

Mission and the Election of God in Christ¹

The “in Christ” focus on election is of vital theological importance. Its scope links election not only to the history of salvation and christological promise and fulfilment, but also to the eternal counsel of God that lies behind it. Practically, it prevents the question of election from becoming dry and speculative. Also in the “in Christ” perspective Christ, the electing actor, remains central as the substance and the vision of Christian mission.

In what follows we propose to present some limited reflections about the relationship between election in Christ and the theology of mission.

1. Mission work is a form of *mediation*. The missional witness stands with the truth for God and before men. Put this way we can see that mission must always be accomplished “in Christ”. He is *par excellence* the one who stands for God and before men in his unique work of mediation. In this respect it can be said that the work of God is one of mission to the lost world, that Christ is “a missionary” and all mission work is accomplished in Christ.
2. The words “in Christ” express *the whole of God’s mission* to and in the world, from eternity *to* time *to* eternity, including election, incarnation, redemption accomplished and applied, justification, sanctified life and finally glorification.
3. But how is this carried out? What is *the status of Christ* and how does he act as agent? These questions can only be answered theologically — by reference to Christ’s divinity and humanity. We are not impressed by Karl Barth’s verbosity and his so-called christo-centrism that makes Christ the elect and the reprobate at the same time. Following Jean Calvin, it seems more felicitous to speak of Christ as the mediator in his divine and human natures, pointing to the concrete historical person of the God-man and the fulfilment of the covenant promise in him.
4. However when we speak of the person of the mediator we cannot forget the *Chalcedonian formulation* concerning the eternal person of the Son. The act of mediation is “in Christ” and as Richard Muller points out Christ is at once the electing God and the elect man. As God, Christ himself, considered in his divinity contains all the essence of the Godhead. In election, He it is who eternally designates himself as mediator, in communion with the Father, and He it is who subordinates himself to the Father in the economy of incarnation. As the second person of the Trinity considered as God, Christ has the *jus eligendi*, the right to chose, and as Son,

¹ Intervention in Holland at the service in honour of mission director Gert Nieuwenhuis in 2006, on his reception of a medal from the Orde van Oranje-Nassau.

He accepts the office of mediator, incarnation, suffering and salvation, as we have it in the high-priestly prayer of John 17. As mediator in his divinity and humanity Christ is the electing God and the elected man. We can say that the divine transcendence and aseity are the fount of Christ's humanity and his mediation in the flesh, so eloquently witnessed to in the Epistle of Hebrews.

5. This perspective is a felicitous way of relating the *two aspects of election* that people stumble over — the *vertical* and the *horizontal* perspectives are united in the person of the mediator. As Calvin put it: “The decree was eternal and ever-fixed, but it must be enacted in Christ because in him it was purposed.” But how is the enactment done? As the elect man, Christ comes into the world. His mission is to accomplish the necessary active and passive obedience as the second and final Adam, the perfect covenant servant. We are not over-enthusiastic about the well-known expression stating that Christ is the “mirror of election”. It seems necessary to be more precise than this in a biblical sense. As mediator of the divine and human nature Christ, the Chosen One, stands as prophet, priest and king, to use Calvin's famous *munus triplex*. In both his divine and human natures He fulfilled the offices in suffering and glory. In his humanity, Jesus stands as the rejected prophet, the sacrificed priest and the king on the cross. In his divinity He is the Logos, the efficacious sacrifice of infinite value and the king of glory. The mission of Christ has as its content the three offices. It is through these that election is accomplished on the horizontal plane and is recognised by the many sons Christ will bring to glory. (Hebrews 2)

6. The mediation of *the resurrected Christ* in his glorification lies in his heavenly intercession. His work of salvation in the expiation of sin is of infinite value and is universally applicable, sufficient for all. This is the foundation of the universal mission of the Church and of the Great Commission of Matthew 28.20: the horizontal task of the universal gospel offer. Yet in his divine, ‘vertical’ intercession, Christ represents his own, the elect, chosen according to grace. Reconciliation, actual redemption, propitiation, are particular, personal and efficacious because of the precise nature of Christ's intercession for his own. Christ *will* save, through the preaching of the good news, those for whom he died; none of his children will be snatched from his hand. The fact that Christ continues his mediatorial work in heaven is the foundation of mission work and the assurance of its success.

7. Union with Christ, being *a new creation* “in Christ” implies union with Him in his mission of salvation. The privilege of the people of God is to be a witnessing people, partaking in the *munus triplex* of the mediator. “You a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2.9) The priestly, kingly and prophetic offices of Christ become incarnate once again in a new and surprising way in the humanity of Christ's people. Their calling it is in radiating abroad the light, as those whose identity is bound up with the Light of the world. This

is a grateful and joyful calling. Because they have received mercy, they can do no other than be messengers of mercy.

8. So we reach the *horizontal end* of the golden chain that began in divine election, with Christ as the elect One, God and man, the prophet priest and king in his suffering and glory. The mission that Adam failed to accomplish in creation as prophet, priest and king is fully and finally realised in Christ. The covenant people of God are called to bear witness in the creation to the new creation already begun here and now in and through the work of the mediator. As a people with prophetic, priestly and kingly functions, they are communally called to ministry of the word, to priestly demonstrations of mercy, and to kingly victory, in trampling under their feet the powers of darkness, sin and evil. The messianic community, in Christ, exists for mission, not for institution or human ambition.

9. The mission of the church *follows Christ's ministry* in the world. In fact it is His ministry in the world, the acts of his apostles. It is not expressed by attributes of divine glory, but in the strange way of divine choosing, which is the path of humility and suffering. This calling reflects in content and form the ministry of the mediator. Treasure there is, but the treasure is in earthen vessels. As John Tauler said, commenting on "Learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11.29) — "we must look to the admirable model of the divine humanity of Christ, whose words, ways, walk and all the he ever did, are simply the illustration of this doctrine. The way of election is that of mission in meekness. "Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For we do not have here an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." (Hebrews 13.12,13)

10. As the body of Christ, the Christian Church is a *ministry of mission*. This constitutes the calling of the whole body, as all are one in Christ and with him. This must be so, and we must strive for it to be so, both in terms of the Church as organism and as organisation. Organisations that do not exist for this goal inevitably fade away into the sociological forms of humanitarian action or worse into bureaucracy. Mission must always keep the threefold office in the forefront of its policies as determinative of its vision.