

The Affluent Missionary Sender and Her Credibility¹

Every once in a while synods of the Christian Reformed Church are forced to deal with issues that are of more than parochial interest. One such incident was forced upon Synod 1975 by Classis Lake Erie's Overture number 6 that deals with the distribution of wealth and power in the world. The overture urged synod to "study the problems associated with the inequitable distribution of wealth and power" with a view to guide Christians "in their political, economic, ecclesiastical and inter-personal actions."²

Since to most readers of this article the overture and its supporting materials are readily available in the 1975 *Acts of Synod*, there is no need to reproduce the entire argument here. Suffice it to state that the overture constitutes a calling into question of the life-style of North America's middle class, including that of the CRC. Having placed the matter in the perspective of the terrifying contrasts that exist in the global village, the overture sought to subject the basis of our affluence to scriptural criticism. In short, it asked the church for Christian guidelines in evaluating modern Western capitalism.

Though, to the best of my knowledge, consideration of such radical concerns by official CRC assemblies is new, the CRC has in recent years been confronted with various aspects of the problem by a number of writers in *The Banner*. When I first joined the CRC missionary force some ten years ago, such official questioning was remote from the denomination's life, but there were voices within the church that had already aired objections along similar lines.

One such voice was that of H. Evan Runner of Calvin's Philosophy Department. However, it was not Runner whose influence was primarily responsible for sensitizing the denomination, but, rather, I dare say, it was the later revolt of America's youth against the predominance of materialism that brought the

¹ *The Banner*, 6 Feb/1976. *Every Square Inch*, vol. 2, pp. 135-136.

² See "[Aspects of the Effects of Wealth on the Church's Mission.](#)" Public lecture delivered at Calvin College, June 1977 (8 pp.).

matter into the popular limelight. In other words, non-Christian influences must be given the main credit for this achievement, a fact that is itself food for serious reflection. Many years and even generations ago voices as disparate as those of Karl Marx, Pope Leo XIII, and Abraham Kuyper already expressed their dissent, but none of these can be credited directly for having brought into motion what could become a revolutionary change in the concerns of the CRC. The one Christian world body that has paid more attention to the problem prior to the WCC is the International Missionary Council (IMC), some details of which will be given in later paragraphs.

The response of synod was basically ambivalent. It acknowledged the critical nature of the problem; it called "the entire membership of the Christian Reformed Church to thorough and vigorous study of the problems: and urged all concerned groups to aid the denomination by making their findings available to the Christian community.

In spite of this positive appreciation for Lake Erie's concern, synod declined to appoint the proposed committee to study the matter on the ground that the classis failed to demonstrate "that a task of this scope and magnitude belongs to the instituted church rather than to concerned groups of Christians functioning within the kingdom." This rejection is buttressed by reference to Articles 27 and 28 of the Church Order, but to one who has not had the benefit of the synodical discussion the use of those articles as a basis for this negative action is mystifying at best.

Furthermore, synod seems to have felt deep down that it could not thus dismiss an issue that has such prominence on society's agenda, for it ended up recommending that the overturning classis take up the very task classis wished synod to consider, but about which synod entertained doubt as to its ecclesiastical legitimacy! I draw attention to this strange twist not in order simply to point out an inconsistency, but in order to indicate that though synod refused to take the step proposed by the classis, it did so with ambivalence and only halfheartedly.

It will be my contention in the remaining paragraphs that the matter is indeed one of denominational-ecclesiastical concern, if only from the point of view of the church's world mission program. At most of the major conferences of the international missionary community of this century there has been deep concern about the association of the missionary movement with the capitalistic West, an association that is no mere figment of the movement's enemies' imagination and that is, at this point in history, almost impossible for the Western missionary to shed.

Let us sample a few statements made at the main IMC Conferences. At the 1910 Edinburgh Conference, a Scottish missionary expressed his opinion that if we could remove every ground for the Chinese belief that missions are political agents, the greatest obstacle to the gospel in China would be removed. At the 1928 conference in Jerusalem, a delegate explained, "To many, Christianity is the instrument of the Western world, disruptive of India's social order, and, above all, the ally of her ... rulers."

At the 1938 conference, one of the most prominent delegates, J. Merle Davis, wrote, "The alliance of the foreign religion with the foreign military and political power lent itself to a misunderstanding and doubt concerning the singleness of purpose of Western missions." The same writer asserted that for Easterners "it has been difficult, if not impossible, ... wholly to dissociate the rapid growth of missions ... from the political and economic exploitation of the mission-sending nations."

This association has been recognized to be a serious obstacle to the gospel throughout the modern missionary era, for it has "caused the increase of nationalist prejudice against missions, and developed in the mind of the intelligent citizens ... a suspicion of the real motives underlying the work of missions." Today, hardly a week passes without some Nigerian newspaper associating the missionary enterprise of 1975 with exploitation, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. In this connection the role of the CIA is also brought into the picture. Though as a missionary I realize full well that missionaries never *intended* to be associated with exploitation, their political innocence has in fact frequently

relegated them to the status of tools of imperialist forces. Testimonies to this effect can be found in the latest publication of the Board of Foreign Missions, *Lengthened Cords*.

The indisputable facts are (1) that *one* of the main causes for Western affluence has been the collusion of capitalism with imperialism; (2) that though colonialism has had its positive spin-offs, it has basically been inspired and largely been guided by the search for profits; (3) that missions have been closely associated with the colonial enterprise as its pioneer and agent.

I do not assert these facts on the basis of leftist inclinations, but on the basis of serious academic research in which I have engaged for a number of years. These facts are of more than academic interest to the missionary enterprise, however, for on the university level in the non-Western world they are the context in which the Christian message is frequently examined and rejected. *Many educated people in Nigeria and elsewhere look at every CRC missionary in that context.* The continuing affluence of the society from which these missionaries come serves to confirm their opinions.

Now, can one seriously claim that Classis Lake Erie's problem is not an urgent one for a denomination that spends millions of dollars on world missions? J. E. Leslie Newbiggin, British missionary and bishop of the Church of South India, emphasized that for missions to continue to be effective and acceptable in the future, they will have openly and clearly to dissociate themselves from the sins of the West. The only creditable way of dissociation is not mere verbal renunciation of greed, but active Christian involvement in the battle for justice. The church, the instituted church, the sending body of these missionaries, must establish a reputation for itself as a champion of the kingdom of justice and liberty, for only then will her agents abroad – or, for that matter, at home – retain their credibility in the future as university education becomes more widespread in the non-West. We may have good reasons to object to certain aspects of the WCC's program, but we do her injustice if we do not first of all appreciate the anguish with which she is attempting to break this fatal association.

Classis Lake Erie's problem *is* the CRC's problem, for as long as the CRC is not recognized as a champion of justice and liberty, as long as her constituency remains implicated in the causes of affluence either by participation or by silence, her affluence will increasingly be understood in the context described above and her agents will be seen primarily as servants dedicated to the continuation of an oppressive system. In other words, her credibility will be nil.

In conclusion, I wish it to be understood that the motivation for CRC involvement in the problems posed by Classis Lake Erie should not *primarily* be one of missionary strategy, for such motivation would soon be recognized as mere opportunism. The primary motive must be that of obedience to the Word of God. However, as a missionary, I am in this article concerned to show the *missionary* relevance of Lake Erie's overture for the CRC as a denomination.