

affinity recognized between the object of faith and the activity of faith. Habakkuk sees God as trustworthy, as a rock in a time of storm, *and* he sees man living by his fidelity to the trustworthy God. St. Paul picks up this thought and makes the intimate relation between the faithful Redeemer and the man of faith the foundation of his theology, the heart of his Gospel. (Gal. ii. 16). Christ is the rock and the ground of faith. And the Christian finds his standing in the storm in his foothold on this rock. This is what it means to be justified by grace through faith.

But that is not all. In the person of Peter, at Caesarea Philippi, God's grace and man's faith met (St. Matthew xvi. 18). Christ our Lord, in a moment of matchless vision, saw in that meeting the earnest of a Church that would be world-wide, saw the triumphant fulfilment of God's purpose. Here was a rock that could move, a paradox of nature yet a commonplace of grace. The rock that was Christ (1 Cor. x. 4), and the rock that was, and is, the faith of His disciples, cannot properly be thought of as something static. It is dynamic, full of movement.

So it is that the final picture which is presented to our eyes is no longer that of a rock standing above the highest waves, a bastion of defence against the elements, but rather of an army battering down the gates of hell.

What a Gospel! No wonder that Luther in the preface to his commentary on the Epistle to the Galatians cries out—"This rock must be published abroad".

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## A Fresh Theological Approach to the Christian Mission

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### I

**T**HE title of this paper contains three terms which, before we proceed into our main argument, need some definition. The term Christian Mission, rather than Overseas or Home Missions, has come into use because it more faithfully describes the present nature and task of the Church. It abolishes geographical distinctions and thinks in terms of the total impact of the Christian Faith, embodied in the People of God, upon the total world situation. The Christian Mission is the age-long purpose of God in the world, overcoming evil through the dedicated witness of a community which acknowledges Him as Lord and Redeemer and which is ever open and receptive to the guidance of His Spirit. The task of the Christian Mission is the proclamation of the Gospel and the fashioning of a People acceptable to God drawn out of every nation, race and class. It is the breaking down of barriers so that all may be one in Christ. The Christian Mission is adumbrated in the faithful remnant of the Old Israel, for

it is built upon the faithfulness of those who looked for the promise. It is seen upon the stage of history with blinding clarity in the life of Jesus of Nazareth ; it is in His Spirit and in obedience to His command that it continues His gracious work until such time as He closes the book of history and takes account of its stewardship.

Our second term is "theological approach". By this is meant an examination of the Christian Mission from a particular point of view. There are many angles from which the Christian Mission might be appraised. The sociologist is concerned with its impact upon human society ; for him the Church is one of the many agencies which have helped to mould civilization. He sees its impact upon primitive communities as providing valuable data concerning the effect of one culture upon another. The student of comparative religion is interested in the Christian Mission for its effect upon the other religions of the world. For the historian, the lawyer, the economist and the philosopher, the Christian Mission has academic interest, for, as might be expected, the impact of a live and virile faith which has affected millions of people in the inner springs of their being, cannot have been without its repercussions upon every aspect of human life. But it is with none of these that we are primarily concerned in this article. Our approach is theological, which, if it sound not presumptuous, is an approach to the Christian Mission from God's point of view.

It must be said at once that such an approach is only possible because the Christian believes in revelation ; he believes that in some measure God has made known to man what His viewpoint is. It is the miracle of revelation that God enables man, by faith, to share in His purpose for the world. This makes it possible for the actual to be compared with the real. Reality is the perfect will of God, actuality is what man accomplishes upon the stage of history. The on-going life of the People of God, which is the Christian Church is something which can be seen in the world, it is part of history. And yet it is not entirely of the earth, earthy ; it is not bounded by history. It is sinful and therefore in part a caricature of what it should be ; but Christians know this and are not ashamed to acknowledge it, because they have also been granted the vision of what it might be. We have seen perfection in Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith ; our hands have handled the Word of Life. It is for this reason, and this alone, that we can have a theological, that is, a God-ward approach to the Christian Mission.

Thirdly, there is the word "fresh". It is surely an indication of our timidity that we are always on our guard when the adjectives "fresh" or "new" are found qualifying our attitude to theology. Yet we are right to be cautious, for fresh approaches in theology have too often savoured of the things that be of men. The Church has the duty of conservation ; it cannot allow itself to be blown about with every wind of doctrine. And yet it must not allow itself to become so set and rigid that it stifles the Spirit that bloweth where He listeth. After all, theology is a science which needs data, and its data is obtained from the day-to-day life of the Church. The Christian has to witness in new situations, he has to deal with an ever-expanding universe of discourse in which his attitude can be none other than "experiment in

faith". The results of his experiments are systematised by the professional theologians, but the theologians are not, as such, the experimenters. It is the humble Christian, in general, the untheologically trained layman or woman who is up against the hard facts of a rapidly changing situation. It is here that decision and action are called for where there is no time to await the guidance of theologians, who, in any case, are not usually equipped at the time to give it.

In this context, therefore, "fresh" denotes an approach which recognizes the new factors, which, in this mid-twentieth century, have to be taken into account in fulfilling the task of the Mission. We live at a time when the sound of the Gospel is heard by more people than at any previous time in history; and yet the response is, numerically, incommensurate with this fact. This failure to commend Christ in a way that will attract men to Him is a constant challenge to the Christian community. It calls for repeated examination to see whether, and in what degree, the failure is due to the method of presentation. It may be that our failure is due, in some measure at least, to our inability to get the outsider's wavelength. Christians must always have their ears to the ground; they should be able to make articulate the unexpressed yearnings of their contemporaries so that those who are living without Christ might at least know that the things for which they long cannot be obtained on the terms which they are prepared to offer. The art and science of evangelism consist in no small measure of an awareness at any particular time of the felt needs of men and also of the factors in their environment which are conditioning their lives. It is because both are changing, and particularly so in an age of revolution such as that in which we live, that a fresh theological approach to the Christian Mission is called for. The Word of God must be spoken to Man's condition in terms which he can understand. It is this, and no diluting or compromising of the Gospel, which we understand by a fresh approach.

## II

Not the least thrilling of the features of the times in which we live is that it is a fluid and therefore potentially creative period of human history. Everything is on the move. It is not only that, quite literally, millions of ordinary people are moving about the world, some in armies, some as refugees, some as emigrants in search of work in new countries; but more significantly, that men's thoughts are moving as a result of the vastly enlarged universe in which they find themselves. A bulldozer in Central Africa symbolizes our times. Thousands of years of tradition and custom are being swept away in a flash. The Christian Mission cannot be indifferent to what the technological revolution is doing to the earth for it believes that Man is not the owner but only the tenant-farmer of the land and that he must use its natural resources with a due sense of responsibility to the Landlord. But the Mission is concerned, above all, with what is happening, as a result of the bulldozer's activities, to the lives of men themselves. It has perhaps been one of the main weaknesses in the past that the Gospel has been presented in such a way as to suggest that Man could be considered in isolation from his environment. The

preacher of the 'pure' Gospel has tended to forget that Man is a part of the creation and is therefore deeply rooted in nature and society. The 'social' Gospel, in reaction against this, has forgotten that, even so, there is an individuality about Man which has a vertical reference. When every allowance has been made for the effect upon me of heredity and environment, there is still an irreducible 'I' which, in the end, will have to stand before the judgment seat of God to account for the use I have made of the heredity and environment upon which I was allowed to fashion a pattern of my own. Times of rapid and far-reaching change illustrate this aspect of human responsibility far more clearly than do the more static periods of history. It is only too obvious that, in our generation, great decisions are being made—decisions which could not have been made before the means to carry them out were made available. No man can effectively decide whether or not to industrialize Africa before he has the technical equipment to do it. This is but to say that the technological revolution has made possible projects which hitherto were impossible, but these new possibilities have vastly increased the area of human responsibility. Decisions are now made which affect the lives of millions, and they are made by sinful and fallible men who are, in many cases, afraid of the power which they can now wield.

The unprecedented advance in human knowledge which is the product of scientific method is so taken for granted that we do not always realize the extent of the problems which it poses for the Christian Mission. It is not that modern man is more wicked than his predecessors; of this there is no evidence. It is rather that he is more perplexed. He is moving about in a new world in which he cannot easily find his way and in which there is an embarrassing absence of sign-posts. And this is true, not only of the "leaders" who have to experiment with such devices as United Nations Organizations, Councils of Europe, and "Point Four" Programmes; it is true also of the common man who has to adjust his life to a whole new environment in which he finds that some of the virtues of his youth have become vices and in which such problems as birth control, leucotomy operations and artificial insemination, to mention but a few, demand his consideration and judgment. In other words, it is in the field of ethics that the modern world poses its most perplexing problems and in which the Christian Mission is called upon to give the answers. It is to the credit of the Protestant Churches that they realize that satisfactory answers to some of these problems have not yet been discovered and that the voice of St. Thomas Aquinas is not necessarily the voice of God. Because of this, protestantism is often accused of not knowing its own mind and of failing to give an adequate lead. May it not be that God, in His mercy, is reminding this generation that when the old landmarks are no longer clear, the way forward must be taken by faith in Him alone? In ethics, as in the physical sciences, experiments will have to be made. Some of these will fail and mistakes will certainly be made, but by this means alone will the theologians obtain the data from which to formulate the moral theology which will guide the next generation. It is earnestly to be hoped that such experiments will be made within the life of the Church and that

Christian love will surround and uphold the pioneers. We can at least be sure that God will be with those who are prepared to take risks in the doing of what they believe to be His will. In recent times, the witness of the Christian pacifist has been such an experiment as we have in mind. The changed attitude of the Church in this country to its pacifist minority is an encouraging sign that pioneers will not necessarily be excluded from the organized Christian community.

It is in the ethical sphere that the impact of a changed and changing environment makes itself most obviously felt by the Christian laity; but because the clergy, and particularly theologians in academic life, are at one or more removes from the point of contact these problems are likely to be thought of as less urgent than they are. It is even more serious when the Christian churches attempt to escape from these problems either by shutting their eyes to them or by retreating from them into a hide-out of traditionalism. In that case, the solution offered to the perplexed and harassed laity is one which may have been applicable in a past age but is to-day irrelevant because it fails to take into account new factors in the situation. Modern man is not only living in a new environment, he is also different from his medieval ancestor. This change in human nature is something with which moral theology must reckon. The Christian Mission will fail to win a hearing for the Gospel if it fails to take account of the subtle changes which have been wrought in human beings as a result of the larger world in which they now live.

### III

The experimental attitude to life which a scientific civilization demands of the Christian laity does not exhaust the new problems posed for the Christian Mission in the mid-twentieth century. The expansion of the Church itself since the beginning of the 19th century has produced two 'experimental fields' in its own institutional life. The first of these is the relationship between itself and the temporal power. Professor Latourette has reminded us that one of the new facts connected with the 19th century expansion of the Faith was that Christian minorities were produced in hostile environments—a condition which had not been normative for the Christian Church since the time of Constantine. The western Churches had become so accustomed to live in countries which were, in some sense, "Christian" that they had lost the art of adapting themselves to a truly missionary situation. This is perhaps best illustrated by the fact that they worked in such a way as to reproduce as quickly as possible the conditions with which they were familiar at home. This was, in fact, only possible while the state which protected them 'at home' was able also to protect them 'abroad'. Africa, Australasia, and India were parts of the vast empires which the western Christian nations had taken under their protection. Whether it wished it to be so or not, the Christian Mission was an infant plant protected—by the enforced 'law and order' of western power—from the worst rigours of the alien climate into which it had been transplanted. To a lesser extent this was true also of China; but it is perhaps also true of China, more than of the other parts of the 'mission field', that the Christian Mission

felt its foothold to be precarious, for there western power was also weaker. Whatever may happen in the future, recent events in China have posed serious questions for the Christian Mission in the sphere of Church-State relationships as well as in the realm of strategy. The Chinese situation forces upon us in an inescapable form the fact that in this world Christians have no abiding city and that the normal dwelling place for the People of God is not a cathedral but a tent. The only buildings which have lasting value (both here and in eternity) are human communities and not those built of wood and stone. The Christian Church, like its Jewish predecessor, will have to learn the lesson of the oft-destroyed Temple. A fresh theological approach to the whole strategy of the Mission might begin from 1 Peter ii. 5 : "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house". Houses of stone are no substitute for this living temple, neither are they indispensable to its existence. Many of the greatest passages of the Bible contain a fearful warning to those who are tempted to think that the Lord's temple is made with hands. In any case, simple common sense might tell us that in days such as ours, when there can be no stability until the spiritual problem behind the chaotic relationships between the nations has been solved, buildings of brick and stone are unlikely to have much survival value.

It may well be that the Christian Mission in many parts of the world for some time to come will not be able to carry on its work within the framework of 'law and order' provided by the secular state. This will mean a complete revision of traditional methods of church life as we have known them in the west. It was one of the ironies of history that many German Lutherans supported Nazism because they believed, as Luther had taught, that a bad state which could preserve order was to be preferred to anarchy. Is it indeed impossible for the Church to carry on when 'law and order' break down? What is the Christian to do when 'law and order' are invoked to maintain a *status quo* which itself embodies a degree of injustice and tyranny which are a denial of God's Fatherhood? This is no academic question for millions of Christians to-day. Wherever Communism forms the government or has provided the setting up of a tyrannical regime in opposition to itself, Christians have to make their decision. Western theologians have to listen to their fellow Christians from the other side of the 'Great Divide' who are discovering that in some circumstances God is not working according to the pattern of Roman Law but to that of Isaiah xxiv.<sup>1</sup> In such situations Christians discover that they can exist on 'iron rations'; they become dwellers in tents again, but they rediscover the power of the living God. Perhaps some of the most important data for a fresh theological approach to the Christian Mission will come from the life of the Church in communist countries : one fact of great significance is that its life has revived in some of these countries. There may also be important lessons to be learnt from the history of the Jewish people during their long dispersion. Although living for the most part in a hostile environment, often deprived of

<sup>1</sup> For an illuminating comparison of two attitudes to the working of God in history see the papers of John Foster Dulles and J. L. Hromadka in *The Church and the International Disorder* (S.C.M. Press, 1948).

civil rights and frequently persecuted, they have retained their religion and have not been without influence on the larger stage of world history.

#### IV

The second "experimental field" provided by the experience of the Christian Mission during the past century of expansion has been that of inter-church relationships. The work of the Mission in the countries of the younger Churches has compelled the theologians of the west (together with their colleagues of the younger Churches themselves) to take seriously the question of Church Order. If we date the beginning of the ecumenical movement in 1910, it is because in that year the first International Missionary Conference, meeting at Edinburgh, called the attention of the Church at large to the urgent need for a theological consideration of the question of the unity of the Church. The material upon which the Faith and Order Movement has had to work has come in the main from the boundary situation in the younger Churches where the very existence of the Church itself is threatened by its disunity. It has always been true and still is that "the unity and renewal of the Church will not be uncovered, in the first instance, through agreement between professional theologians. It will only be made apparent through acts of faith and obedience on the part of lay churchmen and women who are being held by God in the world. The new insights, and the agreements of theologians when they come, will be the result (like all theological formulations) of reflection upon these existential acts of faith, love and hope which men have made unpretentiously and humbly in their daily tasks".<sup>1</sup> This is a word that must be taken very seriously by those concerned with Church unity. Too much of the work of the theologians in this field is unscientific for the simple reason that it ignores the evidence from the experimental bench and proceeds by way of tradition and prejudice. Prejudice, presuppositions, unwillingness to accept all the available evidence, bias in the interpretation of facts are not attitudes which any physical scientist who cared for his reputation would allow to enter into his work. They are all too painfully obvious in much theological discussion of Church union.

It may well be that the pitiful impasse into which so much of the theology concerning reunion has fallen, will only be broken if the problem is looked upon as a moral problem. So many of the divisions which break the Christian community have their cause, not in any deep theological differences, but in sheer human self-will. Vested interests, and the lust for power, to say nothing of the unwarrantable search for a perfection which will not be granted to the Church on earth, are very obvious reasons for disunion and for the persistence of separate sects and churches. In the more primitive conditions of the mission field these factors take on a cruder aspect than in more sophisticated lands. Valuable evidence is awaiting the theologians if they will only examine it. In this connexion it is important to note that "the current tendency in theological formulation is to move from the ethical

<sup>1</sup> D. McCaughey, *The Frontier*, December, 1951, p. 488.

to the ontological, from personal categories to categories of organism'.<sup>1</sup> It is precisely this pre-occupation on the part of western theologians with questions of form, shape, substance and essence which makes so much of their work seem abstract and remote in those parts of the Church where the humble Christian has to grapple with pressing problems of personal conduct, some of which concern his relations with fellow-Christians of other denominations. The younger Churches know far better than the cloistered theologians of the west that the main causes of disunity among Christians are pride, ambition, selfishness and other sins, often reinforced by national or tribal rivalries, and that these are moral faults which can only be dealt with by the grace of God. Once men find their unity in Christ, many of the intractable theoretical obstacles are seen to be soluble. The experiences of the South India negotiating committee during the thirty years prior to union provide invaluable data for Faith and Order conferences. The records of men at work seeking the will of God for His Church should be the stuff of which theology is made. Too often the theologians prefer to study in minute detail written constitutions in order to see whether they are orthodox; there is something wrong about a theological approach which seeks its evidence in verbal formulae rather than in the life of the Christian community.

## V

We might perhaps sum up by saying that the theological approach to the Christian Mission in the contemporary situation must be empirical rather than doctrinaire. This, we would maintain, is the biblical approach. It is a plea that we should reinstate the Hebrew, as contrasted with the Greek, approach to Reality. For the Hebrew, God is not Idea, but Person; not First Cause, but Creator. He is a God who has personal dealings with His People; their common life is His concern, their history the school in which He makes Himself known to them. He calls them to a life of faith which issues in obedience and trust. It is true to-day as it has always been, that the People of God are strangers and pilgrims looking for a city and that He who leads them was, in His earthly life, a 'marginal' Man, with no vested interests in either the social or the ecclesiastical order of His day. For this reason He was free; free to challenge the tradition and to remake it; free to take risks because He knew ultimate security; free to serve the perfect will of God; free to die, and free to rise again. It is to this life of freedom in obedience that He calls His Church. It is to call men into His service which is perfect freedom, that the Christian Mission exists in the world. It is this dynamic conception of the free Spirit of God at work in history and in the Church that must be the starting point for a fresh theological approach to the Christian Mission.

<sup>1</sup> A. M. Ramsey in a review of Dr. Thornton's *Revelation and the Modern World in Theology*, December, 1951, p. 447. Professor Ramsey continues: "(This tendency) requires for its own safety a jealousy for righteousness and conscience as the place where man knows his Creator".