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UNDERSTANDING THE UNGODLY

Missionary Version

By PETER LETCHFORD

Canadian Secretary of the South Africa General Mission

THERE had been an argument in the village. It seemed to involve everybody and everyone had been expressing an opinion. But Christians and non-Christians alike seemed agreed on one thing at least, namely that the missionary had done no good to himself, his work or the Christian cause generally by 'going off the handle' as he had done on the back verandah of his house. Of course he had been provoked. It was certainly annoying (for him) that the Chief had gone off hunting hippopotamus at the weekend and had made the kill on Sunday. Sunday School classes had thereby been denuded, some village services abandoned and even on the Mission Station the church had been half empty. But it had to be admitted that to spend an hour in church listening to the missionary making his customary dogmatic utterances in broken Bantu was a poor substitute for the splendid orgy of meat-eating which rewarded those who visited the river.

This is an imaginary story. But, in their more candid moments, missionaries would admit that they spend much time fussing about such happenings, though few of them realize what widespread antipathy to themselves and their message this fussing creates. It is not a question of the rights and wrongs of going off on a big game hunt on Sunday: it is the spirit in which the matter is dealt with and the attitude taken to the absentees. 'We came all the way from England to build a Mission for these people,' we too readily say, 'and they just use us for a convenience when they want a tooth pulled or a letter written. It's time they were properly told off.'

The above two paragraphs are a plagiarism on the article by the Rev. Hugh Evan Hopkins in the March issue of *The Christian Graduate*. The Africanization of his article could go on very pertinently under the same headings he uses.

THE WRONG WAY

Lack of basic understanding between us (missionaries) and the African can weaken our relationships with him beyond repair, especially at such times as the Sunday hippo hunt pictured above. It is at such times that we find that our evangelistic zeal and moral fervour leave him more or less cold. We therefore complain of his inborn moral laziness or his incurable irresponsibility. We blame factors *in him* without acknowledging the presence of these same things *in ourselves*; and thus we fail to recognize that he is, after all, only acting as we would do in similar circumstances. When all is said and done, a man who enjoys a good steak dinner must be something like we are! And a man who likes to see his wife and children happily eating the best meal they have had in months is also like ourselves. Later on, when the meat is finished and the meat rack empty, the man will perhaps find his wife a little more more trying and his children 'whiny'. Indeed, when things get too much for him, he will resort, just as we do, to some unauthorized means to help himself along — a bout of drunkenness probably. We of course do not drink, so we go in for a nervous breakdown, or maybe just go and blow off steam at the natives on our back verandah. But it is all the same underneath.

The best thing perhaps would be for us to forget for a while that the African is a missionary project — a 'perishing heathen' or a 'precious soul'. We might do better to regard him just as 'good old Pongo' or 'poor old Bumbi', facing along with us the great human problems of how not to be too poor, too unhappy, or too much of a failure. True, he is on his way to hell, but just *our* hell, not a special one of his own. He desperately needs Christ as Saviour, but not a special Christ, just our Christ — Christ in us. And getting fussy over a Sunday hippo hunt will put a sour look on the face of the Christ in us, making Him repellent to the Africans.

FRIENDSHIP

In those parts of Africa permanently settled by white people it is against the custom (and in South Africa against the law) to have warm personal friendships with 'natives'. But experience shows that if people do not learn to want us, they will not want our Christ. Christ is locked up in us, He can be received only from us. If we withhold ourselves from the people of the land, we may succeed in imparting a religion to them, but it will not be the real Christ. 'This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.' Too often we just receive the sinners. We are in a sense 'too religious' with them — zealous to see them in God's House and at the Lord's Table, but embarrassed when they invade our house and sit at our table. In a place like Rhodesia there are more missionary houses where Africans are not regular or natural guests than houses where they are. Our failure is not that we are insufficiently spiritual, but that we are insufficiently human.

TOO WORLDLY ?

There is in us the fear of contamination. Closeness to the African people may, on the physical level, infect us with bugs, dirt or disease. We fear the impact of the pagan customs, the moral degradation and the spirit worship on our own souls. But God can make us one with the Africans without making us Africans. It is a privilege, not a shame, to have one's feet washed with the tears of an outcast and dried with her hair. This is not the touch that defiles: it hallows and beautifies.

LOVE, THE KEY

'I love humanity, but cannot stand people.' We have not got very far if we only love 'the lost'. To win them we must love them as Christ loved — personally. Of the rich young ruler it is said, 'Jesus, seeing him, loved him.' The temptation in Africa is to love the Africans better the less we see of them. We try and get away with 'loving their souls' while finding their human presence distasteful. We love them for the Lord's sake, but not for their own; and so we continue to stand outside everything that really matters to them. Therefore in the final analysis *we* do not matter to them, and if we do not matter, our message does not matter either, and we have failed the task for which we went forth. Through not winning the people for ourselves, we have lost them for Christ.

'The drama of every individual's life is the real drama to him, acted upon a lonely stage.' Mr. Hugh Evan Hopkin's words are as true for Africa as for England; and the measure of our success as missionaries is the extent to which we are admitted to that stage as co-actors in that drama.