

Mission Declarations From Bangkok and Seoul Compared

In 1973 a Conference sponsored by the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches met in Bangkok and dealt with the theme "Salvation Today." But what did the Conference mean with that phrase? Its official report defines salvation as freedom from societal sins. It affirms that salvation is "experienced in many ways by men and women today in their struggle for the meaning and fullness of life and for social justice." We are told that we need to be saved from social injustice and racial oppression.

The Bangkok document does not refer to what the gospel offers repentant believers on the basis of Christ's work on the cross or the Spirit's regeneration. The assembly of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism meeting immediately after the conference on "Salvation Today" took such actions as calling for "increased assistance" through the World Council of Churches "for the educational, social, and medical work of liberation movements and structures in the liberated areas" of southern Africa.

In the light of this Bangkok Conference, we must view the convention of the Asia Missions Association which met in Seoul, Korea, from August 25 to September 1, 1975 "to advocate anew the urgency of Christian mission." This mission gathering was the outgrowth of the First All Asia Mission Consultation held there just two years earlier.

Delegates came from sixteen nations - twelve from Asia and four from the west .

Out of this gathering came a document entitled "The Seoul Declaration on Christian Mission." This declaration is a historic document and presents a balanced approach to missions. It does not set forth missions as either purely soul-saving or social action.

Section one begins with a brief statement of appreciation for the past two centuries of the work of Protestant missions. "We gratefully salute the numerous heroic pioneers of Christian mission who dedicated their lives not only for the sake of assisting the peoples of these nations in solving basic human problems inseparable from the right of existence." Yet it does not hesitate to point out "honestly that the territorial expansion, commercialism, imperialism, and colonialism of western nations often have been stumbling blocks in presenting the core of the Gospel to the oppressed peoples of the Third World, and unfortunately have led many people to regard the Christian mission as a vehicle of Western imperialism."

Section two criticizes the conference on World Mission and Evangelism at Bangkok 1973 as having "placed the liberation of people from structural evils as the main task of Christian mission." This view of mission is seen as a modern un-Biblical concept, leading to grave "evils." Yet the document affirms its deep concern "about social justice and political freedom for those who are exploited and oppressed." And it continues by saying: "We are therefore obliged to declare that the essential and fundamental task of the Christian mission is to proclaim the redemptive power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which can transform the structures of society."

The Seoul document calls for a turning back "from the modern liberal mission based upon a 'social foundation,' and a return to the Christian mission based on a 'biblical foundation.'" "What is the foundation of Christian missions? It is "the confession and

trust in the Scriptures as the Word of God and as the only norm for Christian faith and practice. . . . We cannot accept as a part of the Christian mission, any activity which challenges biblical authority."

Section three involves a reflection on "The Unfinished Task." The task of missions is not over, as some would like to think and advocate. "There are still many pockets of humanity, ethnic groups, and un-reached peoples where even a single church does not exist. Are we praying enough for those nations in the world into which missionaries are not allowed to enter? Are we sensitive enough to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in recognizing ways to reach the un-reached?"

Section four – The most significant section for Western observers is the fourth section – "Development of the New Mission Force and the Cooperation of the East and West." It mentions the grave international situation. "The world today is groping through a dark maze for a new international order to replace the crumbled order of the past. The situation in Asia is rather serious. Our Christian brothers from Vietnam and the Khmer Republic who were here two years ago cannot participate in this historic gathering. In the face of this serious situation, we recognize and declare that the Christian mission should no longer be carried out as a one-way and uncoordinated effort."

An appeal is made to all "western evangelical mission societies still active in Asia: Do not any longer go your own way. Do not any longer compete with each other and with us. Do cooperate with the growing evangelical leadership in Asia. Let us establish a united front of East and West, North and South, to carry out the unfinished task of the Christian mission."

The fifth section is a mutual commitment of the Seoul delegates: "Whereas we are charged to preach the Word ... and whereas we are commanded by our Living Lord to be his witnesses . . . we therefore declare that we are obliged to carry out that commission in the Pauline spirit, proclaiming nothing but the Gospel of the Cross, and trusting in the Word of our Lord who said, 'And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world' (Matthew 28:20). In this spirit we pledge ourselves to march forward." The Seoul declaration on Christian mission is a stirring and scholarly document. The Western churches should take careful note of this much-needed contribution to the role and task of modern missions.

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December, 1976