

The Central Committee of the World Council of Churches has issued a call for a world-wide conference on the theme, Salvation Today. The gathering will be held in Bangkok from December 29th to January 21st, 1973. It will be an expensive meeting, drawing in men and women from all over the world to consider one crucial question:

What is the salvation which Jesus Christ offers men today?

It is highly significant that, while the mission aim of the World Council of Churches, and indeed of all Churches of Christ, is "to further the proclamation of the Gospel to all men that they may believe and be saved," all the advance publications concerning this meeting indicate that the World Council is making a massive effort to reinterpret the classic meaning of that aim so that 'being saved' will come to mean having more food, more justice, more clothes, more freedom, more production, less disease, more brotherhood, more peace, in short, more this-worldly improvements.

A United Methodist minister writing me under date of June 28th, 1972, puts the issue succinctly:

My friends on the left are always saying to me that we Evangelicals should remember that it is both personal salvation and social action. But when I go to Methodist Convocations and read materials from our Board of Missions, I want to stand up and say, "Brethren, please remember it is both social concern and personal salvation." My brethren to the left so infrequently remember the advice they are so free to give me.

Precisely this issue will underlie the Bangkok Gathering. Advance W.C.C. materials insist (on Old Testament grounds) that "salvation" has primarily to do with the current life of flesh and blood, hunger and satiation, manufacturing and distributing, freedom and wholeness in this world.

We hope and pray that as the meeting takes place, better counsels will prevail. We trust that delegates will insist that the Old Testament passages must not be taken by themselves. They alone do not represent the whole biblical revelation. They must be understood also in the light of the unity of the Bible and seen also in the light of the New Testament revelation.

The magnitude of the truncated, sub-biblical deviation being proposed is seen in the fact that all Branches of the Christian Church in all ages have held and all Christians have believed that salvation in the Christian sense means primarily the salvation of the soul which results in abundant life in the body. Such eternal salvation is the most effective agent of temporal peace and righteousness. The possession of this salvation enables the saved to enter into the cultural task to which God calls His people.

The Old Testament is one long recital of all kinds of temporal improvements which God gave His people in the course of disclosing Himself to them as their Redeemer. It says, "God saved His people in these ways, binding them in covenant to be His people and abide in His laws." However, all such improvements (destruction of enemies, abundance of food, riches, status, multitudes of children, houses and vineyards, horses and chariots) turned out to be temporary palliatives. God took the Hebrews - strictly bound to worship Him only - to a land flowing with milk and honey, and lo, within a short time they were disobeying Him, worshipping the baals and asherah, committing adulteries under every green tree, and grinding the faces of the poor!! He forgave them and gave them David's Kingdom. Within one generation, kings, priests, and people had with enthusiasm abandoned the religion of Yahweh for that of the prestigious gods of the land. During all these centuries it became clear that until the heart of man is changed, until he is saved through faith in Jesus Christ and becomes a new creature, until he is firmly joined to the Body and continues in the means of grace, no amount of milk and honey (more to eat and wear, better houses, more justice, more peace, greater individual and national income) is of lasting value.

The issue at Bangkok is clear: does the word salvation, according to the Bible, mean eternal salvation or does it mean this-worldly improvements? Which is the basic meaning? It appears as if the conciliar forces are set to maintain, on the basis of the Old Testament, that salvation means primarily if not exclusively this-worldly improvements. Evangelicals will maintain, on the basis of the total biblical record (the New Testament as well as the Old) that 'salvation' means a change in status of the soul, the essential person, is achieved through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and results in abundant life in this world.

"Once you were no people, but now you are God's people." (1 Pet. 2:10)

"If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

(Romans 10:9)

"There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved." (Acts 4:12)

Let us note what the debate is not about, i.e. what is agreed on. Both conciliar and non-conciliar Christians agree that temporal improvements in man's lot (both individual and social) are desirable. On biblical grounds both agree that Christians should do good to all men, that the hungry should be fed, the naked should be clothed, those in prison should be visited, justice should roll down like waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream. Agreed. Furthermore, it is agreed that a considerable part of the Church's treasure should be spent to achieve these good temporal ends. Missions in the past hundred years have spent from a half to nine-tenths of their men and money for education, medicine, agricultural improvement, and the like. The proportion of the whole budget spent for these things is always a matter for debate, but that a substantial amount be so spent is seldom questioned. No one is advocating that since God grants salvation to those who believe on Christ and are incorporated in His Church, nothing further is required. On the contrary, Christians continually insist that the saved while they are in this world, must and will live in forgiveness and love and press on toward righteousness and justice. Disagreement does not lie on these points.

Disagreement lies in whether temporal improvements are salvation or a fruit of the saved life. The distinction is vitally important. Bangkok will not be splitting hairs. If 'salvation today' means political liberation, land distribution, better pay for factory workers, the downfall of oppressive systems of government, and the like, then the whole apparatus of missions is rightfully used to achieve these ends. Evangelism will be downgraded. Churching the unchurched will be neglected and ridiculed. The airplane of missions will be diverted away from the propagation of the Gospel to the establishment of utopias.

Indeed, these emphases have been occurring during the last fifteen years. "Salvation" is the fourth word which the World Council of Churches is reinterpreting. All are being devalued in the same direction. Their eternal significance is being minimized and their temporal meanings underlined.

- a) "Mission" ceases to be the propagation of the Gospel and becomes everything God wants done by Christians or non-Christians - which necessarily limits what God wants done to the field of ethics.
- b) "Evangelism" ceases to be proclaiming Jesus Christ by word and deed and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church and becomes changing the structures of society in the direction of justice, righteousness and peace.
- c) "Conversion" ceases to be turning from idols to serve the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, as revealed in the Bible, and becomes turning corporately from faulty social configurations to those which liberate men and incorporate them in the great brotherhood.
- d) "Salvation" is apparently going to be put through the same rolling mill and brought out flattened and focused on temporal improvements.

(One kind friend urged me to concede that my bifocals - without which I cannot read or write - are an important part of my salvation!)

Evangelicals should work and pray that this deliberate debasing of Christian currency cease and that the reformation of the social order (rightly emphasized) should not be substituted for salvation. Salvation is something which the true and living God confers on His creatures in accordance with His once-for-all revelation in Jesus Christ, God and Saviour according to the Bible. Salvation is a vertical relationship (of man with God) which issues in horizontal relationships (of man with men). The vertical must not be displaced by the horizontal.

Desirable as social ameliorations are, working for them must not be substituted for the biblical requirements of/for 'salvation'. Those requirements are clear: The New Testament states them again and again. Paul voiced them in their simplest form to the Philippian jailer: "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household." (Acts 16:31)

Church Growth Bulletin hopes that three agreements will come out of Bangkok and urges readers to work and pray that such may eventuate. Let us all agree -

1. That beyond question the Bible teaches that God's people ought continually and creatively to work for a just, brotherly, righteous and peaceful order in their families, neighborhoods, states, world.
2. That beyond question the Bible teaches that to become God's people it is necessary for all men (descendants of Christians and non-Christians alike) to believe on Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour, receive Him in their hearts, become responsible members of His Church, and manifest the fruits of the Spirit in their lives. And that this alone may rightly be called 'salvation today'.
3. That, in consequence, it is desirable for the Church to press forward with classic Christian mission (proclaiming Christ by word and deed and persuading men to become His disciples and responsible members of His Church) on the one hand, and with a program of social action and humanitarian concern on the other. Christians should be entirely free to support each program according to their conscience. It is unacceptable for leaders of missionary societies to determine to what kind of missions they will devote the givings of the devout. Donors themselves must decide whether they wish to carry on 'making disciples' or 'reforming society'.