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# THE CHALLENGE OF MISSION TODAY

Ernest Oliver

*Ernest served as a missionary in India and Nepal (1935-61) during which time he helped to bring into being the United Mission to Nepal. Subsequently he acted as executive secretary of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union (1961-76) and secretary of the Evangelical Missionary Alliance (1966-83). Since 1976 he has been an associate director of Tear Fund.*

## Primary basis

The science and art of mission is, in today's theological jargon, called 'missiology' and many are the learned articles and volumes written upon the subject. For the most part, they warrant our careful study for they present new concepts, but we must state firmly that the scriptures are the basic textbook, and that any 'new' concept must be judged primarily by its relationship to the scriptures and not by its relationship to the church, to culture or to the rapidly growing facility in communication, although clearly it must relate to all three.

Douglas Webster, in his book *Yes to Mission*, asserts, 'we cannot be literate in things missionary unless we are literate in things Biblical'. Peter, encouraging his readers in their life and witness among a scoffing, unbelieving people, wrote, 'Dear friends, this is now my second letter to you. I have written both of them as reminders to stimulate you to wholesome thinking. I want you to recall the words spoken by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles' (2 Peter 3:1-2). In that splendid book *The Responsible Church and Foreign Mission* P Beyerhaus wrote, 'there can be no excess of missionary service if it really restricts itself to spreading the Word and "seeketh not its own" '.

Having recognized this primary basis, and giving more than lip-service to the clause in so many Evangelical statements of faith that 'we believe the Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word of

God and are the only guide to all faith and conduct', let us look at those three areas which deeply affect the science and art of mission today. I hesitate to label them as 'new' concepts except as they have newly and powerfully forced themselves into our thinking.

### **The church**

Obviously 'the Church, its founding, its governance and its expansion' is not a new missiological concept; it is itself basic and has been since Pentecost. Nevertheless, in the great Protestant missionary movement that began in the eighteenth century and continued through the nineteenth and into the early part of the twentieth, mainly from the West, the place and the role of the church in missionary thinking was largely subservient to the role of the 'missionary and mission'. This applied equally to the church from which he came and to the church which he established overseas. This has been one of the main causes of mission/church friction and, indeed, of the problem of the missionary's integration into the church overseas. The right concept of the church's role in mission broke almost suddenly upon the general run of advocates and participants in mission less than fifty years ago. (In referring to them, I do not use the term 'missiologists' because they were unaware that such a term existed!). It was at the Tambaram Conference<sup>1</sup> of the International Missionary Council in 1983 that it was presented and realized that, until the local church became the centre from which 'mission' began and was sustained, the efforts of the expatriate missionary would only last as long as he lasted. This led Kenneth Latourette, the American historian of missions, to state some twenty-five years later that the big question for missions today is: 'What will most contribute to an ongoing Christian community?'

In the 1920s, Roland Allen was a lone voice pleading that, 'wherever the Church is established, it must be accorded the full privileges of the Spirit-directed body of Christ'. The great debate on 'Devolution' raged throughout the period between the two great wars in the first half of this century. This resulted in church leadership overseas accepting too readily the patterns of church government and modes of worship laid down by the missionaries. Only now are we beginning to see the spontaneous expansion of churches throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America on a scale that clearly demonstrates the validity of this rediscovered concept of the church's place and role in mission. The irony is that, of course, it is the concept that Paul had as he established churches in the first

century. How right Archbishop Temple was when he said, 'the existence of the Church worldwide is the greatest significant fact of our era'. I believe that it is the greatest significant feature in the prospect of world evangelization today!

While generally missions and missionaries from the 'West' responded enthusiastically to the call of the pioneer fields (and may they continue so to respond!) where they could assume an extra-ecclesiastical role, it would appear that the place and role of the mission and missionary from the West in relation to the rapidly growing churches in Asia, Africa and Latin America is not yet understood. A growing church needs more Bibles, more Christian literature; it particularly needs more of its leaders to be trained to maintain the momentum and quality of growth, and it is sad that 'organized' missions and missionaries from the 'West' have not been able to gear their activities or reallocate their resources in a manner consonant with the presence and activity of growing churches overseas.

## Culture

The Lausanne Declaration<sup>2</sup> of July 1974 had this to say about culture in relation to missionary thinking: 'the Gospel does not presuppose the superiority of any culture to another, but evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness, and insists on moral absolutes in every culture'. There are obvious difficulties about this area of missiology in so far as culture (which has been defined as 'all socially learned behaviour') cannot, in so many cases, be separated from religious beliefs and practices. Is it possible to establish a Christian church in the midst of a Hindu or Muslim community without, at the same time, establishing a sub-culture? The worship of ancestors is so much a part of Chinese culture that a Christian, refusing on biblical grounds to take part in a ceremony, is accused of disrespect for the ancestor. On the other hand, is it possible to concede that because ancestor-worship is such an integral part of Chinese culture, the Christian must also conform or be socially unacceptable? Or because polygamy is so much a part of the Bantu culture then must Christians disregard the 'husband of one wife' teaching in the church to make Christianity acceptable? Peter stepped right across the cultural and religious taboos of the Jews to eat in the house of Cornelius, a step which led to the conversion of the whole household of the centurion. Peter defended his action successfully by appealing to the evidence of the Spirit's acceptance of the converts and the fact that 'he is no respecter of

persons'. The outworking of the process by which 'the Gospel . . . evaluates all cultures according to its own criteria of truth and righteousness' is so clearly part of the battle for the souls of men, that it is a factor to which the church in every country must give priority of thought.

But it is the clear scriptural evidence that the gospel does not presuppose the 'superiority of any culture to another' which must concern us in the pursuit of world-wide mission today. The history of the Batak church in Sumatra is influenced by the refusal of the German missionaries of the Rhenish Mission to forsake their contention that, because of 'ineradicable weakness of racial character' the Batak 'cannot yet be left to form their administration, much less to lead their own Church'. While that period where the expatriate missionary passed such moral judgements and made such decisions came to an abrupt end when the German missionaries had to leave the country during the first world war, the effect of such an attitude still remains and influences and, indeed, embitters present mission/church relationships.

The carefully prepared statement on the need for the continued separation of church and mission at the Wheaton Congress<sup>3</sup> in 1966 was accepted by the majority of evangelical mission agencies in North America as the basis of the principle of '*parallelism*'. The Americans justified it on the grounds that a) it left the church free to make its own decisions within its own cultural environment without interference by expatriate missionaries and b) it left the mission agency free to pursue its basic task of evangelizing the unreached and planting churches.

It was felt that this would solve the main problems of church/mission tensions. Parallelism has failed to bring such a solution because, in the main, churches overseas have seen in it two important features which they consider to be prominent in the 'Western' missionary approach, viz

- (a) the determination of mission agencies to use their money as they decide without due consideration for the needs and abilities of the churches, and
- (b) a basically racial opposition to the integration of the mission agency and its missionaries into the churches overseas.

Let us not assume that 'Brethren' missionaries are necessarily different from those of the more overtly established mission agencies, for I am sure that the principle of '*parallelism*' is as common among 'Echoes-listed' missionaries as anywhere else.

Before I leave this important subject of culture, may I say that, at the Lausanne Congress of 1974 with its profound statement on the

gospel's regard and respect for culture, there was a sense in which many of the leaders of mission agencies were repenting of their disregard for culture and almost making that disregard the reason for their lack of success. In other words, 'disregard for culture' was being made the scapegoat. I believe this to be an overplaying of the role of culture in the evangelization of a world which is growingly aware of and influenced by the interplay of cultures at every level of its life. It was significant that the Congress closed with a 'breaking of bread' service which I shall never forget, when Bishop Festo Kivengere of Uganda brought us all, representatives of the church in 150 countries, to the foot of the cross. We were all greatly humbled and I, for one, realized that a far greater cause for failure than 'disregard for culture' was the 'pride' in so many of us in all our relationships with God, with each other and with the church overseas. The Holy Spirit is far greater than culture! People have been converted in situations which seem to have hardly any relationship to the individual's culture, for example, the many Chinese students and nurses converted within the context of our student and nurses' movements in this country.

### **Communication**

I am using the word 'communication' in its broadest sense as we see the proclamation of the gospel and the upbuilding of the church related to these current concepts of a biblically based missiology.

In the Acts of the Apostles, the communication of the gospel was through the channels available to those early evangelists and teachers. They were limited to the various modes of travel current in those days. Whether they went on foot or travelled with trade caravans or went by boat, they probably did not cover more than twenty miles in a day. They were also limited to the two means of communication—face to face by word of mouth, and letters. Probably their greatest ally was the Septuagint version of the Old Testament in Greek which someone has called 'the first Apostle to the Gentiles'. The importance of the Greek language throughout the Mediterranean countries surely facilitated the progress of the gospel and the presence of Jewish communities with access to the Septuagint must have provided a base on which the evangelists could build. Clearly, Paul used that base very freely and fruitfully.

While it is true that the opportunities for communication remain fairly constant in their nature, eg meeting people in the neighbourhood, in the market-place, in the schools of learning, in trade, in travel, etc., the area and scope of communication of the gospel has

expanded through the years in direct relationship to political, economic, social, scientific, academic, industrial and technological development. While the progress of that manifold development has, of course, been patchy, territorially speaking, over these past twenty centuries, we are now at a point where there is virtually no territorial limitation to the effects of such development. It will therefore be seen that there has been no period like the present in the history of the church in which such facilities for communication of all kinds have been available. That may be stressing what is obvious, but a missiology which does not include this whole concept of communication would be hopelessly out of date and, because God is sovereign, wholly reprehensible.

It is strange that many still talk of 'closed' and 'open' lands purely on the basis of their willingness to receive expatriate missionaries in an overt evangelistic ministry. There is still the opportunity for expatriate missionaries in large numbers to enter and work in many areas of the world, although the manner of that entry will have to be considered elsewhere. We must also remember that, when talking about expatriate missionaries today, we are not talking of Western missionaries alone, but of Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Philippine, Indonesian, Indian, Pakistani, Sinhalese, Kenyan, Nigerian, Ugandan, Lebanese, Brazilian, Argentinian and Peruvian missionaries. The fellowship of those concerned with and involved in world evangelization today is larger and more international than at any time in the church's history. That fact alone has missiological significance of glorious dimensions. While such 'missionaries' will always play an important part, 'communication' is no longer confined to the personal presence of missionaries. The largest congregations of Christians in that Muslim bastion, Algeria, are formed of those whose only means of hearing the gospel has been the radio set. Surely China is another outstanding example of this. When, in the early 1950s, expatriate missionaries left China following the Communist occupation and the greater threat to Chinese Christians by their association with the capitalist Westerners, there were probably less than one million Christians in that country. After thirty years, during which time we heard of suffering, of closure of churches, of the possible apostasy of individuals and during which time—let it be said to our shame—many of us stopped praying for China 'because none of our missionaries were there', the reports now coming from China speak of any number between thirty and fifty million Christians. Literature, persistent radio broadcasting and an increasing number of taped messages on cassettes have been aids to the virility of the

remnant of the church which has endured, and the word of God has reached the people of China at a time when all other communication with the outside world was cut off. This so clearly demonstrates the sovereignty of a God who 'is patient . . . not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance'.

Radio, television, tape and video cassettes, the acceleration through computers of the methods and processes of Bible translation and publication, the demand for the provision of Bible teaching through correspondence courses and theological education by extension (TEE), the deepening and extending fellowship between churches in one country and those in another, all emphasize the ways in which the worldwide church can and must fulfil Christ's commission to the apostles to reach and teach all nations today.

## Conclusion

Perhaps at this point we feel a little like the worker in the motor industry who sees the robots taking over his work and for whom the threat of redundancy has become a grim and mounting reality. With all the modern means of communication and with the wonderful stories of thousands coming to Christ without ever meeting a missionary, are missionaries redundant? Is the quip about their belonging to the Victorian era perhaps near to the truth? Not a bit of it! We have only to look at our own country where the ratio of 'full-time' Christian workers to the population is comparatively high and, yet, there remain so many areas of pioneer evangelism, opportunities and needs to cross social and racial frontiers with the gospel. There will always be the 'plenteous harvest' and the 'paucity of labourers'. How frequently some churches repeat the prayer the Lord taught his disciples, but how infrequently that other prayer he also taught them: 'Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.' We must discover God's way of using his servants worldwide today. One of the biggest tasks facing the church in the area of 'communicating the gospel' today is to discover how to prepare and use its task force, and I want to conclude this paper with some comments on the role of the 'missionary' today in regard to the methods of communication which he may adopt in obedience to Christ's commands. (By the way, you may call him/her by another name if you think 'missionary' is inappropriate today.)

Where he/she can go unhindered for a ministry of proclaiming the gospel to those who have never heard or to those who need to



hear it again, then they should go as fully trained and prepared as possible to fellowship with the church in that country or, if there is no church there, to plant one in which their efforts can be ultimately multiplied by fellow workers from that church.

There is an increasing resistance on the part of governments, however, to the entry of an expatriate Christian evangelist. At the same time, those very governments are struggling with immense problems of providing an adequate educational, medical and social service to their people. The physical plight of so many is alone sufficient to call forth the compassion of Christ from God's people. I believe, therefore, that it is consonant with the scriptural revelation of God's concern for the total state of all men, for individuals and international teams of Christian professional men and women to enter into contracts with such governments, or indeed with indigenous Christian organizations, to fulfil a role within that country's development plans and thus be able in a very effective way to exercise a thoroughly holistic Christian ministry today. The United Mission to Nepal, HEED (Health, Education, & Development) Bangladesh and the ACROSS in the Sudan are all current examples of this 'new' concept of mission today. I say 'new' with tongue in cheek because it was the method adopted in the Nestorian expansion across Asia from the fourth century onwards when their missionaries, well trained in the seminary in Baghdad Ctesiphon, attached themselves to pagan courts as lawyers, physicians, teachers and artisans with a burning desire to proclaim Christ. Today, individual Christians and mission agencies are rediscovering it! I end where I began: 'there can be no excess of missionary service if it really restricts itself to spreading the Word and "seeketh not its own" '.

#### NOTES

1 Tamaram Conference 1938

The International Missionary Council was formed in 1921 as an outcome of the great World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh in 1910 (the first world war prevented much movement between Christians and accrued this delay). It met in conference at ten-yearly intervals—Jerusalem 1928 was a disaster but Tamaram 1938 brought missions back to their basic task. However, the majority of 'evangelical' organizations disassociated themselves from the IMC when later it was integrated into the World Council of Churches.

2 The Lausanne Congress 1974

The Congress on World Evangelization was set up by the Billy Graham organization in Lausanne in July 1974. Its full report *Let the Earth Hear His Voice* is a mine of information, and the Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization continues to explore the areas with which the Congress dealt.

The LCWE's Executive Secretary is the Rev Carl Johansson now located in the United States.

3 **Wheaton Congress 1966**

This was set up jointly by the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association and the Interdenominational Foreign Missions Association (counterparts in the States of the EMA in Britain). This was attended by the majority of their member missionary societies and representatives from the churches overseas. It seemed to seek to justify current policies rather than to introduce radical missiological concepts for today.