

DAWN AND SUNSET OF MODERN MISSIONS

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Early one day in 1944, I stepped out of my tent on the island of Hawaii into the thinning night of a tropical morning. As I stood alone under a heaven still bright with stars an unforgettable sight met my eyes which seemed to bring together in one majestic vision the distant reaches of God's great creation. I saw in the southern sky the five stars that constitute the Southern Cross, and in the northern sky I saw the Great Bear. Here a sort of infinity seemed to concentrate itself in the time and space in which I was standing and I have never been able to forget it. When subsequent to that something of large symbolic significance came to my attention it always reminded me of that early morning in Hawaii.

A few weeks ago an experience of this sort again overtook me. This time it was not two constellations in the heavens, but two booklets in my hands that gave me long, long thoughts. I held in one hand William Carey's *An Enquiry Into The Obligations Of Christians To Use Means For the Conversion Of The Heathen*. It was published in 1792. In the other hand I held *Christian Missions And The Judgment Of God*, by David M. Paton. It was published in 1953. Both are English, both were printed in London. Between them lie the century and six decades which history will record as the massive effort of European and American Protestantism to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. This period begins with the publication of Carey's book, and it finds a decisive historical turning point in the expulsion of the missionaries from China. To the analysis of this last significant and tragic event Mr. Paton's book is devoted. It will be good and sobering for us to place ourselves between the dawn and the sunset of modern missions and contemplate the lessons which this spectacle can teach us.

Dawn

Carey's booklet is probably the most significant if not the most influential publication in the history of the modern missionary movement. Its author was a Baptist by profession and a humble cobbler by trade. His eyes were opened to the need of Christless millions by the accounts of Captain Cook, the great English explorer. Though an unschooled man, Carey had a keen and inquisitive intellect, he read omnivorously and found a special interest in the study of botany, geography, languages and the Bible. His universal mind was struck particularly by the universalism of God's promises in Scripture. His study of these promises and of the universality of the Gospel led him to take sharp issue with a reigning misconception held by nearly all orthodox theologians from Calvin and Luther to the men of his time – the idea that the command of our Lord "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" was binding only on the apostles. From their day on this command was not valid for the Church, it was believed; there remain now only the responsibilities of the local pastor. The spread of the Gospel must

follow the processes of normal growth at home, of conquest and commerce abroad, and of such providential openings for witness as God may clearly indicate.

So strongly was this notion entrenched in a significant Protestant area like Germany that when in the 1660's one Baron von Welz pleaded for the continuing character of the mandate given in the Great Commission he was so opposed by the Lutheran theologians that he had to flee the country and hear his plea called "of the devil." Nearly a century and a half later large sections of English Christianity were ready to heed Carey and other spokesmen after him, and from England the vision spread to Holland, Germany, Switzerland, France and America. Societies were organized, funds were raised, men and women volunteered, ships bearing missionaries sailed across the seas, and known and unknown heroes of faith gave their strength, their talents, their lives to plant the Christian flag in unknown lands and on the islands of the sea. At this time begins the record whose pages are bright and awesome with names like Carey (who followed word with deed by going to India), Morrison, Vander Kemp, Mary Slessor, Moffat, Livingstone, Nommensen, Verbeck, Adriani, Keyser – giants all in conception, in daring, in devotion. These all did their work in what Latourette has rightly called "The Great Century," and some lived to see the beginning of the next period, "Advance Through Storm." It has fallen to our lot to see the day which at least on some fronts speaks of retreat before the storm. It is about this that Paton writes. But before we can speak about this let us look at some of the characteristics that have marked the missionary movement during the past century and a half.

Carey pleaded for a world-wide preaching of the Gospel. He was not indifferent to the need of the heathen with respect to education, health, and science, but there is no evidence in his book that he regarded the meeting of these needs as a "preaching of the Gospel." Rather he expected these needs to be met *as a result of the preaching of the Gospel*. In one remarkable passage he writes:

After all, the uncivilized state of the heathen, instead of affording an objection against preaching the gospel to them, ought to furnish an argument for it. Can we as men, or as Christians, hear that a great part of our fellow creatures, whose souls are as immortal as ours, and who are as capable as ourselves, of adorning the Gospel, and contributing by their preaching, writings, or practices to the glory of our Redeemer's name, and good of his Church, are enveloped in ignorance and barbarism? Can we hear that they are without the Gospel, without government, without laws, and without arts, and sciences; and not exert ourselves to introduce amongst them the sentiments of men, and of Christians? Would not the spread of the Gospel be the most effectual means of their civilization? Would not that make them useful members of society? We know that such effects did in a measure follow the afore-mentioned efforts of Eliot, Brainerd, and others amongst the American Indians; and if similar attempts were made in other parts of the world, and succeeded with a divine blessing (which we have every reason to think they would) might we not expect to see able Divines, or read well-conducted treatises in defence of the truth, even amongst those who at present seem to be scarcely human?

What attitude Carey would have taken to the later development of large-scale educational, medical, agricultural and other types of mission work I do not know, but in the thesis posited above he expects the blessings of civilization to follow upon the acceptance of the

Gospel. "Would not the spread of the Gospel be the most effectual means of their civilization?" There is no evidence here that the introduction of all manner of Christian activity into a heathen society is to be regarded as a "preaching of the Gospel" and therefore a carrying out of the Great Commission. But this was to characterize missions nearly universally when the sun stood higher in the missionary day.

High Noon

The Christian West was not content with a program of proclamation. It was deeply convinced of the superior quality of its civilization, it shared the sentiment that it was the "White Man's Burden" to transmit its culture to the Orient and to Africa, and it showed little appreciation and often a great deal of contempt for the culture of the people it sought to Christianize. Pity was from the beginning a substantial element in missionary motivation and the pity often amounted to this: the heathen do not have the knowledge, the comforts and skills that we enjoy. As a consequence they suffer. Let us therefore lift them to a higher level of existence. This current ran in and through and alongside the true motivation for missionary effort. The result of this total motivation complex was a mission activity that was often as much intent on civilizing as on evangelizing.

In China particularly was it felt that the social structure must be so influenced as to create an atmosphere favorable to the Church's growth not only, but also to make increasingly possible the introduction of the general benefits of Christianity and civilization enjoyed by the West. Not all Protestant missions were agreed as to this, it is true. The large China Inland Mission did not accept this point of view, and others expressed dissent from what was known as the Social Gospel. Nevertheless the movement was imposing and was characteristic to a marked degree of Protestant missions in China and in other areas at the turn of the century and later.

A leading exponent of this view was Timothy Richard, the secretary of the Society for the Diffusion of Christian and General Knowledge among the Chinese. In 1891 he outlined a comprehensive program including the publication of periodicals, literature showing the bearing of education and religion on the national life, prizes for essays in national progress, the stimulation of lectures, museums for the enlightenment of China, and the like Robert Mateer spoke of preparing men "to take the lead in introducing to China the science and arts of western civilization," the purpose of which he qualified as "the best means of gaining access to the higher classes in China." The growth of the new emphasis did not mean that evangelization was ignored, but it did mean that a large proportion of the total Protestant missionary effort was given to social services and did not aim directly at conversion and at the building of the Church. In this respect the Roman Catholics have been more conservative than the Protestants.

What has been the result of this policy? Has it built a strong church in China? Has it gained for us the respect of Chinese people? Can we contemplate the total result with a measure of satisfaction? We are not here called to evaluate the result of the Social Gospel simply, but also the results of orthodox missionary effort which availed itself of education and hospitals and rural reconstruction and the like. The answer seems to be, not that the sun rose higher, but rather that the shadows lengthened until at last the missionary sun disappeared behind the Communist horizon.

Sunset

It is beyond dispute that the reason for the missionary withdrawal from China is a political one, namely the Communist victory and the Communist attitude to the Christian mission. But already before that there were serious doubts in the minds of some missionary leaders about the validity of the missionary policies that had been followed in the past. Paton says that in the months preceding the missionary exodus “it became evident to some of us, and to many more of our Chinese friends, that our mandate had been withdrawn; that the time for missions as we had known them was past; that the end of the missionary era was the will of God.” The foreign mission that the writer knew “is now not only out of date but was in important respects wrongly conceived.” What brings Paton to this conclusion?

The more important charge that the writer levels against Chinese missions is that “whatever may have been the formal aim of missions, their actual policy was such as not to foster but to preclude the development of a genuinely dynamic self-governing, self-supporting and expanding Church.”^[1] I shall now let Mr. Paton develop this thought at some length in his own words. I do not do so to save myself the time of analysis and reproduction of his thought, but rather to present the very words of a disillusioned but eloquent spokesman of a missionary community that would follow other policies if it had it in its power to make yesterday again today. But when the day is done and the sun has set we can only contemplate what was done between dawn and sundown.

Writes Paton (pp. 37ff.): “The entire structure and ethos of the Church in China was, with minor much-paraded exceptions, Western. Prayer-books are in the main direct, not to say crudely literal translations of the original. The union hymn-book in general use contains 62 original Chinese hymns out of 512, and 72 Chinese tunes. Church architecture is mainly a matter of brick boxes, with odds and ends of embellishment from the Gothic revival. One could not expect high office – succeed a missionary or become a bishop – unless he had at least a Western-style education and preferably rejoiced in a Western degree. The structure of diocesan organization and accounts was based on western models, and is grotesquely complicated for the numbers involved, and the relative simplicity of Church life. Missionaries, with few exceptions, maintained a Western style and standard of living, in which they were joined by those of their national colleagues who had attained the education and the financial means to do so. Chinese Christian leaders with some exceptions, have been notorious for their poor grasp of Chinese literature and philosophy, and have often been more at home in the English language and in Western culture . . .

“The educated Christian leaders were inevitably regarded by the Communist authorities as mainly a reactionary force; they were, however, known to be very discontented; and they possessed a high degree of acquaintance with and mastery of western scientific and technological methods. They are therefore in need of indoctrination and reform, and because of their potential contribution, worth a good deal of attention. In those facts lie the principal causes of the pressure upon the Church in China today.

“It is not otherwise with the Church’s institutions. Our schools were started to produce subordinate professional workers for the Church; they expanded to become the principal training

grounds from which were recruited those who filled positions in the world of the *compradore* – the Customs Service, the Salt *Gabelle*, the Postal Administration, and the foreign firms, and the Chinese banks and business houses which were associated with them. Many of the more ardent spirits were stirred by their shame at their country's weakness and their anger at the wrongs it suffered at the hands of foreigners . . . They went over in the end to the Communist Party, in which there are surprisingly large numbers of people with this close but extremely partial acquaintance with Christian missions. Others, again, became Christians. But the Church has been mainly among the poor and ignorant, and the rank and file of the ministry not such as are able to attract and hold educated young people; moreover, the schools and colleges have been dominated for the most part by a highly liberal version of Protestantism, which the Churches have been mainly fundamentalist. Few educated young people have found a permanent and satisfying home in the churches. Last of all, some of the most zealous Christians among the alumni of our schools have joined and become leaders in the indigenous sects which are nationalist, in reaction against missionaries, and pentecostalist and millenarist, in reaction against the sterility of the Church and the badness of the times.

“Whether they are viewed therefore from the angle of their creative contribution to the needs of Chinese society, or their provision of leadership from the Chinese church, the educational institutions on which we have lavished so much time, money, and loving hard work, seem for the most part to have made a poor return. The case of the hospitals is not substantially different. They have of course healed very large numbers; but they have not created a Chinese medical profession with a conception of its task relative to Chinese conditions, nor have they been an effective sign of the Christian passion that men and women should have wholeness of life . . . The real need of China, however, medically speaking, is for basic work in public health, the control of epidemics, and the reduction of malnutrition – a program requiring much larger numbers of workers, with a substantially lower standard of training, stationed in villages and market towns all over the country. This is the programme of the Communists, not of the Christians. The public health programme of the Church hospitals when there has been one, has too often been centered upon the hospital, and to be effective outside a narrow radius has required vast expenditure of foreign money on transport . . .

“This picture is doubtless somewhat overdrawn for emphasis; any missionary could point to exceptions in his own experience. As the writer reflects on *his* own experience – chairman of a hospital board of managers, secretary of a college board of managers, and concerned with several schools and another hospital – he cannot feel that it is more than a modest exaggeration of a real truth.”

Reflections at Twilight

These excerpts may serve to indicate the nature of the indictment that Paton levels against missions as they have been pursued in China. Even though the author speaks only about the Chinese situation his words are eminently worth universal attention. It is significant that Paton writes, “And can a China missionary be free of the fear that what was true of China is still true of India and Africa?” China was but a massive expression of what the western missionary enterprise was everywhere doing in greater or less degree. We know how thoroughly these policies have been pursued on our own Indian field for decades, and one wonders what to make

of the proposal laid before Synod this year, without prior publication in the Agenda, for the erection of a \$100,000 hospital at Lupwe on our Nigerian field.

In any case, Paton's booklet, searching and honest, drives us back to the question, Why this flight of missions into institutionalism in the first place? It has already been suggested that an important reason was the desire of the West to communicate its culture to the Orient and to Africa. No doubt other reasons could be mentioned. Beyond question one was the implicit individualism in the title of Carey's book, *The Obligations of Christians to Use Means For the Conversion of the Heathen*. Note well: of Christians: Not, of the Church; but, of Christians. This conception lies at the bottom of the rise of missionary societies rather than Church missions, and the activities in which individuals may engage are limitless. But it cannot be denied that when the churches themselves took up the missionary task, as is largely the case in America, they followed almost the identical pattern the European societies pursued in their mission methods. The cause goes deeper, therefore, and I believe that it is ultimately traceable to the conception that one entertains of the Church and of the Gospel. If the preaching of the Gospel is conceived so broadly that it includes everything from preaching and Bible classes to conducting schools, hospitals and experimental farms, and if the Church be regarded as the agency through which all these activities are to be carried out, then clearly the Gospel has become something more than the Gospel and the Church has become something more than the Church. And when missions are based on such a conception of the Gospel and of the Church, then we are equally clearly inviting missionary disaster. It is not a light matter when Mr. Paton describes that which happened to the missionary enterprise in China as Judgment.

It is necessary again to think our way clearly and deeply into the nature of the Church and of the Gospel. It is very true that the hour is late. We do not know how much longer we shall be able to be missionarily engaged in many mission areas. But perhaps we can render this service to the Younger Churches: that we come to a clearer understanding of the problem, a firmer grasp of the missionary task, and convey this understanding of problem and task to the Younger Churches to guide them in the huge missionary labors that lie before them in their several homelands. If we can show them that the task of the Church is a very limited one, but that that limited task is so demanding, and so rewarding when conscientiously pursued, that there is no time for side activities, we shall have performed no small service. They must learn that it is no more the function of the Church to offer a general education on the mission field than it is the function of schools to build furniture. If schools were to go into the furniture manufacturing business I do not doubt that they could turn out a great deal of eminently useful furniture. We all know what has been done in vocational schools. But in the long run this fine furniture would be found to be a rather poor substitute for a citizenry that has a fair understanding of the humanities and the sciences. We must impress on the Younger Churches that our missions have been too busy "building furniture." We have done a lot of good work in this direction no doubt. We have made acceptable bank clerks and school teachers, have produced better strains of rice, have sent many fine influences into the public life of China, Japan, India, Africa and so many other places. But in it all the building of the Church of Christ, the faithful preaching of the Gospel, the patient nurture in faith, knowledge, and grace has lagged sadly behind. So much of what we have done looked like Christianity but it turned out to be something less than Christianity because we looked for the fruit before the tree was mature and sometimes before it was even

planted. Such an inversion of the divine order invites the divine judgment, and in one large missionary area it has come and that quite unmistakable.

The 1953 Synod of the Christian Reformed Church adopted “in spirit and general content” the Minority Report on Education on the mission field. The type of mission method which Paton so strongly criticizes both as to its results and because it was “wrongly conceived” is criticized by the Minority Report on grounds of the Reformed conception of the Church. We must not suppose, however, that the adoption of this report is a guarantee against following methods in the future that have been weighed and found wanting. We have made fine declarations on the indigenous method of mission work before and have often paid little attention to them in our missionary practice. We shall need to retain our vigilance, continue our study of mission principles, and in all this we will find it most helpful to listen carefully as men of experience reflect on the missionary labors that have been performed by other bodies. There is, I think, no better place to start than Paton’s book. You can have it by sending a check of \$1.00 to SCM Press, Ltd., 56 Bloomsbury St., London.

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