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A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php

Recent Thinking about the Church's Missionary Obligation

THE title of this paper reflects the curious fact that "missiology", although a perfectly good word in North America or on the Continent of Europe, does not appear in our English dictionaries. And that presumably results from our British propensity for dismissing as jargon any attempt to use technical terms, except in science or technology—where the longer the better! Does it, however, also reflect the astonishing fact that, with the very notable exception of Karl Barth, systematic theologians have shown little interest in the mission of the Church? If ecclesiology had been sufficiently Biblical not to ignore that for which the Church, according to the Scriptures, was called into existence, a separate theology of mission might well have seemed unnecessary. Yet, even so, an American might wonder why we have no specific (and obvious) word for reflection upon the specific aims, conditions and methods of Christian missions, as well as history and analysis of their achievements and failures. Presumably this is another illustration of the British pragmatism, which prefers "getting on with the job" to theorizing about what one is doing! Is it also one of the reasons, in spite of the missionary efforts of which we have been ordinally proud, for the paradox that missions today are as clearly "out" in popular estimation, as mission is now avowedly "in" in ecclesiastical acknowledgement?

Developments during the past ten years have with surprising decisiveness created an entirely new situation, to describe which the above phrase about "out" and "in" has already become a cliché. Foreign missions are stigmatized (with about equal truth and falsity) as imperialistic, colonialist, and paternalistic. Yet perhaps never since New Testament times have the Churches been so ready to recognize the essential missionary character of their calling. And in some quarters thinking has been going on about "the theology of mission", partly as a result of these developments, but partly also as a creative force which has stimulated the whole process.

The integration, at New Delhi in 1961, of the International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches symbolized more than an organizational necessity; it brought together two streams of theological thinking as well as of modern Church history. It had become increasingly apparent that a Church without mission cannot be the Church, and it was increasingly asked how the Christian mission could be true to its nature if not squarely and obviously based upon the Church. And this, notwithstanding Prof. J. C. Hoekendijk's trenchant article in the *International Review of Missions* for July, 1952,¹ which was timed to shock the

ecclesiastical trends focused in the Willingen Meeting of the I.M.C. that summer, and is still worth pondering over as a corrective to unduly Church-centred thinking about mission. While we may reject the definition of the Church as having existence only "*in actu Apostoli*" between the Gospel of the Kingdom and the world for which the Kingdom is destined, we should nevertheless admit that there has been down the ages far too much self-centred thinking about the Church which has overlooked its essentially mission-centred nature in Biblical theology.

The years of preparation for that act of integration made Protestants painfully aware of the unhappy reactions of their Orthodox brethren at any mention of the word "mission", because of its connexion with "missions"—although the concept of "witness" was enthusiastically accepted by both partners. It is very desirable that Protestants should remind themselves of their original hopes and objectives in starting missionary work in Orthodox territories, and of the sad abandoning of both in the course of history. This they can easily do with Prof. R. Pierce Beaver's admirable aid.² The result of discussions during those years was to accentuate the need for missions to be fully Church-based, and to emphasize the harm done by missions of rival Churches. This had indeed been recognized in the forthright Willingen statement that "Division in the Church distorts its witness, frustrates its mission, and contradicts its own nature".³ But it was reinforced by the deep "feel" of the Orthodox for unity, as evidenced by the remarkable, if somewhat disingenuous, apologia of Metropolitan James of Melita (now Archbishop Jakobus of New York) for the present almost universal lack of Orthodox participation in missions.

"We, the body of the Church, *can grow only if we are built fitly and framed together* (Eph. 2 : 21) . . . No other activity can please the Founder of the Church as much as the activity of bringing back unity into the life of the Church . . . Oneness in the Church is an absolute prerequisite for the proper discharge of the mission of the Church . . . Unity amongst churches engaged in missionary enterprise is of incomparably greater value than disunion even in its most justified form. Mission is far more important to an Orthodox than missions. And the only mission worthy of its name is the preaching of peace to all : those afar off and those that are nigh (Eph. 2 : 17). Division can find justification nowhere. Christ is not divided. Neither can His Church be divided . . . The Orthodox Church therefore will continue to believe that unity belongs to the mission but it will also continue to question the opinion of some that missions can eventually lead to unity . . . Believing that unity is a sine-qua-non condition for the fulfilment of its missionary task the Orthodox Church sought by all means the

reunification of the Church. It can have no other understanding of its mission for it believes more than firmly that there should be one *Church* and one *mission*.⁴

The adoption by the New Delhi Assembly of the important statement on "Christian Witness, Proselytism and Religious Liberty in the setting of the World Council of Churches" was of great help in this situation.⁵ It may also be noted in passing that, since integration, there have been encouraging evidences of a new and friendly interest in missions on the part of some Orthodox Church leaders, one of whom wrote :

"The books you are suggesting will, no doubt, be very helpful to the tutorial work which is about to begin in Salonika, concerning those who would feel inclined to devote themselves to missionary work. We are yet beginners in this task and we wish to solicit both your prayers and your letting us know of your experience for which I shall be writing to you more extensively another time";

and another of whom attended *con amore* a series of committee meetings last year planning for a survey of evangelization in West Africa today.

As a follow-up to the unsolved theological legacy of the Willingen Meeting,⁶ the I.M.C. initiated a long-term study on "The Word of God and the Church's Missionary Obedience". This entailed, among other things, the holding of a series of consultations in America, Asia, Europe and Africa, and the meeting of two theological panels to discuss the first drafts of two important books. Rather than aiming at further agreed statements from conferences or committees, this study commissioned these books as parts of its total process, so as to gain the creative freedom of individual authorship. Here were successfully gathered up modern trends of thinking about the Church's missionary task. Both books were published in 1962, and both have been translated into other languages.

The first was *The Missionary Nature of the Church* by Johannes Blauw,⁷ then secretary of the Netherlands Missionary Council, now Professor of Religions of the Free University of Amsterdam. In this work Dr. Blauw undertook a survey and appraisal of what theologians of various nationalities have been saying over the past thirty years, particularly exegetically, with any important bearing upon the Biblical doctrine of the Church's mission to the world. Although helpfully presented in the form of a single schematic thesis, Dr. Blauw's findings were based upon reference to a great deal of modern theological writing, as clearly indicated in his thirty-five pages of annotated bibliography. As he stated, although the Biblical foundation of Christian missions was present among other varied motives in the past, "the theological basis was often quite narrow,

and frequently took little or no account of the important trends in academical research".

Prof. Blauw's point of departure is the universalism of the Old Testament, which became its missionary message, with high-points in Isaiah 40-55 and the Book of Jonah. But he quotes Prof. Martin-Achard as pointing out that :

"The message of Deutero-Isaiah is not missionary in the ordinary sense of the word; his preaching does not issue in proselytism. The prophet does not invite Israel to range the world to call the heathen to repentance . . . The fortune of the world ultimately hangs upon the existence of Israel in the midst of the nations; living by Yahweh, the chosen people lives for mankind. *That* is the missionary perspective which becomes visible in the declarations of Deutero-Isaiah."⁸

And Jonah can be regarded as a protest, in the interests of a universal spirit, against Jewish exclusivism, rather than as a direct call for mission among the heathen. The missionary consciousness of the Old Testament is centripetal and not centrifugal. But its message of universalism focuses in its Messianic expectation. The nations are to be a gift to the Messianic Servant.

The New Testament is not only continuous with the Old Testament, in testifying to the fulfilment, albeit in unexpected ways, of its hopes for salvation, but also brings something quite new. The turning-point comes with the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It is the proclamation of His lordship among the nations which constitutes the missionary message of the New Testament; because all authority has been given to Him, His Church is commissioned to go forth to disciple all the nations. As Dr. Blauw observes, however, "it is remarkable that so little is said in the New Testament about the obligation, the task of preaching the gospel. Apparently it was so obvious that the glad tidings were to be passed on, that it was hardly necessary to remind anyone of it. It does appear, though, that some were *particularly* charged with the preaching among the Gentiles."⁹ He points out the increasing emphasis from about 1930 onwards on the eschatological character of the Christian mission, and quotes Cullmann: "It is not true that the coming of the Kingdom depends upon the *result* of this preaching; rather upon the *fact* of the preaching."¹⁰ Karl Barth is cited, "The real congregation of Jesus Christ is the congregation which is, in and with its foundation, sent into the world by God."¹¹

This, however, leaves unsolved the question posed by Willingen :

"What is the theological significance of 'foreign' mission within the total responsibility of the Church? The more this total responsibility is emphasized the less easy it is to retain for the foreign obligation a unique element of call and separation.

Have the ends of the earth a theological significance comparable with the end of time?"¹²

It is important to note that while the New Testament does indeed emphasize the "going", this indicates a crossing of the boundary between Israel and the Gentiles rather than geographical boundaries, though the latter of course are not excluded.

"Christ's dominion over the world presses to a proclamation across *all* boundaries, because there are *no* boundaries for those who confess Christ as the Lord of the world and as the Hope of the world . . . The *geographical* factor makes sense only as a sign of the recognition of Jesus Christ as the Saviour of the world . . . Whoever has seen Christ cannot do other than see the world, and whoever sees the world also sees the *map* of the world. This is equally valid for both older and younger Churches."¹³

Blauw summarizes his argument by a detailed exegesis of I Pet. 2: 9-10, showing that a theology of mission is a theology of the Church, as "the people of God called *out* of the world, placed *in* the world, and sent *to* the world" as witnesses of God's deeds and purposes.

The invitation to Dr. D. T. Niles, General Secretary of the East Asia Christian Conference, to write the other volume in this study was deliberately made to him as an Asian acquainted with both ends of the "foreign missionary" enterprise, and as a theologian who is also an ardent evangelist. To his book *Upon the Earth*¹⁴ he gave the sub-title of "The mission of God and the mission of the churches". In his preface he thus listed the questions with which his book would deal:

"What is the nature of the Church's mission to the world?

Where does the justification for this mission lie?

Whose is the responsibility to carry out this mission?

Why are 'missions' from land to land an essential feature of the Church's missionary obedience?

Which are the factors that contribute to a sense of missionary urgency?

Whence arises the necessity to maintain 'missions' as an identifiable part of the Church's activity?

Whither will an adequate missionary strategy lead 'missions' today?"¹⁵

He went on to say:

"Too often a discussion of 'missions' is made to depend too exclusively on a discussion of the nature of the Church. This is inadequate, since the Church's life can be understood only in relation to the world to which it is sent and in which it is set.

The Church is the home of the Christian; it is the world which is the home of all men. So that true perspective demands that the discussion take place in terms of the inclusive reality within which the Church's mission to the world is contained and its nature and limitations determined—the Kingdom of God."

This seems a mediating position between Blauw and Hoekendijk. In a separate and important Introduction, Dr. Niles wisely observed :

"It is essential to remember that theology does not itself provide the justification for missions. It rather elucidates the justification which already exists in the Church and which has been driving Christians to be missionaries for centuries. In other words, we are involved in this study in a theological interpretation of the Church's actual missionary existence. To neglect this dimension of historical positivism in the discussion is to fall a prey to an attitude of theological criticism which is unfair to the actualities of the mission as it is and as it has been."¹⁶

He proceeded to set out the ten very substantial questions, six theological and four practical, with which the various preceding consultations had wrestled, and summarized under seven heads the common factors which had emerged in the discussions. Those twenty-one pages alone could form the basis of further discussions for years to come.¹⁷

What new trends of thinking about the Church's mission find expression in Dr. Niles' book? It is not easy to select from such a wealth of material, but I draw attention to six points. First, the world in which this mission is set and the "nations" to which the Church has to witness are themselves objects of God's governance and design. Mission policy and procedures must therefore take serious account of the tides and movements of secular history. The discovery of selfhood by churches founded by foreign missions involves their realizing that each has a task directed towards its own nation—as a city on a hill, and leaven in the lump. "A church must become a missionary church, its mission addressed to that locus in the world where it has been set, before it can rightly understand the complexity of its missionary vocation."¹⁸ Service of the Kingdom therefore involves secular engagement. It is supremely in this connexion that Christian laymen everywhere are recognized as the Church's "frozen assets", to use the late Hendrik Kraemer's term. Second, real "partnership in obedience"—the I.M.C. Whitby slogan—requires inter-church relationships, not simply connexions between mission boards and churches overseas, in a partnership which finds expression at both ends of the missionary enterprise, involving growth into independence for

the sake of mission. This calls for, not simply joint consultation, but joint decision.

The third point is not a theological but a realistic one of extreme importance, which counteracts false conclusions from a right idea. The latter was thus expressed by Prof. C. G. Baeta of Ghana at the 1961 Kirchentag in Berlin :

“ The idea of one part of the world evangelizing another will not bear scrutiny. Missions are not a movement from the haves to the have-nots, from the educated to the illiterate. They are a movement from the fellowship of faith all over the world to all who stand outside this fellowship, whoever and wherever they may be.”

Dr. Niles insists that, although every church is a home for mission, yet in terms of world strategy the *present* determinative role of the West must still be recognized. He adduces four reasons : (1) the large majority of those who bear the name of Christ live in Western lands—and the fact that so many of them attach little importance to being Christian spells the task for tomorrow, (2) Western culture and civilization have their roots in the Christian faith, (3) in money and personnel the resources of the Christian enterprise lie largely in the West, and (4) the ecclesiastical forms of the Christian faith as found in the world today are largely products of Western history—the entail of which heritage has to be broken. Nevertheless, both Eastern and Western countries must send, as well as receive, missionaries, and the East has its quite distinctive contribution to make to the total enterprise.

In dealing with the relationship between Christianity and other religions, Niles shifts discussion from the world of religious debate to “ the address of the Gospel to men in their several homes ”. The real question, he declares, concerns the operation of the Gospel itself when it is preached among those who are Christians and those who are not. “ An understanding of what happens is essential for an understanding of the nature of the proclamation ”. It is to *the world* that the Gospel is addressed—the world of whose life and thought these religions are a part. It is to be preached fundamentally to man as man, in the faith that God is already active to win each man into His redeeming fellowship. “ There is a true sense in which each man's religion can be more or can be less than his religious system ”—whether that be Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist or Christian—and faith can be both a preparation and a hindrance to finding faith in Jesus Christ. “ May it not be ”, asks Dr. Niles, “ that the whole discussion about the relation between Christianity and other religions has been vitiated by the fact that we have been talking, not so much about what happens when the Christian Gospel is proclaimed to adherents of other

religions, as about what happens when we who are of the Christian faith study other religions?"¹⁹

Dr. Niles defines the "missionary" as one who in deliberate obedience crosses a secular frontier, in order to become at home in that new (secularly defined) area, for the sake of witness to the Gospel. "'Let me join you' is the missionary request; it is not 'Will you join me?'" Since the Church already exists in almost every country, "it is right to speak of a missionary being sent by a church and being received by a church—this sending and receiving are essential—but there must be no detraction from the truth that a missionary is primarily a person sent to a world and not to a church and that therefore, in an ultimate sense, he is not so much a person sent by a church as by its Lord."²⁰

The theological commission which made recommendations to Dr. Niles, after discussing the draft of his book, drew up a statement of its own, which was published in autumn 1961 under the title "Theological Reflections on the Missionary Task of the Church".²¹ The varied backgrounds of members of this Commission²² gave special significance to their agreements. Of the answers they gave to seven major questions, the following paragraphs are here recorded, as dealing with fresh points of concern today that will not otherwise be taken up in this article. First, as regards the uniqueness of the Christian message and the necessity and manner of preaching it:

"The motive of missions is to present the saviour of the world to all men, because He *is in fact* the Saviour. The urgency of missions derives from this fact. The world's saviour is at hand, but many do not know Him and have not received Him. The world looks for joy and freedom and peace, and these are even now at hand, awaiting our reception of them through Him.

"The motive of missions is not to be located in a belief that the lack of explicit faith in Jesus, or the absence of baptism in His Name, automatically determines a man's final destiny. We cannot make any such assertion. Yet we know no other saviour than Jesus . . . The churches are not to insist that only through their own witness can Christ make Himself known, but they must never leave to others the witness to which they are themselves summoned."

"Believing that God has made known in Jesus Christ the mystery of His will to save all men, we affirm that Christians are bound to confront men with the decision to commit themselves to Him. We are required to make clear that this decision is a matter of life or death, that the call of the Gospel is to full and abundant life here and now, and that those who decide for or against Jesus are not the same as they were prior to this decision. Decision for Christ does involve being baptized and

taking a place in His church. We are not in a position, however, to say that those who refuse to make this decision have rejected Christ.

“When we speak of judgment, we must always remember that the judge is the saviour, and that He is the Jesus whom we know. God alone can perceive the real standing in relation to Christ of those who refuse baptism and church membership. It is no part of our Christian responsibility to anticipate God's final judgments or to speculate upon the question as to who will be saved in the End.”²³

As part of their treatment of the question “What is the meaning and validity of the concept of a specific ‘missionary calling’ of certain individuals?”, the Commission stated :

“In the exercise of his vocation, the missionary represents the whole Church; other members of the one Body are called to use the gifts which the Spirit has severally given to them, not only in making their own witness, but also for the strengthening of him and of his work.

“The Church as a whole is under constant obligation to identify the boundaries to be crossed, to recognize and understand changing needs, and to present these to its members. It must seek to discover those who may be specially gifted for specific missionary service, and to set before them the call to this particular form of witness. It must do all in its power to open the way for obedience to this calling. Where a person believes that he has such a vocation (no matter how it may have come to him), the Church must test him and, if satisfied, provide adequate preparation.”²⁴

A third question with which the Commission wrestled arose from the unhappy observation that so often what is intended to be preached as Gospel is in fact heard as Law. Here is the first part of its reply :

“When the Gospel is preached, we should be fully aware of the difficulty of translating its absolute demands into the relative goals of ethical behaviour, whether social or individual. Relative social patterns are not to be confused with the Gospel itself. On the other hand, it is essential that the church in each community develop its own understanding—as contrasted with any imposition even from other churches outside that situation—of the relation of the Gospel to the social problems it faces. Thus it must not be assumed by those who come as missionaries to a society where, for example, polygamy or caste is an integral part of the social structure, that the abandonment of these things should be made a prior condition of entrance into the

Christian community. Indeed, the danger must be recognized that any pattern of social or personal behaviour as a qualification for baptism can be enforced in such a way as to obscure the truth of justification by grace through faith."²⁵

So much space has been given to the preceding report, because it embodies the findings of a long study process, which was prosecuted in all parts of the globe and dealt precisely with the question "What does it mean in theological terms and in practice in this ecumenical age for the Church to discharge its mission to all the nations?" At this point, before speaking of the contribution of other modern writers, it will be well to turn briefly to the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity promulgated recently by the Second Vatican Council.

The significance of this document cannot possibly be properly assessed except against the background of Roman Catholic doctrine and practice, and through the paying of careful attention to the important changes that progressively improved the text. Even the briefest treatment of this kind, however, would take unnecessary space here. For although, in its right perspective, the Decree may be recognized as in some senses a breakthrough for the Roman Church, it throws little if any new light upon the great questions which Protestants have been discussing, though it raises certain questions—for example, that of the relation of the proclamation of the Gospel to the planting of the Church—in a new and stimulating perspective. What is important for us to note is the way in which Roman Catholic thinking and Protestant thinking are now moving along the same lines. Thus in the Decree the Church is declared as "missionary by its very nature", its mission is set forth on a trinitarian basis and within an eschatological framework, the greatness of the unfinished task is recognized, the role of the laity and the importance of witness through Christian community are stressed, and the need is carefully stated for taking seriously men's natural cultural groupings and hence for giving indigenous expression to the Christian faith. The division of Christians is clearly recognized as a hindrance to the preaching of the Gospel, and all baptized persons are exhorted, if not yet fully able to witness to one faith, at least to be animated by mutual respect and love.²⁶ The missionary task is one of the connexions in which collaboration with other *Churches*, ecclesial communities and their institutions is specifically called for—and this because Christ's Name draws us together.²⁷

The deeper aspects of the relevance to missions of a truly trinitarian faith are opened out in a booklet by Bishop Lesslie Newbigin specifically addressed to this theme.²⁸ The Vatican Decree, though full of biblical quotations, for the most part moves more at a formal than a deep level of biblical theology. The

second of the extracts from the Decree given above, however, places the centre of unity in mission and of mission in unity precisely where Protestants also would place it—in the person of Jesus Christ. The ecumenical movement is open to *all* who confess Him as the one Lord and Saviour of the world, and *only* to those who so confess Him.²⁹ Yet this Christological basis, fundamental as it is, is inadequate for a theology of the Christian mission. It was in the throes of missionary encounter between the Early Church and the pagan world that the doctrine of the Trinity became clearly articulated. Those were the terms in which “Christians were able to state both the unity and the distinctness of God’s work in the forces of man’s environment and God’s work of regeneration within the soul of man.”³⁰ And today the experience of missionary preaching confirms the necessity of the doctrine.

“When an evangelist goes into an Indian village where the name of Jesus is unknown and preaches the Gospel for the first time, how is he to introduce the Name? . . . I have sometimes heard the Gospel preached in such a way that the hearers—accustomed to many gods—were led to think that the name of Jesus represented yet another god, this time more powerful and beneficent than those they already knew. Clearly that would not be the Christian faith as the New Testament understands it. I have always found, in talking to such village groups, that they had already in their minds the consciousness however vague, of one God behind all the gods, One who was their creator and judge. If this consciousness is present, how does one relate the name of Jesus to it? Does one say that ‘Jesus’ is the name of that one God? Clearly, again this would not be the New Testament faith. The truth is that one cannot preach Jesus even in the simplest terms without preaching him as the Son . . .

“Moreover, if the evangelist is wise, he will take time to listen before he talks. And if he does so, he will probably find that things have happened in the experience of the hearers which—without any human planning—have prepared the way for them to receive the Gospel. A time will come when they will look back upon those things as Christians and will recognize them as the prevenient work of the Spirit, the same Spirit who spoke to them in the preaching of the evangelist, the same Spirit who enabled them to receive the human words of the Evangelist as the Word of God.”³¹

It is, however, reflection on the total missionary situation today which raises profound questions that only a fully trinitarian faith can meet. Missions are no longer riding the crest of a wave of expansion and success. What, then, is their relation to the events

of world history? "The Christian mission is the clue to world history, not in the sense that it is the 'winning side' in the battle with the other forces of human history, but in the sense that it is the point at which the meaning of history is understood and at which men are required to make the final decisions about that meaning."³² And that meaning requires a trinitarian exposition. In the Church's mission

"Christ continues his work of confronting men with the decision concerning their true end. It becomes, as he was in his incarnate life, the point at which the end becomes immediate for men; the kingdom of God is at hand. But the mission is fulfilled, as his ministry was fulfilled, in dependence upon the Father who determines the events by which it is outwardly governed, and who alone knows and determines the times of growing and of harvest. The outward circumstances which govern it may—and certainly will—include suffering, defeat, apostasy, the rise of false messianic claims . . . The significance of the Church's missionary witness will lie at this point: that it is the place where men are confronted with the reality and power of God's kingdom. The rest is in the hands of the Father. It is sufficient for the Church that it be faithful. But this is not to be a matter of anxiety. The witness to the Kingdom is not the work of men but of the Spirit. The mission . . . is the participation of the Church in the Spirit's witness to what the Father is doing with the whole maze of events which make up human life—namely to sum up all things in Christ, in whom they were all created."³³

How are we to understand the great tide of secularization, beneath which human life is more and more losing its direct religious relationships? Whereas at Jerusalem in 1928 secularism was seen as the great enemy, to combat which Christianity might join hands with other great religions, the Church today is learning to recognize the ambivalent nature of this ongoing development, and to distinguish between the false philosophy and the liberating process. Van Leeuwen, in his tremendous *Christianity in World History*³⁴ traces a direct connection between God's mighty acts in Israel's history, the expansion of the West, and the secularizing forces of today, and regards this dynamic force which breaks up static societies, and awakens men to historical existence, as providing the key to interpretation of the human story to date. The task of the Church is to "forward secularization" precisely by proclaiming the Gospel and celebrating the sacraments, with their *historical* reference.

"It is only by bringing sacred and secular history into a real

relationship with one another that we can show Christianity to be truly significant . . . We have to restore a 'common platform' between the Church and modern man—otherwise the Second Coming, which is an essential concept for Christian faith and hope, is meaningless for the latter. It is human history which provides that common platform."³⁵

In this context, the full significance may be perceived of the discussion carried in three issues of the *International Review of Missions*³⁶ between the writer of this paper and the late Dr. Kenneth Strachan, and also of the study being currently pursued in the WCC Division of World Mission and Evangelism on the Biblical concept of Conversion.³⁷ The former raised the question whether the Gospel is being preached today as good news for *the world* (and not only for the Church), inasmuch as all men, whether they believe it or not, now live in a world for which the Son of God has died, and which God is even now reconciling to Himself.

"In Christ, the age to come is already here. Admittedly, this salvation can never be fully appropriated without personal faith. But the benefits of Christ's victory are already flowing, like a Gulf Stream, into the tides of human history, affecting the climate in which all men live. Is not our good news that it is God's purpose to create and grant precisely this—a new earth, as well as a new heaven?"³⁸

He further pointed out the responsibility which the churches will have to carry if those who are most unselfishly concerned for the well-being of their fellow-men reject the Christian faith as being irrelevant in this revolutionary age, and fit only to foster individual and self-regarding piety. The "Conversion" study, in the stage of revision so far reached, aptly concludes with a quotation from Bishop Lesslie Newbigin's editorial to a later issue of the *I.R.M.*

"Conversion, in this context, is a turning round in order to participate by faith in a new reality which is the true future of the whole creation. It is not, *in the first place*, either saving one's own soul or joining a society. It is these things only secondarily, because the new reality is one in which every soul is precious, and because there is a society which is the first-fruit and sign of the new reality. If either of these things is put at the centre, distortion follows. Biblically understood, conversion means being so turned round that one's face is towards that 'summing up of all things in Christ' which is promised, and of which the resurrection of Jesus is the sign and first-fruit. It means being caught up into the activity of God which is directed to that end."³⁹

Turning back to Bishop Newbigin's exposition of the relevance of trinitarian faith, we may summarize part of his argument as follows. The structures of social existence are to be accepted, being part of God's creation, as the framework within which the Church has to live, without attempting to set up or maintain ecclesiastical control. Thus Christians share in the obedience rendered by the Son to the Father. Having come under demonic powers, these structures claim an absolute authority apart from Christ ('reasons of State', 'economic necessity', etc.), nevertheless they are to be redeemed and summed up in Him. Christ's victory over the 'powers' is already achieved, yet we await its completion. It is by sharing in the life of the Spirit that Christians here and now already experience a foretaste of that future triumph. In this faith, and through this trust in the Spirit, the secular world of industry and technology can be accepted as ministering, in spite of its ambivalence, to the fullness of the new creation in Christ.

When the questions are asked how the missionary strategy and methods of the first century differ from those of modern missions, or why there was then no sign of the spiritual dependence upon outside aid which is now so unfortunately familiar, or what was the secret of the Gospel's original power to overcome man's innate tendency to legalism, the answers are found in the Church's early dependence upon, and obedience to, the free and sovereign guiding of the Holy Spirit. But the Spirit is He who binds men to Jesus Christ and builds them up in the one Body of the obedient and serving Son. "By participation in the life of the Spirit we are enabled to acknowledge (God's) fatherly rule in this as in all things, to share that acceptance of the 'powers that be' which marked the life of the Son on earth, and to have the assurance which the Spirit gives in bearing witness to that victory within the life of a radically secularized society."⁴⁰ And Father, Son and Spirit are one God, in Whom all things are drawn into a coherent whole.

Witness in Six Continents is the apt title of the official report of the Mexico Meeting in 1963 of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism.⁴¹ That Meeting recommended Joint Action for Mission, meaning that all the Churches of an area that can with practicability be regarded as a unit should together survey, in the light of God's total calling to mission in that place, both the needs and opportunities and also the total resources available, and on that basis plan united advance. But a yet deeper level of the significance of that title emerges in the study of "The Missionary Structure of the Congregation", concerning which interim reports and literature are already available,⁴² for the quest there undertaken is equally applicable to churches anywhere in the world. In each case the challenge is to turn outwards, and to let the exigencies of the world's needs rather than developments of existing ecclesiastical and missionary institutions shape the

Church's mission. For many at least, this represents sound theology. But those concerned with mission policy, both past and present, will find much to reflect upon in Dr. Lefever's English presentation of the work of Dr. Peter Beyerhaus entitled *Die Selbständigkeit der jungen Kirchen als missionarisches Problem* (the full study in German is preferable for those able to "take" a massive German thesis).⁴³ Roland Allen's works rightly retain the vogue they have had for a decade now.⁴⁴ Bishop Stephen Neill had several wise things to say in his book *Creative Tension*.⁴⁵ The present writer believes with him, for example, that many mistakes in the missionary enterprise would have been avoided had the churches directed the missionaries they sent out to cease to be "missionaries" on arrival overseas.

"It is my profoundest conviction that the moment a group of Christians land on the shores of an island in which the gospel has never been preached their first business is to meet together, and to say solemnly, 'We are the Church of X', or, if they so prefer it, 'We are the Church of Jesus Christ in X'. There may not be a single national in the group; that makes no difference. Those who have come have taken possession of the whole land in the Name of Jesus Christ; when any of the nationals believe, they will find already in existence a living church of *their own land*, a living part of the great world-wide Church of Christ, into which they can be admitted . . . It seems to me clear that a missionary ceases to be a missionary on the day on which he sets foot on the shores of the land in which he has been called to work. From that moment on he is a servant of the church in that place, and nothing else. Of course he cannot deny that he is what he is; part of his value lies in the fact that he is a foreigner, and that in this sense he is the ambassador of a distant church and culture. But he has no status as 'missionary'; whatever his office may be, it is that which is given to him and to which he is called by the church of the land in which he serves. For good and ill he is a member and a servant of that church and no other, with all the duties and responsibilities that such membership entails."⁴⁶

In *Missions in a Time of Testing*,⁴⁷ R. K. Orchard sets out some of the modern theological insights concerning mission in an era when both its base and its task are recognized as world-wide, and then applies them to the actual organization and activity of missions today, drawing attention to the usual sad lag between theory and practice. A series of a dozen World Studies of Churches in Mission is in process of publication by the WCC Department of Missionary Studies, which seeks inductively to discover truths of

general application through sociological analysis and theological appraisal of various typical situations.⁴⁸ There is no dearth of up-to-date writing on either the theory or the practice of missions, but much missionary history is devitalized because it is denominational, and therefore loses the big issues through painting on canvases which are too small and also often coloured by propaganda considerations.

But what of that "real and spiritual encounter with the great non-Christian religions" which the late Prof. Hendrik Kraemer described in 1956⁴⁹ as being a meeting still ahead, but towards which the Ecumenical Movement inevitably moves, however ill prepared? It is all too true that, in general, the modern missionary movement has lost the painstaking scholarship in study of other cultures and other faiths for which many pioneers were so illustrious. But the tremendous debate which Kraemer himself had opened up in 1938, with his *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, moved into a position of virtual stalemate, with protagonists on either side of the issues of general revelation and of continuity or discontinuity. Among modern books to be greatly commended in this field are Edmund Perry's *The Gospel in Dispute*⁵⁰ and Bishop Neill's *Christian Faith and Other Faiths*.⁵¹ In the ongoing WCC study on "The Word of God and the Living Faiths of Men", the emphasis has come to be placed on the actual faiths by which men and women live; and the method preferred for discovering this is discussion and dialogue between people of different faiths, not on the subject of religion in abstract, but on problems which all face in the modern world. The results of this approach may be seen in the statement on "Christian Encounter with Men of Other Beliefs", commended by the East Asia Christian Council Assembly in 1964 to its member Churches and Councils for study and action.⁵² Though it has not yet achieved any theological breakthrough, the path to which it points may well lead beyond the impasse of recent discussion.

"With what boldness did men like John and Paul press into the service of the gospel the terminology of Greek philosophy, the symbols of the mystery religions and the structures of thought of the Gnostics! The Christians of Asia must live more actually within the cultures of their own peoples . . . The dialogical situation within which the Christian encounter takes place is characterized, therefore, by the Universality of the Gospel as it encompasses all men, the Mutuality that is promised when the dialogue takes place in honest and loving openness, and the Finality of Christ himself who alone is Lord."

Again a challenge is presented to a deeper engagement with the world, a solidarity with all our fellow-men, whom we approach, in the name of Christ, with open minds and hearts.

Sufficient (or more than enough!) has been said to illustrate the fact that a great deal of fresh thinking has been going on in the last twenty years concerning the missionary enterprise. It is important to realize that much of this arises from theological reflection, based upon up-to-date Biblical exegesis, concerning the nature of the Church and the nature of its task in the modern world, and is not put forward by supporters of "foreign missions" as an apologia for their continuance. The concept of missions as a movement from a geographical Christendom to a geographical heathendom has already been replaced by that of the total mission of a world-wide Church to the whole globe. Inter-church aid for mission is of course vital to the strategy. It is also essential that the world character of the Christian mission be stressed by insisting that Christians should be actively interested in mission in other parts of the earth, as well as that over their own doorstep. No local task can be truly perceived unless within a total vision, and that vision forbids merely parochial concern. On the one hand, the Church-base of the mission is more clearly recognized than ever before; on the other hand, the world in all its secularity is being taken with an altogether new seriousness, as the creation which God is redeeming through Christ. The trend could be clearly and exactly stated in two technical terms, missiology is becoming truly ecumenical.

NOTES

- 1 "The Church in Missionary Thinking."
- 2 *Ecumenical Beginnings in Protestant World Mission*, Thos. Nelson, New York, 1962, pp. 203-237.
- 3 *Missions under the Cross*, ed. Norman Goodall, Edinburgh House Press, London, 1953, p. 193.
- 4 "The Orthodox Conception of Mission and Missions", in *Basileia*, ed. Hermelink and Margull, Evang. Missionsverlag, Stuttgart, 1959, pp. 78-80.
- 5 *Evanston to New Delhi*, W.C.C., Geneva, 1961, pp. 239-245.
- 6 Goodall, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-22.
- 7 Lutterworth Press, London, 1962.
- 8 *Israel et les nations*, Delachaux & Niestlé, 1959, p. 30.
- 9 *op. cit.*, p. 102.
- 10 O. Cullmann, *Christus und die Zeit*, 1946, p. 141.
- 11 *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, IV, 3, p. 878.
- 12 Goodall, *op. cit.*, p. 22.
- 13 Blauw, *op. cit.*, pp. 118-119.
- 14 D. T. Niles, *Upon the Earth*, Lutterworth Press, London, 1962.
- 15 *op. cit.*, p. 9.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 22.
- 17 *ibid.*, pp. 21-42.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 144.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 239.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 266.
- 21 W.C.C. Division of Studies, Bulletin VII, 2.
- 22 *cf. op. cit.*, p. 4.

²³ *ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

²⁴ *ibid.*, p. 13.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁶ "nam divisio christianorum sanctissimae causae praedicandi Evangelium omni creaturae detrimentum affert et aditum ad fidem multis praecludit. Sic ex necessitate missionis omnes baptizati ad hoc vocantur, ut in uno grege coadunentur et ita coram gentibus de Christo, Domino suo, unanimiter testimonium reddere possint. Quod si unam fidem nondum plene testificari queant, mutua saltem aestimatione ac dilectione animentur oportet." (Official text, p. 10).

²⁷ "Collaborent praesertim propter Christum, suum Dominum communem: Eius Nomen eos colligat! Haec collaboratio instituatur non solum inter privatas personas, sed etiam, de iudicio Ordinarii loci, inter Ecclesias vel communitates ecclesiales earumque opera." (*ibid.*, p. 21.)

²⁸ *The Relevance of Trinitarian Doctrine for Today's Mission*, Edinburgh House Press, London, 1963. *Trinitarian Faith and Today's Mission*, John Knox Press, Richmond, Virginia, 1964.

²⁹ *ibid.*, p. 17.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p. 32.

³¹ *ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

³² *ibid.*, p. 37.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 50.

³⁴ Edinburgh House Press, 1964.

³⁵ Van Leeuwen, as reported in *Study Encounter*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (which deals with the issues of Secularization and Conversion), p. 75.

³⁶ *I.R.M.*, April 1964, October 1964, and April 1965.

³⁷ Dr. Paul Löffler's opening paper also appeared in *Study Encounter*, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 93-101.

³⁸ *op. cit.*, October 1964, p. 208.

³⁹ April 1965, p. 149.

⁴⁰ Newbiggin, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-3.

⁴¹ ed. R. K. Orchard, Edinburgh House Press, 1964.

⁴² *cp. Study Encounter*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 6-10, 29-34, 41-42.

⁴³ *The Responsible Church and the Foreign Mission*, by Beyerhaus and Lefever, World Dominion Press, London, 1964.

⁴⁴ *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's and Ours. The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church, The Ministry of the Spirit*, all re-issued by World Dominion Press, London.

⁴⁵ Edinburgh House Press, London, 1959.

⁴⁶ *Creative Tension*, pp. 90-92.

⁴⁷ Lutterworth Press, London, 1964.

⁴⁸ *The Growth of the Church in Buganda* by J. V. Taylor, SCM Press, London, 1958. *Christians of the Copperbelt: The Growth of the Church in Northern Rhodesia* by John V. Taylor and Dorothea Lehmann, SCM Press, London, 1961. *A Church Between Colonial Powers: A Study of the Church in Togo*, by H. W. Debrunner, Lutterworth Press, London, 1965. *The Church as Christian Community: Three Studies of North Indian Churches*, to be published shortly, and other volumes to follow, all from Lutterworth Press.

⁴⁹ *Religion and the Christian Faith*, Lutterworth Press.

⁵⁰ *Doubleday*, New York, 1958.

⁵¹ Oxford University Press, 1961.

⁵² *cp. Ecumenical Review*, July 1964, 451-455.

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