



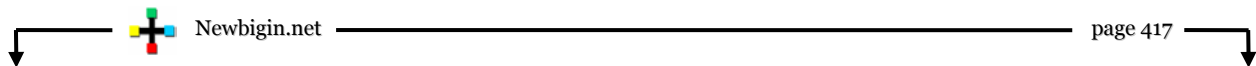
From The Editor

1965

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

International Review Of Missions 54 (October): 417-27.

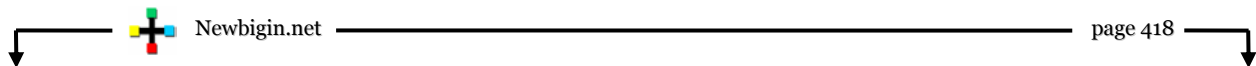
All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.



We devote part of the present issue of the Review to one of the central questions in the missionary work of the churches to-day – the question of mission and service. Dr Linnenbrink's article and the comments thereon place the matter in its theological context. In these notes I wish only to offer some reflections on the issues raised for missions, firstly, by the whole movement of technical assistance to 'developing' countries, and secondly, by the movement of inter-church aid.

I

We are now at the middle point of the United Nations 'Development Decade'. Those who have given their life to missions may be inclined to point out that missionaries have been in the business of technical aid for centuries. Certainly, the record of what has been accomplished by missions for the 'development' of the peoples of the *Tiers Monde* is too often unknown to those who are now engaged in technical assistance. But we can only rejoice that something which was for decades the concern of a tiny minority is now the acknowledged responsibility of



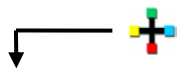
nations. Missions are right to seek the most active and constructive relationship possible with the manifold programmes of development aid. But there are questions that must be asked.

The movement for rapid technical development in Asia and Africa places special psychological strains upon the peoples most directly involved. For the most part, they have only very recently emancipated themselves from the political control of the West. They are still dominated by the economic power of the West and unable fully to assert their freedom. Yet the technical knowledge and skill needed for development can at present be had only by learning a western language and seeking western help. The peoples of the developing countries are thus compelled to become dependent upon those from whom they have every wish and every reason to seek independence. We ought not to underestimate the tension that this creates, a tension that can easily explode into violent hostility. There is evidence of questioning in the developing countries

about whether the present patterns of assistance are likely to produce a growing dependence. The strains which this causes may become insupportable.

What is called development is (though we often forget this) the substitution by the peoples of Asia and Africa of a new hierarchy of values for that which has ruled them hitherto. It means that people are encouraged to seek other goals than those which have been recommended by the traditional religions. It means, to put it shortly, less attention to music and poetry and philosophy, and more attention to sanitation and soil chemistry and metallurgy. As Christians, we ought – presumably – to have a critical and independent position vis-à-vis all such value systems. It should not be only the Gandhians in India who remind us that the values of the so-called ‘developed countries’ are not necessarily the last word in human wisdom. We are fond of criticizing our forefathers for permitting the patterns of their missionary action to be too uncritically conformed to the colonial image. In fact, as we know, they were well aware of this danger and many of them tried to guard against it. We ought to be equally aware of the danger that we in our day become uncritically conformed to the current pattern of development aid.

For this reason, it is our duty to denounce sharply the tendency in some quarters to speak of technical aid to developing countries as though it were the modern equivalent of the missions of a previous era. The attraction of this position is obvious. If one proposes to build a steel-works in India or a technical school in Africa, one is doing



something which almost everyone will accept as reasonable. A programme of this sort seems to be free from the presumption of trying to convert other people to one's own religion. It is felt to be more humble, more realistic, more relevant. Moreover, it has the advantage that it can be finished within a limited period. There are no continuing entanglements and liabilities. In both respects, it is a ‘clean’ operation from the point of view of the typical modern European, who is quite sure of the validity of his technics, but very unsure of the validity of his faith. As Christians, we must sharply deny this kind of thinking. I was talking recently with a prominent Asian Christian layman. He said something like this: ‘Why do you western churchmen get so excited about technical assistance to developing countries? We will get all the technical assistance we need, whether you do it or not. Modern technics are simply part of our modern world, and in due time we shall all have our share in them. Why do the churches not interest themselves in the problems which remain when all the technical development is finished?’ I asked him to tell me more precisely what he meant. He answered by taking as an example the question of the spiritual basis on which a democracy can be built – the beliefs about the nature of man, of authority, of conscience, which concern anyone involved in the Asian revolution to-day. If the churches make it appear that their chief contribution to the developing nations is technical aid, they will be missing their main task.

It is important to add immediately that this does not mean that we oppose what is called the simple preaching of the Gospel to technical assistance. A preaching which does not deal resolutely and realistically with the problems in which men are involved is no true preaching of the Gospel. If the churches have nothing to say and nothing to do which illuminates the real cultural, economic, political and personal problems in which men are engaged, then their preaching is vain. It may serve to keep us out of trouble, but it will be without real fruit. What we have to insist upon is this: the distinctive task of the churches, the task that only they can discharge, is to enable men to meet their real problems in the power of the Gospel. This means that our technical aid will be only an illustration of something more fundamental. It will not be an end in itself. It will be part of our witness to God's Kingdom, in the power of which men can play their part in the revolutionary changes of our time without losing hope and without losing their conscience. If we have nothing to say about the deeper and more enduring problems that remain when all the technical aid has been

given, we are salt without savour. Nations do not live by what is called development alone, and they know it.

There is a particular reason for insisting that the business of technical assistance be not divorced from the testimony which missions must bear to the Gospel. The process by which the world is being unified on the basis of commonly accepted goals of development is at the same time a process of secularization. The technical assistance expert is one of the primary agents of secularization. It is idle to pretend that in his work among the so-called under-developed peoples he is religiously neutral. Whatever else may be the fruit of the work of, for example, the army of technical experts now at work in the Kingdom of Nepal, one thing is certain: after twenty-five years the Hindu religion will count for much less in Nepal than it does now. It is absurd to suggest that our technical assistance programmes have nothing to do with this. They are the main instrument for undermining the traditional system. Even if one does not accept in full Dr van Leeuwen's thesis that the present process of secularization is the form in which the non-western world is now experiencing the impact of the biblical history, one must still ask the question: How are the peoples of Asia and Africa to interpret this process of secularization? It is one of the ironies of our present situation that while the western scientist shows himself passionately interested in the origins and nature of the non-western cultures (using for his investigations, of course, the methodology of western science, and not that of the cultures which he investigates), he shows himself very much uninterested in the roots of the science and technology of which he is the heir. The typical western agent of technical assistance is usually most anxious to make it clear that he is not interested in the Christianity in which the modern world was nurtured. And his non-western pupil naturally follows his lead. As Christians, we can hardly feel that this is a responsible attitude. We have surely a duty to help interpret in biblical terms the movement of secularization that is drawing the whole of mankind into its sweep.

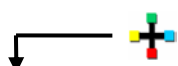
For this reason especially, as well as for the more general reason that we should always be ready to share what we have, there is an obligation upon us to encourage Christians to offer their services in the various forms of technical assistance to developing countries. The famous appeal of Max Warren at Willingen has not yet been adequately met. I know that something has been done, but it is not yet adequate in scale or in quality. Ought we not to recognize it as one of the crucial missionary tasks of the coming decades to find, train and send Christians who

will go as agents of technical assistance-not blindly, but knowing what they are doing because they have been trained to understand it in the light of the Bible? I would emphasize the words 'find, train and send'. We must have means analogous to those we use in missionary education to help young Christians to recognize this call for service we must have adequate facilities for training, especially in the kind of lay theology that can enable a man in secular employment to see his job in a biblical perspective; and though the missions cannot themselves send such men, we can encourage them to go in the service of secular agencies knowing that they are truly sent by God. In this connexion, I would recommend the series of 'Case Studies in the Mission of the Layman Abroad' which has been prepared by my colleague, Dr Paul Lofer.¹ They help to show what it means to speak of the agent of technical assistance as also a Christian missionary.

At this point, I should like to say something about the relation between the preaching of the Gospel, which I take to be the central work of missions, and the various forms of service, including those which we now call technical assistance. I think that our thinking about this is often distorted by a false understanding of conversion. The preaching of the Gospel has as its purpose the conversion of men to Christ. Surely there ought to be no doubt about that. But conversion is not the turning of a man to Christ simply for his own sake, or simply to increase the size and power of the Church. I do not think there is a single case in the Bible of conversion

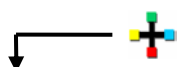
understood in this way Conversion in the Bible is the turning of a man to Christ so that he may become a partner in Christ's work and a witness to God's Kingdom. It is the enlisting of men in God's service for the fulfilment of His purpose for the world. When this is forgotten, it is easy to put up a false image of the relation between preaching and service. One is accustomed to caricatures of the work of the evangelistic missionary fishing for individual souls – perhaps even using medical or social service as the bait for his hook – while the really big world affairs pass him by. How much better, how much more relevant, to be busy tackling the great issues of national development. Certainly, such false conception of preaching and of conversion exists, and should be denounced. But, truly understood, preaching is the announcement of God's Kingdom, and conversion is conversion to its service. There can be nothing bigger or more relevant than that.

¹ These studies also form the basis of *Christians-World Citizens*, by Margaret Nash (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1965).



The preaching of the Gospel and the service of men's need are equally authentic and essential parts of the Church's responsibility. But neither is a substitute for the other. No amount of service, however expert and however generous, is a substitute for the explicit testimony to Jesus Christ. No human deed can of itself take the place of the one deed by which the world is redeemed and to which we must direct men's eyes. There is no equivalent to the Name of Jesus. But equally, the preaching of that Name will be empty, if he who speaks it is not willing to deal honestly and realistically with the issues that his hearers have to face. An escapist preaching which refuses this involvement is no true witness to the Kingdom. We are to be not reporters only, but also signs of the Resurrection, and that means that we are living out in our flesh the experience of victory over the powers of evil. An escapist is not a sign of the Resurrection. The true relation between the word and the deed is that both must be visibly rooted in the same reality; namely, in that new community which is created and indwelt by the Holy Spirit. It is only when they are so, that both play their part in that witness of the Spirit which convicts the world. There are diversities of gifts, but all the gifts are needed. Not all are preachers and not all are technical experts, administrators, healers or teachers; but when all these differing gifts are seen to belong together in the life of the one community, then the word illuminates the deed, and the deed authenticates the word, and the Spirit takes them both to bear His own witness to the Resurrection. The implication of this is clear. In respect of those Christians who go overseas in the work of technical assistance, every effort must be made to help them to become truly integrated into the life of the Christian Church in the land where they serve. Too often this does not happen. If they continue to make any Christian profession, it is within a secluded community of expatriates. One of our biggest tasks is to help the national Christian Councils in their efforts to reach out to expatriates in their countries and draw them into living participation in the mission of the Church in the place where they work. And in respect of those who go abroad in the service of missions, we must be awake to the immense opportunities for living witness that are opened up when the technician, the teacher, the doctor, the nurse, plays his or her part fully in the life of the Christian fellowship, alongside the pastor and preacher, each recognizing and honouring the gifts of the other, and all using them in the harmony which the Spirit gives.

I referred earlier to the acute psychological difficulty inherent in the



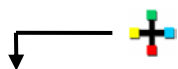
present situation, where the developing countries are compelled to become dependent for technical assistance upon the very people from whom they most wish to be independent. Whenever the concept of technical aid is allowed to move into the centre of our thinking about missions, we are in the midst of this tension. If, as has been suggested, missions are really a form

of technical assistance to developing churches; if, in other words, their job is to supply technically qualified personnel until the younger churches can get on without them; then the missionary will always be in a position of the donor vis-à-vis a church which is the recipient. And this is a terribly difficult relationship. But if, as I am fully persuaded, the centre of the concern of missions is always the communication of the Gospel to those who have not heard it, then the missionary and his younger-church colleague will always be in the relationship of mutual giving and receiving. I am sure that most missionaries know, as I certainly do, that they have received far more than they have given in the fellowship of the Gospel. For the Gospel is that kind of treasure which we can never simply possess and then hand over. In the measure in which we communicate it to others, we receive it back for ourselves. And even from the simplest believer, the most experienced missionary may have to learn more than he can give. There are other and more compelling reasons for saying that the centre of our concern as missions must always be the communicating of the Gospel to those who are without the knowledge of Christ. But it is also true that when this concern is kept firmly in the centre, then there is no need for us to fall into the spiritual perils of neo-colonialism.

II

I should also like to mention briefly the particular issues raised for missions by the development of the movement of inter-church aid. I am persuaded that this movement is of the greatest importance for the mission of the Church in its broadest sense. It is, I think, unfortunate that missions have been somewhat defensive in their reaction to it. There is doubtless much to be learned on both sides, and both sides have made their mistakes. But we know that we have to learn to cooperate.

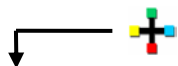
Modern missionary work is also a form of inter-church action. In so far as our work is in partnership with younger churches, and in so far as we are engaged in supporting these churches in their life and mission, we are engaged in inter-church aid. It is, I suppose, only a



small part of the work of missions to-day which is directed immediately to the heathen world, without the involvement of a younger church. We are in partnership as churches, even if the partnership is still far from complete. This is the truth – and it is an important truth – in the statement that missions are also doing inter-church aid.

It would, however, be a great mistake to conclude from this that missions are identical with inter-church aid. The address of the missionary action is not the Church, but the unbelieving world. I think there is a great danger that this may be forgotten. Inter-church aid on a global scale is not the same as mission. One has to ask; aid for what? Churches can aid one another for many good purposes, and yet still fail to be truly missionary. The work of most of our missionary societies is, or ought to be, inter-church aid for mission. A missionary is not simply a fraternal worker sent from one church to another. He is, indeed (or ought to be) a fraternal worker; but the essential gift that he should bring from one church to another is his missionary vocation. I believe with all my heart that a missionary who goes, for example, from Europe to Africa must become fully and completely part of the African Church. He must honour it as the Church, love it, live in its life and obey it in the Lord, as truly the Church of God. He can in no way be someone apart from the Church, co-operating with it without belonging to it. He must be as fully and completely part of it as the African pastor who is his colleague. But within that Church he must fulfil his missionary calling, which is a calling to bring the Gospel to those who are outside its reach. He must be continually pressing upon the Church his obligation in this respect, and the Church must respect that obligation. Certainly this may create tensions. But it is part of the function of a missionary anywhere to be within the Church a perpetual reminder that the Church does not exist for itself but as the witness of God's Kingdom over all men. If missions lose their concentration upon this essential and central missionary calling, they are as salt which has lost its savour.

On the other hand, fidelity to this central missionary calling has always carried with it the obligation to serve men in a variety of ways. Ministries of healing, teaching, theological training, social service and many others have been from early times part of the work of missions. A vast part of our present obligations is for the continuing support of such services. There seems to be every reason why we should welcome the development of new patterns of inter-church aid in meeting these obligations. We who are engaged in the day-to-day work of missions

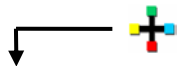


know that our relations with younger churches are often strained.

Many of us have become convinced that a genuinely free and open relationship between us cannot be achieved within the present bilateral relationships between a mission board and a younger church. This conviction is the origin of the proposals for Joint Action for Mission. The development of ecumenical patterns of aid, crossing the frontiers both of confession and of nation, has been a liberating experience for many younger churches. To be able to share fully in it is part of their right as autonomous churches. Whatever be the strength of the traditional bilateral patterns, it is certain that they cannot be the only forms of relationship among churches. The privilege of sharing together in giving and receiving, of being part of a family of churches which are mutually interdependent, is something which churches rightly welcome and which we must all welcome.

However, there are certain obvious weaknesses in the ecumenical relationships as they have developed at present, of which I would mention two.

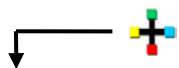
First, to a considerable extent the new development of inter-church aid has been outside or alongside the older bilateral patterns, without being adequately integrated into a single pattern. In other words, ecumenical projects have been developed as something extra, additional to the normal work of churches; this normal work continues along denominational channels without being subject to the critique of ecumenical thinking. There is, I suspect, little relation between the decisions about their own programmes which individual churches in Asia and Africa communicate to their parent missionary societies and the decisions about inter-church aid projects which Christian Councils send to Geneva. The danger in this situation is that ecumenical co-operation becomes a matter of optional extras, rather than a governing principle for the ordinary work of churches. I think that the remedy for this situation lies to a considerable extent in the hands of the mission boards. Would it not be possible for mission boards to adopt the following two simple practices? On the one hand, whenever a request is received from a related younger church for help with a new programme, the board should, as a first response, write back to enquire whether this programme has been discussed with the neighbouring churches and with the national Christian Council, and whether it forms a part of an agreed national strategy for the mission of the Church. On the other hand, when mission boards receive from Geneva their copy of the annual Inter-Church Aid Projects' List, they should study



the projects listed from the areas where they work and should write to their related churches in those areas asking whether these projects are to be regarded as having higher priority than any of the programmes now being undertaken by the church with the help of the mission. This procedure would, I believe, have the effect of bringing together these two kinds of relationship. It would be a long step in the direction of Joint Action for Mission. It would help to ensure that common planning was applied to the fundamentals of the churches' work, and not merely to the extras.

Secondly, missionaries often criticize the whole system of short-term projects on the ground that such short-term commitments are ineffective for accomplishing the real tasks of mission. I think it is true that there is a certain danger in thinking that one can discharge one's obligations towards the world by means of short-term projects. On the other hand, such projects have a real

value, provided that they are properly related to long-term programmes. The weakness of ecumenical development hitherto has been that inter-church aid has been largely limited to projects, whereas long-term commitments remained within denominational channels—from mission board to younger church. That is no longer so. The Mexico meeting of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism drew attention to the great importance of the fact that the World Council of Churches, through its Division of World Mission and Evangelism, is now making possible a growing network of ecumenical co-operation in long-term programmes, including the Theological Education Fund, the Christian Literature Fund and the many programmes supported by the Programme Fund of the Division. What is needed now is, on the one hand, a sound relationship between projects and programmes; and, on the other, that mission boards should be active in educating their supporters in the significance of their participation in these ecumenical programmes. Finally, what are we doing to help the ordinary member of the churches to understand the breadth and the depth of his obligations as a Christian living in the mid-twentieth century? There is, I think, a real danger that Christians may be encouraged to think that they can discharge their obligations by a shorter, non-committal charity, a giving which avoids long-term commitments and which evades the basic questions of faith about the purpose of God for mankind. We must help Christians to see the whole range of their obligations – in technical assistance to developing nations, in the fiscal and commercial policies of their nations, in inter-church aid and in missionary work



in a single perspective. The essential point about that perspective will be this: that we see ourselves as partners with a world-wide family of churches which exist as the signs and instruments and first-fruits of Christ's victory over all the powers of evil. In this perspective, technical aid, inter-church aid and missions are not opposed to one another. The missionary preaching has as its immediate purpose the conversion of men to become themselves signs and agents of God's Kingdom, and the technical aid is itself offered as a sign of faith in God's purpose and hope of His Kingdom. In that perspective, inter-church aid is the activity of churches which are strengthening one another, not merely in material resources, and not merely in that which concerns their own needs, but in all that is needed to become the effective witnesses of God's Kingdom.

All material is reprinted with permission from the Newbigin family, the Newbigin Estate and the publisher. All material contained on the Newbigin.Net website, or on the accompanying CD, remains the property of the original author and/or publisher. All rights to this material are reserved. Materials are not to be distributed to other web locations for retrieval, published in other media, or mirrored at other sites without express written permission from the appropriate parties. The material can be used for private research purposes only.