

# **The Church Engaged in the Mission of God: Learned by the Experience of Being Called “Mr. or Ms. Christ”**

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## **Introduction**

The fact that the Christian volunteers are called “Mr. Christ” or “Ms. Christ” by the non-Christian survivors of the Great East Japan Disaster is one of the milestones in the church history of Japan. The non-Christian survivors consider that the Christian support members might not be the tools of any shady religious denominations, or might not take advantage of their weakness to urge them to repent. By the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the churches of Japan have been raised as “ecclesia: the gathering of the being convoked,” more than ever testifying to the Gospel through our own lives.

The English word “mission” derives from the Latin nominal “missio” of the verb “mittere” which means to send, to dispatch and to order. The word “mission” was used for many years as a technical term in explanation of the triune God. But after the magisterial commission which the kings of Spain and Portugal were made “patrons” of missionary expansion in their colonies in the later fifteenth century, it has been used to “propagation of the faith toward foreign countries” that preaches Christianity to the people who do not know Jesus Christ. So in Japan too, the word “mission” was used mainly to mean that the existent churches tell the Gospel to the people of non-Christian countries, in order to baptize them and to build new churches. However the church in Japan realized that the triune God

himself is the center of the mission, and the mission of God guides the churches in going forward after the critical disaster in eastern Japan.

### **The mission of the Triune God**

Let us see how the New Testament describes the mission that originates from the triune God.

God our Father wants to save every people whatever the cost. “This is right and is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:3–4).<sup>(1)</sup> The loving God who did not want anyone to perish (see Mt 18:14; 2 Pet 3:9) sent Jesus to cherish everyone. “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (Jn 3:17). “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross” (Col 1:19–20).

Jesus himself recognized clearly that he was sent from God to fulfill the wish of the Father. “I did not come on my own, but he sent me” (Jn 8:42). “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose” (Lk 4:43). “I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father” (Jn 16:28).

Before Jesus left, he promised to send the Holy Spirit to the disciples in order to live the intention of God the Father. “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth” (Jn 14:16–17). “I am sending upon you what my Father promised” (Lk 24:49). “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf” (Jn 15:26).

God our Father sent his Son Jesus to love us all. The Father and

Son sent the Spirit for the purpose of love. “To send” by the over-flowing fountain of God’s love is the original meaning of “mission,” so that we can not separate the word “mission” from the love of God. The wish of God is that every people would be set free from slavery to the power of sin, and would share in the fullness of God’s life.

Jesus initiated his missionary activity in the words “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mk 1:15). He showed that nobody is excluded from this kingdom of God. Jesus associated with women and those on the margins of society. He ate with tax-collectors and those considered sinners from the same table. In this way Jesus carried out the words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor” (Lk 4:18–19).

People’s lives were dramatically changed because of Jesus who carried out the mission of God. Those considered sinners and outcasts began their new lives, people with incurable illnesses and disabilities were healed, those enslaved to the unclean spirits were freed, people heard a message of hope calling to a new life and new relationships.

The followers of Jesus are invited to be loving and compassionate, as God is loving and compassionate. The Parable of the Good Samaritan describes how a disciple should think and act (see Lk 10:25–37). Someone who wants to be a disciple of Jesus does not pass by on the other side, but is called to move with compassionate love. Compassionate love is the emotion that wells up from the pit of one’s stomach at the sight of another’s need. Jesus dared to choose a Samaritan to teach charity and to be a neighbor to those who are suffering. He wants to show that the mission of God has the nature to destroy any forms of barriers. Jesus says to us too, “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37). If we allow the parable to release those deeper emotions, we can go and do likewise against whatever barriers.

Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the

prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill” (Mt 5:17). He criticized the exclusive attitude of the Jewish leaders and overcame the surrounding wall. Jesus healed the disease of the Centurion’s servant after learning about the Centurion’s faith, even if he was not a member of Judaism. Jesus said that “in no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Mt 8:10). Jesus entered a house in an area occupied by Gentiles (see Mk 7:24), and he replied to the Canaanite woman, “great is your faith!” (Mt 15:28. see Mk 7:24–30), when he healed her daughter. Through the deeds and words of Jesus that were unprecedented and uncommon at that time of Judaism, his disciples had experienced the compassionate love of God. They had been selected to live the Mission of God.

### **To learn from the disciples’ process that was led by the Spirit**

Having received the Holy Spirit, the disciples began to speak, “Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God” (Acts 2:22). Though they received the Holy Spirit, they did not part from Judaism. At the beginning, none of them thought of defecting from Judaism. They continued to meet together in the temple in Jerusalem. They remained zealous for the law of Judaism. A triggering affair in which the Gentiles referred to them not as “Jews” but as “Christians” was narrated in chapter 6 of the Acts of the Apostles.

Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.” What they

said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them (Acts 6:1–6).

The disciples considered that the discrimination against the bereaved Greek-speaking women in the daily distribution of food was a serious problem. Jesus and his disciples were Hebrew-speaking Jews. And the societies of the districts of Galilee and Judea depended on the Hebrew-speaking Jews. But the families of the Jews who grew up in Greek-speaking countries lived among the Hebrew-speaking Jews. In Judaism in those days, there was some distribution of money for the poor inhabitants from the fund “basket of bread: quppâ” for 14 meals, that is to say for one week. The other poor inhabitants of different areas received every day some food supply “bowl: tamhuj.” However the Greek-speaking Jewish widows were kept out of the distribution of money from the relief fund or the food supply. The Twelve, who were informed of these circumstances of alienation, could not overlook the situation. They discerned that the problem of the Greek-speaking Jewish widows was a serious problem for them. They gathered all the disciples together and ordered them to choose seven men who would carry out the task of acting on the side of the needy women. The apostles prayed and laid their hands on the seven men who had been chosen from all the disciples, and sent them out.

Stephen, one of the seven who were chosen to wait on tables of the discriminated women, was arrested for a false crime. Stephen was killed with stones by the people who had heard his speech to the council. In connection with Stephen, “a severe persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria” (8:1).

The disciples did not think that they would not have been persecuted if the event that led to Stephen’s death had not happened, they would not

have been scattered if they had not engaged in waiting on the tables of the oppressed women. On the contrary, “Those who were scattered went from place to place, proclaiming the word” (8:4). The disciples who had been scattered because of the persecution did not shrivel as fugitives, but as being sent from God, they continued to live in solidarity with the poor, the oppressed and the outcast wherever they went. Philip, one of the other seven who were chosen to wait on tables, “proclaimed the Messiah” (8:5) to the people of Samaria who were considered “half-Jews” and therefore better to be avoided if possible, and he baptized not only men but women (see 8:12). By the guidance of the Spirit, Philip baptized without a moment’s hesitation an Ethiopian who was not Jew, and he was the eunuch who “shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord” (Deut 23:2) according to the law. Those who had been scattered proclaimed the good news to whoever they met impartially, following Jesus who had said “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mk 2:17). They put forth every effort to cherish especially the downtrodden, all who labor and are overburdened, and to be a neighbor of the needy.

“Now those who were scattered because of the persecution that took place over Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Antioch.” At the beginning “they spoke the word to no one except Jews” (Acts 11:19). But those who had encountered the good news of Jesus in Cyprus and Cyrene came to Antioch to speak to the people without exception and by proclaiming the Lord Jesus. “The hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number became believers and turned to the Lord” (11:21). “The disciples were first called ‘Christians’” (11:26) in Antioch, which is one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire where almost all citizens did not read and hear about the Bible.

At the beginning the nickname of “Christian” might have been a kind of disdainful term (see 26:28 and 1 Pet 4:16). The people of Antioch ironically named the disciples “Christian.” The good news of Jesus Christ became connected with the disciples themselves. Although the disciples were not wealthy, following Jesus’ teaching, they gave food to the hungry,

gave something to drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, gave clothing to the naked, took care of the sick and visited the prisoners (see Mt 25:31–46). The people who watched the disciples' behavior toward the nobodies of the society called the disciples as "Christians." Those who came in contact in their daily life with the disciples began to call them "Christians." The words and the deeds of Jesus who was called Christ were associated with the disciples who wanted to be the neighbors of the oppressed.

## **Conclusion**

Several non-Christian survivors of the Great East Japan Disaster called the Christian volunteers "Mr. Christ" or "Ms. Christ" without regard to which denomination or church they are affiliated with. This could be the fruits that Christian volunteers would bear by walking in solidarity with the survivors instead of being an instrument to convert people. And this might be a sign of it being understood little by little that the presence of persons who nestle up to the survivors reflect the presence of Christ who is with them always.

The ecclesia is "the assembly of the summoned" who take a positive slant on the will of God our Father who wants to hold anyone dear, and to testify to the love of God. It is a sure means by which we can experience an overflowing love of God, and by supporting each of survivors they would realize the love from God.

The church is not an end unto herself. Jesus said "Away with you, Satan! for it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him,'" to the devil who tempted him saying, "All these I will give you," (Mt 3:9–10). And Jesus stepped forward to be killed on the cross because he proclaimed the love of God. We too are urged to step forward to the resurrection through the cross and by following Jesus who lived out the mission of God. The Church exists to realize what Jesus commanded her, and by abiding in Jesus who said, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for

one's friends" (Jn 15:13). If we can dedicate ourselves to be a neighbor of the injured, by being involved in and with them, the fruits should be borne by the Lord. The fruit is not only to increase the baptized numbers or to grow the organization of churches. Above all "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Gal 5:22).

## Notes

- (1) We quote from *New Revised Standard Version Bible* published by Thomas Nelson, Inc., Nashville, Tennessee.