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Evangelism and Christian Institutions in India

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Renewed interest has been aroused recently in the work of Christian institutions in India. This is partly due to the general feeling that most of these institutions, whether educational, medical or social service agencies, have not proved effective as instruments of evangelism. Commensurate with the expenditure of men and money involved in maintaining them, they have produced very few converts, it is alleged. The question is also asked now whether they can be regarded as Christian institutions at all. If the primary intention of these institutions is to evangelise the non-Christian, do they adequately fulfill this function; and, if they do not, has not the time come for us to close down many of them and direct our resources and energy to more fruitful endeavour through other means?

Undoubtedly such close self-examination of evangelistic methods and means is necessary today. Besides considerations of efficiency and economy, the new conditions under which we now live in Free India, where a national government is taking more interest in and responsibility for social welfare, furnish another cause for us to rethink this aspect of the Christian enterprise. We need to probe deeper into the issue than heretofore and adopt a more realistic outlook as Christian evangelists than we are usually willing to do.

In the early stages of Christian missions in India, schools and colleges were started in the hope that they would provide avenues of contact with non-Christians. But they were also intended to provide educational facilities and other opportunities for self-development to the growing community of Christian converts. This double purpose also animated Christian social service agencies, such as rural centres, the Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A. Consequently, from the very beginning these institutions were meant to 'evangelise' non-Christian youth in the sense of bringing them under Christian influence on the one hand; and, on the other, to 'evangelise' Christian youth in the sense of nurturing them in the Faith.

One of the encouraging signs of the times is that we are now more consciously aware of this double purpose. But we are not all equally clear as to the twofold sense in which we use the term 'evangelism' as applied to Christian institutions. Much less have we realised with the growth of the Indian Church, the real nature of the difficulty created by the attempt to accomplish two different ends in regard to two different groups through the same institution.

It may well be asked at this juncture, 'Are not the Christians and non-Christians in these institutions all members of the same body, whose needs are fundamentally the same and which have to be met by common means?' The answer would be 'Yes' and 'No' and exactly there is the source of all

our confusion. The fact remains that youth's needs are indeed basically the same: Christian institutions have to meet them as well as and as effectively as they can. In fact, it is good that Christian and non-Christian youth are thrown together and made conscious of their cultural and national unity. That indeed is one effective way of combating the evils of 'communalism' in our country. Nevertheless, our religious objective concerning these two groups of members is not the same. Our purpose in regard to the non-Christian youth is to lead him on the quest of truth to the crucial point where he is confronted with the claim that God is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Up to this point, the challenge is not directly to the individual. Now it is definitely so, for such commitment is specifically a personal choice, which involves the decision to join the fellowship of the Church through the sacramental rite of baptism. In the case of the Christian youth, however, our task is to establish his faith on the sure foundations of the Christian scriptures, the teaching of the Church, and the practice of personal devotion. Are these not two different responsibilities which have to be considered as separate, the one from the other, although they have to be fulfilled by the same institution? Actually many Christian institutions, the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. in particular, have already recognised the challenge of these two different aims. A clear-cut distinction is therefore made in organising their programme of religious education so that adequate care is given to provide separately for the Christian and the non-Christian members. This first step is essential if our Christian institutions are to be effective and fruitful as evangelistic agencies.

However much opinion may differ on other matters, there is general agreement that the *primary* purpose of Christian institutions such as we have been considering is to reach out to the non-Christian with the Christian message of healing and hope. So it is legitimate to ask ourselves periodically whether our schools and colleges, the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A., are successful in this, and if not, how can we make them so. In answering this question we must clear up certain persistent misunderstandings. First of all, there is the misunderstanding about the measure of success to be adopted in appraising the evangelistic value of these institutions. Are we to judge this kind of work by the number of converts from non-Christian faiths that we produce? Because many of us are inclined to say 'No', the others jump to the conclusion that people who are engaged in this type of work are ungainfully employed and, what is worse, that they are preaching a partial Gospel which is a dangerous thing to do as Christian evangelists. What we should all be willing to accept is that there are certain aspects of the Christian enterprise where the standard of success is not in the out-put of converts baptised into the Church. This does not mean that in Christian institutional work we do not preach the Gospel, or preach anything less than the Gospel. We preach the Gospel in its entirety, but without any immediate expectations of results; in fact, we make it clear that it is not our intention to bias the judgment of our non-Christian members by any other consideration than the pursuit of Truth as revealed in Christ Jesus. This does not mean, again, that we do not encourage interested inquirers to persist in the quest, and help them to find their way to the Lord of Life and the fellowship of the Church. Rather, our primary job is to create that inquiring frame of mind which will set them forth on this pilgrimage of faith. Therefore, the standard of numbers cannot be applied here. And yet it is because of this very difficulty of not being able to apply any criterion

in appraising the success or failure of this type of evangelism that we are faced with discouragement and frustration, and the consequent danger of neglecting periodically to take stock of the *religious work* of our institutions. It may even result in our losing sight of the primary evangelistic concern with which we began.

There is also the misunderstanding based upon the oft-repeated contention that Christian institutions are to be regarded not as *directly* but *indirectly* evangelistic. The distinction here refers to a distinction in method, not in objective. The implication is that Christian institutions do not proclaim the Gospel by *preaching* the Word so much as by *witnessing* to the transforming power of the Gospel as manifested in the attitude of Christian men and women to the everyday concerns of life in this world. Is not this conspiracy of silence an indication of moral weakness, an admission of lack of conviction, and, to that extent, are not these institutions less Christian, or not Christian at all? The fault in such criticism is that it fails to realise that both preaching and witnessing are means to the same end. They are both methods of transmitting the Gospel which is evangelism. We grievously err if we regard the one or the other as in some way the superior of the two; for actually they are but parts of a total process, the one being incomplete without the other. But it is also true that evangelists are apt to depend wholly on the one or the other approach, which is a mistake. Perhaps it is true that Christian institutions are more open to this danger of neglecting to preach the Word than is the preacher-evangelist of neglecting to witness to his preaching by his life. So that the charge that Christian institutions like the Y.M.C.A. and the Y.W.C.A. are not sufficiently Christian is in many cases true!

Besides, the danger in all indirect methods of approach is that we are apt to forget the ultimate end of all our striving in our anxiety to make the immediate means sufficiently attractive and challenging. In our efforts to hold the contacts we have made, and to make them lasting, we tend to lose sight of our original intention in making these contacts at all. The means becomes confused with the end, if it does not become dangerously identical with it. Therefore, people who undertake this form of evangelism should be constantly reminding themselves of their vocation and the religious objective of their work; they should be repeatedly checking up on the effectiveness of the various methods they employ in this indirect approach; they should not be afraid to discard ineffectual methods and to experiment with new methods. Above all, they need to be forever on the watch to know just when to switch on from the 'indirect' to the 'direct' approach in the case of individual inquirers who have reached the stage when the challenge of faith has become a matter of personal concern. For, essentially, the indirect method only paves the way for the direct method: its immediate purpose is to prepare the mind of serious and interested youth to the need for faith in the eternal values that God in Christ has made manifest. In a real sense, the indirect method is a preparatory evangelism like that of John, the Baptist, 'preparing the way of the Lord and making his path straight'. In this preparatory evangelism human ingenuity and skilful planning play an important rôle. But the call to the individual, the imperative 'Follow Me!' is the call of Christ Himself. The all-too-human evangelist is now only a feeble instrument in His service. The evangelist now fades into the background; the Lord Himself is in the centre of the picture, claiming His own unto Himself.

One other difficulty in the indirect method of approach which is not sufficiently appreciated is that the evangelist, in the initial stages, identifies himself with the inquirer. Not infrequently this identification gives the wrong impression that the evangelist is not sufficiently confident of the validity of his own religious convictions. As in no other field of evangelism, the Christian finds himself travelling along with non-Christians on the pilgrimage of faith as though he, too, were a fellow-seeker. This is often misinterpreted as accepting the belief in a 'fellowship of faiths' which dangerously borders on a religious relativism. Undoubtedly such danger is always present. On the other hand, to maintain an exclusivism, which savours of religious pride, is to prevent the possibility of true fellowship. Consequently one of the hardest things to achieve in institutional evangelism is to be able to maintain real personal fellowship as a believer with non-believers, and at the same time, in all humility, to hold to the claim that the Christian faith is absolute and final.

This conviction is communicated best in an attitude of faith in the concrete situations of daily living rather than through any academic discussion on the relative value of religious truth. In a sense, the indirect approach is best realised in effective witness to Christian standards when confronted by problems of conduct in individual and social life. Therefore, social service projects for community welfare and national good provide the most timely and opportune occasions for Christian witness to the non-Christian.

Moreover, increasing emphasis should be laid on personal relationships. One of the significant advances in our exploration of Christian truth is in regard to the nature of human personality. We now have a more rich understanding of what we mean by a person. The real level on which human persons inter-act and respond to one another is on the plane of the spiritual, and much of what we call self-consciousness depends on, and is derived from, other-consciousness. Modern thought has been greatly enriched by the claim that the 'I-thou relationship' is the basis of all true personal encounter, where the 'I' is really the eternal God Himself. Consequently our contacts and relationships on the plane of the personal, of which we have talked so much, needs to be very much revised if our evangelism is to be truly effective in communicating our convictions to others. For it is not that we want them to know God, but that we want them to be known of God, even as we are.

All this discussion points to one supreme lesson: evangelism through Christian institutions depends finally for its effectiveness not upon *how* we do it, but upon *who* does it. Perhaps this is a truism. To dismiss it as such is to forget that one of the characteristics of truth is that it is self-evident. And not to face the challenge of this conclusion is to accept the fact that we will not be able to do this type of work because no man can measure up to its demands. If the effectiveness of our work in Christian institutions is to be appreciably increased we need to have people of profound, personal religious experience; people who are themselves fully committed to the claims of Christ; people who regard the unique opportunities which they find in their institutional work as God-given occasions for Christian witness. And yet it remains true until today that the choice of people who are entrusted with this aspect of the Christian enterprise is not primarily conditioned by this supreme qualification. Should not we then, with heart-searching penitence, look into our own selves for the reasons of our failure?