



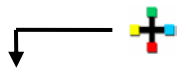
The Missionary Dimension of the Ecumenical Movement

1962

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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I

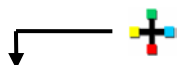
The inter-connection of the IMC and the WCC

The two world councils which come together in this hall today are no strangers. We have been working together intimately ever since the World Council was formed. And the farther back into history we go, the more indistinguishable we become. When William Paton was a secretary of the International Missionary Council he was at the same time, with Dr. Visser t' Hooft, Joint General Secretary of the Provisional Committee of the World Council of Churches. J. H. Oldham was in the full-time service of the IMC when he organized the Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State. At Jerusalem in 1928 it was William Temple who drafted the Message. The World Missionary Conference of 1910 is the event to which both our Councils look back as decisive for our beginnings. In the document which he prepared for the Crans meeting in 1920, outlining possible forms for an International Missionary Council, J. H. Oldham wrote these prophetic words:

"It is becoming less and less possible to discuss missionary matters without representatives of the churches in the mission field, and any organization that may be created will probably have before very long to give way to something that may represent the beginnings of a world league of Churches."

There is some difference of opinion in this country as to whether marriages should be arranged by the parties or by their parents. Of the marriage which is here proposed it can safely be said that it was planned by the parents before the children were born.

But of course the roots of our unity go back much deeper into the past. The Edinburgh Conference of 1910 was the focussing of spiritual forces that had been at work through the 19th century, and which



both in name and in nature. It is not often remembered that the name originally given to the conference planned for Edinburgh 1910 was the "Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference," and that the word "Ecumenical" was only dropped from the title at a late stage in the planning. For it was the ecumenical vision – the vision of the world for Christ – which had created the longing for unity. Men who were divided from one another in their home churches found themselves working, praying, and witnessing together on the world-wide frontiers of the Christian mission. The oft-quoted words of William Temple in his enthronement sermon at Canterbury are surely appropriate to-day

"As though in preparation for such a time as this, God has been building up a Christian fellowship which now extends into almost every nation and binds citizens of them all together in true unity and mutual love. No human agency has planned this. It is the result of the great missionary enterprise of the last 150 years... It is the great new fact of our era."

But indeed we cannot stop with the history of 150 years. We have to go farther back. The deepest reason for our coming together lies in the nature of the Gospel itself. As the Central Committee said 10 years ago at Rolle

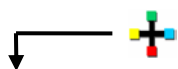
"The obligation to take the Gospel to the whole world, and the obligation to draw all Christ's people together, both rest upon Christ's whole work and are indissolubly connected. Every attempt to separate these tasks violates the wholeness of Christ's ministry to the world."

And the Central Committee statement was right, therefore, in drawing attention to the danger of a false use of the word ecumenical, a use which omits the missionary dimension and therefore parts company wholly with the original meaning of the word. It is time to say again plainly that the words ecumenical and interdenominational are not synonymous. A meeting among churchmen is not, in itself, an ecumenical occasion. This is not a minor matter. The way we use words eventually shapes the way we act. This is a moment, surely, to remember what the word ecumenical really means.

II

The contribution of the IMC to the integrated World Council

I have sought to remind you of the deep inter-connection between our two councils from the very beginning of their histories, and of the source of this inter-connection in the nature of the Gospel itself. Mission



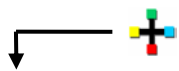
and unity are two sides of the same reality, or rather two ways of describing the same action of the living Lord who wills that all should be drawn to Himself. But it would be a false simplification to suggest that, within the whole ecumenical movement, the IMC stands for mission and the WCC for unity. A moment's reflection on the history of the two councils is enough to dispel the idea. From the Edinburgh Conference onwards the IMC has been profoundly concerned about unity. No stronger call for visible reunion has come from any meeting than those which were given by the IMC conferences at Tambaram in 1938 and at Willingen in 1952. Perhaps the most massive single piece of ecumenically organized inter-church aid at the present time is the Theological Education Fund of the IMC. And on the other hand the World Council of Churches has from the beginning concerned itself deeply with the missionary task – as witness the work of the 2nd Commission at Amsterdam.

Few things have done more to strengthen the understanding of the missionary task of the Church than the work of the WCC's Department on the Laity. Both Councils have been drawn by the logic of the Gospel itself to concern themselves both with the mission of the Church and with

its unity. Their coming together is a wholly natural and proper response to the continuing pressure of that logic.

But human structures are never simply visible embodiments of theological principles. They have the particular and individual characteristics that arise from their history, from the obedience and disobedience of the many men and women whose lives have shaped them. The IMC is no exception. Rather than speaking only of mission and unity as theological principles, it will be wise at this moment to look at the concrete character of that which is brought from the side of the IMC into the integrated council. Let me suggest three characteristics which seem to me worthy of special attention at this moment in our common history.

1. The original base of the IMC was in the mission boards and societies of the western churches. Of its 17 original member councils, 13 were missionary councils. Today, of course, the majority of the 38 member councils represent the churches in what were formerly called the mission fields, and a great part of the history of the Council during the past 40 years has been concerned with the shift in the centre of gravity from mission boards to younger churches. Nevertheless it remains true and important that a very great part of the spiritual substance – if I may put it so – which the IMC will bring into the integrated council, is constituted by the foreign missionary movement. This



movement is a concrete historic phenomenon of the past 250 years. It has its own particular characteristics arising from its coincidence in time with the movement of colonial expansion from the West, and from other particular historical circumstances. We are familiar with the criticism which can be directed against it. I am not concerned here either with criticism or with defence. It is enough to say in this Assembly that the ecumenical movement owes its existence largely to the missionary movement, and that millions of those whom we here represent owe their existence as Christians to it. My concern here is to draw attention to elements in it which are of permanent importance, and which – with whatever changes of form – must remain part of the essential spiritual substance of any living ecumenical movement.

Among these elements I would place the presence at the heart of missions of a continuing and costly concern for individual people and places, expressed in sustained intercessory prayer, sacrificial giving, and personal commitment. The many thousands of people, often poor and hard-pressed by their own troubles, who give regularly and pray constantly for people and causes known only through an occasional meeting or magazine article, these have given the missionary movement the spiritual force which it has had. I am not ignoring the important changes which make it necessary now to broaden that knowledge to set the missionary concern for a particular person or a particular work in the context of a wider knowledge of what others are doing, and of a fuller understanding of what is involved in the spiritual conflicts of our time. I believe that the bringing of missions into a closer integration with the work of the World Council will help to meet that need. But if this broadening of the missionary concern were to be so conceived as to weaken those invisible but immensely strong threads of personal commitment and personal knowledge which have made missions what they are, then the heart would go out of the whole matter. It can become too easy to talk in large abstractions about the whole of humanity. God's love for the world had to be manifested in a concrete human life, lived out to the end among the petty circumstances of a small provincial society far from the centre of the world's stage. That pattern remains determinative for missionary obedience. It is of the very essence of the missionary movement (as secular observers have often noted) that it has always based its working on the expectation that there will be men and women prepared to commit themselves to lifetime service, not to "humanity" in general, but to a particular country and people, and to

a kind of service in which – as a matter of course – they forego the rewards and the regard which they could command elsewhere. New contacts and broad horizons, the vision conjured up by a big international meeting of a world-wide fellowship and a world-wide task – these can be exhilarating and liberating experiences. But for the long haul, for the days and years of routine without which no great enterprise is brought to victory, there can be no substitute for that kind of personal commitment expressed in unremitting intercession, unwearied giving and life-long commitment by which missions have lived for these 200 years.

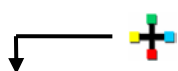
2. Secondly, the missionary movement whether in East or West has been above all concerned to reach out beyond the existing frontiers of the Christian fellowship, to go to the place where men live without the knowledge of the Gospel, and there to be so identified with those men that they may hear and see, in their own idiom and in the forms of their own life, the grace and power of the Lord Jesus Christ. This impulse to *go* is at the heart of missions, and must remain so. It is true that both the starting point of the journey and its end are different now from what they were in the 19th century. The starting point now is everywhere that the Church is, and the end is every place where men are without the knowledge of Christ. Christendom is no longer a geographical area. The very fact that we now bring the affairs of missions right into the heart of the day-to-day work of a World Council of Churches will expose more vividly the impropriety of some ways of thinking and speaking about the missionary journey which still illegitimately survive into the 20th century. The decision that the IMC's studies in the life and growth of the younger churches should now be extended to enable representatives of the younger churches to make parallel studies in the life of the older churches is an example of the kind of changes that we must hope for. I hope also that these studies will be followed by real missionary journeys; that the churchmen of Asia and Africa, having studied the spiritual situation of some of the older churches, their conflicts, their victories, and their defeats, will be moved to send missionaries to Europe and America to make the Gospel credible to the pagan masses of those continents who remain unmoved by the witness of the churches in their midst. My point is that this impulse to go, to reach out beyond the accustomed boundaries for the sake of witness to Him who is Lord of all, has been central to the missionary movement and must remain so in the new circumstances which integration will create. Among the many things which change, this must not change. If we will think for

a moment of the multitudes who are out of effective earshot of the Gospel, we shall realize how absurd is the suggestion that the call to go is less urgent than it was when Carey wrote his "Enquiry" or when St. Paul wrote "How shall they hear without a preacher, and how shall men preach unless they be sent?"

I emphasize this point because there are those who deprecate this emphasis upon the command to go, who point to the very large place taken in the Bible by the centripetal as opposed to the centrifugal understanding of the mission of God's people, to the fact that this mission is a gathering and not just a sending. In certain contexts this reminder is needed, missions are not the whole content of the Church's mission. God's mission is more than the activities called missions. But the activities called missions are an indispensable part (a part, not the whole) of the obedience which the churches must render to God's calling. To quote Walter Freytag, missions have to remind every church "that it cannot be the Church in limiting itself within its own area, that it is called to take part in the responsibility of God's outgoing into the whole world, that it has the Gospel because it is meant for the nations of the earth". This remains true in the new situation in which we shall be after integration. The Commission on World Mission and Evangelism, which

God willing – will be established immediately after this Assembly, will exist "to further the proclamation of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ to all men to the end that they may turn to Him and be saved". It will be the task of the Commission within the life of the World Council to press upon every church in every part of the world the obligation to take its share in that task, as an indispensable element without which its own confession of the Gospel would lack something of full integrity.

3. The IMC has been from the beginning of its existence deeply concerned with the issues – spiritual and administrative – which have arisen in the development from mission to church, and in the relation between older and younger churches. These issues have been deep and often perplexing. There have been – on the positive side – the abiding love, knowledge and concern which the sending boards and societies have had, and continue to have for the churches which are the fruit of their work, and the reciprocal affection and trust which – thank God – bind these younger churches to those from whom their first knowledge of the Gospel came. There have also been – on the negative side – the strains and stresses that that intimate relation has often



entailed. The World Council has made possible a series of relationships between churches in which these strains were absent and everything could begin with all the freshness, the surprise, and the delight of first love. It is of God's goodness that this has been so and we can all rejoice in it. The coming together of the IMC and the World Council of Churches, means that these two kinds of relationship are to be held increasingly within one continuing fellowship. There will be much to learn on both sides. It will be necessary to remember, and sometimes to say sharply, both that paternalism is a sin which (like all sin) tends to blind the sinner to its existence, and also that paternity is a fact with enduring implications.

It is, I think, not out of place to mention these things in this moment, for it is only if we recognize them and face them in a spirit of mutual forgiveness and forbearance that the integration of our two councils will be fruitful, and that, speaking the truth in love, we shall grow up to him who is the Head of the whole body, and in obedience to him who is the one Father of us all.

My purpose in speaking of these three matters has been to remind you that we have to think at this moment not only of the mission of the Church in general, but of those particular activities which are called missions, and of the issues with which those involved in these activities have sought to wrestle together in the International Missionary Council. The form of these activities must change with the changing human situation. I am convinced that the step which we are proposing to take at this Assembly will in due course lead to fruitful changes in the pattern of missionary action. Many responsibilities which were carried in the past by the International Missionary Council because it was the only world Christian body able to carry them can now be fruitfully shared with or transferred to other divisions of the World Council of Churches. Relations between churches which were formerly linked only through the activity of a mission board can now be diversified through the opening of the many other channels of communication now available. Through all of these changes I hope that the effect will be to make the specific missionary task stand out more clearly. But this will only come about if there is – along with the administrative integration which is now proposed – a deep-going spiritual integration of the concerns which have been central in our two councils. For those who have been traditionally related to the IMC, this means a willingness to acknowledge that the particular forms and relationships characteristic of the missionary

activity of the past two centuries must – like all things human – be held constantly open to the new insights that God may have to give us in the wider fellowship into which we now enter. For the churches which constitute the World Council this means the acknowledgment that the missionary task is no less central to the life of the Church than the pursuit of renewal and unity. No movement is entitled to the use of the word ecumenical which is not concerned that witness be borne to the Gospel throughout the whole earth, and which is not committed to taking its share in bearing that witness.

III

The missionary dimension

But God forbid that we should talk thus in negatives! Our mission is not a duty but a doxology. "O give thanks to the Lord for he is good... Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, whom he has redeemed and gathered in from the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south" (Ps. 107). How can those whom he has redeemed be silent? They exist only as the first-fruit of his loving purpose for all mankind; how can they pretend otherwise? How can we, who rejoice in this gathering together by the one Lord, think that his plans end with us? How can we think that we are more than mere witnesses of what he is doing? Where is there any light in this dark world – or in our dark minds – except in him? Where is there any hope of salvation for mankind but in him? What sort of sense does this world make, if there be not at the heart of it the dying and rising of the Son of God? What are we in this World Council of Churches but a mere global sectarianism unless we are missionary through and through?

Sixty-six years ago a group of graduates of Madras Christian College sent a letter to the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland to thank them for what the College had done. The Assembly's reply thanked them for the letter and spoke of the mutual sharing of gifts between East and West which such experience made possible. The Assembly then went on : "But in that spirit we desire affectionately and above all things to commend to you, as our missionaries have often done, the Lord Jesus Christ... We have no better claim to him than you have. We possess nothing so precious – we value nothing so much

– we have no source of good so full, fruitful, and enduring – we have nothing to compare with the Lord Jesus Christ. To him we must bear witness. And we should gladly consent that you should cease to listen to us if you would be led to give your ear and your heart to him".

There is the missionary dimension of any movement, any labour, any programme that bears the name of Christ! Over every phase of it there will be written urgently and insistently "Don't look at us; look at him".

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