

**AN INTRODUCTION  
TO THE  
STUDY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

by

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**CHAPTER TWELVE -**

**MISSIONARY QUALIFICATIONS (Continued)**

THE SPIRITUAL QUALIFICATIONS given in the previous chapter are essential for missionary service. But in the very nature of modern missions other requirements must also be met. The requirements differ from mission to mission and from field to field, so all that we can do is explain general principles or trends. You need to find out the demands of any particular mission from the mission itself.

But remember that under some circumstances the mission may make exceptions. Of course the exceptions are only for what it thinks are good reasons and are at its own discretion. The mission, you see, tries to look at the candidate as an individual and not as a mere collection of qualifications. They try to see how he would fit in with their needs and program.

Note, too, that some boards are strict in their requirements, while others are notoriously lax. If you want to have the happiest and most fruitful service, set your aim high.

We begin with the physical requirements because they are the most obvious and the easiest to judge.

First as to age. Naturally no one is too old or too young to witness for CHRIST. But when we come to choosing a messenger who can go to a foreign land and make known the message of CHRIST among a strange people, a man who can establish and build up a Church there, the question of age is often quite important.

The general principle is this. The candidate needs to be young enough: (1) to learn well the language of the people to whom he goes; (2) to adapt himself physically and mentally to new conditions of living; and (3) to look forward to enough years of ministry to be worth the necessary expense for his equipment, his passage to the field, and the special training the mission will have to give him. On the other hand, he needs to be old enough to be mature in thinking and acting, so he can take on the serious responsibilities of a missionary's life and work.

In practice, some missions will accept young people in their very early twenties. But it is generally held that 25 or 26 is a much better age to enter the work. It gives time for more

thorough preparation and the needed maturity.

Again, many missions set 30 as the maximum age for a candidate under normal conditions. Others extend the limit to 35, especially where more preparation is required. This maximum age limit is set aside in some exceptional cases. It may be done for doctors, for instance. The reason is that their period of training is quite prolonged. Also the effectiveness of their ministry is not quite so closely tied up with their ability to use the native tongue as that of the evangelistic missionary. It may also be done for others with specialized training. That is, it will be done if their special abilities are needed badly enough to offset the disadvantage of their age.

Now a word about health. The average missionary works in fields and under conditions that make serious demands on his health and strength. The mortality rate among missionaries has been greatly reduced in recent years, and the conditions of work in most fields have been improved, but the job still calls for a sound and vigorous constitution.

Then too, in spite of the noble work being done in many fields by the medical missionaries, and in spite of the growth of a better native medical practice, there are still many places where the missionary can't count on competent help in illness. Sometimes the non-medical missionary not only has to take care of his own family, but from his limited knowledge of medicine he has to try to help the sick among the natives.

Of course there are wide differences between fields, and each mission sets its standards according to the need in its own field. But in principle, the candidate needs to be sound and robust when he leaves for his field of service. He will have to be able to adjust himself readily to a new climate and environment, to carry on an active life, and to take up the heavy responsibilities of his mission without undue strain. He must have the health to combat any unforeseen illness that attacks him, with reasonable hopes of success.

To assure this, the missions usually prescribe a rigid physical examination for each candidate. The mission itself prefers to choose the doctor who makes the examination rather than depend on the candidate's family physician. The reason is obvious. Sometimes for greater security they require more than one examination.

It is not at all uncommon for the examining doctor to find some dormant ailment of which the candidate was not aware. And some of these things can easily flare up into activity under the strains of missionary life. Some ailments can be corrected with little difficulty, though the treatment may delay the candidate's acceptance or departure for the field. Others are more serious.

For this reason, if you are thinking of foreign missionary service, it may be well to have a complete physical check-up at the earliest opportunity. Do it even before applying to the mission or finishing your course of training. That is, of course, unless you are already on the verge of applying. It may be that only in a few cases will the examination reveal an unsuspected illness that would close the door to foreign service. But there is no keener disappointment than that of the young person who has dedicated his life for foreign missions, has spent a number of years in preparation, has built up his plans and hopes about it, and then discovers through the final medical examination that he can't go.

In speaking of health the average layman is likely to overlook matters of nervous and mental stability. So let me add a word just here. By experience the missions have learned to take these things into consideration. Excessive nervousness at home becomes greatly aggravated under the strains of missionary life. It may even become dangerous. And of course mental health and balance are, if anything, more necessary for an effective ministry than bodily soundness. The mental and spiritual strains of missionary life are greater than the physical strains. They can scarcely be comprehended by one who has not actually served on the field and experienced them.

A further practical note. One of the most important factors in preserving missionary health is personal cleanliness and neatness. This is largely a matter of habits, habits that can be built up before going to the field and adjusted to meet the conditions there. Slovenliness is both irritating to those you have to live with, and it opens the door to needless disease.

Do keep this in mind. A condition that would keep you from the field today, you may often so correct that within a year or two it would no longer stand in the way. The very experience of overcoming your handicap is the best possible training for service on the field.

Of course there are some physical handicaps that you can't completely overcome. The loss of a leg or an arm, or the crippling effects of poliomyelitis are permanent handicaps. They sometimes close the door to missionary service. But not always. There are some places and kinds of work where the possession of two arms or two legs is not essential. Then, if you have the special ability or training that is needed, you may find the mission ready to overlook your handicap. Teaching in an established station, or literary work, are just two of several types of service that a handicapped person can perform. But of course you have to be superior in your abilities so as to compensate for the handicap.

The matter of educational requirements calls for special attention. It is perhaps more misunderstood than any other requirement.

Missionary work is first of all a spiritual service. As such there can never be any satisfactory substitute for a real personal knowledge and experience of CHRIST. No amount of education can cover up a lack here. If we had to choose between a candidate with little formal education but a vital relationship to JESUS CHRIST, and another with a very high scholastic record but a very superficial experience of the power of the Gospel, the choice would be easy. The first would make by far the better missionary.

But such a theoretical case probably never occurs. What does often occur is that the mission must choose between candidates whose religious experience is more or less similar, but whose educational qualifications may differ widely. Given the same amount of spiritual life and leadership, the one with the better educational background is sure to prove more useful on the field.

Missionary work makes great demands on the intellectual ability and preparation of the missionary. Some types of work demand more than others, but they all demand an ability that is definitely above average. We find the reason in the work the missionary has to do. His ministry is largely mental and spiritual.

Sometimes we get absorbed in the physical side of missionary life. We like to hear of the missionary's adventures, his physical hardships, the problems of living in another land. But these are only incidental. They are interesting but not fundamental. Missionaries at times get irritated because people are always asking what they have to eat. "As if that were all that mattered!" exclaimed one missionary in disgust. "Why don't they ask about the work?"

Of course sometimes the missionary's work does include building, repairing, and traveling, and a good many other such activities. But those are not the real purpose of his being there. His main job is dealing with the souls of men. It may not take most of his time, but it is the heart of his work.

He tries to sway men's thinking. He seeks to change the course and objectives of their lives. The arms of his warfare are spiritual. Words are his most valuable weapons - preeminently the Word of GOD. He plants thoughts and nourishes them until they bear fruit. The fruits of his labors are changed hearts and minds. He stimulates the fellowship of the saints and guides their worship. With wise counsel he multiplies his usefulness and sees recreated in others that spiritual life and development that CHRIST has already brought to him. He deals in thoughts, in souls, in life.

To do this he must be prepared. And while the years of school work don't always show the amount of training a man has, we don't have any other very usable gauge. So missions will continue to use this one. They will keep on stating this requirement in terms of years of schooling, courses taken and degrees obtained.

Remember this. The missionary usually has to do his work in a language other than his own. He has to learn that language, not superficially so as to bargain in the market place or to give orders to a construction gang, but thoroughly. Remember that he has to teach the people in their own tongue the sublime truths of Christianity, the most profound truths the human mind is capable of grasping. Unless the people understand his message, all his work is in vain. Among primitive people his task is even more difficult than among those who are more advanced. It is always true that the greatest simplicity of expression calls for the greatest depth and breadth of knowledge.

Remember too, that a missionary, no matter how humbly he may want to serve, soon finds that he has to take a place of leadership. His work demands it. And while leaders may occasionally come from among the self-educated, they never come from the ranks of the uneducated.

Besides, it is a mistake always to think of missionary work in terms of ignorant, uncultured, primitive peoples. We have a marvelous message to give, but we mustn't get it confused with our blind pride in being superior to every other people. Really we aren't. We have much to learn from others. Even from the so-called "primitives."

But the fact is that in many of the "backward" areas the missionary has to deal with some very well-educated people. We need to remember that many mission fields, just like our own country, are not static. They are changing, too. They are improving their educational systems. Many of their young people have even studied in our own colleges and universities.

It is no wonder that some missionaries, after a time on the field, begin to feel a lack in their educational background. Some are enrolled in our schools right now. They have even asked for extended furloughs so they can complete the education they lacked before going out. Or they

take additional work to improve their ministry.

In reality, the educational needs for a foreign missionary are greater than those for the home worker. He does the same work and more. He has to do it in another language. The circumstances are much less favorable. And he has to get along with only a fraction of the equipment available at home. Or, what is quite common, he will improvise, invent or manufacture his own.

The principle involved in the educational requirement is this: Education should be preparation for living. Therefore the missionary must have an education that will help him to live among the people in a way that will gain their respect. But education is also preparation for service. So the missionary must have enough education, and of the right kind, to prepare him for his part of the missionary job.

This is very broad, I know. The reason is that missionary work itself is so broad. Different kinds of work call for different kinds of training. And some ministries require longer preparation than others. In general, a broad cultural education, plus Bible training, gives the best foundation.

In practice, most of the denominational missions require their candidates to graduate from a four-year college course. In addition, they require seminary or Bible institute of those who are not going to engage in some specialized work, such as medicine, general education, agriculture, etc. Even for this specialized work they may require at least a year of Bible training, since all these efforts must contribute to the chief missionary aim.

The faith missions, and some small denominations, set a minimum requirement of graduation from high school, plus Bible institute training. This is a minimum, and they may recommend more. In fact, the trend among the better established faith missions is toward a raising of these requirements.

For specialized work of course there are special requirements. Some are set by the mission and some by the country to which the missionary goes. The Mission, for example, will insist that its doctors be fully qualified to practice in their homeland. They want their educational missionaries to have the proper training to make them good teachers. The governments, in addition, may make other demands. For instance, in Nigeria any missionary who dispenses medicines must have taken at least six months of certain prescribed courses of study in this field and be certified by the government. In the Belgian Congo, those who conduct schools recognized by the government must take certain courses in Belgium. Since these requirements differ a great deal from place to place and from time to time, you need to have the advice of the mission's candidate secretary during the period of training.

We have said that missionary work demands an ability that is definitely above average. This doesn't mean that every missionary is expected to be an intellectual genius. Each one of course will show more talent in one direction than another, but it is better to have a well-rounded development than extreme brilliance in a limited field. A high average scholarship, in spite of a few low grades, is good. And one of the most valuable traits is an aptitude for teaching others.

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