

Faith Missions

This is a revolutionary age in which we live and serve our Lord. We are experiencing challenging problems. Christianity is increasingly becoming a minority religion. Many countries are now closed to the gospel such as China, Southern Sudan, North Korea and North Vietnam where the only Christian mission work is done by nationals. There is a rapid increase of secularism. Age old customs in the East are breaking down under the influence of Western secularism. The church is faced with an unparalleled unbelief. The world population is said to be growing by 60 million per year, while world-wide church membership grows only 2 or 2 1/2 million. (1) Unbelief is not only outside the walls of the church but also within the church. Liberalism is still gaining ground. Though it must be remembered that most national churches on the mission fields continue to have a tendency to be theologically sound, there is still the influence of Western liberalism. (2) "The tragedy of liberal and modernistic theology in the traditional mission fields was recently underlined, when in Malawi," at a Students Christian Movement Conference, some African students invited one of their European leaders to a small prayer sessions to pray for the salvation of two missionaries at the conference, because they really cannot be Christians seeing that they attack the Bible and Jesus Christ as Saviour so negatively and persistently! (3) There is the increasing problem of syncretism which blurs the sharp distinction between the Christian and the non-Christian religions. As one theologian said to a missionary, "When you go to India, listen to the voice of God speaking through other men's faith and work." (4) After he had been in India for some time, the missionary confirmed the words of the theologian by saying, "All I know is that in my own experience with people of other faiths on a project, we have in a sense found truth. I can't explain that, but I can only just say it." (5)

This is a decade of challenge but also of opportunity. Our age abounds with new means to communicate the gospel to the millions who still live in darkness. The radio ministry, literature work and many other modern means are now open for the proclamation of the gospel. The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church of America are trying to meet the missionary challenges through their foreign and home mission boards. Through subscribing to the Missionary Monthly you can receive information about this outreach.

There are many Christians who try to obey the commandment of our Lord, in Matthew 28:19-20, through interdenominational faith mission programs. Many evangelical and fundamentalist missionaries in our country work through this type of mission. The *North American Protestant Ministries Overseas Directory*, 8th edition, 1968, Section II, Interdenominational and Non-Denominational Missionary Sending Societies, lists 115 societies. Section III, American Branches of International and/or Interdenominational Sending Societies, lists 21. This list does not include some of the smaller Canadian mission societies. Many of the independent mission societies are called "faith missions." Their name does not come from the greatness of their faith, but from their principle of finances. (6) Faith missions operate outside of any denominational control. But the one major difference between denominational and faith missions is found in their respective approaches to the problem of financing mission operations. (7)

The basic distinction is that a faith mission "trusts in God alone for the necessary funds for the carrying out its objectives." (8) For example, the Greater Europe Mission's financial policy as a faith mission is, "to make known its financial needs to the Christian public and to ask God for His faithful supply as directed according to Scripture." (9) The distinction is not in the phrase "trusts in God alone." Faith missions and all other missions profess to look to God for their needs. Faith missions have never suggested that other missions do not look to God. As a matter of fact, the term "faith missions" was coined by others than themselves. The key to the understanding of faith missions is in the phrase "trust, in God alone." This simply states that faith agencies do not ask people for money whereas denominational and other agencies do. Within the faith mission societies you have two groups. Harold Lindsell defines them as "pure faith" and "modified faith" type. (10) By "pure faith" is meant that the mission does not ask for money and does not make its need known to anyone but to God. By "modified" faith mission is meant that kind of agency which makes its needs known but does not ask for funds. Is the "modified" faith mission truly a faith mission? There are those who strongly argue that the presentation of a project or need is in itself a form of solicitation. I regularly receive literature from various faith missions which present their needs. Do you really look to God when you present your financial needs to the public? It seems to me that the "trust in God alone" principle is invalidated when you present your needs to the public. "If acquainting them (the public) with the need breaks down the 'alone' principle why stop short of asking them directly and simply for money? If the making of the needs known does lie halfway between letting no one but God know the needs and speaking of the needs and asking for money, why stop short of one or the other? Is it not reasonable to assume that one should go all the way, either way, but not halt between two opinions?" (11) The dilemma of the "modified" faith mission is increased by the modern methods of fund raising. The self addressed envelope technique is familiar. It is hard to convince people that the envelope is not a silent plea for money.

Field representatives from various missions boards tour the churches, speaking about the challenges and needs, showing 16 mm colour film and colour slides. Many of the larger evangelical and fundamentalistic churches have missionary conferences where missionaries are invited to present their causes. Consequently, there are churches which support 10 or more different mission boards. As a result, their own denominations missions program suffers.

Why not take the final step and publicly appeal for money? Some believe that God has not led them to do so as yet. This finalizes the argument of course. However, there are faith missionaries who are deeply troubled about this problem of finances. A foreign missionary wrote "A young missionary was flown home suddenly from his station and admitted to a large metropolitan hospital. Several days later he died. Cause of death? No, it wasn't snake bite, a poisonous spear or overexposure. It was malnutrition. This young father of two children received his missionary support from several large churches in a major metropolitan center. Yet he died for lack of adequate financial undergirding." (12)

The problem of high cost of mission work is very real and missionary offerings on the home front just don't keep up. Alexander the coppersmith is still doing much harm. The

same foreign missionary wrote "One missionary friend of ours drove 250 miles off his route to be at a church for an evening meeting to which he had been especially invited. At 10.30 p.m. he was sent on his way with no financial remuneration -- and not even a cup of tea or an offer to stay at night in the rural area in which he was a stranger. More and more missionaries are experiencing that even in churches where they are well known they are getting this treatment. We had a service in an area in which I was well-known before we left for the field. People came from far and wide - many hadn't been in the church for years. The large congregation gave generously and the plates were high with bills of various denominations. Yet we didn't see one cent of it" (13)

The "pure" faith mission society makes its needs known to God alone. Yet, there remain some unanswered questions. Most of these mission boards do not pay their missionaries the amount they project as needed for the support. They cannot do so financially. But, the estimates of needs are not reduced, but the estimates are even increased from time to time. Moreover, they pool their gifts. Sudan Interior Mission writes "The basic principle of SIM missionary support is that of sharing. Only as these financial resources are pooled and put to the use of the family as a whole can the support figure be kept down to the minimum. Sharing, of course, means that the missionary takes his turn in contributing to the welfare of his fellow workers as well as in receiving benefits for himself. When he is in need, the other members of the SIM family help him. When his fellow workers are in need, he in turn helps them." (14)

"Thus Church A may support one of its members through a faith agency and send for that member that amount projected by the board as required for full support. But other missionaries may either have no source of support or have limited means. The full support for one missionary is reduced to provide for those who do not have full support. In effect mutual sharing is a stock part of faith missionary endeavor." (15)

Another distinction of faith missions is the refusal to go into the red to maintain their missionaries. This is a very noble stand but not always very practical. As shown already, the faith missions financial policy can cause needless hardships. It brings extra burdens upon missionaries. Faith missions may pay their personnel 50% of their salary one month and the next 100%. On the whole, few faith missions have continually paid 100% of their salaries regularly. (16)

One important question directed towards "pure" and "modified" faith missions is, "Why do they pursue a policy regarding finances which they would not think of using in other areas of their work? Each missionary prays for converts, but he does not stay home but goes out to preach, trying to win converts. Every mission society has its home organization to manage its finances and its activities. Some agencies are highly organized indeed. Why use organizations and other human methods for mission work but not for financing? What is wrong with soliciting money and presenting Christians with the need of the hour? God works through people.

Faith missions have a noble and interesting history. The first one in its category, and one that has served as a pattern for many others, is the China Inland Mission, now called Overseas Missionary Fellowship. It was founded in England in 1865, by Dr.

Hudson Taylor. Dr. Taylor was burdened for the vast continent of mainland China. But it was not really open to missionaries at that time. Besides, the missions already in China did not believe they could take on any more responsibilities than what they already had. To reach the interior of China a new mission would be needed; but there would be no denominations to sponsor it. Dr. Taylor also believed that it was not necessary to insist on missionaries who had all the educational preparations usually required by denominational mission boards. With these factors combined the first faith mission society was launched. Faith missions existed thus before the fundamentalist-modernist controversies which raged in the early 1900's. However, many fundamentalists have joined the ranks of faith mission societies. There is a relationship between faith missions and fundamentalism, but it is not a relationship of cause and effect. (17) Yet, many faith societies have been founded since the 1920's and most of them are strongly influenced by the spirit of fundamentalism.

The background of faith missions of course colours their aims. For many the chief end of man has become the winning of souls. Evangelism and missions are elevated above all other Christians' tasks. When it is said that man is "saved to serve," the service involves only missions and evangelism. Evangelism and missions are the Christians' sacred duty! Yet, it is by no means our only duty. (18)

Elizabeth Elliot, the widow of Jim Elliot who was murdered by the Auca tribe, writes in her first novel "No Graven Image" that she had learned in Sunday School the Westminster Shorter Catechism's "The chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever." In a missionary service in another church than her own, she heard "That the chief end of man is to stop as many as possible of the millions from perishing." (19) In her book, which is a critique on faith mission work, she describes how people on the field speak in terms of "souls", cities in terms of "need" and church meetings in terms of "attendance." (20) The "soul's" lost condition is the main reason for entering into mission work. The proclamation of the gospel in word is considered the most important. The social work, the relief of the physical needs, is secondary. The deeds are done for the purpose of saving "souls." (21) The comprehensive approach is lacking. The total man is not approached. There is a divorce between the body and the soul, the spiritual and the physical. The faith missions' view of man restricts their versatility in this world of rapid change. Their concept of man makes it extremely difficult to find answers to the great challenges of foreign missions. On many mission fields the totality of man's existence is at stake!

The chief end of man is "to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever". The Reformed missionary purpose is the furtherance of God's glory, the coming and the extension of His kingdom, the salvation of man lost in the depth of sin and degradation, the growth of the church, the penetration of the gospel in every area of life.

In the beginning, the church concept of faith missions was extremely weak. The reason for this was the strong individualistic concept of man. Man was as a branch to be snatched out of the burning fire. In recent years, there has been a change. Through experience, it was discovered that individual Christians could not survive alone. "They

came to realize, at least in part, that without reducing their zeal for evangelism they needed to place more emphasis on the building up of the church." (22)

Faith missions are usually Baptist in their teaching on the sacraments and church government. I asked once a faith missionary how the different views of sacraments and church work out in practice on the mission field. His reply was that all missionaries would become Baptist anyway in the long run. There was no problem. Young people from Reformed background who join an independent faith mission usually break contact with the church in which they were raised. (23) This is just a natural outcome of their initial action. Faith Missions are by their very nature very individualistic and have no regard for the covenant with its Scriptural implications. It is my conviction that the Reformed people should make more use of enthusiastic young people who for one reason or another cannot go through the regular channels of training. Enthusiasm for missions should be created in the Reformed denominations. We could use more mission fervor. We must get the "ball" for missions and evangelism! But the comprehensive approach must be stressed. The challenge must be the whole gospel for the whole man.

Is there still a basis for Reformed co-operation with faith missions? It must be admitted that much of non-Reformed mission work is orientated to basic Scriptural truth. We hold in common that the Bible is the infallible Word of God. Together we believe that man is lost without Jesus Christ and in his lost condition is hell bound. There is a common love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Collaboration is possible as there is unity on the basic issues. We cannot co-operate with missionaries who are "followers" of Bultmann, Barth or Tillich. We have nothing in common with men of such theological leanings. With faith missions we can co-operate in Bible translation work and distribution, radio work, the establishment of elementary schools, medical work. There are many spheres in which co-operative efforts can be worked out. Theological training for ministerial positions is another matter however. There the scope of co-operation is very limited. In non-denominational co-operation in this field, the Reformed character becomes lost. You see this right here in North America already. Non-denominational Bible schools or training institutions cannot have a positive approach to church and sacraments and further individualism. (24)

The South African General Mission's Bible School in Chizera, Zambia, C. Africa trains nationals for evangelists and pastors. The students are trained solely to win the lost for Jesus Christ but are not taught to reach the total man in his environment. The kingship of Jesus Christ is seen as very personal. Jesus Christ is King of a "life" but not over all of life. (25)

As Reformed Christians, we cannot agree with some of the faith missions policies and aims. Yet, their zeal for winning the lost and pioneering in some of the most difficult regions in the world are admirable and inspirational.

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