

Editorial

THE first three articles in this issue had their origin in the Islington Clerical Conference, held at the Church House, Westminster, in January last. They represent the substance of papers which were read on that occasion, when the subject of Evangelism was under review. These articles are supplemented by a survey of the experiments in evangelism which are taking place in industrial France, and which, apart from constituting one of the most significant features of the religious life of our time, have clearly something to teach us with regard to the work of evangelism in our own country. There is no more urgent problem confronting the Church to-day than that of translating the gospel into the idiom of this generation and presenting it effectively to those who are not only so largely ignorant of its content but are even more indifferent to its message.

A book which faces this problem is the recently published volume of Warrack Lectures for 1951 by David H. C. Read.¹ The author, who since 1950 has been chaplain to the University of Edinburgh, served as a chaplain to the forces during the war until in 1940 he went into German imprisonment with his men. From then until the end of the war his work lay among his fellow-prisoners. It may be taken for granted that his war-time experiences have contributed much to his thinking about the problem on which he here concentrates his attention: the communication of the gospel to the contemporary world, the bridging of the gulf between the Church and the man in the street.

He begins by recognizing quite frankly the ever-widening gulf which exists between the folk within the Church for whom the gospel has presumably some meaning and vitality, and the great majority outside for whom it has little or no relevance at all. Those who are charged with the proclamation and expounding of the gospel in this generation must, as Mr. Read insists, reckon with this situation with open eyes before the Church becomes an isolated community speaking a different language and thinking other thoughts, while the world rushes on to destruction. The question is, How can the Church bridge the gulf between itself and the masses outside whom it is commissioned to evangelize, and so present the eternal truth of the gospel that the modern man will not only understand it but will also realize its supreme importance for himself and for the world in which he lives?

One thing is clear. The answer to the question does not consist in a watering down of the message in a futile endeavour to bring the truth of God more into line with current secular thought. The gospel which is the power of God unto salvation is the authentic first-century message—not some twentieth-century concoction with the same label attached. Nor is it simply a question of adopting new techniques, or of overhauling the ecclesiastical machinery, or of enlisting the aid of psychology. Much has already been attempted along these lines, and yet we are still confronted with a breakdown of communication on a gigantic scale.

¹ *The Communication of the Gospel* (S.C.M. Press, 1952, 7/6).

Mr. Read has no cut-and-dried solution to the problem he raises ; but he does emphasize the fact that the Church stands, as the redemptive community, between the Word and the world, between God's truth and man's need, and that it is only as the Church maintains vital touch with *both* points of contact that it can effectively become the divine agent of communication. This means, among other things, that while the Church is privileged to share the life of God and to be in touch with the eternal world, it is also called upon to share no less fully the life of men and to be in touch with the present world. For the Church is involved in every current of human thought, every activity of mankind. To retreat from the world of reality into the seclusion of the study and the sanctuary is fatal for the discharge of its mission. " It is our duty to be out and about in the world, hearing what others say, feeling what they feel, sharing their hopes and fears. Then as we sit to know what God would have us say to them, we shall not be thinking in terms of our appearance on a platform, orating from the height to the sinful masses below, but rather of what one sinner who knows something of the grace of God would say to another in all sympathy and sincerity as he sits alongside " (p. 61).

It is in this way that the Church will learn how others think and speak and will guard against the futility of talking in an unknown tongue. The religious phraseology of the average parson is just about as unintelligible to the so-called man in the street as the technical jargon of the scientist or the psychologist. It does not touch his life at any vital point or convey any urgent meaning to his soul. It is therefore essential, as Mr. Read remarks, that the preaching of the Word in our generation should be in the words of our generation and not of the one before. There is nothing that more effectively cuts communication with our hearers than a remoteness of language and archaism of style. " A great deal of modern preaching that is quite faithful to the transmitted Gospel fails to become the Word of God to the people just because it is not modern enough. Modernity in this sense has nothing to do with eliminating the ' scandal of the cross ', but everything to do with eliminating the scandal of archaic expression " (p. 71).

Quite obviously this is a matter about which all of us who are called to the ministry of the Word need to do a good deal more thinking—and thinking of an utterly candid and realistic nature. These Warrack Lectures will help us in this regard, even if they do no more than set our minds at work and make us more fully aware of the problem which confronts us. And Dr. Dillistone's article which immediately follows this Editorial will indicate some of the lines along which our thinking is to be directed.