



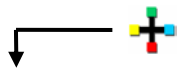
Sugar in the Coffee

1961

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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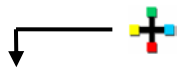
The Editor has asked me for some impressions of Africa after a two-month journey last autumn. The reader will sympathize with me in this perilous undertaking. It was my very first experience of Africa and though we visited fifteen territories in West, Central, East and Southern Africa, I realize that impressions of such a tour must inevitably be superficial. They were, however, vivid; and perhaps that justifies the attempt to pass them on, with due warning that they are based on very slight experience.

Dr Donald M'Timkulu, Secretary of the All Africa Church Conference, and I teamed up for this trip. The primary object was to enlist African participation in the ecumenical study on *The Word of God and the Church's Missionary Obedience*. Our main job was, therefore, Bible study, along with groups of churchmen-African and missionary-leading on to questions about the re-thinking of the missionary job which the present hour demands. I was thankful for this, in two ways. Firstly because we were not going round inspecting anything, or selling anything. We were inviting people to do something they were eager to do because it involved their own deepest perplexities. Secondly, because we were not *merely* blown in by the winds of change.

Perhaps one of the gravest dangers facing missions in Africa is that they might attempt to correct the errors of the past merely because it is now highly unfashionable to behave in a colonialist and paternalist manner, but this is to be like weathercocks in the wind, instead of recognizing that a time of revolutionary change is a time for taking one's bearings on the things which do not change. (Interestingly it was a Ghanaian who argued the case for the proper and Christian form of spiritual paternalism.) We learned again from our Bible-study that if we had listened to the Word of God we might have been saved from too much conformity to the *Zeitgeist* in the days of colonialism; and that attention to the same authority can save us from repeating the same mistake in the new circumstances.

Indeed the Bible should have taught us that the separation of Mission and Church was wrong, and it ought not to have needed the present political changes to persuade us of it. Perhaps one need not say much about this. The old pattern which permitted foreign missionaries to

function as a group separate from the Church, handling funds, determining policy, taking vital decisions for the Church in isolation from its African members, is on its way out. Where remnants of it still exist they are manifestly a cause of stumbling and of deep resentment. We

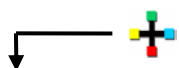


were reminded in several places that missions were practising *apartheid* long before Dr Verwoerd was heard of.

But it was clear from the discussions that African churchmen are by no means satisfied with everything that is now being put in the place of that old pattern. It was noticeable that at several of the consultations the same type of discussion tended to reappear. There were, on the one hand, missionaries who spoke of their job as essentially a temporary one. 'We are the scaffolding,' they said, 'but you-the African Church-are the building. We are here to give our particular gift just so long as the African Church needs it, to build up the Church, and then withdraw. We are here to make ourselves unnecessary.' I was surprised to find with what vigour this conception of the missionary's task was rejected by the African participants in the consultations. 'We do not want this "us" and "you"; if you are here at all, it must be simply as part of the Church of Jesus Christ. We want you to be completely committed with us to the fellowship of God's people in Africa.' A well-known Christian leader in Douala told us that the missionary ought to be in the Church like the salt in the meat. 'Not', he said, 'that we want missionaries who will simply say Amen to everything that we Africans say. That would be salt without savour. But nevertheless the missionary must disappear into the Church as salt disappears into the meat.' A little later in our trip we were told by a Congolese pastor that the true missionary is in the Church like the sugar in the coffee. Doubtless there is room for a variety of missionary flavours, but the point was clearly the same and it was made over and over again. 'Why don't missionaries stay and become simply part of the Church? Why do we have these missionaries who come and shake hands and then leave? We do not want this sort of missionary. We want missionaries who will live with us, work with us, die with us, and lay their bones here in Africa.'

Two Kinds of Identification

But discussions on this issue naturally led on to the question of the meaning of identification. We had to ask, 'What exactly does it mean to say that the missionary must be wholly identified with the Church? Is this, for instance, primarily a matter of the standard of living? Does it mean that the missionary should live in exactly the same conditions as his African fellow-members in the family?' Obviously there are many places where differences in standards of living are a source of weakness. Obviously also it is appallingly difficult to have a real unity of spirit when residential apartheid is enforced by the secular society as in the Rhodesias and South Africa. And it is completely untrue to say that spiritual fellowship is independent of such mundane questions as-for instance-the question who pays the missionary's salary, and who decides whether his bungalow should be whitewashed. Wherever

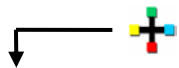


these and similar questions have been taken out of exclusively missionary control and placed where they belong along with the similar concerns of the missionary's African colleagues, there is a real advance in spiritual unity. And yet it was made clear to us that one does not achieve identification by starting with a decision to adopt a way of life which is considered to be African-supposing that one had first been able to decide which of the manifold and ever-changing patterns of life is really 'African'. The issue was put most clearly in one of our discussions by a well-known African political leader who is also a devout Christian. 'There are two ways of conceiving

this matter of identification,' he said, 'There is what I may call the anthropological conception of identification, and there is identification in Christ. It is the second which is the essential thing.'

The implications of this were brought out in discussions in several different places. We listened to a passionate speech by a missionary on the text of the Good Samaritan. His point was that the Samaritan, when he saw the injured man in the ditch, 'went where he was'-put himself in the ditch beside him and identified himself with the other man's desperate situation. This, he said, was the pattern of the missionary. Another missionary in the same group deplored the bourgeois character of Christians-and particularly the fact that as a missionary he lived in a good house in a respectable part of the city instead of living in a smaller house in one of the African quarters. But this interpretation of the Good Samaritan was vigorously challenged by African members of the group. With a rather refreshing realism they pointed out that the Good Samaritan did not think it sufficient to go and stand in the ditch, however sacrificially; he went to the ditch to pull the other man out, put him on a donkey, and take him to an inn. The fact that the Church makes proletarians into respectable bourgeois is greatly to its credit. It should continue to do so in Africa. There is no particular point in the missionary going to live in a slum; he should rather labour to see that those who are in the slums get decent houses. The contrast here, as at many other points, with Indian thinking was very striking.

On the related question of 'Africanization' one found a similar realism. Certainly there was no doubt that in very many places the leadership of the churches is still too foreign, and that the development of African leadership is a matter of great urgency. It was encouraging to find that in East, West, South and Central Africa good progress is being made in developing plans for higher theological training with the help of the Theological Education Fund of the International Missionary Council. But it was repeatedly insisted that Africanization must not be pursued as a policy simply for its own sake. This could be a sort of reversed paternalism. No self-respecting African, it was pointed out, wants to be put into a position of responsibility simply because he is an African; he wants to be there because he is the best man for the job.

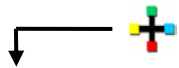


Indeed the concept of an African Church is mistaken; what these responsible African Christian leaders ask for is not an African Church, but a truly Christian Church in Africa, a Church in which all races are truly integrated in one body.

Granted that the missionary's proper place is within the Church, as one wholly identified-in-Christ with his African fellow-members in it, what is his special job? Naturally much of our talk was of this. Missions have been involved from the beginning in massive programmes of technical aid – though they were not always so named. These programmes increase. The demand for education, leadership, training, technical assistance in all forms, is enormous. Missions are now only one of the smaller channels for this aid, though their commitments are constantly increasing. But is it the essential job of the missionary to be the bearer of this aid? We found that this was being sharply questioned. Certainly aid is needed, and the churches have a duty to play their part to the limit in giving it. But if this moves into the *centre* of our thinking about the missionary task then something goes wrong. The missionary becomes one who gives, who hands out, who trains others. The relation with the African community is one-way. The paternalist pattern remains. But – on the other hand – when the missionary is understood to be *essentially* the bearer of the Gospel – the Gospel which he shares with his African fellow-Christians – then there is a different situation. In the essential things he is both learner and teacher, both recipient and donor. That brings him into the very heart of the Church as part of its very life. And as part of its life, he can freely share whatever he has of technical skill or culture; this will be fruitful precisely because it is put in the second place and not in the first. Perhaps the strongest impression that remained after these many discussions was that there is no way in which a Christian man or woman can make a more deep and satisfying contribution to the witness of the Church in Africa today than by

missionary service understood in that sense.

But we have been using the word 'missionary' as though it always meant someone with a white skin. Plainly it cannot be used in that way-though it constantly is. One of the questions down for discussion at each meeting was whether missionary work is a temporary or a permanent feature of the Church's life. When we looked at it from the receiving end and asked whether we could always expect missionaries to continue to come from outside to Africa, the answer was often in doubt. But when we looked at it from the sending end, and asked whether or not there is a permanent obligation on the African Church to send missionaries to others, the answer was always yes; and that led on to useful discussions about how this obligation could be fulfilled, both in other parts of Africa, and in Europe and America. This is not just a matter of planning for the future; it is also matter of recovering the past.



The African Church has a great, but neglected, heritage of missionary service. In very many parts of the continent one discovers on enquiry that the very first witness to Christ was given, before any white missionary came, by African Christians whose very names have sometimes been forgotten. It is surely of the greatest importance that the records of these early 'non-professional missionaries' should be recovered and written down before it is too late. Their stories should be part of the heritage of every African Christian, and of the universal Church. One of the essential elements in the re-thinking of the missionary task in our day must be the re-minting of the word 'missionary' so that it no longer connotes only a person of European origin going out to other parts of the world. To say that the proper home-base of the Christian world mission is the Church everywhere in every land is not merely to voice a hope for the future; it is to state a permanent truth of which many illustrations can be found in the past. Africa can furnish rich material from its own past for this work of re-minting just as Africa will surely in the future contribute richly to the evangelization of the world through her vivid, warm-hearted and realistic understanding of the Gospel.

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