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The Church and Mission: Christian Mission in Theological Perspective

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Book Reviews

THE CHURCH AND MISSION

CHRISTIAN MISSION IN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE,
edited by Gerald H. Anderson. New York: Abingdon Press,
1966. 288 pp.

"Mission is the action of God in which the Church participates; missions are particular forms... of that participation". This statement exemplifies the revolutionary change in thinking about the nature of mission—now primarily conceived of as a theological concept revelatory of God ("a sending God") and only secondarily as a description of Church activity—which is being felt in all Christian bodies. According to this changed outlook, the Church no longer has missions, but in its very life is mission.

Dr. Gerald H. Anderson, of Union Theological Seminary, Dasmariñas Cavite, has been a "facilitator" of such theological sea change in the understanding of mission, largely through his editorship of *The Theology of the Christian Mission* (1961) and compilation of the *Bibliography of the Theology of Mission in the Twentieth Century* (Third Edition, 1966). His most recent contribution to the growing body of literature in the field is *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* (1966) of which he is editor.

The earlier *Theology of the Christian Mission* demonstrates by the catholicity in range of contributions—Orthodox, Anglican, Protestant,—Asian, European, American—the thesis that mission and ecumenism are theological *compadres*. Unfortunately, *Christian Mission in Theological Perspective* witnesses negatively to the same truth, demonstrating that mission is not at its best when viewed from a denominational (Methodist, in this case) vantage-point. The essays are the work of Methodist theologians—all Americans except for D.T. Niles of Ceylon—prepared for annual consultations begun in 1956 by

the Board of Missions of the Methodist Church on "The Theology of Mission".

If the essays are printed in chronological order—though this is not indicated by the editor—a more realistic title for the volume might be "A Casebook of Methodism's Progressive Understanding of Mission". As Dr. Anderson states in the Preface, "there is no systematic development of a single theme" in this series of essays, "but rather a critical and sensitive probing of several areas of major concern in missionary thinking today". This reader would suggest, however, that the "progressive understanding of mission" theme does hold throughout the book, giving it a measure of unity and coherence.

S. Paul Schilling of the Boston University School of Theology provides the initial and concluding chapters of the volume, demonstrating thereby the amount of change in his own thinking on the subject of mission. His first contribution examines "fundamental and systematic thinking on the church and its ministry" as understood by Methodism and for the stated purpose of preparing Methodism for ecumenical conversation. Given such a goal, it is inevitable that the thought and practice of John Wesley (his concern for the urgent missionary situation in Colonial America, leading to abandonment of belief in the necessity of an episcopal order, with rights of ordination, leading to his own "setting apart" of ministers for the American situation) should come under review. However, for the non-Methodist, non-historian reader, this initial chapter has an antiquarian ring to it, seemingly more concerned with apostolic succession than with apostolic success.

Schilling's concluding chapter, on "Restating the Aim of Mission", clearly reflects the newer influences—largely involved in the Church's relation to the world—which affect the understanding of mission. He empathizes with the interested and concerned Methodist who "can hardly avoid wondering over his church's continued willingness to accept a definition (of mission) which has remained unchanged since 1939, and in large measure since 1928". His suggestion for an up-to-date statement on the aims of mission, guided in formulation by the three conditions: "(1) It should think completely in ecumenical terms; (2) it must proceed in clear awareness of the present social and cultural situation; and (3) it must take fully into account the contributions made to the understanding of the gospel by recent biblical and theological investigations", presents a synthesis of the most creative thinking on mission today. Together with the most helpful appendices and bibliography which Dr. Anderson has provided, these final pages of the book place the reader *in medias res* of contemporary mission thought, an exciting position to be in these days.

The intervening ten chapters lead the reader on a winding and uneven path towards the climax. There is an assuredness and trium-

phalism in L. Harold De Wolf's "The Gospel, the Church and the Mission", claiming that it "is apparent to present observation" that God chooses to make himself known through the church, yet making insufficient mention of God's revelation through involvement in His world. The same overconfidence (?) is felt in J. Robert Nelson's thoughts on "Christian Theology and the Living Faiths of Men", in which he speaks of the "clear distinction... between the church and all the rest of the human race which is not-church". These quotations, while admittedly taken out of context, represent a spirit of approach which moves fewer and fewer contemporary students of the Church on mission in the world.

The most unusual—and disturbing—of the contributions in the series is A. Roy Eckardt's prolegomena to a theology for the Christian-Jewish encounter. If the reader agrees with Eckardt's presuppositions, such as: "antisemitism from the first century to the twentieth is a Christian creation and a Christian responsibility", that there is a papal obsession on this matter of "the Jews", attested to by the *denial* of Jewish responsibility for the crucifixion in Vatican statements, that when Christians speak of the historical culpability of "the Jews", they are actually insinuating, and even directly charging, continuing a current sin, that there are not "two" covenants (Eckardt refers to the "so-called Old Testament"), that the prevailing nonacceptance of the messianic character of Jesus Christ falls within the category not of disobedience, but of obedience, that "Jesus Christ does not belong in any crucial or normative way to the history of the original Israel", and that "it was not God's revealed will or purpose that the great majority of original Israel should come to acclaim Jesus as the Christ", then the theological rearrangement which Eckardt suggests may strike him as helpful. At the very least, such presuppositions require a Christian to do a mental inventory of his system of belief.

Those who are acquainted with D. T. Niles and Walter G. Muelder, through other works, will not be disappointed in their contributions here. Niles makes a clear affirmation, and a much-appreciated emphasis, on the life and mission of the church as "the result of the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world". Muelder, Dean and Professor of Social Ethics at the Boston University School of Theology, begins his thoughts on Christian responsibility in matters of revolution from the belief that "human salvation and social salvation are interpenetrating processes"; one cannot be complete without the other.

Christian Mission in Theological Perspective is stimulating reading for the "theology of mission" buff, but probably should not be the appetizer course for the novice, especially if he is not a Methodist.