

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

by

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN -

MISSION BOARDS -

WHY MISSION BOARDS?

MOST PEOPLE TODAY accept the existence of mission boards without any question. They are quite the normal thing in missions. They have certain rather definite duties to perform, and they have clearly been used in the expansion of the missionary enterprise.

However, there are a number of sincere and devout Christians, including some missionaries, who are opposed to mission boards. Some base their opposition on doctrinal grounds, claiming that such organizations are not Scriptural. Others are governed more by their personal situation and interests. Some have used such catch-phrases as "It is better to have a Rock under your feet than a board behind your back." As if you couldn't have both!

We can state the opposition on Scriptural grounds quite simply. Generally those who hold this position are opposed to most formal organization in the Church. They take it for granted that the New Testament gives us a complete and detailed pattern of all that a Christian Church ought to be and do. This includes the methods by which we are to carry on missionary work. We should have no other organization than what we find in the pages of the New Testament. And of course we find no mission boards there.

We respect the sincere faith and earnest zeal of those who hold this view. Some of them have done very good missionary work. Yet they represent the view of only a small minority of all earnest Christians. And most of us don't find in the Scriptures themselves any claim to such finality in matters of organization and methods. In doctrine, yes. The New Testament does present JESUS CHRIST as GOD's final and complete revelation. It pronounces an anathema on all who would preach any other Gospel than what it presents. But we think it is a mistake to extend those claims of finality in doctrine to matters of organization.

In fact, the New Testament itself does not give a unified picture of organization and procedure. What it does give us is a picture of development under the guidance of the HOLY SPIRIT, a developing organization to meet the needs as they arose.

CHRIST left only the nucleus of an organization in the eleven apostles. After His ascension they chose another to complete the original number of Twelve. The Church in Jerusalem grew so fast that soon they had to create the office of deacon to take proper care of needy members.

We don't know when the elders in Jerusalem were first chosen, or why. But we can see the similarity to the Jewish synagogue with which they were familiar. We can also see the need for such officers when the apostles themselves began to die off or to leave for other fields. When Barnabas and Paul started the first churches in Asia Minor, they reversed the procedure. They appointed elders first, since the apostles didn't stay with the churches. The deacons seem to have come later as they were needed.

Mission boards in their modern sense don't appear in the New Testament. In fact, we have had them for only a little over a century and a half. But the basic principle on which they are organized agrees fully with New Testament teaching.

As we stated before, CHRIST laid the responsibility for carrying out His Great Commission on the Church as a whole, as well as on individuals. And clearly the New Testament Church recognized that responsibility, even though it didn't see just how far it was to go.

So when Philip started the work in Samaria, the Church at Jerusalem sent an official delegation to confirm it. When Peter preached to Cornelius, his conduct was officially reviewed by the Church. The decision in that case was to be the deciding factor in their approval of the work of Barnabas and Paul, years later. When the Church began in Antioch, the Church sent Barnabas to confirm the believers in their faith. And when Barnabas and Saul started on their first missionary tour, it was the Church at Antioch that sent them forth, by direction of the HOLY SPIRIT. They also reported to the Church there when they returned.

But the Church did not take on financial responsibility for any of its missionaries. That is a very modern development. Neither did it dictate where they were to go, nor how they were to carry on the work. These men were pioneers, and there was no one able to instruct them. Later on, Paul himself does give some very definite instructions to the younger missionaries, Timothy and Titus. Also, though the Church at Antioch didn't provide their financial needs, other churches did send help to them on various occasions. And of course, as happens in some places today, the people to whom they ministered would often see that they had food and shelter.

The modern mission board is intended to represent the Church in the carrying out of its missionary task. It is formed within the Church and is the servant of the Church. Its constitution and practices reflect the Church that it represents. And since there are a number of different denominations, their boards may have different practices. The funds that the mission board has to use are the gifts of the members of the Church. So it is responsible to the Church for the handling of them.

Of course there are a number of boards that are not denominational. But they are still representative. They represent a large and growing number of independent churches, plus many groups and individuals within the denominations, people who for one reason or another are interested in their work. These boards are not so immediately responsible to their supporters, but the work depends on keeping their interest and support. In fact, this support is more spontaneous and less regular than that of the denominations, so the mission is apt to be more sensitive to the

attitudes of its supporters. One such independent board finally developed its own denomination in the United States.

We need mission boards for the effective, systematic spread of the Gospel, just as the Jerusalem Church needed deacons for the fair, systematic distribution of material help to needy believers. It can't be done on an "every-man-for-himself" basis. It is the Church's business, and that means co-operation. And co-operation calls for some sort of organization.

Take, for example, the handling of the Church's gifts for missions. In a large mission, operating in several fields, this is a big job. It isn't just a matter of sending a salary to each missionary in the field. That would be simple, even if you had to vary the salary according to the size of each family. But there are other things to consider. Living costs are different in every field, and they often change rapidly. Money exchange rates are always changing. The American dollar that will get you five dollars in one country will get only sixty cents in another. The board takes this into account.

Then there are expenses for building, for running schools and hospitals, for printing, for travel, for a multitude of other things that are needed to carry on the mission. And besides, the churches don't give with regularity. Giving reaches its peak just before the end of the year, partly because of Christmas but even more because of the income tax deadline. On the other hand, the summer months are very slim. Business is slack, Church attendance is off, and many people are spending their money on vacations instead of missions. Yet the missionary needs the same support in the summer as in the winter. The board plans the handling of funds to take care of these matters.

We need the mission boards also to represent the work at home. If missions is the Church's job, if the churches are to support the work spiritually and financially, they must have reports on how it is going. Interest has to be fed by information.

It is entirely possible for the missionaries themselves to keep up a certain amount of interest by personal letters and by their visits while on furlough. That is good, but it is not enough. Most churches don't have any personal touch with more than one or two missionaries, if at all. Then too, most missionaries are not well acquainted with the work outside their own stations. Their letters and their talks deal mostly with their own personal experiences.

Only the mission board is in a position to view the whole field and present a balanced picture of progress and needs. It usually tries to do this through the mission magazine, or through visits to the churches by secretaries and others. Sometimes it sponsors the taking of motion pictures or slides that can be shown in the churches to represent the whole work. Or it helps promote missionary education in the churches, providing the needed plans and literature. Or it plans and conducts missionary conferences.

Of course mission boards are needed to secure, examine and counsel missionary candidates. The local Church is not in a position to do this. It may know the candidate and his spiritual fitness, but it doesn't know the field and its needs.

Then when the new missionary is ready to leave for the field, he needs counsel and help in purchasing, shipping, getting transportation, etc. Here, too, the mission board is needed. And there are many other ways in which it proves its value.

We have said that mission boards are usually taken for granted. But there are many who criticize them without good ground because they think they are too expensive for the work they do.

Several years ago a certain writer published the claim that one denomination was spending 87 per cent of its missionary income on overhead expenses. He justified this claim on the ground that each missionary got a salary of \$1000 per year, and that when you multiplied that by the number of missionaries it only accounted for 13 per cent of the total expenditures. All the rest, he concluded, was overhead.

This was far from true. The salary of the individual missionary was indeed \$1000. But that didn't include rent, medical allowances, group insurance, pension payments, and emergency payments in certain critical areas. It didn't even include allowances for the children. The actual average support for each missionary that year came to more than \$2000.

But this is not all. Missionaries had to be transported to and from the field. They had to travel on the field. They had to be equipped for their work. They had to be provided with literature. Equipment and supplies for hospitals and dispensaries were expensive. Seminaries, Bible schools and schools of other types took money. As a matter of fact, the board's financial report for that year showed less than 9 per cent spent at home, while more than 91 cents out of every dollar contributed was spent on the field.

It may be that some boards are not as economical as they should be. But it is doubtful whether any business concern doing business abroad is getting by with as low a percentage of overhead as the most extravagant mission board.

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