

THE WORD WIZARD--AND US

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I don't know her name. She stood watching as I nailed the poster on the wall. As I turned to face her, she smiled faintly and asked, "What is it?" I answered, "It's about this week's clinic. The doctors are offering free check-ups for children under twelve." My eyes glanced over to the baby in her arms, and noticing the child's runny nose and watery eyes, I added, "You missed the one last week." She nodded and said nothing. I asked, "Didn't you see the posters?" Her head dropped as her eyes avoided mine. "I was here...I saw them...but you see, I can't read." Posters, pamphlets, public notices, or newspaper advertisements--from none of these sources could this woman obtain information she desperately needed for her family's health.

This mother didn't live in the remote jungles of India; no, her one-room cabin was located just outside one of the wealthiest towns in Wisconsin. She is symbolic not only of the 8 million Americans who in 1960, according to the United States Bureau of the Census, were functionally illiterate, but also of approximately 2/3rds of the earth's population who cannot read or write. All these people must walk the road of life unable to read billboards, road signs, labels on cans and boxes on the store shelves. These are the teeming millions who never experience the delights of an idea sown in their minds by a written page and nourished by inquisitive thoughts. In fact, it's not too much to say that illiteracy is the basic problem which needs solving before any other.

To tackle this all--important problem, there appeared on the pages of history the story of a man chosen by God as His instrument to lead over one hundred million persons of the world from darkness into light. His life of unselfish service accomplished modern miracles. He brought to a needy world not only the words of man, but more importantly, the Word of God. I refer to the modern mystic, the teacher, the preacher, compassionate friend of the underprivileged, the Apostle of Literacy--Dr. Frank Laubach. Allow me to tell briefly of his life and of the challenge it presents to us.

No account of this man's life would be complete without reference to his

mountain-top experience on his favorite Signal Hill, located on a southern Philippine Island, Dr. Laubach's mission field. On his hill his mystical encounter with the Creator molded him into a person who became, as he put it, lost in the love of God. This experience expressed itself in action. His newly found absorption in God's love exploded like dynamite to change the lives of people in 97 different countries. His dynamite consisted of genuine consecration, ceaseless compassion which was more than pity, and a Christ-like love.

On Signal Hill the American missionary awoke to realize that he couldn't expect the Moors to be fair to his religion if he wasn't fair to theirs. Once down the hill he told the local priests he wanted to study their Koran with them. Soon they crowded his cabin. During this study, Dr. Laubach recognized the greatest need of people, their inability to read.

Soon a huge literacy campaign began. Financial assistance to employ teachers came from the United States. Everything went fine until 1930 when the financial crash in our country ended our support. Dr. Laubach addressed the tribesmen and told them he was forced to end his efforts. Much to his surprise, one chief shouted back, "This campaign shall not stop for lack of money. Everybody who learns has to teach. If he doesn't, I'll kill him." And so, in the darkest hour this fierce, brilliant-eyed chief invented the method of "each one teach one," the motto Dr. Laubach adopted for his method. Wherever the need to educate the illiterate adult is felt, be it in Texas or in the heart of the Congo, people work under his motto.

Dr. Laubach was truly a word wizard. No, he was not a sorcerer, nor one possessed of magical influence. This man was a skillful conveyer of the word, not only in the secular sense as a printed word, but through his concern, millions have come to understand the Word of God. Perhaps the main reason for his success in promoting the cause of literacy is his complete faith in the power of the word to change men's lives. Dr. Laubach said, "I have seen illiterates change from defeat...to a new hope, new faith, --the greatest joy in the world."

Joy! it was this that spread from country to country. Bubbling fountains of joy had sprung up in thousands of hearts because the Almighty had been able to use a humble man's consecration and compassion which had mingled into a practical faith admired by nations. Even today, as in years past, governmental leaders clamor for Dr. Laubach's help in teaching adult illiterates. In 1952 he went to India as an employee of the United States government under the Point Four Program. He achieved the chief objective of this program, helping the masses to help themselves, through the miracle of reading. By it millions were initiated into that first step of literacy, which gives promise of solving the urgent problems of agriculture, food processing, medicine, and birth control.

However, literacy was also a tool used by the wizard to open human hearts to the all-encompassing love of God. To this modern mystic the number one enemy of the cause of Christ was illiteracy. Only by removing this obstacle could individuals claim personally the precious promises of God's Word. In speaking of the Word he said, "...everybody can learn to hold God by the hand and rest. And what a world gain if everybody could rest in the waiting arms of the Father, and listen until He whispers."

But I would not be content merely to call your attention to this great man that we might do him honor. In fact, I'm sure he too would be disappointed were this my primary purpose. His challenge to our concern rather than complacency was well expressed just a few short years ago on an address on our campus. Speaking to an audience of young people, he pleaded, "To live in such a day, to live in it, to give in it, give thanks with all thy flaming heart that in it thou can'st have a part." This was his hope, his dream, that we might be a living part of our world and give of ourselves to it.

Of course, few of us may ever have the kind of mountain-top experience which gave drive and direction to Laubach's life. And fewer still may devote our lives as missionaries to illiterates in a foreign country. But surely, we must all realize that opportunities for self-sacrificial service abound today. Some of us may have ten talents, some five and some only one. But Christ admonishes us to utilize even one talent. Oh, if we could but look closely, with the eyes of a Laubach, at our communities, our inner cities, our ghettos, and our ever growing slum districts. Here we would see that there is no limit to opportunities for us, like him, to show the world the real meaning of God's unselfish love.

It is my hope that after our lingering look at a man like Dr. Laubach and the challenge his life represents, the immortal words of Longfellow will linger in our minds: "Lives of great men all remind us we can make our lives sublime, and, departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time."