

Protagonist Corner

Whither International Mission and Whence Its Support?

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Most members of mainline denominations in the United States hold a concept of international mission which is about thirty years out of date. Most congregations think mission means sending out American missionaries to do evangelistic work overseas. Some church members believe that this is exactly what the church should be doing. Others see it as a patronizing diversion from more important tasks. But few are aware of the tremendous changes which are taking place in the work of the world church.

As a result, international mission today lacks a broadly-based, educated support. Those who might be assumed to be most in favor of current trends have often written off the world mission enterprise as outmoded. Tragically, many persons who could be helping needed changes to take place have abandoned ship and are leaving international mission to more cautious persons who are sometimes hesitant to change. In fact my itineration in the Presbyterian Church in the United States indicates that it is often easier to lead normally conservative Christians to agree with and welcome current trends than to educate normally liberal Christians who have already made up their minds about international mission.

Current changes in mission programs involve the style and methods of mission more than its goal. The basic goal remains the same: to witness to the Lordship of God in Christ over all persons and societies and to his saving work on behalf of all persons. The understanding of how that witness is to be carried out, however, contains new emphases and directions.

First, there is a growing emphasis on partnership. The missionary outreach of most United States denominations in other nations is increasingly carried out with and through national churches and their agencies in those nations. In earlier years when churches in many countries were young and weak, missionaries played a dominant role. Today, however, the main work of the church in almost all countries of the world is done by Christians who are citizens of those countries, not by missionaries from other countries. Missionaries work not as bosses but as partners who provide expertise and a different cultural perspective.

Second, there is an awareness that justice and service cannot be separated from evangelism and the proclamation of the gospel. We cannot witness with sincerity to the love and righteousness of God unless we are concerned about the suffering of the poor and the violation of human rights. Our international mission program will lack integrity if we are not seeking to change those aspects of the world economic order and American foreign policy which hurt the people to whom we are sending missionaries and mission funds.

Third, there is a greater humility in our style of evangelism and a greater

respect for traditions and beliefs which are different from our own. There is an awareness that our understanding of the work of God in Jesus Christ has been colored by our culture and economic position. Thus parts of our theology may not speak to the needs of those from different backgrounds. Also, many Christians who affirm the uniqueness and authority of Christ are aware that they can learn much from followers of other religions. They seek to balance a respect for other faiths, an openness to new insights, and an absence of coercion with their affirmation of their own convictions and their desire to share those convictions and their accompanying joys with others.

Fourth, there is a greater humility in our theology of mission. The church is seen not as the bearer of salvation but as a sign of and witness to God's saving action, which occurs outside the church as well as within it. There is also an awareness that our nation with its materialism, hedonism, secularism, and violence needs to be the object of Christian mission. It is not accurate to think of our country as "Christian" and most third-world countries as "heathen."

All four of these emphases represent trends, not accomplishments. There are still many differences of opinion and many problems related to each trend. The church desperately needs the thought and prayer of a membership which understands these problems and can wrestle with them.

Our success or failure in becoming churches who understand current trends and issues in international mission will determine the type of missionary we send and the type of mission program we have. One third-world church leader remarked, "We said, 'Missionary, go home.' But the wrong missionaries listened to us." Between 1969 and 1975 there was a decline of 31% in the number of missionaries serving under denominations constituting the Department of Overseas Mission of the National Council of Churches. During the same period the number of missionaries related to the more conservative Evangelical Foreign Mission Association and the Independent Mission Association increased about 12%. More important, what type of persons will be attracted to serve as missionaries, and what type of persons will shape international mission policy? Will they be sensitive to the problems involved in representing a rich, western church in countries that are usually poor and non-western? Will they agree in general with current trends in the church's policy? The issue here is more basic than politeness or even humility. The effectiveness and authenticity of our witness to Christ is at stake.

A more adequate understanding of international mission is also needed to avoid isolationism. Some Americans still use international mission as a way to evade issues in their home towns. They find it easier to be concerned about the poor in Africa than about the poor across the tracks. But other American Christians have become so bogged down in a parochial concern for problems close at hand that they fail to see those problems in global perspective. A concern about the world church can widen our horizons. American missionaries and Christians from other countries can serve as reporters and interpreters who help us understand and address such matters as human rights violations, the use of infant milk formulas, and the renewed zeal of Islam. They can also help us look at American wealth, moral standards, and family life from a

different perspective. Because they deal constantly with the dangers of a syncretistic mixing of Christianity and other faiths, they can help Americans see the danger of combining Christianity with patriotism, faith in technology, and the worship of success.

It is time for us all, liberals and conservatives, to take a new look at international mission.