

On Presence and Aid in the Techno-Age

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Sometimes in class students have trouble defining the term “mission.” Yet, when they start talking about the actions that Jesus and his followers took back in New Testament times, students quickly mention concrete measures such as teaching and healing. In other words, when the subject becomes personal and experiential, thinking about faith and practice together seems easier than when ideas are removed from sensory contexts. Students generally, and perhaps intuitively, understand that being a Christian involves servant-like involvement in the world.

In seminaries and divinity schools, we have tended to talk about concrete aspects of engaged service using nouns such as “incarnation” and “mission.” These are excellent words that, nonetheless, can exhibit a confusing abstractness especially for new students of theology. What ideally happens over time and with experience is that students learn to integrate their knowledge. Just as nouns need verbs in order to form complete sentences, so it becomes clear that one’s sacred mission in life, or reason for being, is incomplete if understood in theory only. Mission inevitably involves the spiritual and the material.

This manner of thinking about mission has been profoundly influenced by the ways in which thoughts have been embodied over the past many centuries: as recorded on paper; transmitted in letters; and spoken about face to face. Through going and living elsewhere, for example, past generations of missionaries learned local languages and invented orthographies to record them; they identified plants and rocks new to them; ate unusual foods; saw and heard different creatures. By experiencing contexts that others called home, people carrying the rather abstract labels of “missionaries” also learned that they shared something physical, and sensory with those to whom they had come. In the colonial era—the starting point for such significant travel—even if European missionaries’ economic connections insulated them from many experiences of local residents, everyone was still intertwined by virtue of existing in the same physical location.

Such on the ground, immediately present sort of interactions continue to happen today, of course, as do the palpable experiences of giving food, water, and medical relief in times of disaster. But what also happens now, through the pervasiveness of technology, is that different sorts of presence and aid are possible, too. How does this techno-aged 21st century test our prior assumptions?

Its ability to eliminate many barriers of time and space means that technology is somehow affecting the concreteness that has heretofore been endemic to much mission work. When the sensation of presence can simultaneously be all encompassing and completely disembodied what does this mean for incarnational ministry? Many studies are examining the sociological effects particularly on younger generations for whom using technology seems to feel as natural as breathing. And there are now enough of these younger generations in universities and graduate schools to reveal certain trends developing: a declared sense of interconnectivity; a marked preference for group work; a palpable desire to participate in streams—rather than periodic bursts—of communication. So, is this essentially pseudo-presence, as detractors may be tempted to claim? Is it akin

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to the unified cosmos of organic or indigenous thought systems as enthusiasts might hope?

When it comes to helping out in the techno-age, news and monetary assistance can be transmitted instantaneously through incorporeal networks never before possible to construct. Mobilizing physical resources, whether in reactive response to earthquakes or in proactive protest at inequitable global power structures, is stunningly straightforward when compared to the past. In a sense, the world can now be present, to support and suffer with the traumatized anywhere. This is because those who, heretofore would likely have died in obscurity, are now essential to telling stories of wars, droughts, and disasters with timely snaps of camera phones and video uploads. Will the ability to help others across the planet through text messages and on-line donations eventually lead to global community as technological devotees predict? Will it exacerbate economic inequity by basically offering e-indulgences as skeptics might fear?

The centenary year of Edinburgh 1910 offers an opportunity to revision God's purposes in the world; to rethink what mission is supposed to be about and so it is fitting to consider how the techno-age will affect Christian being and acting over the next 100 years. The questions noted above are merely some of many that deserve pondering. In North America lively conversations are going on about communicating with younger generations. These exchanges raise important questions such as *How can we make our congregation's mission activities fun? What sorts of approaches will ensure that we are meeting millennial generations where they actually live?* Such questions serve as significant cultural indicators and carry considerable theological implications in their own right. They become even more critical when we acknowledge that a wild card tossed into the mix is more conspicuous now than it was 100 years ago.

That is, because the techno-age has been built on cheap and widely available fossil fuels, it may be quite hazardous to assume that how things are now is how they will be even by mid-century. None of the early mission conferences (London 1888; New York 1900; Edinburgh 1910) could have happened on the vast scales that they did without the use of fossil fuels. Taking note of the drawbacks of fossil fueled travel today means that this year's assemblies will be noticeably smaller than those first global gatherings. So, is it safe to presume that videoconferencing and sophisticated mobile devices will largely mitigate the inability to be bodily present as fuel shortages increasingly limit travel? If this is the scenario that ultimately develops, international mission-related questions regarding presence and aid will be no less relevant in the future than they are today. For instance, even if most Americans learn to live contentedly with such *virtual* experiences, it will probably be foolhardy to assume that the roughly 9 billion people expected on earth by 2050 will have equal access to computers and hand held devices—let alone any steady electric supply. What then happens to those left out will be of supreme theological importance. On the other hand, if another scenario develops and the instruments of the techno-age themselves become unaffordable for the majority of people everywhere, mission-related questions will still be urgently relevant. Many students in seminary now should expect to be alive at this century's mid-point. Some of them may be the same ones who are, these days, struggling to define "mission" in theory. Should they find themselves living in a world of greater resource scarcity forty years hence, comprehending and enacting presence and aid in immediate, concrete, and sensory terms may help them live not only incarnationally, but joyfully.