

A MISSION AS A BAD TRIP

Edward Geary

A Missionary Experience. By Lynn Kenneth Packer. New York: Carlton Press, 1969. 160 pp. \$3.50.

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"Probably the key issue in my entire mission was whether I should do everything my leaders told me to do. This issue, I believe, will be one of major importance in the years to come." With these words Lynn Kenneth Packer sums up his experiences as an L.D.S. missionary, experiences which began with his arrival in Germany in 1963 eager "to be a leading baptizer" and led through growing dissatisfaction with the standardized lesson plan and disenchantment with mission politics and an authoritarian system unresponsive to criticism and innovation, finally resulting in a reputation as a "problem missionary," in threats of a dishonorable release, in reassignment to another mission, and eventually in virtual banishment to a remote Indian reservation.

Mr. Packer contends that the inflexible mission programs are often ineffective and sometimes dishonorable, and he offers some disturbing evidence to support this contention. For example, there is the "LDS Youth Club" which poses as an activity group ("LDS" stands for "Let's Do Something") and gradually, almost insidiously, draws its members towards baptism as they advance through the four "degrees" of membership. In a series of appendices at the end of the book, Mr. Packer outlines his proposals to correct these problems. His ideas are not revolutionary; indeed, the tendency is toward fundamentalism: he insists that individual missionaries ought to place more reliance on inspiration and less on prescribed teaching plans; he objects on doctrinal grounds to the heavy emphasis on baptism in the "six discussion" plan and the comparative neglect of the other first principles, faith and repentance; he complains that far too many people are baptized before they are converted or understand the gospel with any real thoroughness.

A Missionary Experience is intended, then, as an indictment of the hard-sell missionary approach. This approach has been somewhat modified since the 1963-1965 period when Mr. Packer was in the mission field. However, it persists in such passages as the following, which was taken from a current mission handbook:

Sometimes missionaries feel they are restricted by being required to learn the discussions word for word. There was never a more fallacious train of reasoning. Salesmen, who are sent out to sell their products, must commit to memory certain lines by which they can be effective in conveying their product in just the right manner. Once they have learned their lines, then they can bring forth their personality in affecting the thoughts of others. Actors on a stage must learn their lines; and having once learned them they are in a

position to use themselves through those lines to touch hearts and to convey feelings in a very moving manner.

The analogies reveal the assumptions: the gospel is a commodity that can be sold by the same techniques that sell used cars or vacuum cleaners; the missionary is a pitch-man, an actor going through his performance to clinch the sale.

These are assumptions Mr. Packer found unacceptable, and rightly so. Unfortunately his book fails to be fully persuasive because of some serious weaknesses. He has failed to compose his materials into a coherent whole; the book exists as an assortment of bits and pieces. The style is careless and the proofreading atrocious: nearly every page contains misspelled words and elementary grammatical errors. The most serious weakness, however, is that the picture we get of the author is far less sympathetic than he intends it to be. We see a person whose missionary zeal is far more apparent in his efforts to reform the system than in his efforts to teach the gospel. We search in vain for the affectionate reminiscences of people and places that characterize most missionary accounts. Instead we find complaints about the unreceptiveness of the German people, the infrequency with which they bathe, and the bad character of local members of the Church. I found my admiration and sympathy for the mission president growing almost page by page. He seems to have displayed remarkable patience with a very difficult young man. When all else had failed, the mission president made Elder Packer a senior companion and told him, in effect, to do his own thing, to preach the gospel in any way he chose. At this point, however, Elder Packer would be satisfied with nothing less than an opportunity to present his ideas to the Church Missionary Committee. When he was flown to Salt Lake City to meet with the committee, he was shocked and disappointed to discover that they were not interested in listening to him but instead scolded him severely for insubordination.

This experience seems to have confirmed Mr. Packer in the conviction that the Church provides "no effective avenue for criticism or productive change by followers." Perhaps he is right, but we cannot be certain without seeing what might happen to a more flexible and less contentious person in similar circumstances. The suspicion is strong that Mr. Packer unknowingly barricaded some avenues that could have taken him where he wanted to go.