

401/10/2/8

**MISSION:****New Words or New Understanding?**

THE SEMANTICS of the Christian witness are being challenged on every front. Contemporary authors are intrigued with such expressions as "the world comes of age," "the secularity of the gospel," "Christianity is against religion," and "true transcendence is not a separate life out there but a life for others." Such treasured words as "stewardship," "evangelism," "redemption," and "salvation" must search for emotional appeal and a respectable place in today's world.

Some of our churchmen dismiss the semantic adventures as nothing more than faddism. There's more to it than that. And it's not handled by changing the decor or rearranging the furniture.

Today the church struggles with the challenge of mission in a revolutionary environment. Perhaps our problem is paralleled by what's happened to the ringing of the church bell. Once upon a time, the bell called the worshippers to church, and it tolled

while the congregation repeated the Lord's Prayer. The elderly, the sick, and the mother at home with her baby knew that the congregation was at prayer. Today the ringing of the church bell disturbs the neighborhood.

And just to insist on ringing it will not change the pattern.

Do we need to think of new words? Or are we at the place where we must renew our basic understanding of mission?

Colin Williams, in his book, *What in the World?*, describes some of the changes that must be confronted. In doing so, he does not present a sociological examination of the world situation. He does underscore the new areas of tension.

Mr. Williams is not dismayed by the changes that are coming. He feels that we ought to be looking forward to the fading away of many of our institutional forms.

"Certainly the church looks forward to the time when it will wither

away and Christ be all in all: but it knows that in this present age it will always need to be available to Christ in the world in such a way that through its separate life he can point the world to his purpose for all life."

Here, more than in any other area of the life of the church, one can understand the new emphasis of mission. The crisis in piety brings people to a re-examination of their faith, their ways of worship, and their ways of thinking. And they find new understanding of mission.

It is this understanding that brings an Alan Paton to a study of the classic prayer of St. Francis. Here is a man, at odds with his own South African government, understanding the tragic tension between his view of the Christian mission and the apartheid policy of his country.

In his book, *Instrument of Thy Peace*, Mr. Paton helps you to see what you've been looking at. He yanks you up from melancholia and

self-pity, helping you to see God's power at work in this world. He writes as a white man who understands the burden of the white man.

"If I am tempted to sneer at Congo chaos, then I must remember who prepared the way for it. If I am angered by Congo brutality, then let me also remember Leopold II. If I am tempted to hate, and if I fall to the temptation, then either I repent or I cease to be a Christian."

This is at the base of mission. It brings you to the humble place of listening, repenting, and understanding.

"It is in pardoning that we are pardoned. . . . What does giving oneself to God mean? Whatever else it means, it certainly means giving oneself to others."

Another book, *Man's New Home*, by Herman Reissig, is dated. It's five years old. That's how fast the world situation changes. His book is important only because he has looked at the international scene for so many years and has indicated the areas of concern that confront the world.

When we speak of the Christian witness we must confront the world revolution, the challenges of nationalism, the nature of the communist challenge, and the rootage of Christian social action. The gospel is shared in a world which must deal with overpopulation, with poverty, and with the chasm between the rich nations and the poor nations.

"In thousands of small towns in Asia and Africa, there is at least one radio around which the people can gather. If the inhabitants there cannot read, they can at least see and hear. For them the question grows and spreads, 'Why must we and our

children live like this?'"

The caricatures of our civilization often overshadow our own understanding of mission, and we are driven into a new examination of our faith. For this is a crisis of faith.

Percival Spear's book, *India, Pakistan and the West*, reveals a specific area of the world in which the whole process of mission sees its challenge. He understands that here is a continent where there is searing frustration and inner conflict. His book is not about the specific tasks of mission, but about the environment in which the witness must be shared.

Mr. Spear sees the West as world-accepting; Hinduism as world-re-nouncing. He emphasizes the Christian understanding of the importance of the personality, while Hinduism seeks to escape from the chain of rebirth. And he sees the points of contact between the Hindu, the Muslim, and the Christian.

Some of the finest reappraisals of the Christian position have been made by Roman Catholic scholars. A symposium on the areas of reappraisal necessary to rethinking the mission situation is reported in the volume, *Reappraisal: Prelude to Change*, edited by William J. Richardson, M.M. Reading the exciting statements raises the sole question, "Is all of this too late?"

In one essay, Father Nevins notes that heroic and dedicated missionaries carried the seeds of defeat with them when they went about their far-flung activities. Without meaning to do so, they patronized those with whom they worked. They took with them the evidences of their own culture. More important, he insists, they

took with them an indefensible apologetic theology which was narrow and self-deluding.

Several contributors to the volume note that if the Protestant church had entered the mission field earlier in history, there might have been an earlier reappraisal. As it was, too many Roman Catholic missionaries proclaimed the conviction that this form of the church was the only correct statement and must be accepted.

As a matter of fact, there is not too much evidence in the volume of real Roman-Protestant dialogue. There are still references to "separated brethren." But then this book was published in 1965, and revolutionary changes continue to occur.

Ronald Joffman does note that Catholics have been living in a ghetto. "It is equally true that the representatives of the missionary movement at home have been living in a missionary ghetto within the church. We have been too much separated from others."

A word from another Roman Catholic theologian, in a book just released, is relevant. Writing in *Grace in Freedom*, Karl Rahner states:

"Freedom is the courage to risk the unforeseeable future. The freedom of responsible decision certainly demands knowledge, objectivity, reflection, circumspection. It wills something and it is responsible for what it knowingly wills, but not for what is absolutely unforeseeable and may happen as a result of what is done. Nevertheless, freedom is the courage to risk the unforeseeable future."

This is true of the whole of our living, but it is especially and particularly true of missionary adventure. □

- **WHAT IN THE WORLD?** by Colin W. Williams. New York: National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. Paper, \$.75.
- **INSTRUMENT OF THY PEACE** by Alan Paton. New York: Seabury Press. \$3.50.
- **MAN'S NEW HOME** by Herman Reissig. Philadelphia: United Church Press. \$2.50.
- **INDIA, PAKISTAN AND THE WEST** by Percival Spear. New York: Oxford Press. \$1.65.
- **REAPPRAISAL: PRELUDE TO CHANGE** edited by William J. Richardson, M.M. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Maryknoll Publications. \$2.25

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