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Rethinking Missions - 1955

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SINCE the close of World War II it has become increasingly clear that the great movement of worldwide Christian outreach known as "the modern missionary movement" has arrived at a point of major transition. The missionary dynamic of earlier generations which issued in a movement of growing strength and momentum is missing from many sections of the church. The vision expressed in the famous watchword of the Student Volunteer Movement "the evangelization of the world in this generation", which called forth a magnificent outpouring of men and money, seems to stir little response except questions as to its validity. Many of the traditions and working patterns of the established institution of "missions" which have been powerful in their time appear awkward and ineffective now.

Those who are engaged in the work of missions are aware that much of the missionary energy of this generation is used in meeting the steady demands of a missionary institution inherited from the past. They see that our missionary program in its motivation is, to a large extent, the expression of the missionary faith of an earlier generation, and in its patterns is a product hammered out at an earlier and very different stage in the development of both the Church and the nations.

The rank and file of ministers and lay people in our local congregations who have been passive in their missionary obligation are beginning to ask questions. They have misgivings about the missionary enterprise as they conceive it but at the same time are becoming conscious in a new way of their missionary responsibility, and wonder how the Church should play its rightful role in the life of these times. They are being stirred by new developments in theological thinking about the missionary and eschatological nature of the Church, and there are important beginnings in the task of rethinking the Church's mission in practical terms.

The need for a radical rethinking is partly a matter of theology. It is not too great a simplification to say that the missionary movement of the past century sprang from two main approaches. First, there were those who went out to "save souls." They saw the heathen as passing over the brink of death into everlasting damnation and they saw their task as that of plucking brands from the burning. To do this they preached what they called 'the simple gospel' of salvation of souls for the life beyond. For life in this world they had only a kind of moralism focussed on a limited realm of personal conduct and often framed in negative terms. When they carried on a ministry of teaching it was chiefly in order to prepare more preachers, and when they built up a ministry of healing it was partly out of compassion for suffering persons, but mainly as a means of contacting men in order to

save their souls. They had little interest in the social order or in general economic problems and indeed were suspicious of the Christian integrity of those who, as Christians, concerned themselves with such things.

Second, there were those who went out with a Christian humanitarian concern. Jesus was one who had a great compassion for men and women in their present need and his disciples should follow his example and go forth in His spirit to minister to the needy. These people tried to see below the troubles of individuals to the social and economic factors which caused them. They were impatient with talk about saving souls which seemed to ignore present suffering. They established some of the great missionary universities and some of the best hospitals in many parts of the world, and pioneered in agriculture and rural reconstruction and social work. But they had a vagueness at the point of the Christian approach to non-Christian religions, and the task to which they called men of good will seemed utterly beyond men's strength to accomplish.

When one examines these two very different approaches one discovers that they both had a very serious lack at the same place. Neither of them had a theology of the Lordship of Christ over the whole of life. The one had power and standards of conduct for men in a limited realm of individual concerns but left him on his own in the wider social and racial and international relationships in which he was involved. It had no good news about Christ the wisdom of God for all of life. The other had a guide for men in his wider relationships but left him to struggle in the midst of massive problems with only his own limited strength. It had no good news of Christ the power of God at work saving the world.

The violent world events of recent years, and the rise of totalitarian philosophies, and particularly the rise of communism have made the Church aware that there were whole areas of life to which it was speaking no word. It has sensed that its work has often been on the periphery of events and that history has passed it by. It has too often been guilty of being an 'historic absentee'.

The need for radical rethinking of the missionary task is partly also a matter of practice and method. We are caught with the patterns of the past when a new day is upon us. We find our missionaries living in massive houses in beautiful spacious compounds in a day when we believe in simpler living. We find ourselves caught with expensive institutions in a day when we talk of new mobility. We missionaries have a strong habit of being in control in a day when we talk of taking a second place to the leaders of the indigenous Church. We are still using in 1955 approaches that were valid in 1900.

But God has not called us to serve the missionary task of the peaceful and optimistic world of 1900, nor of the pre-World War II epoch of 1938, nor yet of the period of reconstruction and hope of 1946, but of the confused and unpredictable world of 1955. Dr. Max Warren, Secretary of the

Church Missionary Society in Britain, has stated that the missionary tradition of the 19th century is one of the greatest hindrances to our fulfilling the missionary task today. We know we should move forward, but its powerful habits of thought still shape our planning and action. We are in the position of the Australian aborigine who was presented with a new boomerang and went mad trying to throw away his old one.

The first and most obvious reason for a changed missionary approach is the changed world. The earlier missionary went out in a world which was safe, stable, and predictable. There were minor disturbances but these were within the overall and growing security of the Pax Britannica. Brief periods of unrest were only temporary setbacks in a sure and steady progress of civilization conceived in European terms. One could see that we were moving forward to world peace and prosperity.

Within this kind of setting a missionary program was developed which was marked by its great institutions and long-term plans. Large schemes could be devised in the confidence that they could be brought to fruition in the coming decades. In this era the great schools and universities and hospitals of the missionary world were built.

Today we go out in a world which is everywhere unstable, dangerous and totally unpredictable. Few lands in all the world are at ease either domestically or in their international relations. The danger spots from which a world conflagration might arise are too numerous to list and the nature of the threat, with hydrogen and cobalt bombs in stock, and intercontinental ballistic missiles in the making, is beyond imagination to grasp. What may happen in any part of the world is not within our power to predict. Yesterday it was war in Korea, then in Indo-China, now it is a threat in the Formosan Straits. Where will it be to-morrow?

This is a time of severe testing and correction for the Church everywhere and perhaps the greatest problem is uncertainty. We cannot tell what may happen to-morrow to the work we are doing today. The missionary who prepares for work in one land may find that when he is prepared the doors are closed and he has to be diverted to work in some country for which he has no special preparation.

Missionary practice has already made some radical changes, but far more important than any changes are the developments in recent years in international missionary thinking. The Madras conference of the International Missionary Council in 1938 may be looked on as marking the end of a former era in world missions. It gathered together in masterly fashion the best thinking of former days, and its seven volumes of report still constitute the best authority in matters of missionary policy and procedure as developed across more than a century.

When the International Missionary Council had its next meeting in Whitby in 1947, meeting as the first international Christian gathering after World War II it said little about missionary method, and laid its great em-

phasis on the fact of the worldwide community of Christians under the phrase "partners in obedience." It met in a spirit of hope, with war behind and the prospect of peace and harmony ahead.

When the International Missionary Council convened another conference in Willingen, Germany, in 1952, it met in an entirely different mood, convinced that the most difficult days of the Church lie ahead. Its great concern was to examine the meaning of the Church's mission at the deepest theological level. At this point it refused to issue a statement.

It was of very great significance that the Willingen meeting refused to give easy answers to basic theological questions and closed without a definite finding. It has thrown back to the whole Church the task of seeking anew the leading of the Spirit. For too long our approach to missions has been promotional, the selling to the Church public of an understood and accepted enterprise. Now we need to re-examine what we are doing in Biblical terms. We are already discovering that the basic questions of the missionary movement are not the problems of missionary procedure but rather the problems of the whole of the Church in its total mission.

Let me suggest three of the questions we must work at as we seek to re-think the Church's mission:

1. *What is God saying to us in the revolutionary world situation? Can we discern a redemptive activity of God in these secular events in relation to which we can understand more clearly the redemptive activity of God through the Church?*

In recent trips to the Caribbean and to Asia, and in an earlier trip around the world I was forcibly struck not only by the turmoil and danger of our time but by the fact that this condition prevails almost everywhere at the same moment. I saw many aspects of revolution—economic, social, political and international in Japan, China, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaya, India, Pakistan and in the nations of the Middle East. Many of these peoples have had to live for decades under war and the threat of war. In most of these lands there are vast communities of refugees and displaced persons. Governments have been destroyed and new governments hold a somewhat uncertain authority. Domestic and international tensions abound. The whole picture appears as a vast confusion and chaos. Can we discern any meaning or promise in it?

In terms of the missionary institution of the past these are days of closing doors. Most of China is now closed to missions from the outside world. In India there is a growing resistance to foreign missionaries. It has been announced that even missionaries from Commonwealth countries will require special visas; and missionaries leaving India and wishing to return will need "No-objection-to-return" certificates. Many other countries are beginning to raise sharper questions. The doors which have been open for almost a century are closing.

At the same time there is increasing missionary activity on the part of non-Christian faiths. All across the world the apostles of Communism are active. Two years ago when I visited India I had not been in the country 48 hours before I was approached on a rural bus by a bright little Indian lad trying to sell me a nicely printed, well-bound "Life of Joseph Stalin" in English. Moslem missionary activity is on the increase. The rulers of three great Moslem states, Pakistan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia recently announced their intention of launching a missionary campaign to make Africa Moslem. On a smaller scale I have discovered more vigorous Moslem activity among the East Indians of British Guiana where Canadian missionaries are at work. Since India became independent there has been a revival of Hindu missionary activity. This too has extended to the East Indians of British Guiana. At the present time the Buddhists are holding their Sixth International Congress, a two year meeting, to clarify Buddhist thinking and prepare for a campaign for world Buddhism. Recently in Formosa I saw signs of more vigorous Buddhist activity.

For a hundred years the Christian missionary movement had the world almost to itself but that day has definitely passed and now we can only regret that we did not take fuller advantage of that open opportunity. Yet, if we believe that God is Lord and that He is at work in His redemptive activity, we must surely believe that doors are open if we have the wit to discern them. In terms of the institution of the past doors may be closing, but in terms of the task to be done this may be a time of new doors opened wider than ever before. Let me give one illustration of a great new door for the missionary enterprise.

In a visit to the Middle East I saw the excellent missionary work being carried on in two of the five stations of the Arabian mission stretched a thousand miles along the northern border of Arabia. I was impressed by the quality of the missionaries and the work of this mission, which has numbered among its leaders some of the great names of American missions. Sixty years ago Samuel Zwemer and John Cantine who established this mission went to Arabia with the aim of preaching the gospel in Mecca. But being forbidden to do so they began as near Mecca as they could. In all these years the mission has had only a few converts from the Moslem faith to Christianity. At the time of my visit the missionaries were rejoicing because they had been able to establish another station in a desert oasis inland some miles nearer to Mecca, but they still had many miles and a great deal of hard resistance before Mecca would open to Christian preaching.

When I returned to New York I was telling this story to a Presbyterian layman who is an engineer in the foreign department of one of the big radio companies, and he commented, "I am most interested to hear this, for at this moment I have a Moslem from Mecca working in my office. He is spending several weeks studying broadcasting equipment and will go

back to set up a station in Mecca." It is still impossible to take the gospel to Mecca but the man from Mecca is brought to the gospel and put alongside a Christian layman. Are we alert to the new opportunity to proclaim the gospel to those who have lived behind fast-closed doors in the large numbers of overseas students and technical men who have come among us? We must learn how to discover and use these and other missionary opportunities of our time.

Surely we can believe that there is a door of opportunity for the Christian mission in the new situation of the Chinese Christian community thrown on its own and forced to re-examine its faith in the context of Communism. What a tremendous new opportunity there is in the revolutionary events which have led many peoples out of ancient patterns of ignorance and oppression and need and opened the way for a different day. There is a marvellous new hope in the freedom and new-found confidence of the non-white nations. It was a very great day for mankind when the Asian and African nations gathered together in Bandung on their own initiative and stood as free and independent nations after a century in which they all had suffered humiliation and foreign control. There is a wide new door of opportunity for the gospel in the hunger for a word all across the world, a hunger which is particularly intense in the newly independent nations seeking the true meaning of national life. We need a deep sensitivity to discern the hand of God in the events of our time and to be at the places where He is working.

2. What does the ecumenical character of the Church mean for the Christian mission?

The old missionary pattern saw its base in Europe and America but now the missionary base is the world-wide Church and every land is a mission land. We must take full advantage of this great new fact and bring the whole Church around the world into a missionary activity which looks to the ends of the earth and the fulfilment of history as its task. In the former pattern there was always the danger that the missionary task might become so intertwined with the cultural and political expansion of western civilization that the gospel would be lost within something known as Christianity. It was not always clear whether the missionary base was the church or the product of the church known as Christendom. Now that the missionary base is in a church located in the midst of many different cultures it should be easier to clarify the word of the gospel.

In the new pattern we will see the movement of missionaries not only from Europe and America to other lands but more and more from these lands to Europe and America. Already some of the finest evangelistic work among students and intellectual groups in the West has been done by Christians from Asia and Africa. We will see also the interchange of missionaries in many directions, in terms of the fitness for particular tasks. One of the

most effective student workers in Indonesia was a young Christian from India. Christians from India serve with good effect in Africa and Papua. Missionaries from Brazil are at work in Portugal. And so the chain should continue criss-crossing the world.

As we explore the full meaning of the universal church in its mission we should remember that the Church is not only a consequence of the gospel, and an instrument for the proclamation of the gospel, but is also a part of the gospel. It is the body of Christ, indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As it has become a world-wide community and is in fact what it has always been in the intention of God it should be possible to proclaim the gospel with a clarity and power such as there have never been before.

The world-wide character of the Church also demands a rethinking of the missionary responsibility of every Christian. No longer will it be possible to have a missionary enterprise going forth from a Church which, in its own character, is non-missionary, or to work alongside a Church which is non-missionary. The Church in each land, and other Christians in each land as well as the sent missionaries must have a common missionary concern if the gospel is to be proclaimed in truth and power. Surely this calls for a deep new understanding of the missionary dimension of the vocation of every layman.

These are only a few of the many lines along which the new fact of the universal Church opens up whole areas of new depth and power in the Christian mission.

3. What does the Lordship of Christ over all of life mean for Christian missions?

No longer can we proclaim a Gospel which is largely concerned with the saving of men's souls for we know that it is a cosmic salvation we must proclaim. No longer can we give ourselves to a social gospel dependent on men's strength, for we proclaim a God who is at work in judgment and mercy in all the affairs of men. The good news must give men assurance about their ultimate hope and guidance about their immediate personal problems, but more than that it must tell them who they are and what they are doing. Everywhere across the world these are the basic human questions to which the Christian message speaks.

Our doctrine of redemption has to be related to our doctrine of creation. The God who saves us is the God who is Lord of all things. A China missionary reported that the Communists were not much concerned when missionaries preached the saving of souls, but they were deeply disturbed when they preached the doctrine of creation for this hit at their basic tenet of the autonomy of the material world.

We Christians have tended to be partly Buddhist and partly Marxist in our view of things. On the one hand we have spiritualized our religion and said that religion was above things like money and have been like the

Buddhist who sees salvation in escape from the material world. On the other hand we have said business is business, let the Church keep out of politics, and have almost granted an autonomy to these material and practical aspects of life and in this we have been Marxist. It is time that we rediscovered a New Testament view of the world as created by God and controlled by Him and the field of His salvation.

Men need to know who they are. Are they just autonomous individuals with no obligations beyond getting the best for themselves? Are they only members of a family, or tribe, or clan, or race with no responsibilities beyond those of their own group? Are they simply part of the human race which finds its meaning only within itself? Before I can know how to act I need to know who I am. And to this question the word of God replies "You are mine and I have sent my Son to call you back to the humanity from which you strayed."

Men need to know what is happening. How can I live with purpose and confidence and joy unless I have some understanding of what is going on beneath and through the perplexing and seemingly catastrophic events of these times? Is everything senseless and without direction? Are we heading for certain disaster? Or is there a deep and sure purpose beneath apparent confusion? To these questions the Word of God replies, "All human history shall be consummated in Christ—everything that exists in heaven or earth shall find its perfection and fulfilment in Him."

Such an understanding would surely save us from the kind of approach which seems to suggest that the end of Christian effort is the increase of Church activities. Perhaps it would lead us to see the instrumental character of the Church as a community called to serve God's redemptive purpose for all human history. It would help to provide an understanding of the vocation of the Church in relation to human events which would give a solid and broad base to understand the vocation of the individual in every area of lay life.

It could relate the preaching of the Gospel to the cry which arises from the nations across the world "Do you have a word from God which speaks to our need?" A word concerned with religious matters and Church activities is not the word for which the world waits nor is it the good news of the New Testament. But a word which calls men to discover their true humanity, and their right relation to God, and their place and meaning in history and in the plan of the universe—this would indeed be good news for a world which waits.