

Mission and Discipleship from the Perspective of Gender and Indigenous Culture

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Abstract

The presence and history of Indigenous Peoples present special problems for mission and missiology and requires some rethinking of basic concepts and the cultural location of mission. Because the next World Mission Conference will take place in Tanzania, this article looks more carefully at the basis of mission, the experience of Indigenous Peoples with missions, and the New Testament warrant for mission. In the latter we find, particularly in the gospel narratives of the resurrection appearances of Jesus and his sending of the disciples the particular and exemplary role of women. These narratives offer some guidance for framing mission with Indigenous Peoples and in relation to colonial legacies and global capitalism.

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Arusha is one of 26 administrative regions in the United Republic of Tanzania. The region of Arusha covers over 33,000 square kilometres; its capital is the city of Arusha.

The population of Arusha is about 1.3 million, with around 38 residents per square kilometre. Most roads are unpaved; ground transportation is by bus. This is a multi-cultural city whose population has mostly mixed roots: Tanzanian, bantú, Arabic, and Indigenous, plus small minorities of European whites and Americans. The religions present are Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism.

Arusha is rich in culture, tradition, and religious experiences.

The above information identifies some socio-cultural aspects of certain similarities that exist in Indigenous communities, such as cultural diversity, deep spirituality, and the fight for dignity. In this context, mission is a challenge that we must take on with humility.

What is mission?

Mission is generally understood as “the ability or strength that is given to one person or several people to complete a certain duty or responsibility.”¹

When referring to mission from Christ’s church, it is nothing less than going out to proclaim or officially announce good news. “Its basic content is the gospel or good news, the reign/kingdom of God, the person and work and message of Jesus Christ . . . inviting conversation and faith. The gospel and Acts are presented through action.”²

Normally, two types of missions are differentiated: those that are related to the expanding of the Church as an institution and those related to the concrete mission of God and his word. This second group is related to the sending of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. One of the bases for religious missions is dialogue . . . there are those who interpret [it] as a medium through which different cultures can relate and be mutually enriched.³

This explanation could relate to Indigenous towns that were Christianized in a poor way, with much violence. This is similar to what happened in Europe when the discovery of America, or rather the discovery of cultures, was celebrated.

Experiencing or witnessing what happened during the conquest of the colonial period has nothing to do with relating to or mutually enriching or discovering cultures, due to the fact that with the evangelism of the West, they imposed their culture onto and eliminated other cultures, towns, knowledge, wisdom, and deep millennial spiritualities, considering them inferior or invalid and qualifying the expression of their spiritualities as satanic or worldly.

These historic and painful details for Indigenous towns of the Americas generate the rejection of Christianity. Using this reasoning, some Indigenous towns have decided to return to deep spirituality, the wisdom of their towns; they are consolidating their self-determination as territories with a single identity, language, culture, and their own spirituality. Within this context, it is much more complex for traditional evangelism to be accepted without questioning and resistance.

¹ <http://concepto.de/mision/#ixzz4EYxbl8tt>

² Luis Alfonso Schokel, *Biblia del Peregrino* (Bilbao, Spain: Messenger Editions 1995), 1672–73.

³ <http://concepto.de/mision/#ixzz4EYyXIChp>

To bring the good news to Indigenous populations, we have to go back and look at the origin of the mission, the sending of Jesus. We need to recognize and value the life of Jesus on earth – the person who fostered an abundant life and questioned the social, ecclesiastical, and economic systems of the day.

Origin of the mission

With the aim of understanding the mission and its origins, we will analyze an important part of the New Testament, using a comparative chart of the four gospels where Jesus passes on the mission to his friends, followers, and disciples.

Comparative chart of the four gospels⁴ Mission

MATTHEW 28	MARK 16	LUKE 24	JOHN 20
1 After the Sabbath, at dawn on the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to look at the tomb.	1 When the Sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they could anoint Jesus' body.	1 On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, they went to the tomb and took the spices they had prepared, and some other women went with them.	1 On the morning of the first day of the week, while it was still dark, Mary Magdalene went to the tomb and saw that the stone had been removed from the entrance.
2 There was a violent earthquake, for an angel of the Lord came down from heaven and, going to the tomb, rolled back the stone and sat on it.	4 But when they looked, they saw that the stone, which was very large, had been rolled away.	2 They found the stone rolled away from the tomb;	11 Mary stood outside the tomb crying.
3 His appearance was like lightning, and his clothes were white as snow.	5 As they entered the tomb, they saw a young man dressed in a white robe sitting on the right side, and they were alarmed.	4 As they were perplexed by this, suddenly two men in clothes that gleamed like lightning stood beside them;	12 and there were two angels in white, seated where Jesus' body had been, one at the head and the other at the foot.

⁴ From Reina - Valera 1960, *The Holy Bible*, Old and New Testaments, old version of Casiodoro de Reina (1569), Revised from Cipriano de Vilela (1602) other revisions: 1862, 1909 and 1960, Copyright c 2001–2005.

<p>6 He is not here; he has risen, just as he said.</p>	<p>6 ... he who was crucified; he has risen, he is not here;</p>	<p>6 “Why are you looking for the living among the dead? He is not here; he has risen.</p>	<p>16 Jesus said to her: Mary! She turned toward him and cried out in Aramaic, Rabboni! (which means “Teacher”).</p>
<p>7 Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He has risen from the dead and is going ahead of you to Galilee. There you will see him.’</p>	<p>7 But go, tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him, just as he told you.’</p>		<p>17 Jesus said: “Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go instead to my brothers and tell them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.</p>
<p>8 ... So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples. 9 And as they were going to give the news to the disciples, Jesus met them and said: Greetings! They came to him, clasped onto his feet and worshiped him.</p>	<p>9 When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. 10 Then Jesus said to them, “Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.”</p>	<p>9 When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others.</p>	<p>18 Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: “I have seen the Lord!” And she told them that he had said these things to her.</p>
<p>16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go.</p>	<p>13 They went away and reported it to the others, but they did not believe them either.</p>	<p>24 Then some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus. 25 He said to them: “How foolish you are, and how slow to believe all that the prophets have said!”</p>	<p>19 On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jewish leaders, Jesus came and stood among them and said: May peace be with you.</p>

17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said:	14 He eventually appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at the table; and he reproached them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who had seen him after he had risen. And he told them:	20 After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.	
19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit;	15 And he said to them, "Go to the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation."	47 . . . and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.	21 Again Jesus said: May peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.
18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."	16 He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned.	48 You are witnesses of these things. 49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."	22 And with that he blew on them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit."
20 ". . . and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you to do. And know I am with you always, to the very end of the age."	17 These signs will accompany those who have believed: In my name they will cast out demons, they will speak with new languages;	52 Then they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy;	23 If you forgive anyone for their sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven.
	18 . . . they will pick up serpents, and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.	53 . . . and they stayed continually at the temple, praising God	24 Now Thomas (also known as Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came.

20 And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed their words with the signs that followed.

27 Then he said to Thomas: “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

28 Thomas said to him: “My Lord and my God!”

29 Jesus said: “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

31 But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

With this analysis we attempt to answer some basic questions. At what time? Who is sent to complete the mission? What is the mission that the followers of Jesus should fulfill? Where are they sent?

The four gospels narrate the experience of Jesus’ male and female friends when they lost him at the crucifixion. In this difficult moment, they felt a huge emptiness, and had doubts in the face of what had happened. There were many women in this group (Luke 24:10, 22) with whom Jesus shared his teaching and life experiences while on earth.

The gospels highlight the role of the women, especially in the first verses of the chapters in the study. The disciples appear with Mary Magdalene, who is mentioned as one of the women, except in Luke, who names women in a general manner and highlights that there are many, that they are the first to go to the tomb, and that while there they see that the stone has been removed. They are the ones who see and speak with the angels, who announce that Jesus has risen, and then run back

to inform the apostles. Along the way, in Matthew and Mark, Jesus meets the women, with one interesting difference in John 20:15-16, where the same risen Jesus is the one who sees Mary Magdalene and asks her, “Why are you crying?” Jesus calls her by name and Mary recognizes him as her Master! And then Jesus himself sends Mary to her brothers with the good news of the risen Christ, the living Christ, Christ with them all.

This part is very important, since we observe how Jesus gives corresponding importance to the women on the mission. We see how, after his death, he first reveals himself to the women in a personal way, as in John or through the angels in Luke. These women are the protagonists, the main actors after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

As for the eleven, the brothers, the men who followed Jesus, they seem doubtful, closed off and fearful, as in Matthew 28:17. In spite of seeing him, some doubted: in Mark 16:10-13, they were described as sad and crying in a place after they heard that Jesus had been resurrected, and they didn’t believe the women. They didn’t even believe two of the disciples. The same thing happens in Luke 24:11, 22-24: after hearing the news from the women, Peter goes to the tomb and sees that things are just as the women had said. In spite of this, the male friends of Jesus couldn’t believe it. In John 20:19-20, we see how the disciples had locked their doors for fear of the Jews. Jesus appears in their midst, shows them his hands and his side; then they believe and rejoice, but Thomas doesn’t believe, since he wasn’t there.

In other words, we see a huge difference in the actions and faith between the women and the men who were following Jesus. The women were in action, at the tomb, on the streets meeting Jesus, believing, and proclaiming the resurrection of Jesus. The men were quiet, closed off, without faith, and this is why Jesus questions them. He scolds them severely in Mark 16:14 about their disbelief and hardened hearts. In Luke 24:25, he tells them, “Oh how foolish, and slow of heart to believe”; in John 20:27, he gets Thomas’ attention and tells him to not be foolish, but to believe.

After these very important actions of the women, Jesus sends out his followers on mission. The women were strong believers, and confident, while the men believed only after seeing and touching him. It is understood that Jesus loved and forgave the male disciples, and this is why they are part of the sending on mission.

Yet the verses that follow, especially those referring to the sending, are written in a general manner. It does not explicitly send the women and men; when reading it on a surface level, it could be understood that the sending is for the male disciples, making the women invisible. However, in the cited verses, and as it says in Luke 24:22-23, the presence of women in this group is clear: “some women were among them, who had gone to the tomb earlier that day.” This helps us understand that there were women known as disciples, which is why the sending can be understood as including both men and women.

Although the role and importance of women is clear from the cited biblical text, some Christian churches in recent centuries have minimized and excluded women from the mission.

The mission, the sending

What words are used for the sending? Each gospel and each evangelist varies a little in the way it portrays the sending, according to the context, purpose, and goal at that time. In the above chart, we cite the four ways of the sending, starting with Matthew 28:19: “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Mark 16:15 states, “Go to the whole world and preach the gospel to all creation.” On the other hand, Luke 24:47 points out the need to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins in all nations, beginning in Jerusalem. Lastly, John 20:21 explains what Jesus told them: “May peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” The gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John make the sending explicit, while in Luke it is understood, as it says to go and preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. They should go to all nations (Matthew), throughout the world, to all creation (Mark), to all nations, starting with Jerusalem (Luke); in John, it is not clear where they are being sent. Either way, the mission is given. We must clarify something here: except in Luke, the sending is to all nations, starting with Jerusalem, but in the following verses (such as 52-53), the opposite happens, as they return to Jerusalem and are always in the temple, worshipping and praising God. From the cited verse it could be said that each gospel author had his role, depending on the time period and place where it was written. In any case, the order was that they should go to the whole world.

But what is their task? What responsibility are they to fulfill when they go out on mission? What should the male and female disciples and apostles do? Matthew

28:20 points out that they should teach people “to obey everything I have commanded you and know I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” Mark says that whoever believes and is baptized will be saved (16:16), and these signs will accompany those who believe: “In my name they will drive out demons; they will speak in new languages’ (16:17); ‘they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on sick people, and they will recover’ (16:18). Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it” (16:20). Luke 24:49, on the other hand, says, “I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.” John states, “having said that, he blew on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’ (20:22). ‘If you forgive anyone for their sins, their sins are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven’ (20:23). But these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31).

The task is clear, it is challenging, and it is large; it is summed up with what their lives should express in the name of Jesus for everyone to believe in the promise of an abundant life. At the same time that Jesus sends them, he promises to be with them, to give them the power that they create and that gives life.

Mission in Indigenous populations⁵ and millennial cultures

As we have pointed out, the mission starts with women, and then the men join it once they believe and accept that Jesus has risen. The mission is nothing less than taking the good news of Jesus, the risen Son of God, to people – not as things were done in the period of conquest and colonization, but the practical message of the life of Jesus, from Luke 4:18-19, which says: “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” Matthew 10:1, 5-8 establishes that Jesus’ followers should preach the kingdom of heaven, heal the sick, resurrect the dead, heal lepers, and drive out demons, among other commands.

⁵ For this part, we have two interviews with theologians who are leaders in the Indigenous church in Ecuador. Both have graduate degrees in scripture.

This means that the central message of the mission

is to proclaim the kingdom of God and his justice in a society that is subject to the religious dogma and the imposition of a dominant regime. Restoring the kingdom of God in the Indigenous communities means the return of communal living, sharing of *Kukawi*,⁶ community projects, practising reciprocity, redistributing products, revaluing deep and holistic spirituality, among other things.⁷

Also, within the process of the mission in Indigenous communities, there is nothing better than arriving with the practical teachings of Jesus, since

the entire life and testimony of Jesus are examples that should be followed in the majority of Indigenous towns. However, we need to highlight the healing actions of Jesus, through the knowledge of his parents, grandparents or from the people, when he takes dirt and makes “mud with his saliva and smears it on the blind man and asks him to go wash in a pool and he becomes healed” (John 9:1-41), or when he invites his disciples to feed the multitudes in the middle of the desert by means of sharing the products from the land or the *kukawi* that children and adults are used to bringing and sharing at a common table (Matt. 14:15-21; John 6:8-9): this action is the most resistant action to consumerism, the system, and that is the mission.⁸

This should be a strategy for going on mission in these communities, which would be a great contribution to this generation for their freedom, independence, dietary safety, and value of cultural traditions and identities that do not go against the practices of an evangelical lifestyle. Within this context, it is fundamental to recover the original aim of the mission, to be able to reach some millennial Indigenous people where there is resistance and rejection, thus

recognizing and being self-critical of how religions and some missions have ended up subjecting them to the interests of large businesses and empires, who have sacrificed and violated many lives and devastated villages in the name of God to justify their greedy interests, thus generating new readings from every kind of historical and contemporary critics, from religious impositions and promoting the gospel of Jesus of Nazareth, who faced the dominant structures of his time and sought for liberty for its victims.⁹

⁶ This is a plate of food that women, men, children, farmers, and Indigenous take for a day of work in the field, or when doing community projects, for long trips around their territory. It is a common practice. *Kukawi* is an Indigenous word from the Kichwa language from Ecuador, South America.

⁷ Interview with theologian Gerónimo Yantalema, 5 August 2016, Cebadas Parish, Guamote County. He is advisor for Ecuaurunari, a regional Indigenous organization in Ecuador.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

On the other hand, when “the mission of the church is confused with the idea of ‘civilization’, ‘modernization,’ or ‘progress,’ it destroys populations. The mission of the church is always to change, and it has change these towns for the better.”¹⁰

To complete this mission in Indigenous communities, one should consider the message of 1 Corinthians 9:20, “which is considered to be the best text on how to do mission, embodying it, doing it as they do,”¹¹ but do this not with the goal of destroying or minimizing the cultures and existing Indigenous knowledge, but rather to be able to understand, recognize, and “comprehend the presence of God in Indigenous town communities, starting with daily living and understanding the life of human beings, their nature and divinity, overcoming any manner of opposition and cultural and religious colonization.”¹²

In addition, there should be respect and understanding of the different ways of relating Indigenous people with God, understanding the history of life for each one of these communities, their fight for life, even in the way that we are currently trying to understand how these Indigenous populations lived and how they felt with regards to God, the Hebrew, Palestinian, Nazarene, and other communities and nations mentioned in the Bible. Up to now, we have not been able to understand how they related with God, the Spanish, Portuguese, American conquerors and colonists, and others with whom Christianity arrived to Indigenous and Afro lands.

Considering the biblical and historical conquest in Indigenous towns, going on a mission from the Christian church in 2016 in Indigenous populations should be understood as a space where male and female missionaries should “live with the communities and in this way contribute to life, by recovering and valuing their culture, identity, language, sciences, knowledge of health, education, agriculture, among other aspects, in addition to seeking ways to support them so that they have food and work”¹³ – and thus dignifying the life of the sons and daughters of God, in fulfillment of the gospels that are there to bring the good news and a life of abundance to all people of the world.

This message was practised and lived out by Jesus in the territories where he walked, lived with the people, freed people, and healed them. He defended the

¹⁰ Interview with theologian Julián Guamán, 13 August 2016, City of Riobamba.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Interview with theologian Gerónimo Yantalema.

¹³ Interview with theologian Gerónimo Yantalema.

rights of the Samaritan woman (John 4:39-42), the Syrophoenician woman (Matt. 15:22-28); he freed and forgave the adulterous woman (John 8:1-12); he cured a man who was blind from birth (John 9:1-41), among other efforts and actions that caused him to face those who opposed the message of life and freedom. This message did not reach the Indigenous populations during the time of the conquest and colonization. If someone tries to practise the message and life of Jesus with someone who was persecuted like Jesus was, this would also mean facing and going against the unjust structural system that caused his death.

The mission in Indigenous towns should also begin with “the reading of the Bible from the world view of Indigenous populations, which would contribute to strengthening the spirituality and understanding of divinity and its relationship with the community.”¹⁴ Spirituality in Indigenous towns is not so different from Christian spirituality: both promote life, respect for the life of human beings, respect for all creation, and nature, since without it human beings could not continue to live.

The meaning of mission in the capitalist context of destruction for mother nature (*pacha mama*), life, water, biodiversity

As extraction, mining, petroleum companies, and multi-national companies destroy nature or our common home, mission should provide specific solutions to this type of violence. Doing this will help to “recover the city of creation, just like an administrator of *oikos*, which God has given and the gospel, which is life, should rescue.”¹⁵ In the same way, it is fundamental to find patterns within the biblical context for the reconstruction and reconciliation of nature, while at the same time valuing the knowledge of Indigenous towns regarding mother nature.

This mission also has meaning in a context where technology and wild capitalism have become part of daily life for human beings. Currently, many youths have started to declare themselves atheists; this tendency is not only in the cities or major world capitals, but has also passed to the youths of Indigenous towns, who agree with this lifestyle and confess to being atheists. “Mission has deep meaning in this context, as long as it is not used as an instrument to reproduce the system with a cost of violence, submission, and the homogenization of communities. It is necessary to recover daily life, simple things, promoting life, support as an action of

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Interview with theologian Julián Guamán.

resisting every form of violence for the dominating system that is apparently invincible; however, it is fragile, as consumerism only feeds on those dragged away as victims.”¹⁶

“Capitalism is precisely what is exploiting the human being, destroying nature and creating social inequality. This is happening in nations, towns, and countries; as a result, the mission of the Church needs to say and do something to face this.”¹⁷ In this kind of context, “Jesus was very critical of any subjugation of religious leaders for politics and the empire and its emperor, with the dogma imposed as a convenience for its leaders and the benefits of its cheaters, which is why he proclaimed the kingdom of God and its justice.”¹⁸ So the role of mission is not easy: it implies facing all of the actors and agents of the capitalist system of accumulation, in defense of life. Another strategy might be to bring together the various cultures, towns, nations, and religions to face death. Currently, the mission is not only to make disciples, convert them, and baptize them, but also to announce the life of abundance, which implies recognizing diversity, the plurality of thought, actions, and cultures, and together building a new plural, inter-cultural, inter-religious world that recognizes the Son of God as alive among human beings who proclaim the kingdom of God and its justice.

¹⁶ Interview with theologian Gerónimo Yantalema.

¹⁷ Interview with theologian Julián Guamán.

¹⁸ Interview with theologian Gerónimo Yantalema.