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What is the Goal of Industrial Mission?

IN a recent article R. P. Taylor presented what he considers to be the goals of Industrial Mission. He tells us that these mission aims are:

To be present in industry and to understand it.

To stimulate responsibility and critical thinking and to encourage and support those who carry responsibilities.

To see the industrial situation in the light of a Christian understanding of things, and to do whatever may become possible there to help in the process of the word becoming flesh.

To report back to the Church, not only on what is happening out there, but also on the insights this work has found to be important.

To set up the kind of flexible structure that will serve these objectives.¹

I strongly share Mr. Taylor's concern to reach the so-called "working-class man." Overdue is a call to the Church to become aware of the unreached multitudes in industrial areas. Far too long has the Church ignored the criticism that it is essentially a middle-class institution with no real relevance to the working masses. The neglect of the millions of industrial workers and the seeming lack of awareness on the Church's part that these millions often view it as an aspect of the Establishment against which they are more or less pitted is a serious error of which the Church is surely guilty. In my opinion, this attitude of the industrial man must be seen as one of our greatest hurdles in mission outreach in Britain today. We simply must come to grips with this problem if we are to make any real inroads with the Gospel into society at large. Mr. Taylor has seen something of this serious sociological phenomenon that so impedes mission to the mass of industrial society, and has attempted to come to grips with it. This is surely a vital step the entire Church must take.²

Mr. Taylor is very conscious that God is at work in the great movements of society today and that the work of the Holy Spirit can never be restricted to what he is doing in and through the Church alone. I feel something of the same revulsion he feels towards those in some of our churches who think they have "God in a box," and that if we want to know anything about him or what he is doing we must ask them to open the box and let us peek in.

Despite all of these areas of complete agreement with Mr. Taylor, there are, however, aspects in the presentation of his philosophy of industrial mission that somewhat disturb me. First and foremost, the basic criticism I feel compelled to lodge is in the area of his goals for such a mission. It is not that I disagree with the basic ideas that rest behind what he has presented as his aims. Rather, it is that these goals that he apparently sees as *primary* and *inclusive*, seem to me to be *secondary* and *supportive*, and that he has, moreover, ignored the *essential goal* that, in my opinion at least, must be central and basic in mission, industrial or otherwise, i.e. *the conversion of the individual man to a vital dynamic faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour*. This, to me, is the *primary* goal in which all mission activity must find its end. All that I wish to say in the remainder of this article is essentially a development of this basic criticism of Mr. Taylor's approach to industrial mission, ending with a positive note concerning what we can do *now* to begin reaching the industrial world with the message of Christ.

It seems that Mr. Taylor has a rather dim view concerning the Church and its evangelistic outreach at this present hour. For example, he says:

In many a summons to evangelism there is now no attempt to hide the pretence that this is anything more than another bid to keep the thing going a little longer; it is born of fear and despair, and is several stages removed from anything that could properly be called mission. . . . The panic, the defence mechanism, the introversion, the nostalgia, the tub-thumping, the bonhomie and so on, can be seen as functions of the realization that the Church is not now operating in a seller's market.³

Now, to a limited extent, at least, I share this criticism. There are those in the churches who have erroneously tied up their emotional security with some of the present institutionalized patterns of the Church. Therefore, they have a decided "vested interest," as it were, in the *status quo* of these present church patterns and will often go to rather ludicrous means and assume ridiculous postures in their "frenetic attempts to restore a departing glory to the poor old Church."⁴

But concerning the rather blanket judgment on the Church's contemporary evangelistic thrust, I have two criticisms to make, one minor but one quite major. The minor criticism is that Mr. Taylor seemingly failed in his almost categorical condemnation of present day evangelistic efforts in the industrial areas to make a distinction between the Church and some of its local institutionalized manifestations. This distinction should be drawn lest we condemn the whole Church on the basis of some of the flaws we see in local situations. It must certainly be granted that in places some of the Church's institutionalized forms are poor and old and need radical change. In these places, I would strongly agree that a pioneering attempt be undertaken "to discover the nature of the Church's task in the kind

of society we live in today."⁵ As the helpful report of the Evangelical Alliance Commission on Evangelism has pointed out, for example, the Church must come alive to the sociological scene wherein it finds itself today and address itself to the scene in a relevant manner that genuinely communicates the Gospel. Such terms as "secularism," "urbanization," "industrialization," "fragmentation," must not be just words we throw around because it makes us sound "relevant." We must truly understand what they mean when translated into flesh and blood. But to confuse the "Church" with some of its irrelevant institutionalized forms and imply, as Mr. Taylor seems to do, that "the Church," capital "C," is largely "poor," "old," "tub-thumping," "panicky" is a mistake. We need to remember that "the Church" is the "Body of Christ," that he himself is its head, and that "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" regardless of its weaknesses. I am very aware that the Church is human as well as Divine and thus has flaws, but I do not share in the depth of disillusionment concerning the Church that many do today. Perhaps I have misread Mr. Taylor here. Perhaps he did not mean to make such a categorical judgment upon the Church?

Moreover, I cannot agree when Mr. Taylor implies, as he surely does, that the Church often has rather mean motives in its evangelistic outreach. I have already granted that some may have erred here, but I also feel that there is still a large "remnant who have not bowed the knee to Baal" and are honestly motivated by the love of Christ in their mission endeavours. Many who call to evangelize today just are not "tub-thumpers," attempting in panic to "restore a departing glory to the poor old Church." This rather broad condemnation of present day evangelistic efforts seems much overstated and unrealistic.

But this minor criticism now leads into my major criticism and into the main theme of this article. Perhaps here I criticize Mr. Taylor more for what he does not say than what he actually does say, i.e. for saying nothing about the need of industrial man for personal conversion to Jesus Christ. For as Bryan Green has said, "No task is more important or sacred than leading an individual soul into personal conversion."⁶ Mr. Taylor does not even mention that as an aim which is to me a vital issue and that which must be seen as the ultimate goal in industrial mission. For as Douglas Webster reminds us:

. . . the fundamental meaning and aim of all evangelism (is)
 . . . to tell the good news of Jesus in such a way as to elicit a response of faith which will be sealed in an act of commitment (baptism in the case of the unbaptized) and membership of the Christian community . . . the heart of evangelism is the initial act of confronting someone else with Jesus. . . . The aim of all serious evangelism is conversion.⁷

I would disagree with Gibson Winter, whose statement Mr. Taylor quotes and seemingly approves, when Winter states:

A ministry to *individuals* in a segregated residential area must

be viewed as a *subsidiary unit* of a more inclusive ministry which intersects with *public* as well as private concerns of society.⁸

Now I do not mean to imply in any sense that the Church is not to be involved in the great contemporary sociological movements for justice and human dignity. The Church should be on the front line of this offensive. We should care for men as persons in all of their needs and aspirations. And I am sure that to help the man who "falls among thieves" on today's Jericho Road we shall have to form a committee and call ourselves "The Action Group to Make the Jericho Road a Safe Motorway." We simply must not permit ourselves to be thrust into an "either-or" situation. Our task is not personal conversion evangelism *or* social action. It is both. And I heartily agree with William Barkley when he says, "An individual gospel without a social gospel is a sadly truncated thing."⁹ But the question is: is social action our main aim or goal in the task? It seems to me very explicit in the Scriptures that it is not, despite the important place it obviously *does* have. Surely the Bible is abundantly clear that the *primary* mission of the Church under God, for it is his mission after all, is to make disciples of all people? Our call is to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature. Simply put, we are to be witnesses to the transforming and reconciling power of Jesus Christ, first in the individual life and in society as a whole as well. This is our basic task. And surely the Scriptures speak so forthrightly on this score that no defence or apologetic is really needed for it.

Now I am quite aware that the theology of mission today, and probably the battleground of an immediate tomorrow, hinges on the issue as to where the reconciling work of Christ is to be centred; on the individual life in conversion or on the structure of society as a whole. No one denies the centrality of mission today. It is very popular to be concerned with mission. But where does the atonement of Christ do its basic work? This is the question of the hour. Space precludes a theological discussion in any depth on this pressing issue. Suffice it to say that it is my firm conviction that the men who call for the so-called "secular theology" are as lop-sided in their approach as are the ultra-conservatives who would refuse to recognize that God could even be in the world working in society as a whole. It seems clear to me that the basic Scriptural approach is that the redemptive work of Christ begins and centres in the individual and that it further moves into society at large.¹⁰ I run the risk of sounding terribly out of date and not aware of society's needs, but man actually is "lost" and in a very real sense separated from God until he accepts the Lordship of Jesus Christ in his individual life. He desperately needs God through Christ. He is basically an unintegrated personality until the reconciling work of Christ is begun in his life, which starts at that point we call personal conversion. He can never properly relate to God, himself, or his fellows in real depth until he "knows Christ" personally. Surely this is what we basically mean

by the doctrine of 'the Fall and the effects of sin and the need of salvation.' To me, therefore, personal conversion is man's fundamental need.

Furthermore, I am of the opinion that in the very depth of his personality, man is really asking, though usually quite unknown to himself, that old question of the Philippian jailor, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Though he would rarely express it in these words today, the human heart still longs for God. After all, we are in his image and made for him. And although a man may seek to fill the "God vacuum" in his life in a thousand different ways, he still longs implicitly to know the fellowship of his Creator. This I firmly hold, on theological *and* practical psychological grounds. Thus when we answer man's deepest question on how to find meaning and reality in life through Christ, it is indeed good news that we share with him.

Of course, this does not mean that we aim to "get them saved and then forget them," as the Church is often accused of doing. Nor are we to fake an interest in man's social needs so that we can "get at his soul," as rightly or wrongly we are often said to do. Rather, we are to get involved in the total man and attempt as much as possible to meet his total needs whatever they may be. But we must always remember that man's most fundamental need is Jesus Christ as a *personal* Saviour, Lord, Friend, Companion and Helper. In a society where the individual is all but submerged in a sea of computers, numbers, mass impersonal movements, it is strange that those who minimize the importance of personal conversion fail to see how relevant this aspect of the Church's message is to man in this kind of a society. Man is all but screaming for recognition as an individual and we have the most individually vital message to meet this need that he can ever hear. I conclude, therefore, that according to the Scriptures and in the light of man's prime need, the *basic* aim of industrial mission—indeed, of mission in general—must be personal conversion to faith in Jesus Christ.¹¹

In final summary, I feel Mr. Taylor has made the error of showing us only one side of the coin; or better, merely one aspect of God's activity in the world. In his eagerness to show the weakness of some industrial mission activity and the urgent need to become sociologically oriented in the industrial world if we are ever to reach that segment of society, he seems to have thrown out the baby with the bathwater and left us with the impression that these secondary matters and aims are all that is really essential to mission. This is to me his basic error and this is my major criticism of that which in many respects is an article well worth pondering.

Let me conclude on a positive note. I share Mr. Taylor's concern for reaching the industrial man and his willingness to identify with him, learn about him and his environment, and genuinely to relate to him as a person. This is what we *must* do if we are to make any impact on a segment of society that is virtually unreached. There-

fore, if I were to present one positive programme to minister to the working man, it would be for the Church as a body and Christians as individuals to come out of our spiritual ghetto and truly relate to the masses as persons. As Rutember has said, "The church must see itself as primarily a ministering community, not a talked-at congregation."¹² The Church must learn that it is people that primarily matter, not just programmes, institutions or services. As the report of the Evangelical Alliance puts it:

We do not see any great improvement in Christian witness until individual believers are much more deeply involved in the life of society and in a better position to have real relationships with people for other than spiritual purposes. We may need to learn all over again what it means to be a "friend of sinners" . . . Christians (must) . . . be more involved in their society in such a way as to make possible genuine personal relationships with those they seek to win.¹³

In something of the same spirit, Douglas Webster has presented the principle in these words:

We cannot do effective evangelism or healing if the *only* relationship we establish is that of doctor or nurse to patient, or teacher to pupil. Christian evangelism depends on getting beyond all official relationships, all clinging to the great protective of status; it is man to man, heart to heart, a sinner who knows the Saviour speaking to a fellow-sinner who does not.¹⁴

Put theologically, we must capture the implications inherent in our valued doctrine of the priesthood of all believers. *All*, not just the religious "professionals," must see each man, industrial or otherwise, as a person for whom Christ died, and as a person with a multitude of needs. Further, we must have such confidence in the power of the living Christ to transform life and meet needs that we shall be eager, as "priests" if you please, to lead that desperately needy person to Jesus Christ. It is true that sometimes this will be on a very personal and intimate basis. At other times this will have to be structured and we shall have to throw ourselves into some kind of a movement. But put in a word, we must all learn to relate on a level of depth with men wherever and however we find them and enter into their needs and in every way possible effectually minister Christ to them. This is truly the "Word becoming flesh" for which Mr. Taylor calls. This is what it means to bring Christ off the altar and into the market-place. We have a message and a ministry, and it is glorious, for it brings to the individual by word and deed the good news of redemption and reconciliation in the fullest sense of these terms.