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Missions

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A manuscript written ca. 1991 relating missions to homiletic theory and practice.

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Homiletic theory and practice in the western world normally assumes that the audience knows the name of Jesus and recognizes that the Bible has some kind of authority. Missionary preaching can make no such assumptions. 'Jesus' is a new word – perhaps the name of a new deity? Quoting from Scripture evokes no resonance.

The preacher has, of course, to begin by learning the language. This means that he or she has to use words which are freighted with meaning, often with profoundly evocative meanings, derived from the mental world of the hearers. The preacher uses, and must use, words which have a meaning for the hearers different from the preacher's intention. There is no escape from this. Words like God, sin and salvation derive their Christian content from the entire experience of sharing in the Christian tradition.

People nourished in a tradition wholly alien to the Christian tradition come to share the Christian understanding of these words by becoming familiar with the Bible. It is impossible for people to understand who Jesus is, without a deep insertion into the mental world of the Old Testament. The widely practised custom of making parts of the New Testament available many years before the whole Bible was translated has had far-reaching consequences, especially in Africa where the splitting off by independent groups from the churches founded by missionaries has been in direct proportion to the availability of the Old Testament in their languages.

But first there must be a deep insertion of the preacher into the mental world of the hearers. A preacher, for example, who claims to offer eternal life to an audience of Hindus is offering them exactly what they are trying to escape. If he or she offers the gift of salvation in Christ to those who are strangers to the Bible, they will assume that he or she is offering them something like the benefits of the welfare state.

A great preacher of the Gospel to Hindus, the Scottish missionary A. G. Hogg, used the phrase 'challenging relevance' to describe what is needed. The preacher must be heard as addressing real issues. But the word must probe behind the unquestioned assumptions of the hearers with a call to new allegiance. In his book 'Karma and Redemption' he illustrated his

principles by taking the Hindu doctrine of karma as the frame for a sharp presentation of the atoning work of Christ. But the supreme examples of missionary preaching are those to be found in the writings of St Paul and St John, who use the philosophical terms and concepts of their Greek readers to communicate a message which calls these concepts into radical question.

The work of foreign missions during the 'Great Century' (Latourette) of Anglo-Saxon missionary outreach, has had effects in the preaching of the sending churches. The reports of missionary success have provided material for preachers. It must be candidly said that while missionaries were all too aware of their failures and disappointments, it was expected of them that they would report their successes, and these reports provided encouragement to preachers looking for evidence of the truth and power of the Gospel. They helped to nourish a mood of triumphalism, and it must also be admitted that this sense of triumph could become a dangerously syncretistic mixture of a proper Christian glorying in the cross with an improper nationalist glorying in the achievements of 'our people'. Such concepts as those of British imperialism and American 'manifest destiny' could be too easily nourished by a certain kind of missionary reporting.

The elements of falsehood in this mixture were unmasked when in the late 20th century large numbers of the peoples to whom missionaries had been sent ('the heathen') became neighbours of Christian congregations in the cities of the western world. The reaction of guilt about western imperialism easily infected its religious components, with the result that, in many Christian circles, it came to be regarded as improper to preach the Gospel to the adherents of the world-religions. 'Dialogue' became the preferred option.; This development overlooks two facts: (1) that dialogue in the `sense that it is understood in the western society which inherits the Greek tradition is foreign to the world-religions; and (2) that no dialogue can replace the communication of factual news, which is what preaching in the biblical sense is.

The impact of missionary experience on preaching in the western world is likely to be of a different character in the next decades: The long syncretistic relation between Christianity and western culture has now developed into a situation where the specificity of the Gospel is almost lost, absorbed into the relativism, individualism and narcissism of western culture. It is now necessary for preachers in the western world to recognize that they are in' a missionary situation where the Bible is no longer authoritative Scripture, and the name of Jesus, freely used in swearing, does not refer to any well known person. The difference from the experience of the foreign missionary of the 19th century is that here the preacher does not have to make a deliberate effort to immerse him or her self in the mental world of the hearers. That is already all-too effectively done'. 'The task is to recover the full meaning of the words we use in Christian discourse, and that can only happen when the Bible, in its canonical wholeness, recovers its place as Scripture. Preaching is the announcing of news; it is narrative. In a missionary situation, in a society which has a different story to tell about itself, preaching has to be firmly and unapologetically rooted in the real story.

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