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The Task of Missions in a Changing World

BY LESLIE LYALL

TO start with, the very word "mission field" is one which, in some Eastern countries at least, produces a strong reaction. It conjures up a picture of self-conscious philanthropists engaged in the task of good works in general for their own merit and the greater glory of the countries they represent, and, incidentally, the furtherance of "the aggressive designs of foreign imperialism". And this is a picture very repugnant to the fervent nationalist of the post-war era. Even the Christians, who would not fully share this view of missionaries, resent the implication of inferiority implied in the expression; for after all the Church in a country like China has a hundred years of history behind it and, although the country is vast and the national Church small, the Church no longer feels itself to be inferior to other Churches of the world. The accepted talk of "sending" and "receiving" Churches is patronage of a most unwelcome kind. So it will do us no harm to submit the missionary movement to a dose of Communist-style self-criticism!

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The achievements of one hundred and fifty years of modern missions are monumental. Throughout the world may be found universities, medical colleges, hospitals, leprosy colonies, orphanages, institutions for the blind, and a variety of other institutions which were established and maintained as the result of the vision, initiative, and financial generosity of Christians in the Western world. Hundreds of millions of pounds have been poured out and some of the finest scientists, doctors, scholars, and administrators have dedicated their lives to helping the under-privileged people of the world. The fruit of their work is seen today in the large numbers of men and women who have passed through the Christian schools and universities and who are now holding influential positions in the government or educational institutions of nearly every country in Asia and Africa. Quite clearly, if it is ever right to be so, the older Churches do have considerable reason to be proud of those accomplishments.

But their very success has revealed a serious blind spot. The magnitude of the material benefits conferred has too often obscured the paucity of the spiritual results achieved. Great Britain is full of Africans educated in mission schools but very few of them are convinced Christians! And visitors to Africa cannot fail to note the generally low educational standards of the clergy in the Christian Church. Mission-educated leaders have not on the whole found their way into the Christian Church. While European governments have been very ready to grant heavy subsidies to missions that are prepared

to staff and manage their educational, medical, and other institutions for them, their motives have been the advantage of African nations, not of the Church, and the state not the Church has reaped the fruits of mission schools.

It was the same in China. Its four or five Christian universities turned out well-trained men and women in their thousands. But there are proportionately far more graduates working for the Communist or Nationalist governments today than are found in places of leadership in the churches. Mission education and medicine tended to become ends in themselves. By comparison, the humdrum task of building a living church has been dwarfed. It was always comparatively easy to recruit educators and doctors, often on a short term basis, to staff the institutions, but desperately difficult to find men with the evangelistic passion, the theological equipment, and the missionary vision for "church work". In the eyes of the Christian public at home, moreover, there was always glamour in the medical and social work of missions; there is nothing like the appeal of the leper, for instance, to stir human sympathy and to loosen the purse strings. But the public sees nothing thrilling about mere church work and it is hard to arouse any enthusiasm about this primary and fundamental work of the Church.

Most people would agree that education and the care of health are primarily the function of governments and not of voluntary agencies. Where governments do not provide these facilities, it is proper for missionary societies to provide them as a temporary measure; some would argue, however, that as soon as possible the government should take over such institutions. In Communist, and often in violently Nationalist countries, the government takes over in any case without being invited! The very desirable result is that missionaries and money are released to further the primary task of evangelism and church building. None will deny the vast amount of good that has been done and the goodwill built up through missionary institutions all over the world, but it is seriously open to question whether the missionary programme has not been hopelessly off balance in this matter. It would seem that far too large a proportion of the available human and financial resources have been diverted to institutions which have produced an all too inadequate result in terms of the Church. It is common observation that where mission institutions are largest and strongest, the local church is usually weakest. And where, as sometimes happens, mission institutions have to close down for financial reasons or for want of personnel, the local church also disappears. Assessed by Biblical standards, such work, however impressive in appearance, is a failure. The Apostolic goal was the establishment of vigorous, self-reliant, and missionary-hearted local Christian communities wherever they went. Institutions, therefore, are to be judged by the extent of the contribution they make to the establishing and up-building of strong, independent churches.

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were founded in the last decade of the eighteenth century. They have thus grown up during the heyday of Western imperialism. They gained access to inland China, for example, as the result of "unequal treaties" forced on China by an arrogant British Government. In India, British missions enjoyed the prestige and advantages of being associated with the ruling power. In Africa, missionaries like Livingstone pioneered the interior and paved the way for the rise of British colonialism there: in Africa more than anywhere else government and missions have shared with colonial administrators the "white man's burden". With their superior technical knowledge and equipment, and with a genuine sense of responsibility to the underprivileged and backward nations of the world they have gone forth to do as much good as they can and to improve the human lot of primitive races and of oriental peoples alike.

And they have succeeded. But the prestige enjoyed by missions and the nature of their task seemed almost inevitably to demand a paternal attitude to the "lesser breeds without the law"! To the latter the missionary was "father and mother": he was "bwana" to the African, "sahib" to the Indian, and "tuan" to the Malay. Everywhere people kowtowed in the presence of this superior person! And in general he accepted this in a spirit of often unconscious condescension. As a matter of course the missionary lived in lordly style compared with the people around him. As a rule, his home was barred to the people—except for his retinue of servants! Mission compounds in China were often walled about and constituted an American or British acre into which Chinese were not admitted. There, the tired missionary could escape from the dust and the din to his luxuriously appointed foreign home! The missionary, unlike his Master, thus failed to identify himself with those whom he came to save. He did not empty himself of prestige and power. He did not take the form of a servant. He did not humble himself. No, he clung to his rights and privileges: he lived in comfort, often more comfortably than had been his custom at home, with all the servants he needed and a few more. A modest salary according to home standards set him up as a comparatively wealthy man on the mission field.

No doubt about it—in the "good old days" before the last war, life for many a missionary was very delightful. In those days the natives accepted the way missionaries lived and their attitude of superiority to all around as the normal thing. This attitude didn't seem to matter much provided the sick were healed and the illiterate taught.

Then came World War Two. Any prestige left to the Western nations after the First World War was shattered by the Second. The sight of Christian nations fighting each other to the death was not an edifying spectacle seen through the eyes of peace-loving Buddhists and Hindus. Buddhism obviously had something better to offer than Christendom! Moreover the military might of the West was shown to be a myth when Japan defeated the combined armies, navies, and air forces of the United States, Great Britain, and France. It didn't matter that that defeat was eventually turned into victory. The damage had already been done.

Propaganda for liberation from Western domination was tremendously effective in the years following the disasters of 1941 when the Japanese were in control of the whole of East and South East Asia. Though a Western victory was eventually won, it could not quench the flames of nationalism. The right to govern themselves badly, rather than to be governed well by foreign nations, was insisted upon. And so India and Pakistan became separate and independent nations within the British Empire. Burma contracted out of the British Empire. Indonesia fought bitterly and successfully for complete independence outside the Netherlands empire. The Philippines were immediately granted full independence by the United States. Malaya obtained independence within the British Empire. Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in bloody battles threw off the yoke of France. Singapore has won internal self-government. In the Middle East and North Africa, British and French power faded as the new and independent states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Libya, and Tunisia obtained freedom from their former colonial rulers. For forty years the whole of Africa has been rushing headlong into a new age. Sudan and Ghana are already masters of their own fate. Nigeria is soon to follow, and there is a long waiting list of other states impatient for the day of full independence from white domination, whether it come by peaceful negotiation or by violence.

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This strong desire for independence at any cost deeply affected Christians too. Ask the African today what he thinks of missionaries and their traditional attitudes. Any African in London will tell you and you'll be shocked! Ask any Chinese about the way a great many missionaries lived and acted in their luxurious "No Chinese Admitted" compounds and you will feel ashamed. The Indian will be frank in asserting that the traditional "mission compound" organization is utterly repugnant to him, for it perpetuates the atmosphere of the colonial era with the white missionary still at the hub of the wheel and everything else revolving around him! It is an alien organization which tends to remove the Indian Christian from the stream of Indian life instead of sending him back into it as a witness for Christ.

To the missionary used to the "good old days" the times may seem to be out of joint. But the truth is that the missionary is at last being cut down to size. He must confess that his former attitudes to the African and the Asian were not only unwise but un-Christian. His patronage and paternalism may have seemed to suit an earlier stage in the history of missions but it is completely anachronistic today. The young clergyman can no longer hope to become a colonial bishop! That privilege is now reserved for the African and the Asian. The experienced educationalist can no longer take it for granted that he will one day be the headmaster of the mission school. That, too, is reserved for his national brother.

The missionary of 1960 should start out on his career by studying the pattern of the ideal missionary in the second chapter of the Philipian epistle. He must be prepared not merely to talk about service but actually to become a servant to his national fellow Christians,

willing to do the menial tasks while his black or brown brethren move into the limelight. His home must be open to all alike. He must be prepared to live and sleep and eat with his African or Asian brethren. He must treat them as his equals. He must know what intimate spiritual fellowship with his fellow believers of another race means—fellowship stripped of all hypocrisy and camouflage, a fellowship characterized by the humility which is willing to confess, where necessary, to his national colleagues faults and failings, sins and shortcomings. Somehow, the old type of missionary no longer seems to fit into the world of the 1960's. The missionary of today and tomorrow must take a closer look at the Pattern Missionary. Christ-likeness means more than being kind to people and conferring certain favours upon them !

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Too much missionary work has been empirical rather than Biblical. Because certain methods and practices have grown up with the Church at home it has been assumed that they will be equally appropriate to the Church overseas. This has been the cause of great weakness and much misunderstanding. To export a British system of worship and church life with all its trappings is asking for trouble as the Rev. Roland Allen, a former S.P.G. missionary in North China, has so trenchantly pointed out in his prophetic books *Missionary Methods, St. Paul's or Ours?* and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*. Our wholesale export of foreign denominational systems has not unnaturally created the impression that the Christian Church is just another rather mystifying foreign institution, an exotic culture ill-suited to the life and culture of other than European nations. The very names of the denominations were, in China, reproduced phonetically, using a meaningless jumble of Chinese characters! The architecture was usually foreign in style. The hymnology was largely a translation of foreign hymns and sung to foreign tunes, difficult to Chinese lips and painful to Eastern ears !

It is not surprising therefore that, with the upsurge of nationalist sentiment, there has been a deliberate reversion to native cultures at the expense of what appeared to be a form of European culture. For Christianity has become associated in the minds of Asian and Africans with European civilization. And so, to stimulate nationalist enthusiasm, it was necessary to revive native cultures in order to cultivate a strong nationalistic spirit. This is the explanation of the familiar "resurgence of eastern religions". It is not that there is inherent in these religions any spiritual power to account for their revival, but the simple truth is that eastern governments—even Communists—have deliberately sponsored, encouraged, and even financed Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Shintoism as being the true native cultures. This gave a strong support to the campaign to free eastern nations from all attachment to or dependence on the West.

We need therefore to carry our self-criticism a stage further to discover to what extent our methods of the past have been misguided or mistaken. A closer look at the Book of Acts will take us back to first principles, and a study of one case history will guide our thinking.

In Acts xx St. Paul bids farewell to the leaders of the Ephesian church. He would not have been human if he had not contemplated this parting with emotion, but at the same time he could look back with satisfaction on his work at Ephesus—a work which in a pagan city had established a strong church, having spiritual leadership and evangelistic zeal on a completely self-reliant basis. He had so worked as to eliminate himself! In declaring unto them the whole counsel of God (v. 27) he had fully discharged his responsibility and whatever the future dangers threatening the church (v. 28) he was able to commit them confidently to God alone (v. 32).

In recent years also, missionaries have been forcibly detached from the churches they founded, notably in China. The future may well see similar events transpire in other lands of Asia and of Africa. Happy the missionary who has his eyes on the day of his departure and who therefore labours to establish the kind of church which he can leave with the certainty that his task of establishing a fully self-reliant, or, rather, God-reliant church has been completed—a church strong enough to weather all the storms that threaten in the world of today.

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And this leads us back to Paul's initial work at Ephesus in Chapter xix. On his first arrival he found a group of nominal converts, hopelessly ignorant of the first principles of the Christian life! The possibility of the early evangelization of the province of Asia, of which Ephesus was the provincial capital, then seemed hopelessly remote. The same could be said of many of the churches on the mission field today. But St. Paul was not dismayed. He put into action a carefully staged programme. (1) He concentrated on the nominal nucleus with the result that they were soon rejoicing in a vital experience of Christ—verses 1-7. (2) With the co-operation of this nucleus, now aflame for Christ, the Apostle conducted a three months evangelistic campaign in the Jewish synagogue with the usual results—genuine conversions and bitter opposition—verses 7, 8. (3) St. Paul did *not*, at this stage, go on elsewhere to conduct further evangelistic campaigns, but hired a local school building and conducted a two year course of instruction in the Scriptures—the prototype of the present day Bible School or Theological College. Note that this was not a continuation of the evangelism but specifically instruction for “disciples”—verses 9, 10. History shows that evangelism divorced from instruction can have the direst consequences. The spiritual training of leaders holds the highest priority today! (4) During the course of the two years' instruction, the whole province of Asia, including the busy provincial capital, was completely evangelized—“all . . . in Asia heard the Word, . . .” Since Paul was daily and systematically teaching the disciples in Ephesus, this work of extended evangelism was not his work. It must therefore have been carried out by the newly won converts, none of whom had more than three years' Christian experience and some much less.

This fact throws light on the substance of the Apostle's teaching: among other things he must have urged on them the importance of

world evangelization, he must have taught that this was the responsibility not of the apostles (the missionaries) only but also of the local church, and he must have instructed them in the necessity of a systematic plan for evangelism. In this way the result which had seemed so improbable three years previously, was actually achieved: a limited area was completely evangelized in this comparatively short time. Only then did Paul move on. But the thing to notice is that he did move on, resisting the strong temptation to stay in such a strategic and needy centre of commerce and culture to help, guide, and advise the promising young Church.

This is the pattern which the Church has forgotten or ignored in favour of a now discredited method of work. For quite frankly the "mission station" is discredited in the eyes of national Christians and non-Christians alike. The mentality it represents is no longer appropriate to the new era into which the world is rushing headlong. It savours of the old, outworn colonialism. The mission station cannot be other than a missionary dominated set-up. How can the control of a mission station be transferred to nationals? This can only be done with a church! The New Testament concept is that of a local church planted in the first instance by the missionary, instructed for a limited period by the missionary but then, as soon as possible, entrusted with responsibility for its own organization, finance, and leadership and for the continuing evangelization of the area in which it lies.

The mission station is also a settled and static concept. Its location may originally have been quite arbitrary and today be remote from the actual centre of spiritual activity. Locally the response may be negligible. It has become a stagnant backwater! And some unfortunate missionaries find themselves very reluctantly acting as caretakers of mission property rather than carriers of Good News! As one missionary put it, "I came out to the field standing on the promises and now I find myself sitting on the premises!" Furthermore, settled mission stations have seriously militated against the mobility of the missionary, which is so essential if the world is to be evangelized. There are mission stations which were established fifty, seventy, and even a hundred years ago. The local church remains weak because the national leaders are overshadowed by their missionary colleagues and deprived of leadership, while there are areas not so very far away still unevangelized because the missionary is tied to the station and the church has never seen the vision of its own responsibility to evangelize: this it has thought of as the missionary's task!

The fact is that the "mission station" is not only an anachronism in 1960 but a serious hindrance to world evangelization. The sooner foreign missions face realistically the problem of this embarrassing legacy from the past the better for themselves and the better for the national churches. One large missionary society, which was one of the biggest losers in terms of property of every kind in the withdrawal from China, profiting from the experience, has made it a policy in its new spheres of work never to build "mission stations" on the old pattern but to depend on rented property or buildings put up for the missionaries by the local people at their expense. Exceptions are made in the case of hospitals and business centres in large cities. This

practice makes it possible for the missionary to move on without any difficulty should a selected place later prove to be either unresponsive or unsuitable as a centre for a developing work. It also makes it easy for the missionary to leave just as soon as the church has reached the stage when it can manage on its own. It also enables the missionary to live close to the people under similar conditions and on friendly terms. In short it ensures a large degree of mobility, flexibility, and simplicity in the work and close identification with the people.

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But there is more to the Ephesus pattern than an example of how a missionary should set about planting a local church. If Paul had imagined that he was personally responsible for the evangelization of all the people in Asia, he would probably have taken many years over the task. The only way to ensure the task being accomplished speedily was for it to be done through the local church. And a cursory study of the available statistics of unmet need and western missionaries to meet that need reveals at once that the task as commonly understood could not possibly be encompassed within the foreseeable future—if at all. How could twenty thousand white missionaries operating from bases in Europe and America hope to carry the Gospel to every creature when we are told that two thirds of the world's population—(sixteen thousand million) is completely unevangelized and that the world population is increasing annually far more rapidly than the Church is growing?

To state the question is to answer it. It is impossible! We must therefore conclude either that the Risen Lord's Commission to the Church was just an unrealizable ideal or that the Church's method of setting about the task has been hopelessly mistaken. We have only the second alternative to accept. And if Paul thought of his task as one of planting self-extending churches rather than personally reaching every creature (as in Ephesus and in Thessalonica, *cf.* 1 Thess i. 8), why have the Western Churches thought in terms of evangelizing the world from western bases with western personnel, western finance, western initiative, and using western methods? It has been all too common for western missionary societies completely to ignore and bypass national churches in their enthusiasm to evangelize. If we understand the mind of the great Apostle aright, he had a picture of a world dotted with living churches, each actively evangelizing the areas around. These churches would be so distributed as to ensure that no individual in the world was out of range of the evangelistic outreach of a local church.

The only reason why the Gospel has not long ago become available to every creature in earth's remotest bounds is that the Church has not carried out this programme. It has been a bad sower. It has scattered its seed too thickly in some parts of the field and too thinly or not at all in others. The picture today is of heavy concentrations of churches in some areas and vast areas without any churches at all. The urgent and immediate task of the church is therefore to plant churches where none at present exist and so, as speedily as possible, to bring every part of the human race within earshot of the Gospel.

This is surely what was meant by the slogan used at the Lambeth Conference: "The whole church taking the whole Gospel to the whole world." Note the emphasis on "the whole church". It emphasizes what has been said that the task is not the prerogative of the "older churches" nor of the white missionary alone. It is the task of the whole church in its every part and every local representation. It is as much the task of the small, poor, bush church in central Africa as of the wealthy, packed parish church in London's West end. It is as much the task of Japanese as of German Christians. In fact there are today Japanese missionaries in Laos, Indian missionaries in Singapore, Chinese missionaries in Japan, South Indian missionaries in Nepal, and Philippine missionaries in Thailand. And this leads to one final comment: if the task is to be speeded up to the necessary extent, we must not only revert to Biblical methods and patterns and recover a New Testament passion and enthusiasm, but we must also close our ranks to a far greater extent and secure a large measure of co-ordination in the work of societies which work in the same areas and which have no profound doctrinal differences to divide them. It was only Nehemiah's wise statesmanship and the willingness of his rather motley and tribally distinct followers to co-operate in the building of the wall of Jerusalem that secured the achievement described in the words: "So the wall was finished . . . in fifty and two days." Our God-given task can also be finished, but only if we are ready to go back to the Bible and forward with the times !