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## REALITY IN WITNESS<sup>1</sup>

By the REV. R. V. G. TASKER, M.A., B.D.

*Professor of New Testament Exegesis in the University of London*

THE Annual General Meeting of a Fellowship such as this is very naturally, and very properly, a time when we take stock of past achievements, and when we pause in the onward movement of our continuing life to notice the outward and visible signs of seeming success or apparent failure, before pressing on to the tasks that lie ahead. But I feel sure we should all agree that it would be a pity if we were to leave this gathering tonight feeling unduly self-conscious about the effects we have produced, or have failed to produce; and a still greater pity if we were to yield to the temptation of regarding efficiency as an end in itself, so that we came to imagine that if only our organization could be further improved, or our publications become more numerous, or our membership enlarged, or the numbers of our conferences and meetings increased, we should *inevitably* be achieving the object for which we exist. Desirable though all these visible signs of a vigorous life may be, they can never be the exclusive criterion of our own spiritual condition or of our effectiveness.

We live in an age when standards of value tend to be quantitative rather than qualitative, when to be *numerically* superior, it may be in manpower or in money, is felt to be *really* superior. It is not easy therefore to avoid the dangers of thinking that we must at all costs be producing visible effects, and of becoming so self-conscious in our efforts to do so, that we become unreal ourselves, and in consequence *ineffective*.

### A TRUE MINISTRY

And lest we should fall into the snare of such 'self-conscious efficiency' and the unreality that accompanies it, may I draw your attention for a few moments to a well-known passage in which the greatest of all evangelists, the apostle Paul, underlines some of the characteristics of a true and faithful ministerial life? For although only a very few of us are ordained ministers in the Christian Church, engaged in what is called full-time service, we are all conscious that we have been called to bear witness to the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ by what we say, by what we do, and above all by what we are. And it is very certain that if we lay to heart what the apostle has to say on this all-important subject, we shall be purer in our motives, more understanding in our methods, more courageous when faced with new or it may be increasing responsibilities, more persevering when discouraged, and more loyal and faithful in our service — in a word, we shall be more *real*, as we set out to discharge our obligations in the coming University session.

In the first two verses of the fourth chapter of 2 Corinthians, the apostle writes: 'Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; but have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commanding ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.'

<sup>1</sup> Closing address given at the I.V.F. Annual General Meeting on 30 September, 1960.

## THANKFULNESS

His first point is this — ‘having such a ministry as this, the ministry of passing on to others the glory of God as it is reflected in Christ Jesus our Lord, as we have received such mercy, we dare not be untrue to it’. In other words, the primary note that should characterize all our thinking about our work and service as Christians is praise and thanksgiving for the wondrous mercy of our calling. That call came to us in different ways. With some of us it was the direct consequence of our home life, of early associations, and of the influences to which we were subjected in our childhood and schooldays. To others the call came later, often as a shock disturbing the even tenor of their ways, reshaping their ambitions, and reorientating their outlook for the future. But in whatever way the call may have come, come it did; and as a result we find ourselves assembled here tonight as members of the body of Christ, bound in fellowship with others who have received a similar call to ourselves — no longer freelance, but as willing servants of God, thankful for the mercies bestowed upon us, and looking forward to fresh opportunities for service that lie ahead. And ever-mindful of those mercies, ‘*we faint not*'; we do not lose heart. However diffident or apprehensive we may be, we remain true to our calling; we have nothing to do with unworthy motives that have to be hidden for very shame by the double-minded and the disingenuous; we say ‘No’ to the things that would make us stand ashamed before Christ and would make Christ ashamed of us; for we are very sure that no effective witness to divine truth can ever be borne by anyone, however learned or religious he may be, who has something to blush for, something to hide, and who lacks simplicity of purpose. ‘We have renounced the hidden things of shame'; we are open and above-board as we strive to commend the gospel of Jesus Christ to others.

## HONESTY

‘Not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully’ the Epistle goes on to say. Here I suggest Paul is drawing attention to the double peril that must be avoided by all who are called to bear witness to the truth as it is in Jesus, if they are to be worthy of their calling. The first concerns the way the gospel message is presented, and the second concerns the messenger himself.

The ‘crafty’ man is the man who goes to work ruthlessly and recklessly, caring not what methods he uses in order to attain his end, a ready subscriber to the devil’s doctrine that the end justifies the means. So, the apostle seems to be suggesting, it is possible to think that any methods of evangelism are permissible so long as the gospel is preached. But this is, of course, not so; for however good an object may be, if the means by which it is pursued are corrupt, the end itself becomes corrupted in the process. It is therefore incumbent upon all who take part in evangelism to consider carefully the methods that are being used, and to ask themselves searching questions. One such question might be ‘How far can we be true to the principle underlying Paul’s confession that he was “all things to all men” that he might gain some, without rendering ourselves liable to the charge of walking in craftiness?’ Another pertinent question surely is ‘Are we justified in using the techniques of mass suggestion and crowd psychology in order to obtain decisions which, if they are to be sincere and lasting, ought to be made (so our reason would tell us) when all the faculties are alert and not subjected to any external pressure of a semi-hypnotic character?’ For may it not be that by the adoption of such means as these, we are in effect, to use the apostle’s language, ‘walking in craftiness’?

But the complementary and equally serious danger that confronts all who are called to bear witness to the gospel, concerns the evangelist him-

self rather than the methods he employs. It is what our text calls 'handling the Word of God deceitfully'. In the light of the context it is probable that the apostle is here thinking primarily of those who tamper with the Word of God by diluting it to suit the taste of the majority, by twisting it to suit their own philosophies, by extracting fanciful and unnatural meanings out of it, or by failing to present its various truths in their proper proportion, exaggerating one aspect and neglecting another. It is also probable that in the following words, 'by manifestation of the truth', he is primarily stressing the importance of concentrating upon the fundamental truths of the gospel, the things that God has made plain, and not wasting time and energy, and jeopardizing still further the unity of Christendom, by trying to define precisely points of doctrine which are left uncertain, and even obscure, in Scripture itself. For we may be very sure that by indulging in doubtful disputation we shall never achieve what the apostle says is to be our object. We shall not commend ourselves to every man's conscience.

### REALITY

But those words 'by manifestation of the truth' could also be translated 'by giving evidence of the reality of our ministry, so that we may commend ourselves to every man's conscience.' At any rate we may feel certain that Paul would be the first to tell us that if we are real persons, then those with whom we come into contact, whether they agree with us or not, will recognize that we believe what we say, that we say what we believe, and that we do what we profess to do; but that if evidence of that reality is lacking, then even though what we are actually saying may be true, and our behaviour correct, we shall never commend ourselves to the conscience of others.

We must therefore be daily on our guard against the things that make for unreality. We all know what they are: false sentimentality; keeping aloof from perfectly harmless human concerns and activities in the interests of a false type of unworldliness; the glib repetition, in season and out of season, of pious phrases; the passing on to others (as though they were the convictions of a lifetime) of slogans and catch words which we have heard at some meeting, or read in some article, but which we have never really made our own; — all the things, in a word, which are substitutes for disciplined thinking, and which prevent us from saying what we mean and meaning what we say. It has been well said that one of the characteristics of a bad teacher (whatever his subject may be) is that he imparts to others what has never been real to his own mind and conscience and heart, so that it is not his truth for he has never bothered to make it his own. On the other hand, the good teacher is able to present his teaching clearly and convincingly, precisely because by disciplined concentration it has become 'part-and-parcel' of himself, Paul preached the same gospel as his fellow apostles and evangelists, but he preached it as his gospel and he preached it in his own way. Christ, let us never forget, entrusted the proclamation of that gospel to persons, people like you and me. He did not commit it to recording machines. And we may rest assured, that if we pass on to others truth that is not real to ourselves, so far from commanding ourselves to the conscience of every man, we shall appear to many of our contemporaries (on the most charitable estimate) as detached or superior persons, and (on the least charitable estimate) as hypocrites, pedants and prigs. And it will not be, as we may be tempted to think, their worldliness, or their lack of spirituality which will lead them to feel like that, but their inherent sense of what is true and genuine. The Pharisees were called 'hypocrites' by our Lord precisely because they were not real people. With their sophistries and their subtleties and their hair-splitting casuistry they did not 'commend themselves to every

man's conscience'; their teaching was second-hand and artificial; and they themselves were out of touch with ordinary life; and an unreal religious person is essentially irreligious.

'By the evidence of our reality commanding ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.' These last words tell us how we can avoid unreality in our life of Christian witness. We are only truly ourselves when we see ourselves as God sees us; when we refer everything that calls for serious decision, not to the judgment of ourselves or even of our friends, but to the judgment of Him who sees not as man sees, but looks into the hidden recesses of the heart; of Him to whom everything is 'naked and laid bare'; of Him to whom all our desires are known, and from whom none of our secrets is hid; the God from whom we come and to whom we go, the God by whose mercy we have been called to spend ourselves while life's brief day shall last, in doing, each in his own particular way and according to the ability God has given him, the great work for which the Christian Church, and this Fellowship within it, exists.

May the glorious majesty of that merciful God rest upon us all in the days that lie ahead; and may we pray continually to Him 'O prosper thou the work of our hands upon us, O prosper thou our handiwork'. Amen.

## TO SERVE WITH THE ORGANIZED CHURCH OR NOT?

### 1. The Abuse of Interdenominationalism

By J. CLAUDE MACQUIGG, M.A., H. Dip., Dip. Ed.

A MISSIONARY with considerable experience in both home and foreign work has remarked, 'The greater the opportunity I have for viewing Christian activities in all their varied aspects, the more I become interdenominational in spirit but the less in practice'. The meaning of such an apparent paradox is that on the one hand we acknowledge the necessity for extending all charity of personal judgment to other believers who differ from us on certain points of view, for times of fellowship with those of other denominations can be of great mutual benefit and encouragement. On the other hand, the great commission itself can best be obeyed, and can show its most lasting results, when carried out within the framework of our own denomination. To decline active co-operation with others, whose views we cannot approve, does not necessarily violate the principle of Christian unity.

With the above thesis many will no doubt concur, having learnt in the hard school of experience that while interdenominationalism is a glorious reality, denominationalism (under whatever title) is at the same time a stark necessity. There are today a large number of Christian workers, part-time as well as full-time, who are engrossed in an interdenominational activity as their *main* interest and sphere of service.

#### DIVIDED LOYALTIES

Many and complex are the reasons for this state of affairs, some deep-rooted, others superficial. Perhaps most of all, church leaders themselves