

MY PILGRIMAGE IN MISSION: or
What to Do When There's no Harvest

by Clem Payne*

When I arrived in Morocco in 1948, I awoke to the reality that I was actually on this field where missionaries before me had spent a lifetime with no visible fruit. And of course as soon as troubles began to descend upon me, I asked myself if I were in the right place. Was it right to spend a lifetime with no (visible) fruit? And if it's right, can I stick it out?

Some of us who have spent years in ministry to the Islamic world have been called upon to defend our ministry to Muslims--to unresponsive and resistant peoples. At first I could give only a subjective defense of my ministry. I felt that God had guided and called me, but I could not give a rational basis for my call. I didn't have anywhere to put my feet, in a sense, where I could be sure I was in the right place and could defend my ministry to myself. Over a period of years, however, I have gone through a slow mental pilgrimage. Bit by bit I came to see that I had somehow a wrong basis for mission.

Mission Based on God Viewed as "Infinite Businessman"

I once read an article by a Middle-Easterner who accused westerners of having a businessman's mentality. I wondered if my western orientation had colored my view of missions. I came to see myself as a product of my culture and that this had colored my view of God. All of us have a picture of God fashioned in the image of our own culture. I believed, for example, in investing God's money where it would bring the most results. And I felt very virtuous about this. Surely God must favor this procedure since He's the "infinite businessman." I have discovered on my furloughs that this, at any rate, is the unstated assumption behind many a missionary appeal. But I've come to realize that this is a poor foundation for a missionary to Muslims, or for any kind of missions--anywhere. God is not looking for profit from any of us. We are all unprofitable servants.

Mission Based on God Viewed as "Infinite Father"

Well then, if the profit motive is the wrong premise, what's the right one? The Scriptures teach us that God's relationship to His people is that of a father. That relationship is eloquently expressed in the life of Jesus Christ--the unique Son of the Father in whom we become sons in such a literal fashion that now a common term for God is "Father." So rather than seeing God in the image of an infinite businessman, I see Him as an infinite Father. That's the true basis of mission.

If God is an infinite Father, I can immediately perceive that He would spend time on the unprofitable, the unresponsive, or the resistant, whereas a businessman wouldn't and couldn't. As I think on the seven children the Lord has given my wife and me, not one could I ever treat on the basis of the return I might see from my investment in him or her! To the contrary, a father ought to shelter and love

even more the child with the most needs, without thought of the return on his investment. How much more is this true of God, the Infinite Father! In His eyes, no one in this world can be dispensed with, no race or people is without value.

This reflection turned my thinking around. I began to see that an infinite Father needs servants who are expendable, willing to be wasted if need be in the service of His love. The prophet Ezekiel tells of an infinitely patient God stretching out His hands all day long to a rebellious and resistant people. That's not the picture of a businessman.

Laboring PRECEDES Harvesting.

John chapter 4 also came to mind as I meditated on this subject. So often in missionary conferences we misinterpret the passage because we make out verse 35 (the fields are "white already unto harvest") to be the general principle. If you consider the whole context, it is not true that all fields are always white at all times. Verse 37 is the general principle; "One sows and another reaps." Jesus goes on to say, "I am sending you to reap and to harvest that whereon you bestowed no labor." The kind of labor represented by harvest is dependent on another kind of labor that must precede it. Harvest comes only at a specific season of the year; no field is always ripe. A harvest is the end product of a process of labor. If a field is unresponsive and resistant, there's a simple explanation--not enough labor.

There was a time when I felt that people from the church growth movement were trying to saddle me with a guilt complex--and they almost did. I understood them to say it was poor strategy, and ethically wrong, to keep missionaries in unresponsive areas. It seemed then that they wanted everybody to go where the harvest was. But if the harvest is the end product of a process of labor, we'll soon run out of harvest if we don't spend some labor in unresponsive areas! We tend to forget that, even in our own country, fields become "responsive" (yield a harvest) only after much time and labor.

When Jesus said, "Others labored," I'm assuming, and I think correctly, that it was another generation, or generations that did the laboring. Years ago in England over 200 people were burned at the stake for preaching the gospel or translating the Scriptures into the common speech. That was their crime. Would you call a society that did such a thing responsive? Two such victims were to be burned at one stake together. The older turned to the younger just before they were tied up and said, "Be of good cheer, for today we shall light such a candle in England as I trust under God shall never be put out."

Because of such martyrs, we have evangelistic campaigns today that work. That's why we have freedom of worship today. That's why the Bible is effective. Not because of just one year of preparation before the campaign. It takes labor if we are ever going to have responsive fields. We cannot say, "Let's take the workers out of the unresponsive areas and put them in the responsive areas." That, to

me, is folly. If you do that, you will run out of harvests. If God is an Infinite Father, you should go there anyway.

But God is not only an Infinite Father. He is also the omnipotent, the omniscient Lord of the harvest. And if He plans a harvest there will be one. But it isn't always in my time and in my way. He is sovereign and His ways are not my ways. I mustn't grow restive and quit the work because the harvest doesn't come in my time.

The Proper Perspective for Evaluating a Lifework

I recently heard a speaker say that he felt changed lives should be the criterion for evaluating a ministry. That might be valid for some people, but not all. You cannot evaluate the work of a Swiss cheesemaker, for example, by the same standards you use to evaluate his neighbor, the watchmaker. You need something more basic than the standards for each specific task.

The Apostle Paul said of himself, "I will not dare to speak of anything except that which Christ has wrought by me..." (Rom 15:18). Here we are approaching a proper basis for evaluation. What counts is not whether I can point to visible fruit in someone's life from my ministry or not. What really counts is whether or not it is a work in the Lord, the Lord working through me. Then my labor will not be in vain. But I must make sure that it is in the Lord that I labor.

I dare not, however, evaluate someone else's life because I cannot see the fruit. It's true, of course, that the lazy streak in all of us may take refuge in this fact. On the other hand, you need to avoid the other extreme of preparing yourself for a guilt-trip by saddling yourself with someone else's standard that's unreachable for you. Those are two extremes. You should be "not slothful in business, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (Rom 12:11), above all serving the Lord, for no labor in the Lord is vain.

I used to say, "Lord, I'll go anywhere, anywhere in the world, just so you're at work there." The assumption was that I had to be able to see God at work, that I had to be able to count, report, and make graphs of the results. And if I couldn't see Him working then He wasn't working. Finally I saw the error of this conclusion. When seeds are planted in the garden there's a long period when you can't see anything going on. Is God at work in that period? Very much so! The fact that I don't see it does not mean a thing.

In Hebrews 10 the author writes, "Let us hold fast... . Cast not away, therefore, your confidence (your boldness) which hath great recompense of reward. For ye have need of patience, that ... ye might receive the promise." (vv. 23, 35, 36) In chapter 11 he goes on to speak of the "great cloud of witnesses" who lived by faith; while some were blessed in this life, others suffered terribly, of whom, he says, "the world was not worthy" (vs. 38). Right in the middle of the list (11:13) we learn that "these all died in faith not having received the promises". It could be disheartening to those of us who have the businessman mentality: "Let's see the results, please. Let's prepare a report, graph it and make slides of it!"

Again, at the end of the list (vs. 39) he repeats, "these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise." Kind of bad news, isn't it?

Adding the Finishing Touch

That is not the full explanation, however; it can be spelled out in two letters--US! God has something better in mind than the immediate results that one can see, "... that they without us should not be made perfect [complete]" (vs. 40). Seeing this did two big things for me, it removed one burden, but it gave me another.

One thing I saw was that it's always wrong to draw a line and add the total at the end of a man's life. It's wrong to put a period there. The story isn't ended. A dash maybe--and that's all. When a Christian dies, we can't say that he died fruitless. Eric Fisk* had a friend (if you can call him a friend) who said to him when he left for the mission field, "You're wasting your time if you go there. Those people are under a curse." When Eric returned at the end of his career, just before his death, that same "friend" was still alive (unfortunately) to greet him with these encouraging words, "I told you so. You wasted your life." According to Hebrews 11, however, no man can say of another "you wasted your life." The story definitely doesn't end with his death.

When I saw John 4 coupled with Hebrews eleven I said to myself, "Clem, you could spend a lifetime, like some of your forebears, without visible fruit. You could do it with a good conscience." That's the burden that slipped from my shoulders.

But then I got saddled with another, a different kind of burden. I realized that those who preceded me were depending on me. I thought of them as giants. I couldn't match them. I saw it like an unfinished painting that we're called upon to complete. The martyrs who were burned at the stake are themselves not yet complete. Who is going to finish the painting? What kind of ending is their story to have?

According to Hebrews 11, they are waiting for us, for our generation, to put on the finishing touches. Who does the "they" refer to? The 200 burned at the stake, and of course the "cloud of witnesses" mentioned in chapter 12. Above all it refers to the Witness Who was their model, "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession" whose example we are to "consider" (12:2-3). His is the painting that needs finishing. And it must be finished in the same spirit in which it was begun. That's our challenge, to capture something of the spirit of the One who began it all. For without that spirit we are mere daubers who will only spoil the picture.

I once visited an old farmer in Weymouth, England. I don't remember much about my visit except for a conversation we had at breakfast one morning. He said he had read somewhere that God does 98% of the work on a farm, and the farmer 2%. And then it hit me. I said to the man, "And yet where would this farm be without you"?

What struck me is that the program of redemption is just like that. I'd say God does 98% of the work. But there is that 2% that is not just busy work to keep our hands out of mischief. It is real work. And that 2% is such that we can say, "Where would the program of redemption be without the 2%? That's the burden I received. But the story doesn't end there, just as it didn't end with those before me. There's a part that's mine and there's a part that's yours.

*Fisk was a Brethren missionary to Morocco earlier in the century.

FEEDBACK ON PROJECT SUNRISE (SIRA):
A LOOK AT "DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE" IN AN ISLAMIC CONTEXT

by the Editor

SEEDBED II/4 (Fourth Quarter 1987) featured David Owen's article on "Project Sunrise" or Sira, a gospel harmony in literary Arabic which makes use of the terminology, phraseology and literary style of the Qur'an. Responses were solicited from 18 or so knowledgeable persons, including missionaries and Arabic-speaking Christians of both Christian and Muslim background, whether favorable or unfavorable. Nine written replies were received, some very brief, as well as verbal remarks from several others. My sincerest thanks to all who responded; your comments were most helpful. These are editorially summarized or collated below. I hope that this discussion will help to advance the work of translating the Bible for Muslim audiences.

As could be expected, attitudes toward the project were mixed. Several respondents were fairly positive, a few others were rather negative, but many critiqued specific ideas, translation choices or other features without reacting either positively or negatively. Of the two respondents from a Muslim background, the one was negative and the other positive. One or two appear to have only responded to Sira without reference to the article, or vice versa. Unfortunately, no responses were received from Middle Eastern Christians.

I-General Comments

On the positive side, a North African Christian gave three reasons why he was favorable: it was prepared for Muslims ("It is the first time that such a [translation] has been undertaken specifically for Muslims"), by a "composer from a Muslim background," and it is presented as a literary form well known to Muslims (i.e. "Sira" or religious biography). With reference to this title he adds, "From my experience in answering letters of Muslim students from North Africa, they often ask on their own for the title Sirah al-Masih because they cannot really figure out who Jesus Christ is."

Some who had objected to calling it Injil and referring to it as a translation of Scripture found the title Sira more acceptable. Concerning this, one wrote: "As long as the translation was being presented as Scripture, I was most uneasy about the Harmony approach,
