

A Review and Restatement of Missions

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I

THE SUBJECT of this paper is one that has rather special importance at the present stage of history, not only for people in non-Western lands (at the receiving end, so to speak), but supremely for Christian believers everywhere. Right at the start let me make it plain that I have no professional competence for the task, because I have never been a missionary in the ordinary meaning of that word. My contacts with men and women "on the field" have been few, although I number many friends who are serving in a wide variety of missionary service. If, then, I have any ground for offering some views on the matter, it is partly that I have had in the past a minor rôle to play in the administration of a mission, partly that my work as a biblical theologian has given me certain clear convictions.

Our concern in this essay is with a heart-searching scrutiny of missionary policy and strategy that is presently going on in many ecclesiastical circles. The reasons for this review and restatement are varied.

1. The leaders in the world-wide missionary movement have met from time to time in consultation, for example in the third ecumenical missionary conference at Edinburgh in 1910, out of which came eventually the International Missionary Council. Under its auspices further large-scale meetings were held at Jerusalem in 1928, Willingen in 1952, and Ghana in 1958—just three years before the integration of the I.M.C. with the World Council of Churches at New Delhi.

All of these conferences have brought illumination and insight to the world Church (mostly outside the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communions, of course), and they have all been closely related to movements within Western denominations and the so-called Younger Churches. They have been much affected too by developments in the international situation: the two world wars, the growth of the Welfare or socialistic State in the West, the emancipation of the nations in Asia and Africa, the spread of world trade, and the exciting beginnings of space exploration. Today we know far more about this one world that has been the scene of every form of Christian enterprise. Today we know more, and maybe appreciate more, about the mission policies of the Church of Rome and the rising sects of Protestantism. Through their involvement in the ecumenical movement, the Orthodox have communicated to us their fears about proselytism. Besides such churchly matters, we have had to take account of very significant developments in psychology and psychoanalysis, as well

as in other areas of human thought and practice. Hence the situation that faces a mission board in the 1960's is greatly different in several respects from what it was in 1800, 1875, or 1910.

2. One fact that has recently been impressed upon us is the constant decline in the proportion of Christians to the total human population. An Australian cited this at New Dehli as cause for inducing the World Council to signalize its Third Assembly (held in the very midst of Hindu and Moslem peoples) as the beginning of a new missionary crusade. One got the impression that few people in the Assembly were seized with anything like his sense of urgency and alarm. My colleague at McGill University, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, a missionary expert, has said that he personally does not expect many conversions from one tradition to another anywhere in the world in the coming century.¹ If that be so, why should Christian missions continue?

3. Fundamentally, there appears to have developed in some parts of the Church what we may call a failure of nerve on this question. Many of us have become over-sensitive to the oft-repeated accusation that missions since 1792 were foreign and imperialistic, carrying Western culture under a disguised Western arrogance. Sometimes this is dubbed the "Chinese accusation," and it may be read in some of the earlier writings of David M. Paton. Missionaries in the old China were charged, and some charged themselves, with being reactionary, individualist, and irrelevant to the growing life of the country where they worked. In other words, they tended to be Tories or Republicans, I suppose, when they were at home; they grew up with nice Christian antagonism towards Fabians, Marxists, and other radicals of the "Left." Since they had no intention of taking out Chinese passports, they could never really identify themselves with peasants or intellectuals or army generals in their struggles. Their ideas of salvation were probably geared to adventist and other-worldly hopes of the kingdom of God in heaven, and not to any social gospel of a divine order of justice here in America or Europe, far less in Africa or Asia. No wonder they produced rice Christians, and failed to prepare their converts to play a creative role in national life, whether economic, political, or cultural.

Only those with wide, specialized knowledge can deal adequately with this accusation. No doubt there is some truth in it. But is it really fair to many of the wisest, most devoted, and truly heroic missionary pioneers of the nineteenth century? Were conservative preachers so far off the mark when they insisted on giving with the gospel both hospitals and schools? One might well argue that many a mission school has turned out revolutionaries simply on the strength of the gospel's insistence on human rights and individual freedom. It is at least high time for us to be more sober in our assessment of our fathers' mistakes.

1. Cf. *The Faith of Other Men* (Toronto: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1962), p. 2.

4. Our modern "Caesars," that is the political States, are fast taking over the service institutions established by Christians, their hospitals, schools, colleges, and social welfare agencies. Many Anglicans and Reformed churchmen will feel that this is a good thing. Such institutions ought to be democratized and secularized for the good of the whole community. But the questions that emerge are these: Is there any longer a need for *missionary* doctors, nurses, teachers, and other experts to be imported into the new nations? If they are encouraged by the nationalist governments, will the policy be on a "Nepal" basis—provide technical help, but stay out of the conversion field? Already this formula has been put into effect in certain countries, but does it really enable Christian witness to be maintained? It would be easy for an Orthodox to say "Yes," because the Orthodox apparently believe in the "silent witness" of a good man's life and worship. But this solution certainly runs counter to traditional Western missionary policy.

5. At the same time, one notes that some of the "sects" are doing relatively well on the old-fashioned lines of an adventist, individual-centred evangelism of sin and of atonement through the one Name given under heaven. Reports of their success come in from Latin America, Korea, and Africa. They have been accused of preying on the converts of the institutionalized churches, and they make headway even among the unconverted. They have pentecostal zeal, they are quite dogmatic in their assertion of the Christian message as they understand it, and they proclaim an eschatology of crisis. There is no necessity to name or to damn them.

By contrast, the missionary societies that date from near 1820 and the world mission boards or departments of some Protestant denominations continually report fewer candidates, withdrawal from a number of fields because personnel or money is lacking, and generally a serious decline in missionary interest at home. In a year such as 1963 it may be possible to meet 34 out of 175 requests for missionary positions overseas.

Facts of this sort are discouraging. But they are facts. In some churches the women members may have a tradition of missionary study and concern; who knows of anything truly comparable among men Christians?

And yet in the very years of such decline (say, 1947 to 1963) both men and women in the churches of Britain, Europe, and North America have found plenty of money for the building or reconstructing of their edifices, for their new cathedrals of worship or Christian Education; and they have seldom if ever allowed evangelistic work at home or abroad to starve their own established life and agencies in the local parish or the national area of the resources that are required for upkeep and extension. Just think of the statistics for Canada alone in the field of "Church Extension," with hundreds of manses and parsonages, hundreds of halls and sanctuaries, new colleges, new residences, new anything that can be proved essential to our own parish or denominational existence. It is easy to channel ourselves and our possessions into the maintenance of our own religious life. It is, with

far too large a number of "members," quite impossible to channel anything into the expansion of the Christian faith in other, remote parts of Canada and the still more remote parts of Asia, Africa, or the Far East.

6. In view of the facts, it is now customary to assign the loss of missionary interest and the serious decline in candidates and finances to a basic loss of conviction here or in any one of the "home" countries. The real crisis is not in Asia or Africa or Latin America. It is in Britain, Europe, and North America. We must beware of letting the Grahamite crusades mislead us by the hordes they attract. Responsible opinion is that the Christian faith has suffered a serious decline in quality as well as in numbers throughout the Western world. There cannot be any renewal in mission unless there be a renewal of the ancient Churches in the West. This will involve a baptism by the divine Spirit of unity and love—unity, because divided we are falling; love, because our entire life as Christians depends on the revelation that God is Love and man's simple duty is really to love his neighbour.

II

There is, however, one fresh element in the situation that faces us today. That is the encounter now being forced upon us between the various living faiths of mankind.

This meeting is here in Canada, and "here" in Britain and the United States of America. For the Moslem who studies in the West, or finds work in it, brings with him his mosque and (believe it or not) his "Sunday School." There are Buddhists in our midst who erect sanctuaries and call them "churches." Men of other religions meet freely in our open society and propagate their way of life among us.

Gerald Cooke has analysed the new situation for the average reader in a recent volume, *As Christians Face Rival Religions*.² Weightier discussions are to be found in the latest books by Hendrik Kraemer, Stephen Neill, Paul Tillich, and others.³

When we first encounter these other faiths, there are similarities and differences that may bewilder and confuse. Confucius teaches the silver rule of not hurting a neighbour but caring for him. He is thus very humanitarian. Hindus claim their *avatars*, persons who are revealers and indeed incarnations of the divine. Here some may discover how the *Logos* or divine Word has elsewhere than in the Hebrew-Christian tradition become flesh. It looks very much the same as St. John's doctrine about Jesus of Nazareth. Or consider the Buddhists. In spite of the fact that some of them seek to compel every desire within them to commit suicide, there are Buddhists who practise the service of a loving heart.

2. New York: Association Press, 1962. See especially pp. 73ff.

3. Cf. H. Kraemer, *World Cultures and World Religions* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1960); S. Neill, *Christian Faith and Other Faiths* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961); P. Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963).

Brotherhood seems to be the aim of all faiths. Unity of mankind is offered by them. Accordingly, tolerance becomes a primary aim. Let us learn from one another, and above all let us find coexistence in today's world. If we fail to do so, there may be disaster.

Professor Cantwell Smith indeed warns us that, for our survival in a human brotherhood in the coming century, we must accept the continuing fact of religious pluralism. The Buddhist is going to stay Buddhist, and why not? For he sees in this universe a meaning that must be put in his own terms. His faith, cult, and ethic are not just parochial. They hold universal elements. Hence we Christians have the task of seeking empathetically to appreciate the meaning as the Buddhist has seen it; for this we should thank the one God. The truth expressed by another faith is not in its system or its theology; it is in the nature of things. Dr. Smith goes on to say:

The new world community towards which we hope that mankind is moving, must be a world community that includes and affirms re-activated Buddhist, Hindu, and Islamic religious traditions. . . . Only with a West that believes Oriental civilizations worth defending, and Oriental dreams worth realizing, will the Orient in general be willing to co-operate.⁴

Now this approach by Dr. Smith is urbane and highly sympathetic. It is the way of "conversation." He teaches that it is extremely hard work, since few of us find it easy to understand the mind of others in the Eastern traditions. But our own meaningful religion should in fact be one of the best qualifications for appreciating the meaningful religion of another. The better believers we are, the better should our approach and achievement be in the long run.

But the way of conversation is quite unusual, I should say, in the ongoing debate concerning Christian faith and the other living faiths of men. Since 1958 there have been many "consultations" in the circles associated with the former International Missionary Council and now with the Division of World Mission and Evangelism in the World Council of Churches. They have produced some important literature, and at least two significant books—one by Johannes Blauw, and the other by D. T. Niles.⁵

In the second book Dr. Niles mentions four other attitudes among Christians, in addition to that just named as the way of conversation. (a) The polemical attitude assumes that religions are of human origin, but Christianity is a revealed faith and must supplant them all. (b) Or alternatively, the truths of other religions are but partial. They must find fulfilment in Christ alone who is the final Truth. At best, they may be considered as *praeparationes evangelicae*. (c) According to the third view, God in Jesus Christ judges all religions, and in this judgment Christianity as an historical phenomenon is included. The missionary is under divine

4. *The Faith of Other Men*, pp. 55, 58.

5. Cf. J. Blauw, *The Missionary Nature of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962); D. T. Niles, *Upon the Earth* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1962).

judgment just as much as the man to whom he communicates the gospel. On the other hand, the missionary is the chosen witness of the true God. He, therefore, has the function of speaking *for* this judging, Christlike God in a dialogue with men and women in other areas of life and faith than his own. (d) Or, finally, missions as such should be abolished. The right thing is for Christianity to be merged with the other faiths in a new world religion.⁶

If one is a Calvinist of the old school or a Barthian according to the *Römerbrief*, first edition, one will not have much difficulty in knowing where one stands. But which of our denominations works from such premisses?

Let us suppose that we were to follow the undoubtedly attractive line of tolerance advocated by Wilfred Smith; would this not really cut the nerve of *missionary* zeal? Or must we learn to excise from "mission" every thought of "proselytizing"? The troubling questions facing Christians at this time are as follows: Can there be missions without evangelism? Can there be a Christian evangelism that does not honestly seek conversion from other faiths to our faith, or better, from other faiths to the acceptance of God the Father's self-revelation in the Son who is Jesus Christ? Is it not possible to undertake mission, understood evangelically, along with a genuine and loving effort to appreciate the faith of others and their response to the revealing Spirit of God throughout the ages?

These questions touch very closely the life and witness of the Younger Churches, as D. T. Niles knows so well. They have had the wit to see that our faith is not basically a Western one at all. They have perceived the missionary vocation as it is proclaimed in Scripture. But the very same questions concern the churches in the West who still are relatively the rich churches. It is the West that must go on for some time longer to provide men and women with money and equipment if the causes are to be maintained and improved. Once more it becomes clear surely that the place of issue is here in the West. What is at stake is the Christian nature of the institutional Church as we know it, and are it. Do the Christians of the West have a vision that mankind will perish without the saving grace of the One God, that time is literally short for various reasons, that "religious" or "pious" means and methods are not the sole options to hand?

III

When I reflect on this problem, I am bound to state that the catholic and apostolic faith of the New Testament and the early Church has mission at its very heart. Jesus came as the Father's ambassador (Heb. 2:3f., 3:1) and his disciples were commissioned to be the envoys of his Holy Spirit to the world of nations (John 20:21f.; Acts 5:32; Matt. 28:19f.). St. Paul was a man with a passion to preach (1 Cor. 1:17; 4:1; 9:16; 2 Cor. 5:20).

6. Cf. Niles, *Upon the Earth*, pp. 227ff.

Whatever be the story in our own century, in the first hundred years the Christian movement was dominated by a conversion enthusiasm and an advent hope that drove it from Jerusalem to Babylon, from Antioch to Rome and Spain, and very soon beyond all Roman frontiers to China, Ceylon, Arabia, and distant Thule and Ireland. Why should we now abandon the hope that the world shall come to bow the knee and confess the Jesus is its Lord? This is no more arrogant today in Tokyo or Calcutta than it was 1900 years ago in Rome or Alexandria.

The gospel as the New Testament Canon presents it is not for the redemption of provincials nor for Jews alone. It is for humanity. Jesus of Nazareth is an Easterner who is also, mythologically, the Last Adam. We do not yet see man reclothed in his divine dignity and creatively in his right mind, wonderful though his achievements have been, but, like the author of Hebrews, we see Jesus, crowned with glory and honour (Heb. 2:9). Our missionary message is Jesus in his own person and work, man's friend and teacher, a truly historic and historical man. He is the example of missionaries and all other disciples. We need his love (John 13:1; Mark 10:21), his tolerance (Mark 9:39f.), and his humility (Matt. 11:29). We need also the adoration and fidelity of the martyr Church after the feast of Pentecost (1 Peter 4:12ff.; Rev. 5:9f.).

This is not the place to argue that the biblical word conveys the divine Word through the Spirit to those who have ears to hear. But it is pertinent to insist that, given the Church's doctrine of the Canon, we modern Christians cannot contract out of evangelical missions without ceasing to be faithful to God and his Christ. There may be discussion about the *method*; there cannot be any about the *imperative*.

At the same time, there is a "Bonhoefferism" that exhibits out of Scripture the necessity for life in Jesus Christ to be fulness of life in the world. It cannot be merely a "worldly" life, since that would mean for the biblical tradition a life apart from God and in rebellion against God. Neither can it be life "out of the world," as St. Paul had to tell the Corinthians (1 Cor. 5:10). The sphere of the divine service, in other words, is not merely the "sacred." Culture has to be religious through and through, politics belongs to the realm of public ethics, and Christians have a calling to be witnesses or missionaries in the political realm. Amos and all the prophets may be cited for these insights.

It would appear to follow that Churchmen may never withdraw from serious co-operation with other men in science, commerce, art, and education, whether the others be agnostic, atheist, communist, or members of religions in conflict with our own. Cantwell Smith is right to assert that the world can survive only through brotherhood. Nevertheless, it is our conviction that Christ is the world's Redeemer and that he would save it for the Fatherhood of God. Neighbours belong to us in and through our common Maker and Judge. It is the Christian's sense of obligation that compels him to witness for that Christ and, in his Name, to seek lovingly

the reconciliation of the divided children of mankind. We want to become the channels of *God's* action in today's history.

All this means that missions have the right and the duty to continue. It means also a radical critique by Christians of secularist life and culture as it is presently found in Great Britain, Europe, Canada, and the United States. It was a naturalized Japanese-American who said the other day that the white Christians are forfeiting their claim to leadership in the world of today. We have to be told these things from without, not because the wisdom is in Asia or Africa, but because the wisdom is in the world since the Incarnation and in the Younger Churches through past missionary enterprises. So it is natural to see Indian Christians going to Kenya to follow their missionary vocation. It would be just as proper for Koreans or Chinese or Angolans to visit Canada and the United States in order to evangelize this continent afresh. Much of our life is devitalized by institutional inertia, and the winds of the Spirit may blow again from the East.

Finally, it must be said that the ultimate hope of the Church is not confined to a planet spinning at peace, with children growing up in freedom and every man happily at work. Although we have not yet restated it adequately, our Christian hope is related to the life of God's eternal Kingdom. We await the "resurrection" of all whom God will redeem, not knowing either the time or the form of it (cf. Mark 13:32). Confessing, however, our blindness and our sin, still we lift up our eyes to the City of God that has foundations, whose builder and maker is God (Heb. 11:10). So in this day of crisis and uncertainty let us recall the historic figure of Jesus of Nazareth, who went about doing good and healing all manner of sickness, for God was with him (Acts 10:38), and who was faithful unto death in his Father's service (Phil. 2:8). It is to his pattern of life that everyone of us is called.