

The Mystery of Unbelief

John R. Mott, pioneer of the 20th century ecumenical movement, who. toured the world ceaselessly, promoting Christian missions, had as slogan: "Evangelization of the world in this generation." He was convinced that this goal could be achieved. Similar declarations are made today. But will the whole world be evangelized in our twentieth century? Has this optimism a Biblical foundation?

Of course I thank God for the tremendous growth of the Christian church in so many areas of the world today. The Christian faith is now truly world wide. It is estimated that in the last 180 years more people have become Christians and more churches have been planted than at any other time in history. Samuel Moffatt of Korea reminds us that "even where there are no organized churches, even where missionaries are turned away with guns and Christianity is a forbidden faith, you will find Christians. Perhaps only one, two, a handful, perhaps only foreigners, but they are there, and they belong to the oldest and strongest world-wide fellowship the world has ever known, the people of God, the Church of Jesus Christ. "

In Malawi, the largest Protestant denomination is the Church of Central Africa, Presbyterian (CCAP). She claims a million members and adherents. The fantastic growth of this church has created a critical shortage of ministers. At present there are only 172 ministers.

In 1945, the Korean church had 300,000 members and in 1977 Christians numbered approximately 5 million. All denominations are growing very fast, though at different rates. The growth of the churches in the Philippines has slowed down. The general average growth of 55 denominations according to incomplete statistics, shows much less than the annual rate of population growth, which is 3.5%. However, one optimistic note is that growth by conversion is much higher than the rate of growth "by either biological or transfer growth."

Do all these optimistic reports prove that the world will be evangelized in "this generation?" Is this optimism warranted? For each convert, we give God the glory. And thanks be to the Lord of the church for each new church planted. But how do we account for the lack of growth and converts in places where the gospel has been faithfully preached for years? Why are churches declining in so many European countries? Why is mission work among the Muslims so extremely difficult? Mr. George K. Harris, a missionary with the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, was asked: "Mr. Harris, in your thirty-five years of work among Muslims in China, did you see the establishment of a church of Muslim converts?" Mr. Harris, in thought with head slightly bowed, answered, "No, we didn't have that privilege."

Why unbelief? Why do some accept the Gospel and others reject it? Is unbelief only the hardening of the heart or rebellion against God?

Church leaders have called for the assistance of experts in sociology and psychology to discover the reason for unbelief. Sociologists have pointed to secularization, urbanization, and industrialization as causes for unbelief. Psychologists are pointing to rationalism, stress, strain and the unwillingness to accept religious authority as reasons for rejecting the Gospel. In Third World countries, society and family pressures and the poverty of the masses are cited. And some evangelicals suspect that the lack of success must be attributed to improper techniques. If you only have the "right technique" or the "proper method," you will be assured of results. If an area is not responsive to the gospel, the evangelization methodology must be re-evaluated. The contributions from the experts in sociology and psychology are helpful. The development of an evangelism technique is useful. But we should not overrate them. Why do people resist the Gospel? Besides sociological, psychological and methodological reasons, there is the spiritual. The Bible speaks of an ongoing struggle between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan. "For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places." (Eph. 6:12)

In the parable of the weeds, Jesus tells of the sowing of good seed in a field. And the day following the sowing, the servants of the owner of the field "came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds? He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.'" (Matt. 13:27).

Why unbelief? This is a deep mystery! Not faith but unbelief needs an explanation. Christ is the Victor over Satan. The cross and the empty tomb are symbols of Christ's triumph over evil. Satan has been defeated.

Christ is the great Sower, but as the seed is sown, the enemy is also busy. The coming of Christ's kingdom brings the reaction of Satan's kingdom. Wherever the Gospel is preached, Satan opposes. Why the Gospel seed finds fruitful soil in some part of the world and not in others, we don't know. Yet, we do know that Christ has overcome the evil one. And we can still sing that stirring hymn written by the great Reformer Martin Luther.

And though this world, with Devils filled,
Should threaten to undo us,
We will not fear,
for God has willed His truth to triumph through us.
The prince of darkness grim,
We tremble not for him;
His rage we can endure;
For lo! His doom is sure,
One little Word shall fell him.

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