



A Review of "The Communication Of The Gospel," by David H. C. Read.

1952

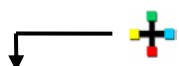
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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The Chaplain of Edinburgh University here gives us his Warrack Lectures for 1951, in which he has addressed himself to the urgent task of bridging 'the expanding gulf between the thought and language of the inner Church and those of the contemporary world'. He is exceptionally well qualified for this task. Five years in a German prison camp ('the best post-graduate school in practical theology that could be devised') and his own conviction of the need for 'genuine down-to-earth participation in non-clerical life' have helped him to understand and to speak the language of modern man in a way which ministers of the Word are too often unable to do. These lectures, with their vivid, forthright style, provide an excellent illustration of what he is urging upon his readers – the expression of the ancient Gospel in the language of modern man in the mid-twentieth century. He knows how to talk to the modern pagan 'for whom Genesis is a biological term and Revelation the name of a suit-case'. He is perfectly well aware of the dangers that this involves. There is a kind of communication which begins by modelling itself on the methods of modern salesmanship and therefore necessarily ends by trying to purvey what the public wants. But there is also a grave danger in the 'totalitarian habit of mind which presents the Gospel in the form of a *Diktat* and virtually ignores the condition of the hearers'. There is indeed an offence in the Gospel, but 'Woe to him through whom the offence cometh'. The true servant of the Word must strive ceaselessly to understand both that Word and the world for the sake of which the Word was made flesh.



The world to which the preacher must speak to-day is undergoing a revolution of unprecedented severity. Mr Read will have none of the comfortable argument that our sense of unprecedented crisis is merely an error of perspective. The idea, beloved of ecclesiastics, that things remain fundamentally the same is a delusion. 'The pressures created by the technological revolution – living in the mass; constant bombardment of ideas, news, entertainment; secular apocalypticism; belief in, and fear of, the scientist-have resulted in a confusion of mind and

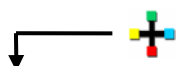
paralysis of the moral sense on an unprecedented scale.' The preacher must deal with 'bewildered, distracted, uncertain men and women, conditioned to respond to scientific demonstrations, suspicious of obvious propaganda, and unable to see much meaning in our religious propositions'.

But even to recognize this fact is not enough. The Church does not merely look at this situation; it is in it, and the preacher must *feel* with the world. He too often gives the totally false impression of speaking from an immaculate isolation, like the clock in its glass case on a Victorian mantle-piece, 'remote, dust-proof, and losing time'. The Church is in the world; its difficulty is that it is constantly inclined to clothe itself in the worldly forms which are those of the preceding generation. It must face frankly the necessity of true involvement in the world of today, neither bolting down 'the eschatological rabbit-hole' to wait for Doomsday, nor seeking to dwell on the Mount of Transfiguration above the sinful world. Its word to the world must come out of a true involvement in the deeds of the world. True preaching will come when three conditions are fulfilled: contact with the living Word; contact with the world; and a true placing of the sermon in the context of the Church, the Christian community in action in the world.

These lectures were given in Scotland. A reader with the Indian Church in mind was very conscious of some of the differences in the two situations. Mr Read admirably pillories that picture of the preacher's task which lectures on preaching sometimes suggest:

The peaceful study – with the Bible on the desk in the centre, flanked by concordance and commentaries, the walls lined with the best theology, the telephone disconnected, and the door guarded by a zealous wife. . . . No interruptions, no irrelevancies, no 'phone calls from Mrs Brown, no last-minute intimations about next Tuesday's social, no hawkers, no circulars – the preacher's paradise.

A Christian minister in India is in little danger of being becalmed in that particular backwater. Much more than his brother in the West, he is deeply involved-perhaps too deeply-in the secular affairs of his flock, and his study, if he has one, is not, alas, 'lined with the best theology'. But though the book does not speak directly to the minister in the 'younger churches', it will raise for him, and help him to answer, two very vital issues. First, the Word and the



world. Burdened with manifold 'worldly' affairs, we constantly sigh for more attention to 'the spiritual'. I think that we should rather thank God (even at 10 o'clock on Saturday night) that we are so deeply involved in the worldly affairs of our people, but that we should seek for a truer, more Biblical understanding of the relation between the Word and the world. This book will help us to do so. Secondly, it will give us a much-needed rebuke about our use of language. I cannot speak about other language areas, but when I think how few there are in the Tamil churches really wrestling with the task of clothing the Gospel in words which will convey the true meaning to the hearers, how little we study Tamil secular literature, drama and film, how feeble have been our efforts in Tamil theological training, this book, with its burning passion to reach men where they are, makes me feel very much ashamed.

To say that ultimately the communication of the Gospel is the work of the Holy Spirit is the right of those who are prepared to strain every nerve to understand our age, to enter into it and be thoroughly involved, to wrestle with the words in which the Word is clothed. On the lips of those who are content with some traditional pattern of piety or ecclesiastical order, it is a soporific platitude.

That is a stinging word, but a true one. This book has made one reader feel uncomfortable. I hope it will do the same to many more.

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