



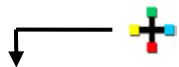
The Pattern Of Partnership

1961

J. E. Lesslie Newbigin

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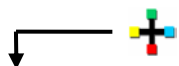
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The issue which I want to lay before you can most simply be explained if I begin by stating it in the most personal terms possible. Let me submit to you what I will call the dilemma of the foreign missionary. Though I know little as yet about the churches of Asia, I know enough to realise that conditions vary greatly from place to place, and that one man's experience will not be fully representative of all. And yet I also know enough to know that what I am going to say is much more than one man's experience.

The dilemma of the foreign missionary

On the one hand I am a missionary of the Church of Scotland: on the other, a minister of the Church of South India. Those who sent me out as a foreign missionary sent me with the intention that I should preach the Gospel to the Hindus and help to win India for the Kingdom of Christ. Those who chose me as a bishop in the Church of South India did so with the intention that I should be a faithful pastor of Christ's people in Madura Diocese, helping to build them up in faith and hope and charity. I know very well that there is – theoretically speaking – no incompatibility between these two things. I think I could write a fairly good essay on the fundamental unity between them. But in practice, in the ordinary business of the Church, as I sit in committees and councils, and as I visit the towns and villages of the Diocese, I find myself pulled in two directions. On the one hand – as a pastor – I feel that what the Church most needs is a much greater spiritual independence, a sense of being absolutely *responsible* to God alone and not to man, and absolutely *dependent* on God alone and not on the power and wealth of any Church or

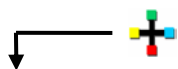


mission. Money which is still fresh from the giver, money which has come into your hands as the sacrificial gift of a man or woman whom you know, moved to give by the love of Christ, has

about it something sacramental. You handle it with the sense that you are handling holy things and that by the way you handle them you are judged. But money which comes from afar, remote, anonymous, and apparently inexhaustible, can have a sadly corrupting effect. It can confuse and corrupt the life of a church and create a deep irresponsibility at the heart of its life. Moreover, it can easily create the very opposite of the effect which it was intended to produce. In the place where I first served as a district missionary, there was a small village in which some fifty years earlier two men had been converted. The good missionary of that time, wishing to protect them from the changes and chances of this fleeting world, purchased for them a piece of land, divided it into two and gave each of them one plot. The result of this charitable act is that there has never been another Christian in that village and short of some ultimate catastrophe there never will be, for the simple reason that if there were another Christian the land would have to be divided into three. That little situation is a symbol of something that exists on a wider scale and in many churches.

And so it comes about – and I am frankly confessing to you my inmost difficulties – that as a pastor in the church of South India, I find myself tempted to pray that somehow some catastrophe might happen by which foreign aid was cut off and the Church was compelled to learn what it means to depend on God alone. I say ‘tempted’ – but I have not yielded to that temptation, for that is only one half of the dilemma.

The other half of this divided personality is a missionary sent out, supported and prayed for by people who genuinely believe that the Gospel is to be preached to all men, and all nations brought under the kingship of Christ. How can I report to them, ‘Your gifts and your missionaries are no longer needed’? With less than three per cent of India even nominally Christian, with literally hundreds of thousands of villages in which the name of Jesus is never heard from one year’s end to another; with whole tracts in which the Gospel has never been preached – how can I possibly tell the multitudes of people who with such amazing fidelity and often with real self-sacrifice go on supporting the foreign missionary cause with

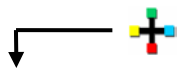


gifts and prayers : ‘You may keep your subscriptions for something else, we don’t need them’? Will they not have a right to answer: ‘Tell us that when you can report to us "mission accomplished". At present it looks as if you were merely reporting, "mission abandoned"’?

I confess that I find that a stinging thought. Nor is it surprising that there are Christians in the older churches who have practically drawn that conclusion. They look at us in the ecumenical movement and they say: ‘These people with their talk of devolution and integration, with their complications about comity and Church-centricity, they are not doing the job! Let us send men who will simply go to it and preach the Gospel to the heathen and let everything else take second place!’ And so there is a flood of missionaries – more than the number sent out by the old established missions – coming out from America, Britain and Australia to do direct evangelistic work as they understand it, without bothering about these small struggling churches in the Asian lands. I say it is not surprising that this has happened, but at the same time it is grievously distressing for a church honestly struggling to find its selfhood as a truly Asian church, painfully learning to do without the securities and the superficial successes which foreign money can provide, to find itself surrounded on all sides by an army of men and women who seem to have learned nothing and to care nothing about the meaning and the necessity for this struggle. And yet it is futile merely to complain and to condemn. These men and women have a question to put to us, a question to which we have got to listen: ‘Are you serious about winning the world for Christ? Have you really accepted the great commission to preach the Gospel to every creature? Or is it really a case of "mission abandoned"’?

There, then, is the dilemma of a foreign missionary. And of course it is more than a merely personal one, it is the dilemma of the foreign mission cause today. It is the dilemma that one feels more acutely every time one passes back and forth between the two ends of the foreign mission

enterprise. I am quite sure, knowing what is happening in my own diocese and knowing the generous impulses of Christians in the churches of the West, that I could tell a story that would bring double the number of missionaries and double the amount of money that we now receive. And yet I cannot help knowing that to

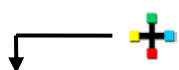


do so, within our present framework of operations, could well do far more harm to the Church than good. There is our dilemma. Is there any way out?

A radical break is needed

If we are going to face this question honestly, we have got to ask searching questions. We have got to turn back and say ‘Where did we go wrong?’ When we do that, it is almost inevitable that we shall seem to be criticizing men much greater than ourselves. God forbid that we should imagine ourselves to be wiser or better than the men and women to whom, under God, we owe our very existence as churches! As yet the issues are far too serious for there to be any evading or obscuring of the truth for fear of falling into the sin of judging others. Our very faithfulness to Christ depends upon our facing this issue honestly, however radical may be the criticisms we have to make.

I have already suggested in my first lecture that this difficulty lies deep in the missionary method of which we are the heirs. The most obvious symptom of something wrong is that the whole type of structure which we have come to associate with the word ‘missions’ has been characterized by paternalism on the one hand, and by a wrong kind of dependence on the other. Let me at once hasten to say that this is not created by, though it may be reinforced by, the attitudes of superiority which have at certain stages characterized the relation of the white races with those of other colours. I say that because I find that the same relation of paternalism and dependence tends to reproduce itself when the characteristic language and methods of missions are introduced even in a situation where there is no racial question involved. It has been amazing to me to watch how all the defects and distortions of the missionary structure, distortions which the Indian Church has been struggling to correct during the years of transition from mission control to church control, are faithfully reproduced in the missionary societies established by the Indian Church itself. We have in my diocese, in addition to the work of three foreign mission boards, also two Indian missionary societies. Whereas the work formerly under the foreign boards is now wholly in the hands of the Church, the old missionary pattern continues in the two small areas under Indian missionary societies. Thus, whereas the churches in the area round about

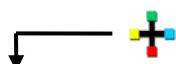


are self-governing and self-propagating churches with a fairly strong sense of their own responsibility, the Christians in these two areas are still kept in a state of comparative infantility, looking up to the mission as the producer of all good. Here, on a small scale, without the added complications of racial differences, you can see the fundamental flaw in the type of structure to which we have come to apply the word ‘mission’. At the giving end there is much that is admirable – the call to sacrificial giving and to prayer, the call for difficult service, all the things which have made the missionary movement such an incomparably precious thing in the life of the great Protestant churches of Europe and America. Well may a church covet the spiritual blessings which come to it from such a movement! But the tragedy is that it seems to be paid for at a very heavy cost at the other end of the operation – in a sort of infantilism and spiritual debility which is content to be permanently dependent upon others for the ordinary necessities of the Christian life.

I know that there are great differences from place to place, and that no one generalization can cover all the facts. But nevertheless it is true that this relation of paternalism on the one hand and infantile dependence on the other has been, and still is, distressingly characteristic of

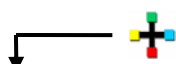
missionary operation – whether the two ends of the operation are located in different ethnic areas or not. It is still true, and I say it with distress even of my own church and family, that there are people who think that being a member of the church means having a statutory right to certain kinds of financial and other perquisites – whether it be scholarships for my children, jobs for my nephews and nieces – or only an occasional trip to the United States for myself – and that there are mission boards in which the idea still lingers that we are ultimately responsible for the welfare, guidance and support of the churches founded by *our* missions, and that if others have dealings with them without our approval, it is at best a kind of impropriety, and at worst a kind of kidnapping.

But it is not enough merely to record these facts, which are after all only symptoms. What is the real root of this distortion in the structure of what we call missions? I have already suggested in my first lecture the place where we must look for the answer. If I read aright the Acts and the Epistles, the relation between St Paul and the churches he founded was



wholly free from this distortion. He treated them from the beginning as responsible adults. He did not expect them to pass through a sort of kindergarten stage in the Christian life. On the contrary he tells them that it was only while we were under the law that we were treated as children. From the moment we put on Christ we are free men. Certainly this freedom carries with it the possibility of going astray, even of going back into bondage as the Galatians wanted to do. But in dealing with them St Paul treats them simply as adults. He can lash them with his tongue, plead with them, castigate them, wring his hands in despair over them; but one thing he never does, he never treats them as a class of trainees under his tutelage. From the moment they turned to Christ they were free adult men and women, having their own empowering and illuminating by the Holy Spirit.

I want to say with as much force and directness as I can that I think it is here that we shall find the root of the distortion which so distresses us in the actual working of missions. I think it is fundamentally a matter of our belief in the reality of the Holy Spirit, a belief which radically determines our understanding of what we are doing when we bring the Gospel to another people. If there is in my mind as an evangelist any of the feeling that I am imparting something of my way of life to them, so that I have to guide and direct them, so that, in the beginning at least, they really depend on me for their new life; then they will miss the essential thing. There is a phrase in Acts 14: 23 which I always find deeply moving. St Paul is going back to Antioch at the end of his first missionary journey, and we read: ‘And when they had appointed elders for them in every church with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed.’ Is it not the real tap-root of the difficulty with which we wrestle in the missionary movement, that we have not been willing from the very beginning to do just that, too commit them to the Lord in whom they believed? We have not been willing to believe, and act upon the belief, that when a group of men and women turn to God in Jesus Christ, believe the Gospel, commit themselves to him, and are baptised into him, they are then, quite simply, the Church of God in that place. I may be the one through whom they learned the Gospel, but henceforth they do not depend on me. They have Christ in their midst. They



are his people. *They are solely and absolutely responsible to him.*

I would add a word of personal testimony, and say that this is not just a matter of theory, but of experienced fact. I have seen churches in two adjacent areas, newly won from the same communities, having exactly similar heredity and environment in every respect. In the one area the traditional missionary pattern was followed, and as each new village was won for Christ, a paid and trained teacher was put among them to train up the new congregations. In the other the

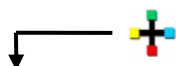
full responsibility was placed from the outset upon the new congregations themselves. Following the Pauline pattern their own elders became the elders of the new congregations, and the responsibility for passing on the Gospel to the next village was placed on them. The result has been that in the one area, after even forty years, there is the cry that the Christian community cannot survive if the diocese does not keep a paid worker there to look after it, whereas in the other the Church has stood and the Gospel has spread by the spontaneous witness of the village people themselves, and the Christian community has multiplied itself four times in twelve years.

It is experiences of this kind which convince one that there has been a radical defect in the pattern of operations which has come to be called by the name of missions, that this defect is the root of that distressing dilemma which I described at the outset, and that we shall not break out of that dilemma and produce a real advance in the task of world evangelisation unless we are willing to make a radical break with the traditional pattern of missionary operations.

At this very significant moment in ecumenical history when the East Asia Christian Conference is being constituted, when we are thinking of missions in a new way as 'ecumenical mission', when we are planning missionary expeditions from one country to another within East Asia, I plead that we pause to give some thought to this fundamental question 'What is mission? What is involved in taking the Gospel to another people?' – lest in what we are doing we merely reproduce in a new context the old distortions from which we are struggling to be free.

Foreign aid for the Christian mission

But what are the practical consequences of what I have



said? Where do we go from here? Is the effect of what I have said that we leave each other alone and take no further responsibility for each other—leaving each church to do the best it can for the evangelisation of its own area? Does it mean, in fact, that the day of foreign missions is over, and that the missionary can resolve his dilemma by finding a parish at home?

No, and for two reasons. First, if there is a false dependence, there is also a true dependence. There is a false dependence which is the mark of infantility, of arrested development. But there is a true dependence which is one of the marks of health. 'We are members one of another.' In the mature and healthy body each part is dependent on the whole. Each part has something to contribute, but also much to receive. Once the basic responsibility to God is established, there is then a whole multitude of ways in which mutual interdependence will express itself in a living church. This has certainly been our experience in the area of evangelistic advance of which I have been speaking. New congregations are certainly not left alone in isolation. They would certainly have died if they had been so treated. They were from the beginning linked up with neighbouring congregations and with the wider life of that church through ministry of presbyter and bishop. By elders' conferences, conventions and visits they helped to build one another up in the faith. And surely the same is true of the world-wide fellowship of the Church. None of our churches is meant to stand alone. While in one sense we are all dependent upon God alone for the life in Christ, in another sense we are truly dependent upon one another. *But it is a dependence in which each has something to give as well as something to receive.* That is the criterion by which we will know a true dependence from a false one.

There is a second reason why we cannot say that the day of foreign missions is over. If a church is content simply to do the missionary task on its doorstep, then one of the essential dimensions of the Christian life is lost. The Christian is one who is living up against the end of the world, and one of the essential symbols of that fact is that his religion visibly concerns itself with the ends of the earth. The Christian's concern may rightly begin with his own nation and people; but if it ends there, for practical purposes, his religion is no longer the religion of the New Testament. There is of course, something



absurd about this missionary passion to get out to the ends of the earth even while there is a colossal unfinished task at home. But it is part of the absurdity of Christianity, Christianity which claims that these insignificant little churches are not just local societies, but advance posts of a vast colonial power, agents of an imperialism which is destined to control the world. You are a 'colony of heaven' – says St Paul to the Philippians, very conscious of the fact that they were under a foreign power. The Church must always be, in a sense, foreign, and the fact that it insists on crossing every national frontier is an indispensable symbol of its supernatural character and calling.

So there is no escape from our initial dilemma by abolishing foreign missions. But we must have foreign missions in a different pattern, set in a different context of relationship – a context which can express the true dependence of the members of one body, and not the false dependence to which we have become accustomed in the relation of so-called older and younger churches. I have become personally convinced that nothing will meet our need save the substitution for our present pattern of relationship of a new pattern which will be multilateral rather than bilateral – in which the fundamental principle will be accepted that all have something to give and all have something to receive. I recognise that the task of applying this principle to our actual situation is one about which we have only just begun to think, and which will require a very great deal both of clear thinking and of imaginative experiment. I am sure that it will only be workable if it is on a regional basis – if churches in adjacent areas get together to think about their common task, to consider how they can help each other in it, and what help they need from outside. It is obvious that the formation of the East Asia Christian Conference is from this point of view one of the most significant developments that could possibly have taken place in the carrying forward of the total task of world evangelisation. I earnestly hope that our deliberations here will help to bring the first elements of detail into this rough outline of a pattern of missionary effort free from a false dependence and shaped by a true interdependence. I hope too that what is being done here in this pioneer regional conference will help to light the path for our sister churches in Africa and Latin America, also



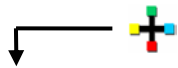
feeling their way to some such regional pattern of fellowship and mutual aid.

But it must be clearly envisaged from the start as *aid for mission*. There could be a false interdependence, a situation in which all our energies were employed in the mutual effort to prop each other up. The crying need of our time is for fresh advance. Our resources have been too much and too long exhausted in the task of keeping us where we are. Our need, the very purpose for which we need a new pattern of relationships is that the dilemma of which I spoke at the beginning may be resolved in *a new forward movement of evangelism, a movement in which all the resources of all the churches are deployed in full strength and in mutual interdependence*.

The church which lives on the frontier

It will not do merely to have a new pattern of relationships. It will not do merely to have a new missionary advance. The very core of our need, as I have tried to say, is that we recover a more biblical understanding of what mission is. It will not help us if we merely multiply under ecumenical auspices the kind of missions which we have carried on under the old pattern. After all there is plenty of evidence to show that other kinds of mission are possible. Bishop Sargent, in his book, *The Dispersion of the Tamil Church*, has told the story of how groups of Tamils, mostly coolies, have gone to remote parts of India, Africa, Malaya and the islands, and founded churches unknown to any missionary or church leader. And from South America we learn how the Pentecostal churches are spreading by the simple method of sending out lay members to new centres, there to earn their own living in secular service and to be apostles and pastors for new

communities. Such new congregations are from the beginning equal partners with the older ones, and become at once missionary groups which accept the responsibility to pass the torch on. I do not doubt that there are weaknesses and distortions here, too, which need to be mentioned. But it seems impossible to doubt that it is by this kind of spontaneous expansion, and only so, that we can expect a real missionary advance in the period immediately ahead of us. And is it not precisely such a pattern of mission, the pattern of the pre-Constantinian Church, which is the proper pattern for this post-Constantinian era which we have now entered, and in which the Church can

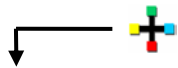


no longer count upon the support either of State or of national culture for its advance?

In such a pattern of advance there will certainly be room for the foreign missionary, though he may have a different role from the foreign missionary of the immediate past. Certainly he will not normally be chosen because he is an expert. That strange aberration in missionary thinking can surely be left behind now. Certainly he will identify himself completely and without reserve with the church to which he goes. But he will go, and he will be accepted, primarily as a missionary, as one sent out over the frontier to make Christ known among those who know him not, the symbol and the instrument of the Church's commission to preach the Gospel to every creature.

Granted such a real recovery of faith in the possibility and necessity of a fresh advance, we may confidently look for the emergence of a radically new pattern of missionary operations, a real pooling of resources on a multilateral basis, so that all may give and all may receive according as God has given to them. Such a new pattern would require a great strengthening of the organs of co-operation, both national and regional, and in this the formation of this Conference may be reckoned by future historians as one of the decisive turning points.

But all of this rests upon one pre-supposition, and with this I will close. All that I have said about a new pattern and a new missionary method will remain mere verbiage except on one condition. *That condition is that there shall be distributed throughout the whole membership of the Church a deep, and strong, and experimentally verified conviction about the sufficiency and finality of Christ for the whole world.* I say experimentally verified, because you cannot really stake everything on a belief that you have not tested and found true. Here one could say much or little. I will say only this. I believe that in Jesus Christ, in his life and death and rising again, there is given to me and to all men the only light in the in the darkness and perplexity of human life, the only release from the power of sin, and the only anchorage of hope in the face of the whole power of evil. But I know also that that faith can become cold and formal, can lose its power to illuminate my mind and warm my heart, and that there is only one way to prevent that happening, and that is to live in situations where it is constantly being matched against the powers of evil, and to have



company with those who are being newly gripped by it. That means, in one sentence, that faith is kept strong by living on the frontier. *It is the church which lives on the frontier that will be ready to advance in strength.*

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