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A Taste of Salvation at Bangkok

J. E. LESSLIE NEWBIGIN

The conference called by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the W.C.C. at Bangkok on SALVATION TODAY was an experience different from any of the earlier world missionary conferences. Its theme was right at the very centre of the missionary concern. Its make-up was more truly representative of the world-wide Church as a whole than that of any previous conference. It spanned the most agonising conflicts of our time. Its difference from previous meetings in the great series from Edinburgh 1910 onwards was that it was deeply involved in the realities of this world of the 70's.

I confess that I went to Bangkok with anxiety in my heart. I had found the meetings of the missionary Section at Uppsala very painful. There had been a futile polarisation in which one side was unable to hear the other with sympathy. There were many indications that Bangkok might be a repetition of the same thing on a bigger scale, with added bitterness. This did not happen. Something quite different happened which it is hard to describe. Each delegate will give his own testimony to what the Spirit did for us at Bangkok. I can only try to give mine.

Two major statements at the opening of the meeting shaped all that followed. M. M. Thomas gave us 'a personal statement' on the meaning of salvation today. The heart of it was a profound analysis of the meaning of human spirituality. Man is part of the animal species involved in the process of organic nature, but all this involvement 'takes place not within the realm of necessity but within a structure of meaning and sacredness which the self in the freedom of its self-transcendence chooses'. Any attempt to set over against each other the spiritual character of man on the one hand, and his physical, social, economic and political character on the other, is futile. The mission of the Church is concerned with the salvation of human spirituality, not in an individualistic isolation, but in relation to all the realities of human life in our time. Dr Thomas went on to say some things about the forms of the Church's life and unity with which I do not agree, but this opening statement was of immense importance to the whole meeting in creating a context of discussion which precluded any crude collision between 'pietists' and 'radicals'. Not only this statement, but the living embodiment in the person of a man who really holds these things together in his own life, was of great importance for the whole meeting—even though Dr Thomas had unfortunately to leave early in the conference.

The second major opening statement was Philip Potter's report. In a masterful way which it is impossible to summarise in a few

sentences, he placed the Christian world mission for our time in the context of three paradoxes. The first is that we live in a world which is being unified at an accelerating pace, but which is yet divided by fearful conflicts—political, economic and racial. The political dominance of the super-powers, the economic exploitation of the poor nations by the rich, and the arrogance of white racism are among the realities with which the Christian mission has to deal if it is to be faithful. The second paradox is that while man's technical mastery over nature increases more and more rapidly, it has become frighteningly clear that the ideology (or idolatry?) of secular power can lead only to disaster—the outward disaster of a planet made uninhabitable, and the inward disaster for the soul of man which cannot live for ever in a religionless world. The third paradox is in the realm of culture. On the one hand there are deliberate attempts to renew or re-create culture—most notably in China; on the other hand we are witnessing in the western world a revolt against the dominant culture and the attempt to create a wholly new style of life over against the dominant culture. This address, and many of Dr Potter's interventions in the plenary debates, helped to keep the conference awake to the real issues of our time and to prevent the development of a kind of debate between 'conservatives' and 'radicals' which would have been irrelevant to the real issues.

The major part of the following three days was devoted to the study of the Bible, partly in plenary sessions where a variety of teaching methods was used, and mainly in small groups which met for nearly 15 hours in three days. Once again the Bible proved its astonishing power to speak to people in their real situations, to open out new horizons, and to open the participants to one another. As one of the Sections reported: 'In this conference we have once again experienced the way in which common Bible study unites us, by surprising us again and again, and by leading us together into a deeper understanding of God's will for all men'. Above all, this experience in the Bible groups gave us a new relation to each other. We came to know and respect each other as people, to accept each other's limitations and to feel a sense of mutual responsibility even where we disagreed profoundly. This helped immeasurably as we went into the sectional and plenary discussions.

The early plenary discussions were marked by very sharp attacks by the representatives of the Third world on the churches and nations which hold the overwhelming economic and political and cultural power. Their arrogant use of power—in the world of missionary relationships as well as in the political and economic spheres—was repeatedly attacked. The few representatives of the churches in the 'Second world'—Eastern Europe and Russia—made occasional complaints that their problems were being ignored. The representatives of the 'First World'—those whose speeches and documents have usually dominated the proceedings of ecumenical conferences, maintained on the whole an embarrassed silence. It was hard for them to know what to say. Probably most of them did not wish to engage in what one Brazilian delegate called 'sado-masochistic rituals

which leave realities unchanged'. I think that they were really hearing what was said. The test will be afterwards.

The question of power and powerlessness was very central to the discussion. At some points it seemed to be suggested that the transfer of power from the powerful to the powerless was the thing needed, but others repudiated this. The delegate from the Kimbanguist Church of Central Africa eloquently pointed out that his Church, which has never employed missionaries and has never had power in the sense that the western churches have enjoyed it, has nevertheless grown far more rapidly than the latter. At some points one became tired of the incessant litany about the oppressed and the oppressors. The speaker was always the oppressed. Sometimes one felt that a very naive sort of philosophic anarchism lay behind what was being said—the idea that the life of man can be ordered without any use of power. There was little to help those who are entrusted with power to learn how to use it. If M. M. Thomas had been able to stay to the end, our discussions might have been more realistic at this point.

For me one of the most significant remarks, thrown out almost as an aside at the end of an intervention by General Simatoupong of Indonesia, was to the effect that the crucial question for the world mission of the Church today is 'Can the West be converted?' Some of the delegates of the Third World rejected this; it seemed to be putting the West once more in the centre. Personally I find it difficult to escape the conclusion that it is true. The 'developed' world still sets the pace and direction, and none of the rest of the world can really keep out of reach of this apparently irresistible movement—even though it is seen to be a movement towards disaster. The world cannot turn its back on technology, but it does seem to me to be the crucial question whether the 'developed' world can find a radically new direction, a new concept of what development really is, a new concept of what is good for man. It was in the context of this remark that Simatoupong added the statement that Church growth might be meaningless in the West but that in a country like Indonesia it might be an essential sign of salvation.

The plenary discussions, however, were not the most important element in the conference. Other things were more important. There were the group bible studies to which I have referred. There were the acts of worship—deeply felt and shared. The cry 'Out of the depths I cry unto thee, O Lord' was the sung response that united a great variety of different prayers spoken extempore from many different situations. There was the evening when we shared through films in a vivid experience of the world we live in, sang and danced together. For bishops, theologians and church bureaucrats to have to dance around on their stiff legs and be lovingly accepted in spite of their stiffness—this was all part of the grace of God at work in the meeting. It was all concrete and totally personal. It was not the 'pale cerebral Christianity' of which we have known so much. The inputs of the meeting were all concrete—bible passages and concrete human experiences—in Ulster, in Vietnam, in the wards of a hospital for the dying, in the places where people know the difference between being

saved and being lost. And outputs were of the same kind. Delegates and groups were encouraged to write their testimonies, protests, prayers and cartoons on the wall-spaces around the main hall. The end-product was testimony rather than dogma. Few formal statements of lasting value came from the meeting, but something much more valuable came out. It is embodied in the personal and corporate testimonies and prayers and affirmations which delegates wrote before they left. These cannot be summarised without the loss of their power. The reader should ponder them for himself.

I have studied the reports of the great series of world missionary conferences—Edinburgh, Jerusalem, Tambaram, Whitby, Willingen, Ghana, Mexico City. I was present at Willingen and deeply involved at Mexico. In spite of the immense changes in that period of more than half a century, I think all these meetings had one thing in common. I could try to describe it by saying that they spoke with the consciousness of a secure power-base. Very obviously this was so at Edinburgh. Willingen and Ghana were much more conscious of the ambiguities and perplexities at the heart of the missionary movement. By the time we reached Mexico we had *in theory* fully recognised that the mission-field is everywhere; yet the personnel of the meeting was still predominantly white and western. What all these meetings had in common, it seems to me, was a strong feeling that 'we' have the answers and other people need them. Even in the western churches where the old assurance about the Gospel has become so much weakened, there was a complete conviction that 'development' was the answer to the world's need, and that 'we' could provide it.

At Bangkok the feeling was profoundly different. 'Out of the depths I cry unto thee, O Lord' was the cry of us all together. Our concern about power led us again and again to the vision of the powerlessness of the Lamb. We did clash and hurt one another, but there was no pitched battle in which one side defeated the other. Rather we were humbled, and because we saw that the powerlessness of Jesus is a more profound reality than our powers, we were helped to accept one another in our need of mutual support and understanding. Perhaps one could say—in a sense that I would find it difficult to say about any of the previous ecumenical conferences which I have attended—that there was the glimpse of a new kind of spirituality. It was expressed by one of the delegates who said 'We need not crusading minds but crucified minds'. I think that the personal reality of Jesus himself—not as a theological concept but as a living and encountered reality—laid hold on us as persons and not just as minds.

Because the meeting had this character, its findings can be communicated in testimony rather than in formal statement. One of the Sections wisely adopted this form for a large part of its report. I close by quoting at length an 'Affirmation of Faith' which forms part of this section report.

'We came from almost too many situations, with the usual prejudices, our own ideas, our exaggerated hopes, many of us tired of conferences, all of us full of our own preoccupations. Then we shared our biographical

materials, struggling to express our thoughts, groping for words that might communicate, hurting each other by hasty reactions, being hurt when not heard, showing some of the frustrations we have in our work back home, sharing our fear for the future of the world, our feeble faith.

And in that process we were met by God himself, who revealed himself in his word which we studied, in our friends around the table who questioned us, who gave us new insights, comforted us, accepted our limitations.

No more than a glimpse of God we saw, a smile of his grace, a gentle gesture of judgment.

And so we repented because we saw that God is so much greater than we. We experienced the meek force of God's invitation to continuous conversion, and we accepted to be sent back whence we came, a little better motivated, a little wiser, a little sadder, a little closer to him.'

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