

# MISSION

Jim Punton

## *The Nature of Mission*

The **Meaning** of mission can be either 'the action of sending someone' or 'the assignment on which he is sent'; so the one who is sent on an assignment is a missionary. The word 'apostle' has exactly the same meaning, and 'apostolic' means 'carrying out the assignment on which one has been sent'. We shall see that this involves every Christian and Christ's community as a whole.

The **Sphere** of mission is the world. The NT word 'cosmos' is not a simple one . but carries the basic idea of 'the order, pattern, system of things'. So we find God's world made through Christ and so loved by God that He sent His Son as the Light of the world to reconcile it to Himself. This was made necessary because the world has given itself over to the demonic prince of the world. In Christ came the world's Saviour, and men made new in Christ and no longer of the world, are sent into the world to make known to all the good news of Christ. The world, even in its alienation, is God's world and loved by Him. To it we are sent as we get caught up with God. It is not the geographical so much as the world of human relationships, decisions, meanings, cultures – in fact the whole dynamic interrelated constellation of human life. (Other NT words translated 'world' have quite different meanings.)

The **Source** of mission is God Himself. He is a sending God; one might almost say a centrifugal God. So we find Him sending prophets, sending His Son, sending His Spirit, and also His people. We must see mission as an activity, almost-an attribute of God. It begins with God and continues with God. He hasn't given the task to others and withdrawn, but draws men in Christ into participation in His mission. So we see the Christian community as a function of God's mission. His mission is not a function of the Christian community. The community does not send missionaries: the community is by its nature a community of missionaries sent by God. The people of God are true to the name only as they are in mission with God.

The **Agent** of mission is Christ. 'Consider Jesus, the Missionary', says the writer to Hebrews. Our whole understanding of the mission of God centres upon Jesus Christ and what He was sent to be, to do, and to say on God's behalf in God's world. God the Father sent His Son for the world. In Him the reign or kingdom of God was seen embodied and enacted; through His death that reign is offered to men; through His resurrection men can live within that reign now, The Christian community is that part of humanity which has accepted God's reign in Christ,

experienced new birth, and so in which Christ has taken form; it is “the avant-garde of the new creation”. This community, the church, is organic rather than organized; it is the whole people of God; it is not a cultic society, not a collocation of denominations, knows nothing of a lay-clerical dichotomy. It is found in its entirety in each and everyone of its cells, microcosms of the whole. And through each God would carry on His mission. In prayer Jesus says, 'As you have sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world'. He takes us where He Himself is already: the church cannot take Christ anywhere where He is not already ahead of us. Nor is He bound in mission to the church. “God's mission in the world is much wider than His work through the church; His mission reaches into all areas of life, including those untouched by the church.”<sup>1</sup> The Agent, then, is Christ to whom God's Spirit witnesses, and in whom His church is privileged and commanded to share God's mission.

The **Message** of mission is the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is a gospel that He brought and a gospel that is Christ Himself. It is “the good news that something entirely new has happened to the universe – and to man in particular – and that this has been brought about by Jesus Christ. .. The new has come. That is what the mission is about: a new birth, a new humanity, a new creation in Christ.”<sup>2</sup> “The gospel is something that God has done, not a series of phrases describing it.”<sup>3</sup> 'I must,' says Jesus, 'give the good news of God's reign ... for this is what I was sent to do.' It is the good news brought by Jesus of the reign of God; it is the good news of Christ Himself who embodied God's reign and by His overthrow of the demonic, by His reconciling death, by His resurrection has made available God's answer for man's predicament and for the whole universe. “It is the living Christ with the virtue of His reconciling death in Him, who is the burden of the apostolic message.”<sup>4</sup> It is good news of 'salvation', and Jesus had such a conception of salvation that He uses the word for the forgiveness of sin, for the restoration of physical sight, and for the transformation of character. It is good news for the individual, good news for the world. It is news of reconciliation and forgiveness, of love and peace and wholeness and hope and power. It is personal, and social, and cosmic. “The big theme of the gospel is God and man. Therefore it is one of the essentials of the gospel that there should not be a single theme in this world which is not touched upon by the gospel.”<sup>5</sup> Jesus Christ is Lord! Alleluia!

The **Scope** of mission is co-extensive with life itself. It means for the Christian the giving of life in all its aspects to God and the world. In this sense it is one with worship in the full sense. “In mission the church faces the world in the name of Christ on behalf of God... In worship the church faces God in the name of Christ on behalf of the world.”<sup>6</sup> In both Jesus is Mediator: 'Consider Jesus, the Missionary and the High Priest!'. In both the motive is love for God and the world. God intends that all that His people are and say and do in the ordinariness of life as much as in its high moments should, at one and the same time, be mission and worship. This

idea permeates the Bible where the common words translated 'worship' don't refer to cultic celebration at all. We must get back to the Bible.

The **Motive** for mission must be found in the source of mission which is the heart of God. It is the love of God, that persistent, irrepressible care He has for man in his need, rebellion, arrogance and estrangement. 'God so loved.' The early Christian community could say 'The love of Christ leaves us no choice'. 'A compulsion is laid upon me,' says Paul. "We can't do anything else," say Peter and John. To be genuinely caught up in God's mission is to be caught up in His love, and to know the provision of His Spirit. Concern for God's glory, gratitude for His love in Christ, obedience to Christ's missionary mandate, the need of men, self-fulfilment, are not themselves the motive for mission, but they will be realities for the man participating with God and sharing His love. Much that the Christian community has called mission has not been a participation with God and has been pursued for other motivation than God's love for men. "There has been an ineradicable ambiguity about its mission and its motive for mission. There has been an inner contradiction between its message and its manner of life."<sup>7</sup> There still is, and we must examine ourselves.

The **Dynamic** for mission, as we have seen, is the Spirit of God. It was in the power of the Spirit that Jesus carried through His mission: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me for He has anointed me'. It is by virtue of its participation in God's Spirit that the church participates in God's mission. Jesus has promised 'I will send you the Spirit... He will witness to me and you also are witnesses'. So we find the early church saying, 'It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us'. "The church's witness will always be subordinate to that of the Spirit. It is less that we do the witnessing and He confirms our testimony than that He bears the witness and we corroborate His."<sup>8</sup> Every aspect of the missionary assignment depends upon God's Spirit. Is 'fulness of the Spirit' specifically for participation with God in mission? 'As the Father sent me, so I send you. Receive the Holy Spirit,' said Christ.

The **Goal** of mission is a new humanity that is wholly Christlike. "Mission is not only Christianity looking outward into the world, but also looking forward into the future. It sees a future filled with Christ and dominated by Christ. He is already Lord. He is the Omega point to which all converge. His destiny is to complete, to unify, to fill all things."<sup>9</sup> God wills that through Christ and in Christ the entire creation find its true wholeness and fulfilment, 'that the universe, all in heaven and earth, might be brought into a unity in Christ', 'through whom God chose to reconcile the whole universe to Himself, making peace through the shedding of His blood'. The goal of mission is that 'every tongue confess "Jesus Christ is Lord" to the glory of God'. Another way of seeing God's goal in mission is through the concept of 'shalom'. "Shalom is the exclusive content of the New Era. It is the character of the kingdom of God, the new regime of the Messiah."<sup>10</sup> "In shalom, peace is established between God and man ... between man and his neighbour ... between a man and himself."<sup>11</sup>

It means God-given wholeness, soundness, maturity and well-being; it implies right relationships, love, peace, joy, justice, truth, goodness, health, trust, mutuality; it is the gift of God in and through 'the prince of shalom'. 'Glory to God ... on earth shalom'; 'Shalom from God the Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ'; 'He is our shalom who ... has broken down the barrier of hostility'; 'Shalom I leave with you, my shalom I give to you'. So mission makes towards the shalom of God in the reign of God when 'the kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ'. Indeed the "missionary direction is the only constant in history" .<sup>12</sup>

## ***The Assignment of Mission***

If we consider Jesus, the Missionary, we see the constituent parts of God's mission. There is space to deal only with the main areas of mission's assignment.

### **a) Proclamation**

The NT word means 'the proclamation of a herald' and suggests that the message is a given one and comes directly from the king. It "contains a declaration that the long-prophesied Messianic Age has dawned in and through the ministry, death, and resurrection of our Lord; a conviction that the power and glory of Christ, who is now exalted by virtue of the resurrection, is shown by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church; a belief that the consummation of the Messianic Age will shortly come with the return of Christ, and appeal for repentance and baptism for the remission of sins" .<sup>13</sup> 'By the absurdity of what is proclaimed it has pleased God to save those who believe.' This proclamation was an activity of the whole people of God. Moreover, "it is not religious discourse to a closed group of initiates, but open and public proclamation of God's redemptive activity in and through Jesus Christ": "There is little evidence of formal preaching in the NT (which was also a cool communication age)."<sup>15</sup> It is "hard to see one place in the Acts of the Apostles where anybody preaches a prepared sermon to a docile audience of believers ... Where preaching was a spontaneous, outgoing announcing, it has now become a prepared cultic act presented to the insider" .<sup>16</sup> The Christian community must again herald the message of what God has done and make clear His summons to accept His reign.

### **b) Evangelism**

This overworked word means 'the announcing of good news' at the request of the one sending the news. The evangel or good news is the message of mission we have already considered. Evangelism was clearly not confined to proclamation and was often in the context of personal conversation. Whatever the circumstances and whatever the outcome, the man who is communicating the good news of Christ is evangelizing. Again the NT sees evangelism as an activity of the whole people of God.

### **c) Discussion**

The NT uses many words that show the early church using every means of verbal communication. They talked or conversed the gospel, they discussed, they reasoned, they debated. “The example of the apostles was that they frequently engaged in debate, argument and disputation for the sake of asserting the reasonableness of the gospel and of demonstrating its merits against other points of view.”<sup>17</sup> Nor were they afraid to use fully contemporary thought-forms in communication. Paul changed the whole vocabulary of the gospel and remained true to the message. “If the Holy Spirit did not spare ... John the use of 'in' words such as 'the Word' (very modern in the first century!), I don't believe He wants to spare us the use of modern 'in' words and expressions.”<sup>18</sup> We must always be adapting and translating if God's Word is to be understood. This applies to 'evangelism' and 'proclamation', too.

### **d) Witness**

In the Bible, witness is primarily a legal term. The witness gives evidence of the things 'which we have heard, seen with our eyes, looked upon, and handled of the Word of life'. Jesus had said, 'The Spirit will witness to me, and you also are witnesses,' and the apostles found this true: 'We are witnesses and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey Him'. “We might almost conclude that the experience of the Holy Spirit's power in the Christian is dependent on his obedience to the command to witness.”<sup>19</sup> We must note, too, that witness is to Jesus Christ. “We do not stand on the fact of our own experience, but on the fact which we experience.”<sup>20</sup> We must avoid simply identifying witness with “giving a testimony”; apart from the danger that Christ so often becomes incidental, the “seemingly inevitable glamourizing of Christian experience in testimonies is pastorally irresponsible and gives a falsely romanticized impression of what being a Christian is like.”<sup>21</sup> The NT means much more by the word. Such, indeed, was often the nature of Christian witness that it gave us the word 'martyr'.

### **e) Making Disciples**

Jesus clearly saw the making of disciples as an essential of His mission and included it as such in His apostolic commission. The word approximates most nearly to 'apprentice' and our mission includes bringing men into apprenticeship to Christ. From the beginning Jesus called men, 'Follow me'. His mission summoned men to decision, to trust in God, to exclusive allegiance to Himself. 'Whoever doesn't forsake all he has, can't be my disciple.' Again and again He demands a total break with priorities of the past. In calling men to follow Christ today we must honestly present the realities of life in Christ without false sentiment; we must encourage the thinking through of the implications of discipleship before any act of commitment. The full meaning of a life of worship and mission within the world as a member of Christ's body should be carefully explored. There is need for 'metanoia',

a radical and total reorientation of heart and mind by which a man turns right round to face God. In the old terms, repentance and conversion. But this is clearly the beginning of an apprenticeship that lasts a lifetime. Nothing in life matters more than that men should 'know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent'. We cannot love men and not long for their sakes to bring them into freedom in the discipleship of Christ. We cannot love God and not participate with Him in His mission of love to men till they confess 'Jesus Christ is Lord' to the glory of the Father. We have the awesome privilege of summoning men to accept God's gift of reconciliation in Christ. It is not tolerance but lack of love that makes the church silent and inactive. Make disciples of all peoples, for there is no other means through which man can experience God's wholeness.

### **f) Teaching**

A disciple is a trainee or apprentice, and education and instruction are part of the mission of God. In the NT times the primary purpose of the synagogue was education, and Jesus made considerable use of its teaching opportunities; He used the temple porticos when He was in the capital city, taught in homes and in the open-air. His mandate to the Christian community is to teach men to maintain 'all those things I've commanded'. We need to look again at our Lord's own teaching, both at the content and at His methods, and especially at His training of the *twelve* as a group. The early community could say, 'We instruct everyone in all the ways of wisdom, so as to present each one as a mature member of Christ's body. To this end,' Paul adds, 'I am toiling strenuously with all the energy and power of Christ at work in me'. Would that such concern for wholeness marked the church's mission today! We should note also that teaching preceded discipleship as well as following it; that it was not seen as a function of one man but of the whole community; that there was teaching rather than preaching when Christians gathered together. "Teaching in the church ought to take the form in which men have to stand up for their faith in the world, that is in dialogue. They are aware that their explanations often fail to convince, that they are countered by questions they cannot answer, that situations arise in the world to which faith seems irrelevant, that much of the personal morality taught in the church cannot be translated straight into situations of group responsibility, decision and action... They have to grapple with problems of family breakdown, young people going adrift, illness, death, crisis and boredom. All this must be said within the teaching life of the congregation."<sup>22</sup> The need today for teaching is critical. Men simply must be better taught about their faith and how belief relates to life in secular society.

### **g) Baptism**

Jesus included baptism in the apostolic commission; disciples are to be baptized. There is no suggestion that baptism makes a man into a disciple, but that discipleship should be marked by baptism. 'By our baptism we were buried with

Him and shared His death,' says Paul. "Baptism involves judgment. God's judgment upon sin was executed in the baptism of death which Christ underwent."<sup>23</sup> It is a death with which the disciple chooses to identify himself as a response in faith to God's grace of which baptism speaks. Through the ages God has declared the gospel of Christ in this pictorial action even when the voice of the church has been confused; His grace is prior to our faith. But the NT knows only of baptism which follows or incorporates the affirmation of Jesus Christ as Lord. It is, moreover, God's ordination to participation in His mission to the world, and the disciple's confirmation. Should it not follow hard on commitment to Christ? Can it be separated from admission to the Lord's supper? Is it intended to take place before the church or before the world? Is it an action given over by God to a sacerdotal caste? Should not the children of the baptized be introduced into the catechumenate from birth and so have part within and be the responsibility of the Christian community? Current understanding and practice raise for mission many such questions to which the church must address itself.

#### **h) Community life**

The NT word is more dynamic and active than is suggested by 'fellowship' or 'association'. It means something like 'joint-participation', 'mutual sharing', 'co-involvement'. "The gift of the Spirit carried the believers into a new unity of common life in Christ across the previously impenetrable barriers of language, religion, race and culture. The life of apostolic fellowship, therefore, far from being the self-enclosed life of a new and separate institution in the world, is a life that reveals within the institutional structure of the world a new life that transcends the old walls of division."<sup>24</sup> It should be a community of forgiven and forgiving men and women where human barriers of colour, class, status, gender, education, etc., are seen to be broken in Christ. Here we see the relevance of unity to mission; differences and variety there should surely be, but they must be taken up into that unity which is a gift of Christ. Society sees the incongruity of our proclamation of reconciliation when we are not reconciled the one to the other. Jesus said, 'All men will know you are my disciples if you love one another', and prayed that we might be one 'that the world might come to faith'. The early church stressed togetherness and sought to love one another, pray for one another, forgive one another, encourage one another, give deference to one another, etc. The non-Christian entering such a group is likely to understand the meaning and power of the gospel more readily than by an intellectual process alone. So it is encouraging that there are Christian cells and housegroups everywhere who are accepting afresh God's gift of *koinonia* and making new discoveries in the Spirit as they share in mission through their corporate life.

#### **l) Acts of Celebration**

There is no biblical precedent for limiting the concept of worship to what we have today in liturgies, 'catholic' or 'free', since it embraced the whole of life. But this is not to deny that the early church had many ways of celebrating Christ. The combinations that have developed hardly reflect the spontaneous joy of the Spirit that we see in the NT.

Celebration was by all the people as the Spirit led the group. The Lord's Supper was in the context of a meal. Whether this was set in a larger setting of 'preaching', etc., is very doubtful. Like baptism, proclamation was before the world. Teaching had a central place, but probably not in the acts of celebration. Singing and reciting the doings of God in history and supremely in Christ, speaking in tongues, prophetic comment, prayer – these seem of the nature of the early church's celebration. The outsider present in such a group of Christians will, says Paul, be convinced of sin and 'bow down and worship God, acknowledging "God is really here with you" '. Above all, it was in the Lord's Supper that celebration focused. "The Eucharist is the gospel of the kingdom in action, the proclaiming of the Lord's death till He comes; it is the manifesto, not only in word but in deed of all Christ has done, is doing and will do, to change the world – the notice of the new order served upon it."<sup>25</sup> Can we expect that as we really participate with God in mission we shall celebrate Him more really when we come together? This would seem to be how God's Spirit has always brought renewal to God's church.

### **j) Penetration of the World**

As 'the salt of the earth' the Christian community permeates society but remains distinctive. Salt dispersed throughout food brings out its true flavour (and acts as a preservative) but is as useless if it fails to penetrate or if it loses its saltiness altogether. Every area and aspect of the whole world's life must be touched, and this is part of the mission of every Christian in every situation where he is set. This involves penetration of the many worlds of our lives – the commercial, industrial, educational, moral, technological, political, artistic, entertainment, mass media; it means complete engagement with the worlds of the down-and-outs and up-and-outs and everyone between. "Surely our Lord would have us penetrate the world of government, of school, of work, of the home. And does He not will us to penetrate ... the worlds of entertainment, of the intellectual, of the labouring man, of the disenfranchised?"<sup>26</sup> "Nothing but costly involvement is Christian. Withdrawal to whatever degree is Pharisaic. As our Lord took on our flesh, so He calls His church to take on the secular world. Otherwise we do not take the incarnation seriously."<sup>27</sup> But in this involvement the church has God's gift of distinctive life. "Identification with the world does not mean that the church must become like the world. It is not the similarity between the church and the world that attracts people to Christ: it is the difference. Yet belief in God as the Lord of creation and of all aspects of life, and a desire to follow Christ's example, both impel the Christian to be identified with the world. This means a genuine, a full participation in the life of the world."<sup>28</sup>

## **k) Visitation**

Jesus sent out His disciples on house-to-house visitation. We are enjoined 'to visit orphans and widows in their affliction', and reminded to visit the sick and those in prison. Clearly, too, our homes are to be open to the visits of others; we are to be 'given to hospitality'. The mission of Jesus indicates the paramount importance of the home.

## **l) Service**

Sacrificial service is integral to mission: it was the way of Christ and commended by Him to His disciples. Paul recognized that proclamation could not be divorced from service: 'We proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake'. "Full participation in God's mission will demand costly service, both in meeting the needs of men, and in seeking to reform the patterns of society which produce these needs – service which is neither an excuse nor a cloak for evangelism, but a genuine expression of the love of God."<sup>29</sup> It stands on its own as yet another sign of God's reign, an overflowing of His love. We must repudiate the attitude which moves towards men "with the banana of caring in one hand and the halter of conversion in the other."<sup>30</sup> On the other hand "if our service is not a kind of bribe and not done in an attitude of condescending superiority, the cup of cold water or the washing of dirty feet may open the door of the heart to hear about the cross."<sup>31</sup> The NT word translated 'service' is also rendered 'ministry': 'servant' and 'minister' mean the same thing. "When we ask, 'How many ministers does your church have?' the traditional answer is 'One' or 'Two' or 'Five' depending on how large the paid staff is. But the true answer is 'Two hundred' or 'Two thousand' depending on how large the membership is. Every believer is a minister."<sup>32</sup> Our baptism, as we have seen, is our ordination to mission and so to the ministry or service of God in service to the world.

## **m) Healing**

Jesus did great miracles of healing and these were clearly signs of His defeat of cosmic evil and signs of the presence and power of God's reign in the person of Christ. The disciples were sent out 'to heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers and exorcise demons'. The ministry of healing covers body, mind and heart; it is the restoring of broken relationships; it is all that makes for health and wholeness and holiness. It is part of mission to listen, to counsel, to assist confession, to affirm the forgiveness of those who confess in faith, to accept the social deviant with love and understanding, to help the anxious, the fearful, the lonely, the suicidal, to care for the sick, the infirm, the distracted, the dying, the bereaved, to support those whose lives are dependent on alcohol, heroin or other drugs, to follow Christ in the exorcism of the demonic. Nor should we regard healing as solely personal: it is also a social responsibility. In John's vision the leaves of the tree of life 'are for the

healing of the nations'. This has bearing on mission in groups and communities and in society at large.

#### **n) Concern for Social Justice**

This has always been a primary aspect of God's mission. "The Bible lays much stress on the need for social justice."<sup>33</sup> and "leaves us in no doubt that God is interested in legislation as well as love, in hygiene as well as holiness, in work as well as worship."<sup>34</sup> In fact the Bible has more about politics, wars, economics, sanitation, etc., than about what most men would call 'religion'. "The God of the Bible ... worked in and through political events ... revealed Himself in the exodus, in the conquest, in the defeat of the kingdom. He revealed Himself in political events in the liberation of the people from serfdom and political slavery, in the military conquest of the land, in the defeat at the hands of a world power."<sup>35</sup> The Biblical record clearly shows that in His mission God works for justice both in personal and social terms. Such concern figures large in the OT prophets, is clearly taken up by Jesus and integral to His message of God's reign. Mission works for those things which reflect shalom, which affirm the reign or kingdom of God; thus it extends to the exposing and opposing of all destructive powers that deny the Lordship of Christ and keep men less than fully human. Such powers make for injustice, exploitation, poverty, hunger, homelessness, brutality, racism, militarism, imperialism, totalitarianism, etc. Jesus and His disciples were clearly seen as revolutionary by those who recognized the significance of His message and His actions and His life. The early Christians "embraced an entirely different set of values from those held by other members of society. Those original values are still in conflict with the values of contemporary society; yet religion today has become as conservative a force as the force the original Christians were in conflict with."<sup>36</sup> It is tragic that the church is so failing to share in God's mission that it actually buttresses a status quo that is a denial of God's shalom and the Lordship of His Christ. "Many say, 'You cannot make love by law'. That is quite true. But Christian realism is not content with this, for it knows that love in social terms is expressed in justice for all."<sup>37</sup>

#### **o) Embodying the Reign of God**

The Christian community is called to live as a microcosm of the new age, to be a breakthrough of Christ's way of love and unity and responsible freedom in a world of hostility, division and enslavement. The church is to embody and reflect in its life, its fellowship, its service and its worship something of the 'shalom' towards which God's mission in the world is advancing, and which He has gifted to man and the universe through Jesus Christ.

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## Acknowledgements:

1	On the Other Side	
2	For All the World	John V. Taylor
3	The Gagging of God	Gavin Reid
4	The Christian Doctrine of Reconciliation	James Denney
5	The Relevance of the Gospel Today	Gerhard Bergmann
6	Study Paper on 'Worship'	James Torrance (Scottish Youth Assembly)
7	Unchanging Mission	Douglas Webster
8	Our Guilty Silence	J.R.W. Stott
9	Not Ashamed	Douglas Webster
10	God's Revolution & Man's Responsibility	HarveyCox
11	Theological Reflections on the Work of Evangelism	W.C.C.
12	The Theology of Hope	J. Moltmann
13	Apostolic Preaching & Its Developments	C.H. Dodd
14	New Bible Dictionary	R.H. Mounce
15	The Gagging of God	Gavin Reid
16	Ibid	
17	Evangelism Among Children and Young People	John Taylor
18	Hindrances to Evangelism	Jose Grau
19	What Is Evangelism?	Douglas Webster
20	-----	P.T. Forsyth
21	Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God	J.I. Packer
22	We the People	Kathleen Bliss
23	An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament	Alan Richardson
24	Where in the World?	Colin Williams
25	On Being the Church in the World	John Robinson
26	The Christian Persuader	Leighton Ford
27	Christ, the Controversialist	J.R.W. Stott
28	On the Other Side	
29	Ibid	
30	Evangelicals on the Brink of Crisis	Carl Henry
31	The Christian Persuader	Leighton Ford
32	Ibid	
33	One World, One Task	
34	Christian Beliefs and this World	A.R. Vidler
35	God's Revolution & Man's Responsibility	HarveyCox
36	The Comfortable Pew	Pierre Berton
37	The Christian Persuader	Leighton Ford

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This paper was first presented at the FYT conference in Nottingham in 1971.