

The Role and Responsibility of Christian Writers

By Vivienne Stacey, March 1975

Notes:

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Introduction

The greatest man who ever lived was literate like every Jewish boy of his day but as far as we know he never wrote anything except in the dust. (John 8:6-8). The Lord Jesus Christ was the supreme communicator and God's supreme communication. He was the Eternal Word manifest in the flesh. In him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. His words and his actions were in total harmony. He is our point of reference as we consider the role and responsibility of the Christian writer. His story is written in the inspired writings of the New Testament and foretold in the equally inspired writings of the Old Testament. Early in the Christian era the canon of Scripture was closed for ever. All who have come after have also had this second point of reference the written word of God. The Christian writer in his living is to be tested by the Living Word and what he writes is to be in harmony with the Written Word.

Let us firstly consider the role of the Christian writer.

1. He should write material concerned in some way with **the issues of the day**. I will illustrate from my own limited experience and efforts.
 - a. In February 1974 an Islamic Summit Conference was held here in Lahore. Some Christians were somewhat dismayed at this display of Islamic solidarity and felt even less secure. Such occasions are opportunities for Christian writers to produce articles and tracts. I wrote and presented a Bible study on God's great summit conference—the conference at which He shall sum up all things in Christ and when all nations shall be represented.
 - b. Many church leaders are concerned about the numbers of Christians especially educated ones leaving Pakistan. It is right to be concerned but not discouraged. In this movement of peoples the hand of God who is sovereign can be discerned and I have tried in magazine articles and papers to set forth how God may use the Pakistanis of the Dispersion for his own purpose just as he used the Jewish dispersions as launching bases for spreading the Gospel in the days of the Apostle Paul.

The Christian writer is therefore to be alert to what is now happening around him and to write for the contemporary situation.

2. The Christian writer should take a long look now and then at **the current situation in its historical perspective**. Again I can only illustrate from my own experience.
- a. I have written on Henry Martyn as Translator and the Masihi Isha' at Khana plans to publish this. The seed thought for this book came out of the actual situations of 1967 and 1970 produced by the MacIntire schism. There have been numerous attacks on numerous translations of the Bible in English and it seems as though the schismatics would reinforce the idea that one special translation would be good enough for one culture and language. In the Bible Society Conference convened to discuss the possibility of a new translation of the Bible in Urdu there was such controversy. This set me thinking about the main translator of the Urdu New Testament, Henry Martyn, who died in 1812. There have been several revisions of his translation but no new translation. He would probably have been the first to have said, 'Let us have a new translation'. What I write is for a real and actual situation. It is not for any imaginary need or group of people. Accordingly I wrote to the publisher: I think a new book needs to be written stressing:
 - i. The Urdu translation – illustrating the importance of the study of the original language for the translation and incidentally presenting the evangelical view of the doctrine of scripture and inspiration. I think a careful treatment of this in a biographical setting on Martyn may help in the controversy which is sure to come before any new translation of the Bible will ever be completed in Urdu. I think the Christian view of translation could also be brought out.
 - ii. Martyn's concern for Muslims and his evangelistic zeal plus his penetration of the Eastern way of thinking etc.
 - iii. His deep devotion to Christ.
 - b. With this same concept of writing for the current situation in historical perspective I am embarking on a biography of Bishop Thomas Valpy French, the first Bishop of Lahore. You may say, 'why write on Bishop French now?'. The answer is twofold. There is an occasion or rather two occasions. In 1977 the Diocese of Lahore celebrates its centenary as also does the Theological Seminary in Gujranwala. Secondly French is relevant to our times. He has much to say to us now although he became bishop in this city nearly a hundred years ago. He was interested in many problems and opportunities that confront us today. In writing on him as theological educator I can deal with this whole subject of theological education in historical perspective tracing it to the present. French was ecumenical before his time, co-operating in outstanding ways with others outside his own tradition. I will therefore write a chapter on this aspect of his ministry. French finally resigned his bishopric. After recovering his health in England he volunteered for missionary service in Muscat where he died after ninety days. He took routes which have been followed in our day by Pakistanis of the Dispersion. He had a burning passion to share Christ the Lord with Muslims. He is one of the most relevant figures of the last century. He being dead yet speaks to us today.

So I argue that the role of the Christian writer is to speak to current issues in their historical perspective. Now let us look at

The responsibility of Christian writers.

1. **The Christian writer must write from his experience of life** more than from his study or office. P.T. Forsyth in *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind* wrote that great Christian writers are those who ‘thought in an atmosphere of Christian experience...their theology like the wounds of Christ is graven upon their hearts and the palms of their hands.’ This does not mean that he writes theology all the time or at all – it may be a novel about a Punjabi farmer now working in Oman – but out of his own experiences, encounters, sufferings and joys, the writer describes in chiseled words the message God has burned into his heart and mind. Every so often – in fact for part of almost every day I leave my books to find out what people are really thinking and suffering. In 1977 I spent nearly three months talking, interviewing and questioning – hardly reading at all compared to what I usually do – but getting fresh ‘copy’, fresh ideas for my ministry and writing. The written word may be important though not as important as (the following words have been crossed out in my copy and then written in the margin after ‘thought’*the thought for this conference quoted on the programme*) suggests. ‘No other agency can penetrate so deeply, abide so persistently, witness so daringly, and influence so irresistibly as the printed page’ (Charles R. Watson). This is why we write but the message of the gospel was first spoken by Christ and carried by word of mouth through the known world. Some years later the New Testament was written down. The oral transmission of news and information may yet be the prime method of communication if it (is) reinforced by Christian living. Paul said of some of his friends: that they were living letters known and read of all men. And after all much of mankind is still illiterate. This is perhaps a digression but the point is still made that real writing comes from real living.
2. **Another responsibility of the Christian writer is to do his homework.** To write involves one in hard work, careful research, integrity, ability to ask others for help and the graciousness to acknowledge it. If one is dealing with any historical subject or for that matter with any factual subject it is vital to study primary sources. I will illustrate from what I am trying to do on Bishop French. I refer to **primary sources** – letters, diaries, journals, records, human memory, newspapers and contemporary magazines and then to **secondary sources** -- books and articles written by others.
3. **A responsibility of the Christian writer is to seek and welcome criticism**
 - a. **for his own sake.** Christ was meek and lowly in heart. For whose glory do we write? A writer is not born perfect – he develops and criticism accepted helps him to develop to the fullness of his capacity.
 - b. **for his readers’ sake.** They need the best.
 - c. **for his publisher’s sake.** They need the best. The writer should welcome criticisms and suggestions by his publisher and others on his general plan, outline and concept for a new book. Authors or books are rather like parents. They have to make a disciplined effort to accept criticism of their books or children.