

A Critique Of “The Role Of The Missionary Today”

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There is much contained in the foregoing presentation to which one would say Amen and give a strong endorsement. One would question other points; some would be revised; some enlarged and still others added to or even omitted.

First of all, one expected to find answers in the body of this paper to the question that appeared in the opening paragraph. One expected to hear something about the effect of the upheavals in the Middle East upon the roles of the missionaries, or the roles of the missionaries in those areas of Africa where there is a steadily growing consciousness among the people of human rights and basic freedoms, and what the missionary can and should do about them. One hoped to learn of the ways missionaries are coping with the issues in the ideological struggles of these times. What of the role of the missionary in the midst of this world-wide ferment in which he may be a voice for the silent people, a guide for the lost people, a spokesman for the uninformed people, an interpreter to the confused people, a champion of the causes for the unjustly-treated people.

The reply to the question could have dealt with the call for more missionaries with the spirit and courage of Father Huddleston, Michael Scott, and the Bishop of Johannesburg. For certainly there is a place today for the missionary who in the critical situations can help in redeeming, and reconciling people. It is dangerous, yet it is demanded.

One looked for something about the redemption of economic life -- the struggle for justice in trade, commerce, and honesty in business affairs;

the building of cooperatives and the establishment of new enterprises for improved standards of living. There is a role for the missionary today like that of Mr. Shepherd, the economist in Uganda.

The task of the missionary amid the turmoils in the complex processes of rapid urbanization where so few qualified persons are at work was not mentioned. Nevertheless it is an area where it seems that a major catastrophe is taking place, where so much is being left to the government or the Roman Catholic Church.

One must differ with the author when he says that it will be by the multiplication of churches that the social welfare needs of the people will be most surely achieved. It is imperative that skilled technicians who are missionaries must be used as members of the evangelistic team.

The author seemed to have a far too limited understanding of the "end of mission" found in such expressions as, "the planting of churches and the upbuilding of those planted," or "the leading of people to Christ," or "the passionate concern for the redemption of men." These definitions are excellent but they are not inclusive enough. The end of mission is the redemption of the whole man in the whole society. This seems true notwithstanding the author's insistence that for the Church to include the many good things that are not mission, the mission becomes so thin that the Church fails to reproduce itself and is found barren. A mission to save all of the people in all of their relationships and to help them grow toward an abundant life in all of their activities is a full mission productive and bearing fruit.

The writer outlined several roles for the missionary, the first, multi-racial ambassadors for Christ. The adoption of a policy to send out inter-racial teams seemed to hinge upon the question whether or not such work would cause one to live in the midst of tensions, find his energies consumed and his discipling thwarted. This role is so important that the Church must find persons fitted for it by careful selection and thorough preparation. Where tensions have arisen among missionaries there is ample evidence that the persons were not adequately tested for this role.

In discussing the role of the ecumenical messenger there seemed to be a contradiction, for in one paragraph it was stated that "the basic purpose of most missionaries cannot be considered that of harmonizing churches, building up in existing congregations adequate conceptions of what the world Church really is, or bringing about an ecumenical viewpoint, desirable as all these are." Yet a little further along he concluded, "As ecumenical messenger (the missionary) makes sure that in the

process of being reconciled, men have a sound understanding of the world Church.” If this is not a contradiction, then it probably means that the ecumenical messenger is a specialist who alone may perform this task. Where are the missionaries who cannot be prepared to play this role and find it the most natural thing in their ministry to meet this need. In a day when we deplore as much as any generation has the fact of our brokenness as a Church into hundreds of segments overseas like the brokenness of the sending churches, certainly the reconciling role of every missionary is one of harmonizing churches. This task is to help make possible even more significant cooperative efforts than have yet been achieved. More than this, the role of the missionary would seem to be one of doing all within his power to stress the likenesses between all Christian groups which are so many more than their differences. The practice must cease when we pass on our peculiar ways to the persons overseas and require them to do the same.

In discussing the third role, namely that of short-term specialist, it seems to be debatable whether American specialists can advise effectively in relatively few areas. Perhaps one should say that properly-prepared specialists who know how to learn from the people overseas, how to establish rapport, will be in a position to advise in a large number of areas. So much depends upon one’s understanding, humility, and approach to other people.

Much more emphasis should have been placed upon the roles of the missionary in university work, teaching, and research, where as Mr. Danners has well put it, “the Western missionary is most needed today.” Much more importance should be attached to the role of the missionary as a researcher.

So very few missionaries are engaged in full-time research. Too few are giving even a part of their time in gathering essential data. But a trickle of missionary money is being set aside for research by all of the Protestant denominations overseas.

The strongest emphasis should be placed upon the role of the missionary as assistant to the younger churches. In so many places the missionary wrestles with himself to be willing to learn how to be a true servant of the Church abroad.

The role of the mobile missionary is very fitting for some areas and at certain stages in the life of the Church. However, there are many places where the frequent movement of the missionary seems to have been the

chief reason for ineffective work; for the poor command of the language; and the lack of necessary knowledge of the people.

The situation described with reference to the missionary as seminary professor points up again the need for better preparation for missionaries. If he has learned about the real worth of the elements in the culture of the receiving group, of the processes of culture change, of the limitations of his own cultural trappings, he will not be in a position to present his American fashions and plans. Instead he will be seeking to know the ways by which he may help the people to develop their own patterns of thought and action. Here again, the problem is not a matter of the role to be played, but of the type of person that is being asked to play it.

Finally, if the task before the missionary is that of helping in the redemption of all of the life of people in all of their relationships, then the roles for the missionary will be as wide as life itself.



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