to be understood.” Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 10.

32 On sin as a cosmic power see Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Cosmic Power of Sin in Paul’s Letter to the Romans,” in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 125–36.

is faithful to the gospel does not so much give itself to the world — as if the purpose of its mission is to point back to the church’s own interior life, as if the church bears within itself something that the world *needs*; rather the missionary church gives itself up *unto* what it is *not* in and of itself, namely the crucified Jesus Christ and the coming kingdom of God. And this is what it means to begin to rethink mission and witness theologically within a post-Christendom context; it is the missionary church that gives itself up unto witness, in an *ek-centric* movement that points away from what the church is in itself by pointing *to* the living Lord Jesus Christ. In other words, the missionary church is that community called forth by God in the power of the Holy Spirit that never loses sight of the fact that its sole purpose and reason for existence is to *witness* to the one who became nothing for the sake of the world, the crucified Jesus Christ, and to say that here, in this mutilated body, is the salvation of the world. “He must increase; I must decrease” (John 3:30).

Mission as Solidarity with the World *under* the Cross

And so, we might say that the church in mission is a church called forth by God in the power of the Holy Spirit to live and to work as witnesses to the good news that, in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, God has reconciled the world to Godself. The church is called forth to witness to the occurrence of this singular, unrepeatable event in history, but the church is not only called forth to witness to this event as something *past*. The church is also called forth to witness to the *promise* of the future coming of God’s kingdom.³³ Here, as before, the missionary church is not called to point *back to itself*, nor is it called to point to any established kingdom on earth. It is rather called to point in faith and in hope and in love, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to the future which is imminently and apocalyptically coming. The church thus lives in *expectancy* of the coming of God’s kingdom — a kingdom that comes *for the earth*. And the church announces in word and in deed that this future, which is *not yet* here but which is nonetheless promised, marks the final defeat of the powers of sin and death, the passing away of the old world, for it is God’s victory over every anti-God power. It is, in short, God’s final word of love for the world: the justification of the ungodly and the resurrection of the dead.

***Ecclesia Crucis*: the Mark of the Missionary Church**

Living in the expectancy of this future the missionary church is given to live in

³³ As Wilbert Shenk puts it, “The promissio of the eschaton is correlated with missio” Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 19.

solidarity with this suffering world that God so loves, a world that still *groans* under the weight of the powers of sin and death.³⁴ By the power of the Holy Spirit the missionary church is thus thrown into the depths of those places *most* marked by the powers of sin and death.³⁵ And it is for this reason that the missionary church is given to be the church not of the godly, of the pious, of the religious, of the holy, of the saved, but the church of the *ungodly*, of sinners — and so it is to live and to work with and among the damned and wretched of the earth.³⁶ The church is given to live and to weep among the dying and the dead, the social outcasts, the mentally ill, the prisoners, and especially the crucified peoples of the earth.³⁷ It is into these spaces of death and nothingness, from these spaces of *hell*, that the missionary church is faithful to its calling to be *conformed* to Christ's own life and death — for his is a life that is always self-emptying and self-expending, a life that transgresses the boundaries of our ecclesialogically constructed notions of “sacred” and “profane.”³⁸ To faithfully witness to this crucified body is to risk the integrity and wholeness of the church vis-à-vis the world; indeed, it is to put at risk the church's perceived “holiness.” God moves his witnesses into hell on earth, not heaven, because God loves the whole world *without* exception. And it is precisely here in the midst of hell that the missionary church is given to proclaim that “Jesus is victor!” For there is no hell — whether visible or invisible — that can keep out the

34 See Beverly Roberts Gaventa, “The Apocalyptic Community,” in *Our Mother Saint Paul* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 137–48.

35 For a brilliant description of an ecclesia crucis — a church of Holy Saturday, see Alan Lewis, *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

36 “Christians know of the God who will create the new heaven with a new earth, who forever puts down the mighty from their thrones, calls blessed those who labor and are heavy laden, and has become Advocate of all the damned of the earth. If it should be revolutionary to state that the Father of the Crucified is not a God of the possessors and enforcers, for good or ill Christians must take the side of the revolutionaries because they are called to serve humankind and not the partisans of those who cry for order, by which they mean the preservation and continuance of their own power, their traditional prejudices, and their economic, cultural, and political privileges.” Käsemann, “The Righteousness of God in Paul,” in *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene: Unpublished Lectures and Sermons*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 26.

37 See Jon Sobrino, *No Salvation Outside the Poor: Prophetic-Utopian Essays* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

38 See Donald M. MacKinnon, “Kenosis and Establishment,” *The Stripping of the Altars* (Bungay, UK: The Chaucer Press, 1969), 13–40.

power of the love of God in Jesus Christ. In the words of Christoph Blumhardt, “God is ready, always ready, to break up any hell.”³⁹

Mission as Resistance, Service, and Work for Liberation

The missionary church is that community which is called forth by God, the community that lives from Pentecost in the power of Holy Spirit under the cross of Jesus Christ and in expectancy of the promise of the coming of God’s kingdom. The Spirit that is poured out at Pentecost is a Spirit *for the earth* — the promised future of God’s kingdom is a promise *for all of creation*. And that Spirit and that promise are none other than the gifts of God in Jesus Christ. The Spirit is both a gift and a power that calls forth witnesses — but she is never a possession of the church community or of particular ecclesial offices. The Spirit cannot be packaged or dispensed, nor can she be “handed down” by way of a set of doctrine or traditioned practices — she cannot be ecclesiastically domesticated precisely because God is *free*, and she is free *charismatically*.⁴⁰ Yet the Spirit *possesses* us — she lays hold of us individually and corporately — and this occurs as the calling forth of disciples, of witnesses, of those who are brought into the captivity of service, of a new obedience to Jesus Christ. While each one is called by the Spirit to a specific task and vocation, the Spirit is not something that settles down, she cannot be managed or controlled, for she is wildly and creatively *dynamic* and always moves with great power as she quickens and announces her presence by calling forth obedience, by calling forth disciples. Because the Spirit is not a predicate of the church community, and because the Spirit is inseparable from the nothingness of the crucified Jesus Christ, one might also say that, theologically speaking, the missionary church is that community which holds nothing in common.⁴¹ It is also to say that the work of the Spirit is the dispossession of the church community of any and all

39 Christoph Blumhardt, *The Gospel of God’s Reign: Living for the Kingdom of God*, trans., Peter Rutherford, et al.; eds. Christian T. Collins Winn and Charles E. Moore (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014), 13.

40 “Evangelical freedom cannot be bureaucratized.” Käsemann, “Beginning of the Gospel: The Message of the Kingdom of God,” in *On Being a Disciple of the Crucified Nazarene: Unpublished Lectures and Sermons*, trans. Roy A. Harrisville (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 13.

41 Cf. Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing in Common* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994). “The community that produces something in common, that establishes truth and that now establishes a technological universe of simulacra, excludes the savages, the mystics, the psychotics — excludes their utterances and their bodies. It excludes them in its own space: tortures” (13). (*continued*)

claims to private property.⁴²

The charismatic action of the Spirit is not that which takes us out of the world to stand over against the world as the established triumphant church — she is not that which consecrates certain times, places, or offices as “holy” and “sacred” — she is rather that power which moves us into the service of Jesus Christ for the world, seeing the world anew in light of God’s action in Jesus Christ, again and again, as if for the first time. Such charismatic action occurs as a work of service for the world. But this work of service is neither accommodation nor the confirmation of the world as it is in itself; rather, charismatic action is a work of judgment, a matter of “discerning the spirits,” and so also a work of resistance against anti-God powers.⁴³ As we see in the gospel accounts with Jesus and his disciples, it is a work that involves casting out demons in the power of the Holy Spirit and entering into a spiritual and bodily struggle against every anti-God power, as one is given to announce in word and deed the gospel news that even now as the community in service to the world awaits the future of God’s kingdom, God is apocalyptically at work to bring forth life from the dead. Thus charismatic action is marked by the work of service and resistance — a work of struggle especially with and among and alongside those who are continually struck down but the nonetheless continue to resist the anti-God powers that enslave the world. It occurs wherever and whenever demons are cast out, wherever and whenever the sick are healed and the blind see, it occurs wherever and whenever prisoners are set free and the oppressed are liberated. Such action, such work, is the sign of the coming of God’s kingdom — the passing away of the old world — it is what Paul calls *charismata*, and it is inseparable from God’s dynamic mission in and for the world to make all things new. The missionary church is faithful to God’s mission only and insofar as it points exclusively to the one crucified on Golgotha, who was made nothing for the sake of the earth, and to the coming of God’s kingdom which comes in power, apocalyptically, to make all things new.

(*continued*) See also the helpful philosophical reflections on the “no-thing” that constitutes community in Roberto Esposito, “Appendix: Community and Nihilism,” *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*, trans. Timothy Campbell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 135–49.

42 Cf. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works English* (Fortress Press, 2011). “The church is church only when it is there for others. As a first step it must give away all its property to those in need” (503).

43 “Resistance is the reverse side of faith. Those who believe live unavoidably in strife with the powers ruling this earth.” Käsemann, “The Righteousness of God in Paul,” 23.