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The Mission Of The Church To All The Nations

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J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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I

It has become common to say that we live in an age of revolutionary change. It is not as common as it should be for Christians to welcome this fact. Yet surely we should welcome it – not merely because of the challenge which it offers to any man of faith and courage, but because it is precisely what our Lord led us to expect. "I came to cast fire upon the earth and would that it were already kindled!" The events of our time ought not to be strange to us who have the New Testament in our hands.

"Many will come in my name, saying 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. And when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must not take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places, there will be famines; this is but the beginning of the sufferings. But take heed to yourselves; for they will deliver you up to councils; and you will be beaten in synagogues; and you will stand before governors and kings for my sake, to bear testimony before them. And the gospel must first be preached to all nations." (Mark 13:6-10)

If these things come about, shall we be surprised or dismayed, as though something unexpected happened? Did anyone really think that so revolutionary an event as the preaching of the Gospel of the crucified Messiah could fail to produce revolutionary effects?

It is a plain fact that much of the ferment of our time can be traced directly to the new contact of the ancient peoples of Asia and Africa with the ideas which have been brought forth into the world from the womb of western Christendom. It is no accident that the newly-liberated people of these continents, having thrown off the colonial tie, do not and cannot go back to the conceptions of human life, of government, of human rights, with which the white man found them. It is no accident that they think now in terms of fundamental human rights, of human dignity, of the welfare state, of freedom from want and fear and the other ills of the world. It is no accident that politics becomes more and more messianic, that leaders and movements arise which

promise total welfare for man if he will follow them. These things are what we must expect, for once He who is the Alpha and the Omega, the true origin and the true End of human existence, has appeared, human life can never be the same. It can never return to the static or cyclical patterns of man's pre-Christian history. When Christ has come, men and nations must either give themselves to Him, their true Saviour, or else follow those who offer salvation on other terms. The pressing of this choice of its ultimate issue is precisely the work of Christ – in the days of His flesh, and in the continuing mission of His Church. All history converges upon that choice – the history of every man, and the history of the world. Jesus is the determinative center of all history, as He is its beginning and its end. The ultimate question is, "Faith in Jesus, or unbelief?" And it is the task of the Church, by faithful witness to Him who is the Word of God, sharper than any two-edged sword, to be His instrument in bringing all men and all nations to that choice. Hence, the promise of conflict, of suffering, and of division. "These things must come to pass."

If we understand the dimensions of our task in the terms of the New Testament, we shall be delivered from much of the anxiety which we find around us. We shall not ask "What is coming to the world?" because we know Who is coming. We shall not think of our task as one of trying to hold back the revolution of our time, but as one of bearing witness within that revolution to its true meaning. We shall not allow ourselves to be so obsessed by the fear of Communism that we can see nothing else. Communism is not the author of the revolution of our time; it is one of the movements which exploits it; the revolutionary movement of our time has deeper roots and a wider meaning than Communism understands. Our privilege as Christians is to understand its real meaning. The penalty of allowing our judgment to be controlled by the fear of Communism is that we may find ourselves defending injustice against the human cry for justice, and tyranny against the cry for freedom. For civilizations as for individuals, the beginning of wisdom is to fear God more than we fear death or disaster or anything else. If God has permitted Communism to gain a measure of world power and thereby to threaten our security, that is for His own good reasons. He knows what we need. Our concern is with something far more glorious and far more terrible than anything which any earthly power can either promise or threaten. We have seen the one real crisis of human history, the Cross, the point at which – once and for all – the ultimate issues between man and his Maker were exposed and settled. We know, therefore, the true dimensions of human history. We know that the meaning of all history is the pressing to its final issue of the single question: Christ or anti-Christ? It is the supreme privilege of the Church to be used as God's instrument to press home that issue upon every man and every nation. If in the exercise of that privilege, God leads us through suffering, failure, and contempt, that will not surprise us.

Of the many stories I was told in the Congo when I was there in October, one that remains in my mind is of a young Roman Catholic nun who was left behind in a small town after all other white people had fled. For two days she cried, and finally sent a message to her superior to ask, "What do I do?" The answer came back, "You stay and if necessary you die." She stopped crying and went on with her work. Is that too harsh? It would not be counted so in an earthly warfare. Our warfare is not less serious, and a servant is not greater than his Lord.

Am I wrong if I say that we have tended to think of missions as one of the good causes which we support, an extra which we attend to after the budget for essentials has been served, something that comes under the head of benevolences, something that you might perhaps pull out of if it isn't going too well? This is false in two ways.

Firstly, it is false because it fails to acknowledge that the Church's mission to the nations is the clue to the real meaning of world history. It is not just a good cause which we have to promote; it is the witness to all mankind of what God is doing and will do, of his kingly power which is hidden now but will in the end be revealed to all in its majesty, glory, and terror. We do not need to waste our time being anxious about whether God's Kingdom will come; what we have to be concerned about is whether or not we are being faithful witnesses to it now, whether when the Lord comes we will be found awake and alert. Secondly, it is false because it means that we haven't really faced the question of the truth of the Gospel for ourselves. If the Gospel is just the way of understanding religion which is meaningful for me, which helps me and comforts me, then

I have no right to interfere with others who have their own versions of it, their own ways to such peace and security as men can hope for. But Gospel is the truth, and therefore it is true for all men. It is the unveiling of the face of Him who makes all things, from whom every man comes, and to whom every man goes. It is the revealing of the meaning of human history, of the origin and destiny of mankind. Jesus is not only my Saviour, He is the Lord of all things, the cause and cornerstone of the universe. If I believe that, then to bear witness to that is the very staff of existence. If I think I can keep it to myself, then I do not in any real sense believe it. Foreign missions are not an extra; they are the acid test of whether or not the Church believes the Gospel.

II

I have used the phrase "foreign missions" – many Christians do not like it. It has overtones of the 19th century, of paternalism and colonialism. That is true, and we have to recognize it. There are things in the old missionary pattern which have to be changed and are being changed. It is no longer a matter of the white man going from his advanced civilization to under-developed areas as the man with the "know how" going to give it to the rest of the world. It is a matter of the witness of the whole people of God in Asia and Africa and the remotest islands of the sea equally with that of the peoples of the old Christendom. And we of the white race will by no means be the dominant partners. We have very much to learn of Christ from the Christians of Asia and Africa. I am often shocked by the evidence that even in well informed Church circles there is still so little conception of the quality and quantity of Christian leadership in the so-called younger Churches. The Church of South India, in which I serve, has 900 ordained clergy. Less than 10% of them are foreign missionaries. By any standards, there are cities of Europe far more pagan than some of the cities of Asia and Africa. The Churches of Asia have only 200 foreign missionaries sent out from their own lands to take the Gospel to others. The home base of foreign missions is in every place where the Church is, and the mission field is in every place where Jesus is not acknowledged as Lord. We need and we must expect and welcome the witness of Christians from other lands in face of the new paganism of Europe and America, just as they need and welcome and expect our witness in face of theirs.

Yes, there is much in the old pattern of missions that has to change. But there is much that does not change. What does not change is this: that to be a Christian is to believe that Jesus is the Sovereign Lord and Saviour of all mankind. And to believe that, in any real sense, is to be committed to the Church's mission in all the nations.

III

The Church's mission to all the nations – that phrase, of course, means more than what we call foreign missions. It means the total corporate witness of the Churches and of all who profess and call themselves Christian to the sovereign love of God in Jesus. It includes, for instance, the works of relief in times of emergency, of service to refugees, of aid to stricken and suffering Churches, which form such a great chapter in the Christian history of our time. It means also more than this. If we have the New Testament as our guide, we shall understand that the Church's mission concerns nothing less than the fulfillment of God's purpose for the whole life of mankind, for the social structures in which man's life is lived, and even for the cosmos itself. The language of the New Testament is quite clear about this. God's purpose revealed in Christ concerns the whole creation.

I think that means, among other things, that we must make a much bigger effort than we have done, to bring the great issues of international politics, of economic policy, of commercial development within the range of our thinking about the mission of the Church. It is not enough, for instance, that we should dispense charity on a vast scale to the poor and hungry of the world. It is a great and noble thing, new in its scale and its vision, but it is not enough. Charity is greater than justice, but it is never a substitute for justice. We have, I believe, reached a stage in human history where we must bend our minds to the task of devising those economic and fiscal policies which will enable something like economic justice to be established among the peoples; to the

creation of a situation in which the Indian or African peasant who labors all day in the sweat of his brow will not be rewarded by a mess pittance, while the same day's labor of a man in Western Europe, or Australia, or America produces the equivalent of a month's earnings in Asia. This task calls for the kind of dedicated and advance thinking which has, inside many of the Western nations abolished in our time the same kind of injustice between rich and poor. It calls also for costly and unpopular decisions in the realm of public policy. In both of these, Christians should surely be in the lead. I have mentioned this as one aspect – I believe a very important one – of the Church's mission to the world in its broadest sense, but I choose now to speak of the missionary task in its more restricted sense, in the sense of those operations which are designed to take the Gospel to those who do not know Christ or do not acknowledge Him.

IV

I have just returned from spending two months in Africa, visiting in 15 different territories, and consulting with groups of African and missionary churchmen about the task of the Church in the light of the Word of God and of the needs of Africa today. I want to share with you three deep impressions which that experience has left with me.

1. In the first place, I have been told by African churchmen what they expect from us in the way of missionary help. They want men and women who will come to Africa ready to be completely part of the Church there, ready to sink their lives in its life. "Send us missionaries," they said, "who will live with us, work with us, die with us, and lay their bones here in Africa." Over and over again they said they did not want missionaries who thought of themselves as scaffolding for the African Church. Indeed, they said, "We do not want an African Church, we want a Christian Church in Africa, a Church which is truly missionary, and in which there is neither black nor white." A distinguished pastor in the Republic of Cameroun said, "The missionary in the Church should be like salt in the meat. He should lose himself in the Church." A few days later, a Congolese pastor put it that the missionary should be the sugar in the coffee. I leave it to you to decide which you prefer; the point is the same. Africa and the world need men and women who will be ready to commit their lives without reserve to partnership in the Gospel with Christian people in every part of the world.

2. A second impression was made in my mind more slowly, but not less deeply, as the African journey went on. It was this. We have been concerned, and rightly concerned, with the needs of the so-called under-developed areas for education, health, and aids of all kinds. We have been concerned that missionaries should be equipped to play their part in giving them this aid, and this too is right. But I found myself increasingly aware, and candid African churchmen confirmed the impression that there is also a danger here, a danger of losing the one essential thing for which the missionary movement exists. That one essential is the Gospel of the saving power of God in Jesus Christ. That Gospel we share with our African Christian brethren. In respect to the Gospel, we are co-partners. When we speak of underdeveloped developed areas, we are using a criterion which we have devised. If we take our measuring rod from the New Testament, who shall say which are the underdeveloped areas, Some of the brethren of the revival movement whom I met in East Africa, the people who had faced horrible death rather than give way to racial hatred, had so little education that we could not converse in any European language. But in their company, I knew that if there was anybody under-developed, it was myself. And one of them, a man of the highest education in the culture of the Western world, gently reminded us that if missionaries speak too much about technical gifts and skills, the wealth and the resources which they can bring, a new kind of paternalism can easily be created and the real gift of the missionary to the Church be lost. There are many kinds of inter-Church aid, and we must be thankful for them all. But we must beware of thinking of inter-Church aid only in terms of the things in which we are strong – wealth, education, technical skill. If we do that, we shall lose the real mutuality, the real equality, which St. Paul says should belong to all the members of Christ. There is a sense in which a missionary who goes out from the Church in America to the Church in Africa is an inter-Church aid worker, but the essential gift which he brings is his missionary faith and his

missionary calling, his experience of the saving power of Christ and his longing to help the Church in Africa and to share that experience more widely. And that kind of inter-Church aid is one in which there can be real mutuality, in which all can be both givers and receivers, in respect of which it might even happen that some of the under-developed areas were found here among us in the Christian West.

3. And that brings us to my third impression. The world missionary task of the Church demands all that we have and are our wealth, our skill, our strength. And yet, my strongest impression at the end of this journey in Africa is that the things most needed are the things no money can buy. Here one has to say things that may sound impractical but and yet the real truth. Karl Barth once wrote that when God speaks to us we don't want to wait to hear Him to the end, but jump up to drown His voice with our good works. It would be easy to end with a great call for missionary advance, and yet that might just be the way of shutting our ears to God's Word. There are times when God speaks hard words to His Church. To one which was apparently prosperous, he sent this message:

"You say I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. Therefore, I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, that you may be rich..." (Rev. 3:17-19)

Could it be that this is His Word to our strong and prosperous Churches in Europe and America today? There is gold to be had – refined by fire – if we want it. We have to ask it from Him, and He chastens those whom He loves.

We do not need to be anxious about His cause. Nations and empires are but the small dust of the balance before Him. He is the first and the last, the living one, in whose hand are the keys of death and Hell. His cause is not in doubt. What matters is that we would know Him, know that there is none to be feared beside Him, none to be loved except in Him, nothing to be desired beside Him; know both the of His suffering and the power of His resurrection, both His power and His peace, so that we may be the bearers of His peace to all the nations. We have nothing to fear except God. Jesus knows the weakness of His Church. It was in the moment when He knew it most poignantly that He said:

"The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."

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