

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ACTION

P.F. JENSEN

"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

If a poll was held to discover the most popular people in the world (and I'm sure there must have been such a poll, things being as they are), it is virtually certain that Mother Theresa of Calcutta would figure very prominently, and rightly so. Through her selfless, caring work she has demonstrated love to the world and challenged the prevailing ego-fulfilment ethic of our age.

There is a danger, however, in this fame which has come to Mother Theresa of getting things out of perspective. We may begin to think that she is the only person doing such things in today's world. Such is far from being the case.

In an earlier generation, the same danger attended the reputation that came to Dr. Albert Schweizer. This brilliant man - he was equally famous as a musician, a philosopher, a theologian and musicologist, trained as a medical practitioner and lived in Africa, far away from the centre of European culture in which he had made his reputation. It was an act which captured the imagination of the world. I remember my scripture teacher telling us about him, and then being somewhat peeved when a boy in my class kept referring to other doctors who had gone to spend their lives in Africa. Of course they were not as talented as Dr. Schweizer, and in this sense may have been less 'worthy'; but I have always felt that the lad was right and the teacher wrong, in the sense that these other obscure people had given their lives too for the well-being of others. They gave what they could.

In fact, of course, for hundreds of years men and women like Mother Theresa and Albert Schweizer have put their own self-interest to one side and left their own homes in order to bring life and health

to others, all in the name of Jesus Christ. The work they have done - often unsung - has been of immense importance. It is truly said, for example, that the missionaries brought literacy and western education to Africa and trained the first generation of African leaders. All over the world to this very day, Christian workers are in the forefront of the attack on illiteracy and ignorance. In teaching people to read they are giving them the precious gift of the Bible; but they are also preparing them for the world of the future.

Recently in my church we heard the story of two Australian sisters who saw the need for child care in one of the largest cities in Korea. They began to work in a small way; today their work has blossomed into a large maternity hospital; and 1,000 midwives have been trained. These midwives are using their skills all over South Korea. Hundreds of lives are being saved; lives which may otherwise have been lost. There is only one example of the work which Christian missionaries are doing all over the world.

At a time when folk are saying that the task of the missionary is to concentrate on social action, it is well to remember two things. First, the gospel itself has profound social implications. To accept the gospel is to accept a whole new way of life. The first task of the missionary is to preach the gospel; it has never been divorced from social action. Second, we ought to be aware that missionaries have never hesitated to meet the physical and social needs of those around them, often in very practical and effective ways. These heroic tales may be unfamiliar to us, but they are true nonetheless. For them we should thank God.

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