

*People/Profits* is a beginning in the development of both questions and answers as to the social impact of proxy holders. The questions are easier to discover than the answers. The discussion provides a number of alternative answers to each question proposed, but with very little consensus. Beginnings must be made on complex issues.

#### REFERENCE

- 1 Adolph Berle, *Economic Power and the Free Society* (Santa Barbara, California: Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions 1964), p. 102.

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## Wake Up!

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#### MISSION: POSSIBLE

By Gottfried Oosterwal

Nashville: Southern Publishing Association 1972 122 pp \$2.95

For a people who spend much on *mission* and who are at times almost in a frenzy to keep personnel rotating, it must surely surprise observers that so little on the subject of mission has been and is being written by the Adventist church. Whatever strategies in mission the church may have, they originate with boards of trustees — albeit “guided by the Spirit,” but as interpreted by trustees. Objective external assessment of the strategies or examination of mission objectives has not been encouraged. New suggestions may be considered judgments against patterns of the past. To query may raise the question of disloyalty. Yet, if one wishes to be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit, does not the Spirit most effectively break through when the church is provoked out of its tranquility?

Gottfried Oosterwal’s *Mission: Possible* may well be a breath of fresh air — stimulating the church to awaken and look anew at itself, its priorities, and its motives.

According to the author, “each chapter was written specifically for Seventh-day Adventists” (p. 13). Well, *almost all* were. It may have slipped his mind temporarily that chapter four was written specifically “for a discussion group of Protestant and Roman Catholic theologians” (p. 12). The book is primarily a collection of articles and lectures, most of them prepared for different audiences, except for chapters one and seven, which were written specifically for this book. These two chapters are similar in mood (in contrast to the varying accents of the other chapters, because of the differences of the groups addressed) and are complementary in the concerns they express.

Oosterwal's main message is succinctly brought out in these two chapters: (a) the church exists *only* to participate in mission; (b) each generation must discover *its* "present truth" to be reinterpreted by each culture; (c) biblically circumscribed, to be sure, the generation's present truth must be reinterpreted nevertheless — in order to be meaningful to the non-Christians that compose the staggering 80 percent of the world's population unprepared to accept relics of a past and very foreign tradition; (d) mission is *the work of the Holy Spirit*, a theme recurring throughout the book (pp. 18-19, 62); (e) self-centeredness is an ever-present danger that institutionalized Christianity faces; (f) the role of the laity, clearly one of the main concerns of the book, is enormous (p. 103).

A reviewer is prone to pick at numerous details. But, to be fair to the author, the critic should remind himself that there are indeed legitimate reasons for writing other than a learned monograph that speaks only to a few colleagues. In the main, Oosterwal is writing to the Seventh-day Adventist church general reader who makes his weekly "sacrifice" to mission — after which, with a sense of having done his part, he withdraws into his protective shell, to emerge again when the next "payment" is due (a practice not unlike a religious "protection racket" in which one buys oneself peace of mind and a sense of "supporting mission").

Oosterwal's aim is to push the church out of such complacency into the unlimited openness lying ahead. In this aim he succeeds well. But in so doing, he simplifies; possibly even overstates; short-cuts to make his points; omits details that a systematic treatment of the subject would demand. Consequently, he may fall short of taking the general reader into areas of discussion for which the reader is not prepared, and this avoidance may becloud that which is primary and urgent.

*Mission: Possible* is not (and undoubtedly is not intended to be) a systematic treatment of mission theology or mission strategy. Rather, the book is filled with questions that members of a half-asleep Christian community must ask themselves in order for them not to become castaways in God's scheme. In raising the questions and stirring the readers, Oosterwal reveals a singlemindedness which, although understandable in view of his overriding objectives, leaves one a bit unsettled and at times puzzled.

For example, in his openness toward other Christian communions in their witnessing task of lifting Christ up before men, Oosterwal seems to say that they are God's agencies to evangelize the world in this generation (pp. 32, 34, 39) and that the Seventh-day Adventist church should therefore cooperate with them in this "world-wide evangelistic thrust" (p. 39). Some of Oosterwal's readers may well hold that view with him. But is the Seventh-day Adventist church really prepared to accept it (regardless of whatever "public relations" statements some given occasion may call forth)?

Could it be that the overwhelming task ahead necessitates an adapted — although in saner moments not readily believable — mode of thinking? Do not church leaders spasmodically make such statements but find themselves afterward, on reflection, muttering and sputtering a number of "buts" which amount to backtracking so as to continue saying what indeed Oosterwal himself says, that "Seventh-day Adventists can never leave to others what God has entrusted to them" (p. 39). Or, "Seventh-day Adventists believe that their unique part in God's mission" is to prepare a people to

meet him (p. 34). Interpreted in practical terms, what this means to those to whom the church witnesses — and according to Oosterwal 90 percent of Adventist converts come from a Christian background (p. 33) — is thus: “What matters is not what other Christians have told you before, but what I tell you now. You have got to leave that other church and join us in order to be saved. But before you can do that, you have to adhere to the following list of things.” Only rarely does the more relaxed proselytism (if-you-feel-you-more-meaningfully-can-worship-God-with-us-then-come-and-join-us) enter into the relationship of Adventists with other Christians.

When Oosterwal discusses the expansion of the church, he wishes to say simply and clearly that Adventists have spread far the past few years — “working in 84 percent of all countries” (p. 43) — and that the most rapid growth is in non-Western areas. His use of statistics to establish this is not particularly helpful. He makes frequent use of percentages, but a percentage growth chart not attached to specific figures is almost meaningless (as in Figure 2, p. 46). And he demonstrates how one can juggle percentages (undoubtedly unwittingly; hence it would be unfair to say “manipulates”) to support one’s thesis, leaving the reader with an impression out of harmony with the facts.

Another “percentage” statement made is that the Adventist church “is now the most widespread single Protestant denomination, working in 84 percent of all countries” (p. 43), with the subsequent conclusion: “Such a rapid and far-reaching expansion has not had its equal since the early Christian church conquered the world. . . . Now that the gospel has reached the remotest ends of the world, we have truly entered the last days of this world’s history” (p. 43).

How helpful is it to observe that Adventists are “working in 84 percent of all countries”? So one person has been able to scramble into Dahomey and plant the church’s “flag” there, or a book evangelist is working in some sections of the capital where the educated people live. What does this say about the extent of Adventist work in that country? Naked or inadequately interpreted statistics often mislead and give the church that false sense of satisfaction and security which in other sections of his book Oosterwal so admirably combats. Geography (i.e., having “entered a country”), of all criteria, is the poorest means of assessing missionary expansion. Distribution of peoples and the sheer matter of communication (i.e., how much have they understood of what I am saying?) must be additional criteria in determining whether in fact one has “reached the remotest ends of the world.”

The percentage figures given on page 107 are also bewildering. When the Christian movement is a lay movement, expansion is rapid and spontaneous, according to Oosterwal. One may have no problem in accepting this as a principal thesis. However, when the author assesses the growth of the Seventh-day Adventist church in the light of this thesis, the image is distorted. (Again, percentages are used without attachment to specific figures.) Oosterwal maintains that from 1870 to 1900 the church was essentially a lay movement and that therefore expansion was rapid and spontaneous (432.54 percent increase in membership). Between 1900 and 1930 “the biblical concept of the laity became blurred” and a “sharp drop . . . in the missionary expansion of the church” resulted. Membership increased during that period “only 184.83 percent.” The next three decades (1930 to 1960) saw the church drop to what he hopes

is its "lowest point," with an increase in membership of 167.25 percent. The actual figures, however, are: 5,440 members in 1870; 75,767 in 1900 (432.54 percent increase?); 314,253 in 1930 (184.83 percent increase?); and 1,245,125 in 1960 (167.25 percent increase?).

Entirely apart from the fact that I am at a loss to explain how Oosterwal arrived at his percentage figures, a membership growth pattern established on percentages, going from a very small figure to the over two million today, has an extremely limited value. It took the Seventh-day Adventist church almost *a century* to reach half-a-million members; and yet the increase in membership during *one decade* (1950 to 1960) when, according to Oosterwal, the "lowest point" was reached was almost a half million. I would have thought that a fairly healthy growth in membership, but the naked figures for this decade do not tell all. By 1950 the church had regained balance after World War II and was ready for a delayed missionary thrust. As one looks at the three three-decade cycles (1870-1900, 1900-1930, and 1930-1960) with the author's "good," "not-so-good," and "bad" growth descriptions, one cannot quite escape the feeling that Oosterwal's whole laity vs. "set-apart" ministry thesis, as applied to the Seventh-day Adventist church, is a bit strained. Did such epochs, presupposing change in the consciousness of the people, ever exist in the Adventist church?

I find myself asking the same question with regard to what Oosterwal describes as the epoch of "church-centrism," which he sees as having now been replaced by a new epoch of "Christ-centrism" (p. 34). The pattern of expansion, followed by a period of consolidation and preparation for further expansion, is not, as one looks at the missionary movements of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, an unusual expansion rhythm. It may even be a necessary rhythm for the strength of a movement — a strength which is not measurable solely by figures of numerical expansion.

In a stimulating and provocative way, Oosterwal touches on areas relevant to missiology which churches and historical missionary societies have found disturbing and uncomfortable to consider: the pilgrim-nature of the church (p. 109); a nonecclesio-centric (or anti-?) approach to mission (pp. 20, 70); missionary existence as pro-existence ("the church . . . exists for the world") (p. 101); a declericalized missionary ministry (pp. 108-116); the church as a sign of *shalom* (pp. 70-71); and the work of mission as "the work of the Holy Spirit" (p. 18). The church must be alert in order to see the progress of the work of the Spirit and be ready to harvest when the Spirit gives the signal (pp. 62, 89). Does the Spirit work independently of the church members who are being asked to "keep their eyes open for the people whom the Spirit has prepared to join them" (p. 62)?

In his concerns, and in the way he accents them, Oosterwal repeatedly comes close to the thinking of his fellow Dutch missiologist and (I believe) former teacher, J. C. Hoekendijk. How far along Hoekendijk's path is Oosterwal prepared to walk? This we shall know only when he acquaints us with a further developed ecclesiology and a more detailed theology of the apostolate.

On the whole, *Mission: Possible* is not only a very readable book. It is also a much-needed elbow jab in the side of a church community for which the danger of losing its urgency is real.