

A Critique of “The Vocation of the Missionary”

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This paper is a most able exposition of the missionary vocation, and it is scarcely fitting that anyone should undertake to levy criticism against it. Instead one needs to read with care and learn from its paragraphs, for there is much in it that stabs the mind awake. But if we must not criticize we can note one or two points that deserve serious consideration.

The missionary vocation is described in four sections: its contemporary breadth, its historical depth, its theological content, and its significance for the unity of the Church. The missionary must live and work in the world as it is now; he comes out of the Church as it is now in all its dividedness; and he must face the forces which now move through men and their societies. Much more could be said about this than is in the paper, but the pressure of time placed serious limitations upon the treatment. It would be interesting to ask about the role of the missionary who comes from the West and thus is a child of the cultural condition of that part of the world, and of the role of the missionary who comes from an Asian land where the search for new life has begun in excitement and hope. Both are servants of the Church and yet they are different servants working in different human settings. Once a question like this is posed a multitude of ramifications appear. The very complexity of the contemporary world affects the missionary, and the relationship between the man and his environment is never static.

The historical depth of the missionary vocation is portrayed through two brief biographies: Ziegenbalg and Manikam. Both of them had (have) within themselves the vocation of the Church, and were (are)

living symbols of the world mission. Both felt the demand of God upon their lives and answered that demand by obedience; both of them faced the problems and needs of their respective positions; and both of them worked out answers to those problems and needs in ways which were to them the manner of their obedience. Thus the depth of God's continuing activity among men came alive in them.

The third and fourth sections of the paper carry the weight of the discussion. Out of those two sections two issues emerge, among others, which deserve the most careful consideration. First, there is the fact that the missionary is an officer of the Christian Church, selected, supported and directed by the Church, and at the same time an ambassador of Jesus Christ, picked out and sent by Him. These two relationships which the missionary has are not the same, nor are the alternate sides of the same coin. The early missionaries of the modern era went out as ambassadors of Christ; the Church had little interest in them or their work. Yet it is equally clear that they were Church men who heard their call because of their place in the Church and whose work brought new life to that institution.

Like a pendulum the missionary vocation swings between the two points. This, however, raises the question of the relation between the Church and the Kingdom of God; and here another swinging between two extremes appears. "For the missionary in his vocation today it is necessary to know where his task is set... he knows that the Kingdom of God is a reality that has to do with God's purpose and plan... he knows that the Church is the means God uses to achieve His purpose... he knows that the mission of the Church is derived from God." In this list of truths the missionary must know there are variables, elements which change through the years and under varied circumstances. Surely one of the tasks devolving upon the missionary in his vocation is that of finding how these variables mingle for him.

This same issue appears in the discussion of the difference between the missionary enterprise of the established churches and the enterprises launched by the free agencies or the sects; and it appears again in the resume of the problem created for the missionaries enlisted, trained and sent out by the mission boards of the Continent when circumstances forced them to return home and they found that the Church did not recognize them or assume any responsibility for them. The Church, the divinely-chosen missionary and the Kingdom of God are all involved in both discussions.

The other issue is that of the relation between the Christian missionary and the resurgent non-Christian religions. The treatment

accorded this theme by the paper is cursory, as it had to be if time were to be respected, let again, there are suggestions that warrant careful discussion. Note is made of the continued lack of interest shown by missionaries in the non-Christian religions. In the early years of the modern enterprise such was not the case and today the situation is changing, but in between all was subsumed under heathendom. Now serious efforts are being made to understand other religions. But “the deepest danger (in this) may lie not in the several religions overwhelming the Christian faith but in the Church itself being tempted to pose as a religion.” Yet the missionary is a religious man even as the Buddhist is a religious man, and the Christian Church is a religious institution even as is an Hongwanji temple, and the difference between them is not easily settled. So that within the missionary vocation there must be an acute awareness, not alone of his responsibility toward men of other faiths, but also of what God is doing to and for those men through other agencies than missions.

These comments have but touched a few points that were raised by the paper. An adequate critique would require a paper of equal length to the original.



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