

Nationalism and Missions

Missions is not outdated! The opposite is true! If there ever was a time for an all-out missionary effort it is now. The church cannot withdraw from the fulfillment of the Great Commission, though the task seems too formidable.

Cultures are in convulsion, societies in explosion, dictatorships increasing. The very foundations of ancient Asian cultures tremble. The social and political roots in Africa and Asia are being cut. Many Africans and Asians feel unsettled through the influence of Western secularism and materialism. Old ways no longer suffice and cohesive societies are disappearing. Communism is making rapid gains. Eastern religions, especially Islam, are becoming more aggressive. Nationalism has become a strong force.

What is nationalism? It is a state of mind in which the supreme loyalty of the individual is felt to be due to the nation. Nationalism as a force is rather new on the world scene. It didn't become a recognized sentiment molding public and private life until the end of the eighteenth century. Its roots are in the French revolution. Its philosophy spread from Europe to put its stamp upon South America, Asia and Africa. By the end of the Second World War, the world experienced it for the first time as a great determining force.

Nationalism's philosophy looks so simple. Each nationality should form its own state. But the development of nationalism went hand in hand with the process of secularization. Many new nations have been formed; and they are seeking their own identity! In the Third World, a fierce pride in independent nationhood, often accompanied by extreme resistance to Western influence, and the creation of a spirit of national solidarity, despite great diversities of tribes and languages, have made relations with Western nations difficult.

Many Asians and Africans view Christianity as a threat to their national development. The missionary is often seen as a leftover from the colonial era, a carrier of Western culture. The former Belgian Congo's (now Zaire) attitude proves the point. President Mobutu dropped his Christian name, Joseph Desire, and assumed the name Mobutu Sese Seko. The people of Zaire must have an identity card showing their African name with their baptismal name, which is no longer recognized, in small print and in brackets. Churches and schools must adopt Africanization policies.

Nationalism has often become a real enemy of the missionary enterprise of the church. Religion is viewed as opium for the people. Religion threatens and blocks economic development. If we want to become strong and vital as a nation, we must secularize our life, and adopt modern technology.

Communism has really "capitalized" on nationalism. Russian propaganda broadcasts that religion is the ally of capitalism and imperialism. Religion preserves the status quo and the economic stranglehold over the poor masses. It has to be radically removed to give new life.

Missions can never be satisfied with "soul saving" only. Christ never withdrew from life. He touched every aspect of life with His presence and preaching. As Christ's followers we must be Christian in our attitudes and way of thinking. Poverty, hunger, injustice, oppression and exploitation must be challenged by Christian missions. This requires flexible programs. Missions in the 80s can no longer have fixed programs and patterns. In some cases poverty must be shared, because there is not enough wealth to be shared.

Dr. Samuel Escobar said: "I think we must come to the point where we also see the cross in Christians who for the sake of Christ and in obedience to Him are ready to risk their lives in the hands of the extremists of the right and of the left, in Christians who try to be witnesses in the world of labor, politics, improvement of human relations, the fight for peace, and the fight for justice.

Missions, by its very nature, cannot maintain the status quo. The gospel does not only renew individuals, but also the structures of society. It must speak to nationalism, so that it won't become another god. Nationalism without the gospel is idol worship.

Nations are results of the Fall, but nevertheless God has worked through nationhood. He even chose a nation to be His very own people! Each nation has the right to maintain its own identity, and to defend it, providing it places itself freely under the discipline of God's Word. Christ is still the Healer of the nations and the glorious King. Missionaries must go into the world to tell nations about King Jesus!

Johan D. Tangelder
April, 1980