

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

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HOW TO CHOOSE A MISSION

TO MANY PEOPLE the choice of a mission is no problem at all. They are members of one of our Protestant denominations. They either have a general call or are called to a specific field in which their denomination is working. And they see no reason why they should not be accepted and work in harmony with their denominational board.

There are advantages in working with the mission of your own denomination. As a missionary it makes you feel that you represent not just the Church to which you belong but the whole denomination. Other churches besides your own are presumably interested in your work.

In addition, you work on the field with other missionaries who come from churches like your own. Their doctrinal views are largely the same. The churches they have started use an organization you are familiar with. And in other ways you are made to feel at home. Sometimes, too, you will find in the mission an organizational and financial stability that are not always present in the independent missions.

But for some, even in the denominations, the matter is not that simple. There are reasons why they hesitate to ask for appointment under the denominational board. The board doesn't always appreciate those reasons, but they are very real to the missionary volunteer.

One of the main reasons is theological modernism. Not in the official statements of belief. There are probably none of our denominations that have adopted officially modernistic creeds. So there are many churches that have not followed the modernistic trend and are considered decidedly conservative in their denomination. It is also true that there are many members of modernistic churches who are not in sympathy with their modernism but have not yet come to the place of leaving them.

Conditions are not the same in all denominations. Neither are they the same in all mission fields of any one denomination. But it is not at all uncommon to have a young person say, "I would prefer not to serve under my denominational board; it is too modernistic."

We have mentioned that the board often doesn't appreciate this viewpoint. It says that it hasn't

any objection to the candidate's holding to his more conservative beliefs if he wants to. It can't understand why he won't be just as tolerant of the beliefs of others.

But it is more than a matter of personal viewpoints. It is a matter of basic principles. We can be tolerant of others' beliefs if the differences are not important to us. We can't be so tolerant if we believe they are basic issues.

In such a case the candidate's hesitation is perfectly proper. If the missionaries themselves are not agreed on their message, how can their mission be successful? And if a missionary cannot have spiritual fellowship with the other missionaries, how can he stand the strain of missionary life and give good service?

There are others who do not want to work with their denominational boards because they believe they have been called to another field or type of ministry than the ones in which their board is engaged. Sometimes this happens when the board's ministry is almost wholly institutional and not evangelistic. For it is true that in some of the major denominational missions evangelism holds a very minor place.

Then there are some who might like to work with their denomination but can't meet the requirements, especially in educational preparation. And there are actually quite a few young people who have come to dislike the narrow denominationalism of their churches and would like to serve in a broader fellowship.

Add to these the members of the many independent churches, and members of denominations too small to support an extensive missionary work of their own, and we have a large group of young people who want to know how to choose a mission board. Their choice is made doubly hard because many of the independent missions work in only one field, so that the choice of a mission is also the choice of a field.

If the young volunteer is sure of his field, the following suggestions will be helpful:

- (1) Find out what boards are in that field.
- (2) Get all the information you can about the missions there and the work they are doing.
- (3) Write to those with which you might be interested in serving. Tell them of your interest and ask for more information about the mission, its organization, principles, requirements, etc. Don't fail to tell them also something about yourself, so they can tell whether to encourage you.
- (4) If possible, have personal interviews with mission representatives and individual missionaries.
- (5) Above all, and through all, wait upon the Lord for guidance.

There may be a special divine call to a certain work. But at any rate there should be a whole-hearted conviction that the mission you choose is where GOD wants you.

If the prospective missionary is not sure of his field, he may do one of two things. He may wait until the Lord shows him the field. Or he may choose a mission on its own merits without reference to the field, under GOD's guidance.

This latter course of action is usually the better. We have already seen that a missionary call is

not necessarily associated with any particular field of service. It is quite a common thing for zealous young missionary volunteers to be uncertain about their precise fields. If they waited to be sure of the field before approaching a mission, many would never reach any field.

The relative unimportance of knowing the exact field is seen in the fact that many a missionary today is serving successfully in a different field from the one he first had in mind. In fact, hundreds of missionaries have been transferred from one field to another without losing any of their effectiveness. See where the China missionaries are today.

Much more important is the mission board. A real missionary is seldom disappointed in his field after he gets there. But there are all too many occasions when he becomes disappointed in the mission with which he is working. It is amazing how little attention many pay to these things. As if the people you work with in the Lord's service were always easy to get along with and never succumbed to temptation!

There are a number of specific things about a mission that every candidate ought to find out if he can. We shall list some of them here in the form of questions, not necessarily in the order of importance.

(1) Doctrinal standards - What is the theological position of the mission and its missionaries? It is easy to get the answer to this question. The mission usually has an official doctrinal statement that it publishes from time to time in its magazine. If not, it will gladly send it to you. Do you agree with it fully? If you have any hesitation, move slowly. Of course if you are not in full sympathy with what it stands for, the mission probably wouldn't accept your application anyway.

(2) Finances - Are the mission accounts regularly audited? Is the audit published so that anyone may examine it? For most people it makes dull reading, but you can well be suspicious of any mission that doesn't publish such a statement.

What plan of missionary support is used: pooling, individual support, or some modification? You may not have any preference, but you ought to know which is used.

Are the missionaries well cared for? This is not always easy to find out. But it might influence your decision, especially under the pooling plan.

(3) Origin and aims - How and why did the mission start? If it is a split off from another group, why? If the reason was good and sound, the mission itself will not hesitate to tell about it. If it does hesitate, be careful.

Is the mission meeting a real need? That is, is it performing a service that is badly needed and that no other group could do? Or is it in the same area with other good missions and competing with them? There is more of this than the people at home realize. It may be best to get this information from sources outside the mission itself.

(4) Organization and methods - Young people themselves are not often the best judges in this matter. Yet they should not be so willfully blind as the pastor who wrote us for information about a certain questionable mission. He said, "Please tell me about its doctrinal position and its financial honesty; I am not interested in its methods."

Is the control in the hands of one or two individuals? In very small missions this may not be significant, but a personal or family dictatorship never works out well. Incorporation doesn't mean a thing in this regard; it has to do only with the conduct of financial affairs.

On the other hand, it is just as dangerous for the individual missionary to have too much independence. There needs to be authority which is recognized and obeyed.

Who is on the governing board of the mission? Who sponsors its work? Don't be misled by so-called "councils of reference." These are just lists of men who have been persuaded to allow their names to be used to recommend the mission. They may know something about its affairs, but just as often they don't. They are window-dressing. They have no authority in the mission itself.

(5) Fellowship - Missionary relationships on the field are so close that it is important to have a good basis for real fellowship. A fellowship that might be very enjoyable to one might not suit another at all. For this reason it is good to have an opportunity to get acquainted with some of the missionaries before going to the field.

Often after meeting the leaders of the work you may ask yourself this question, "Are these the kind of leaders I would be glad to follow, people who would inspire me to my best service for the Lord?"

Another practical question. Are the other missionaries of your nationality and culture? It is not easy to be a foreigner in a foreign land and at the same time feel that you are a foreigner in the mission. Some of us can find congenial service with those of another nationality; but we need to face the fact that the adjustment is more than many are able to make with real success. We ought to, but we don't.

(6) Reputation - Does the mission have a good name among other missions? Remember, other missions on the field are in a better position to judge of the value of a work than are any of the people in the homeland. And they are usually inclined to be charitable in their judgments. One or two might possibly give a bad report through jealousy; but if several agree in such a report it is best to be wary.

You can judge the interdenominational missions on this point by seeing whether they are members of the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association of North America (IFMA). Only missions of good reputation are accepted into this association. They must also be interdenominational missions, evangelical in their theology, follow the faith principle of missionary operation, and publish an annual audit of their accounts. Missions in the association have a total missionary force of well over five thousand missionaries.

(7) Missionary turnover - Do the missionaries generally stay with the mission? Allow for some who have to leave the field because of illness or some other good reason. But does the number of those who leave the mission in a comparatively short time seem unreasonably high? Do they go back for a second, third and other terms of service? An unusually high turnover means there is something wrong, regardless of the reasons the missionaries may give for their leaving.

Although the suggestions we have just made are useful, they will not settle the question for you.

The decision is yours. There are some factors in the decision that are known only to you and GOD. Be frank with Him, and let Him lead you to the best choice.

~ end of chapter 18 ~
