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The Christian Mission, a Look into the Future

R. PIERCE BEAVER

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THE AUTHOR ARGUES ON THE BASIS OF A LIFETIME OF EXPERIENCE THAT THE MISSION of the church demands a return to the proclamation of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and to a reaffirmation of the principle of voluntarism, as distinct from bureaucratic mission strategy.

The officers of the Midwest Fellowship of Professors of Missions have asked me to peer into the crystal ball and tell what I discern about the future state of the Christian mission. I am scarcely a seer, and swiftly moving and changing events, trends, and developments in our contemporary world becloud the vision and obscure the horizon.*

The term "crisis in mission" has become an old and hackneyed expression. Nevertheless, the crisis continues and deepens or heightens as the case may be, and we who are scholars in the field have ever more urgent need to ask questions, to attempt clarification of issues, to essay new formulations, to suggest experimental ways and means, to try to redefine mission, and

* In this address I was unable to draw on the discerning insight and knowledge of former students and enduring friends who prepared the *Festschrift* in my honor entitled *The Future of the Christian World Mission*, ed. William J. Danker and Wi Jo Kang (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971). The collective wisdom of the authors of that volume deserves attention and careful study.

to point the churches to a more adequate understanding of what we believe to be their essential task. The crisis is the product of an abysmal decline in faith and concern. Its measure is that of the old Chinese expression: *I lo ch'ien chang* — one fall a thousand fathoms. In the realm of theory one may suspect that the crisis is in part a consequence of the merger of the International Missionary Council into the World Council of Churches, as was foreseen by such persons as Max Warren and Helen Kim. They feared that local concerns, ecclesiastical bureaucrats, confessional politicking, professional evangelists in the secularized West, and the growing parochialism would conspire together drastically to reduce commitment to witness "to the ends of the earth" and to the discipling of the nations. Ecumenical studies and discussion have come up with the slogan "Witness on Six Continents" and with a definition of mission as the church's witness to the world in the situation of each local congregation and com-

munity of Christians. The "sending" dimension of the total mission has been written off as an anachronism, and it is being phased out in a diminishing system of interchurch aid. The new theory has matched the mood of the American local churches at least, and the overseas boards are "broke" because of the decline in giving. In the name of "our world mission," funds are diverted from overseas programs to shore up weakened structures and to oil creaking machinery at home. This tendency is strengthened by the skepticism about the rightfulness of conversion and drawing persons from other religious communities into the church. The adverse movement within the churches is aggravated by the tendency of the United States and Great Britain, long the dominant leaders in Christian world mission, to withdraw from their political and economic commitments overseas, and for their citizens consequently to be preoccupied with domestic concerns. One front of mission cannot be neglected or denied without adverse effect on other fronts; and already the domestic agencies of the churches are being afflicted with blight and malnutrition.

The mission is one, and it is worldwide. It is directed to every individual, family, social unit, nation, and the whole race without exception. It is the communication to mankind between the Ascension and the End of knowledge that God has in Christ reconciled the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:18-20). I find the form of the Great Commission in Acts 1:8 illuminating in comprehending the whole breadth and scope of the mission. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear wit-

ness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth" (NEB). What is implied in the "ends of the earth" is set forth in Matthew's form of the commission: "Go forth therefore and make all nations my disciples; baptize men everywhere in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; and teach them to observe all that I have commanded you."

The commission appears to list the simultaneous fronts of mission rather than successive geographical or chronological phases of it. Witness in Jerusalem is in the disciples' home town; that in Judea and Samaria is in one's country and among its depressed minority groups and semi-colonial appendages. The Samaritans were the remnant of the old Northern Kingdom, intermarried with strangers, heretics or adherents of a debased form of the old faith, despised by all proper Jews. Samaritans are ever with us in every age and every land. They are those despised, segregated, ignored, alienated, and exploited groups disdained by the dominant class in the churches and the establishment in any country. We Americans have a Samaria in Puerto Rico and Samaritans in the blacks, the red Indians, the Chicanos, the migrant sharecroppers, and other minority groups. (In a sense the whole lot of developing nations, former colonies, are Samaritans to Europe and America.) The ministry of Jesus Himself was to the Jews and Samaritans, and His precepts and example show us the model and spirit for witness and ministry to our neighbors. He taught men who God is and showed them how to be truly human children of the God who is the Father, how to meet a brother's need for food, shelter, healing,

freedom from want, dignity, worth, friendship, love. Love your neighbor as yourself because you love God; treat him as you would want him to treat you when you are in need. Present ideas about "the church for others," Christian presence, humanization and development, along with new kinds of ministries to the oppressed and the alienated, come from the words and example of Jesus by way of Bonhoeffer's "man for others" and such pioneer efforts as the French worker-priests. Without such outgoing love the church becomes formal and sterile. Nevertheless, such concern and ministry alone cannot generate long enduring devotion to the ideal in actual sustained practice. It cannot maintain a world mission. What happens when men accept Jesus as a great, even the greatest, spiritual and ethical teacher, is seen in the Brahma Somaj, Ghandi, and many a Neo-Hindu swami and devotee. Jesus is accepted as an inspiring teacher and faithful guide, but not as Savior and Lord. The vital power for sustained witness and the transforming power are both lacking. Witness in Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria must be complemented and sustained in witness to the ends of the earth. The teaching of Jesus is the second, not the first, part of the message of Christians in mission.

The primary Gospel is what God has done in Jesus Christ: that on the cross He granted His Son victory over sin and death and in Him reconciled the world to Himself. God raised Jesus from the dead and made Him Christ and Lord. The mission to the ends of the earth is a spontaneous celebration of the resurrection. Jesus had limited His own mission to the household of Israel. The resurrection

raised all limitation and incorporated the witness in Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria into the discipling of the nations. The early Christians knew the presence of the risen Lord in their witness, and they found that the Holy Spirit was given them for power in testifying. Easter brought the conviction of the uniqueness of Christ as the revelation of God, of the fullness of His power and grace as Savior, and of the finality of His sovereignty as Lord. The resurrection means that the course of history moves under the impact and power of Christ to the conquest of the powers of this world and their transformation into the kingdom of God. This is news which cannot be held back and has to be proclaimed and demonstrated to all men. The sending mission discipling the nations to the ends of the earth is always the spiritual thermometer which measures the faith of the Christian community.

"Christendom" is no longer existent, and the base for world mission is found in every land where there is a community of Christians, and fundamental thought about mission must be in terms of the entire church. Yet the crisis is so acute in the West that we must endeavor prayerfully and earnestly to deal with it. It is largely due to the fact that there seem to be so few Christians who give more than lip service to Christ as Lord, Savior, and the unique and decisive Word of God to men. The resurrection appears to be no longer a reality celebrated by hosts of faithful. The glad contagion of faith is lacking. When many persons learn that God has never left any of His children orphans, they in embarrassment abandon participation in a mission that seeks conversions. They do not know how to relate the two truths that

God is the Father of all men and that He has made Christ to be Savior and Lord.

So it is that missiologists, theologians, and mission administrators have a tremendous obligation to provide Christian disciples with a creditable, inspiring, and exciting contemporary explanation of what it means to the world today that Christ is its Savior and Lord, what is the salvation that is found in Him for every man and woman, for society as a whole, and for the realm of exploited, polluted nature. Keep in mind that by and large over our planet today there is far less interest in personal salvation in terms of a future life than in terms of a genuine human life here and now and less concern about personal salvation than in salvation for the race of mankind. Is conversion necessary still, and how must it be manifested? How, unallied with imperial power and colonial might, do we carry the Good News to the nations freed from our old spiritual, racial, cultural, nationalistic superiority? How do we witness in friendly encounter with those other children of God, the men and women of other faiths? New forms, techniques, organizations, and material for education are imperative and urgent needs.

However, instruction and promotion cannot awaken motivation, dedication, and zeal. They can only cultivate them when they exist. Last November several missiologists met in an ad hoc group to plan a consultation on the future of publishing for education in world mission. Unfortunately we found it impossible to get a grip on the problem. The deadly malaise in the churches first has to be at least partially cured. Only the contagion of faith can rekindle the fire as the Holy Spirit fans the flames. I frequently recall that assertion

of Emil Brunner made in Japan: "The church exists by mission as fire exists by burning." There are enough little fires still tended by faithful ones to set the whole church aflame.

Our professional associations of missiologists have as much responsibility for kindling the fire as for our academic studies. Most missions chairs were created after the collapse of spontaneous action for recruiting students as missionaries and for inspiring the local churches through the seminary students. We above all others should concern ourselves with the tending of the flame. The gloom resulting from the disappearance of some schools of missions is now being lessened by the promising new program of world mission studies being developed in the Chicago Cluster of Theological Schools. I have great hope also for the salutary influence of the new International Association for Mission Studies, because the European missiologists are personally committed to the primacy of the mission to the ends of the earth.

These remarks about the personal influence of teachers of missions bring me to the stating of my conviction about the next stage of world mission in America. The encouragement of voluntarism is necessary to recovery and advance. Most British and European mission agencies and the American inter- or undenominational missions are still voluntary societies. Twenty years ago Max Warren and Hans-Werner Gensichen were suggesting that the voluntary principle is essential to mission. Here in America, however, we claimed that official commitment of denominational churches through official boards was a better way and better justified by Bible and theology. But our boards were put into

the straitjacket of denominational structure and budget, became administratively rigid, were subjected to American business managerial principles and methods, and eventually deprived the local disciples and congregations of meaningful and conscious part in the sending operation. The whole thing became depersonalized. Now many members have been lost to the cause, alienated or discouraged. Actually all through the 19th century and the first quarter of the 20th the expanding American overseas mission was sustained by a tremendous volume of voluntary participation. For more than the first half century the promotion and education were provided by voluntary association of interested persons in the monthly Concert of Prayer, and after that the women in their denominational and interdenominational societies initiated the children and kept the congregations knowledgeable and committed. The students educated and recruited themselves through the Societies of Inquiry and the Student Volunteer Movement. Managerial, administrative centralization and uniformity gradually destroyed this spontaneous participation, and we now pay a very heavy cost for its elimination. It is time once again to look to voluntary association and action for rescue and to foster voluntarism among those who remain devoted. Various kinds of local groups within congregations may be formed, and COCU's suggested "task force" may lend itself to the local scene. The boards should find ways and means of bringing their constituents into policy-making and programing. The Western portions of the church cannot forever resist the prompting of the Holy Spirit and

remain cool to the fundamental reason for its existence.

Nevertheless, despite my hope that the missionary vision and zeal will revive in the Western churches, I am becoming more and more convinced that leadership and predominance in personnel in world mission are about to pass from Europe and America to the churches of Africa, Asia, and perhaps the Pacific. Those churches must throw off the handicaps that inhibit action, which result from the methods of their past planting and fostering. They are doing that. Just as the North American churches had to enter upon overseas mission before they could learn stewardship and bring forth the men and money for the churching of a continental nation, so the Asian and other churches probably need such a mission for the development of their strength and power for homeland tasks of mission.

David B. Barrett's statistical studies show convincingly that black Africa south of the Sahara will soon have the largest Christian community on any continent. Our African brethren are now preoccupied with escape from European and American ecclesiastical colonialism and with the Africanization of Christianity. But already many of them see distinctive contributions which Africans may make to Western and Asian Christianity, and the mighty tide of evangelization is bound sooner or later to burst out of Africa into other parts of the earth. Many churches in Asia are stagnant, ingrown enclaves, but others are powerfully on the move. The studies and action programs of the East Asia Christian Conference are imparting inspiration, illumination, motivation, confidence, and encouragement to the member churches.

During my visits to seminaries in south-east Asia last winter and spring students for the first time asked me questions about how their churches, so poor materially in comparison with Western churches, could begin discharging their responsibility in world mission. Already there is much lending of personnel to sister churches for evangelistic purposes and a considerable amount of direct sending of missionary agents. I think that we shall find them working in Europe and America tomorrow. Eventually they will be offering us all new ideas, insights, methods, techniques, leadership, and partnership in the world mission. The resurrection is more of a living reality to many of those Christians than to us, and in their situation they understand better than we what it means to accept Christ as Savior and Lord.

How are the three fronts of world mission to be kept integrated into one whole with each contributing to the strength, power, and effectiveness of the other? That is a thorny problem. I am sure, however, that it is not to be done by merging the boards for overseas ministries with the homeland boards, as many persons advocate. That would only aggravate the present tendency to define "world mission" in local terms and to divert most resources to immediate, near-at-hand programs. All would be concentrated in Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria. Institutionally an umbrella agency covering all mission concerns, providing autonomy for each, and allowing voluntary participation by those passionately devoted to each might be feasible. The whole mission of Christ's church has to be kept under the lordship of Christ.

Witness and service on all fronts of world mission are likely to be, according

to the evidence, much less professionalized than at present. Again the principle of voluntarism is called into application, now in the realm of action rather than planning and support. The churches of Asia and Africa, both in witness and ministry at home and abroad, will never be able to employ the large numbers of professionals customary in the West. Only voluntary lay witness on a large scale can provide the volume of ministry required and the vehicle through which the contagion of God's love can be carried far and wide. Something of the same declericalization and laicizing of the church's ministry is happening in our land also. All this puts a high premium on the right type and high quality of professional service, which is the indispensable resource for such lay ministry. The whole enterprise of mission is likely to be much more spontaneous in the future.

There will be, I am convinced, the renewal of mission from each of the six continents to the other five, and eventually to the seventh when Antarctica is settled, as well as witness and service in the six severally and separately. In the whole of the one world mission there is bound to be more stress on unity for mission and mission in unity because a more convincing demonstration of the reconciliation of men with God in Christ simply must be given by the church, which is Christ's body. The long-advocated international, interracial, interdenominational teams may be formed and deployed, and there may be more united missions such as the one in Nepal. There will be some new institutional means for support of such ventures. The breach between so-called evangelicals and so-called ecumenicals must be healed

and a common committed fellowship of witnesses achieved. Concerted study and planning by Roman Catholics and Protestants, now rapidly developing, will become more general and eventually result in more extensive common action. Hopefully the Orthodox will join forces with the others as the Eastern churches enter more vigorously again into mission. There may be some merger of agencies and of churches, but the urgent matter is the expression of our already God-given spiritual unity in the fundamental task of the church.

At this moment each church in each land considers itself to be sovereign there, and few welcome the coming of new missionaries into the country no matter how inadequate present evangelism may be in relation to the territorial size and population of the country and the extent of available resources of the church there. Effective mission throughout the world in the future demands the giving up of false pride and the baseness of full sufficiency. There is no church large or small, ancient or very young, in any country today which appears thoroughly adequate to its responsibilities in evangelism and ministry. Certainly the American churches are no longer adequate to our own situation. We should welcome Asian and African missionaries who might come with a fresh statement of the Gospel and a new approach to our dechristianized masses. Similarly no other church in any part of the world shows itself adequate to its situation's challenges. Common planning and general clearance ought to precede any new evangelistic ventures, but there should be room for both union enterprises and direct ventures mutually agreed

upon. I do not mean that there is still room for the multiplication of denominations. There is not. But there is a place for direct sending if the missionaries do not compete and overlap with existing churches and if they direct the new churches into organic relationship with those older ones.

Furthermore, in the future world mission the present interchurch exchange of personnel and granting of subsidies, which still passes for "mission," should include a far greater number of persons from the non-Western churches. But on the whole this kind of activity should be drastically reduced in favor of investing resources in a genuine mission of witness to unbelief and nonbelief and in loving service to human need and conquest of the evil powers of dehumanization. The meaningless distinction between "mission" and "service" should be abolished and the duplication in administration terminated. Ways of introducing Christ as Savior and Lord to men of other faiths, to whom God has always granted revelation of truth and His saving grace, among whom the Holy Spirit is already active, without doing violence to this work of God and to what these persons hold true and dear, is probably the most crucial item in the design of the mission of the future. Dialog is accepted as a means to mutual understanding, but very few agree that it may contain an evangelistic intent. How does Christ, the creative, revelatory, and salvatory Word of God hidden in those religions relate to Christ manifested as Savior and Lord by the church? Not even Karl Rahner's doctrine of "anonymous Christianity" answers that question satisfactorily.

Pioneering experimentation is the order

of the day in the meeting with persons of other faiths and in every aspect of witness and ministry. Able missionaries should be sent forth from the churches in every land on earth, free, trusted, allowed to discover new ways of presenting Jesus Christ without being pressed speedily to demonstrate "success." Asian, African, and other non-Western missionaries will come up with much that is new and some of it will be effective.

As we seek the shape of the mission of the future, let us have done with the present unprofitable strife over polarization of concepts and issues. Why must we so absolutize every new insight or discovery of one aspect of truth that we are compelled to deny the continuing validity of what we have known to be right? Let there be no more of the folly of setting "presence" in opposition to "proclamation," humanization and development in stark contrast to evangelism, mission in Jerusalem, Judaea, and Samaria in antagonism to discipling the nations even to the ends of the earth. All the partial phases and aspects

of the mission, fronts of mission, and means of mission should be gathered into a balanced synthesis in tomorrow's mission.

I cannot give a blueprint of tomorrow's world mission, but I have hope and faith that there will be one. *Agape* works itself out in world mission — to Jerusalem, Judaea, Samaria, and everywhere. The nations are still to be discipled. The kingdom of God is still that goal toward which history is moving. God has in Christ reconciled the world unto Himself. He has committed to us disciple members in Christ's mystical body the message of reconciliation in and through a ministry of reconciliation. If there is a resurrection and if Jesus Christ is Savior and Lord, as many of us still believe, there is no option, no alternative: there must be a mission to the whole world. Until the end of time we who bear Christ's name are spontaneously compelled to say to all men: "Behold your Savior and Lord! In Christ's name, be reconciled to God."

Chicago, Ill.