

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

by

HAROLD R. COOK

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CHAPTER TWENTY

WHAT A MISSIONARY DOES

THE TITLE OF THIS CHAPTER is presumptuous - almost ridiculous. Who could possibly compress into a chapter or two all the multitude of activities in which missionaries engage? And who could describe the activities of a missionary in Latin America and presume that the same ones would be carried on in New Guinea?

Yet it seems wise to attempt some sort of description of a missionary's ministry. The major reason is that people at home have conjured up such a fictitious idea of a missionary's life that they need a corrective. And the young people who are volunteering for missionary service ought to have some idea of what that service is to be.

Actually, in spite of the great variety of missionary activities, there are some that are common to all lands and to most missionaries. There are also some principles that are valid everywhere, though the way we apply them will differ in different circumstances. And we are not going to try to give a complete picture. We are going to concentrate on just a few features, trusting that this rough sketch will be reasonably accurate and suggestive of the many details that we shall have to omit.

Judging from the questions they ask, most people seem to think of the missionary as a sort of combination itinerant evangelist and handyman. They usually think he has a rather hard life, though some would insist that the picture has been overdrawn and that missionaries really lead a sort of life of Riley among the poverty-stricken natives. They do agree that there must be something of glamour and adventure in his life. All faraway lands and strange people are glamorous from a distance.

As for the missionary's work, they think it consists almost entirely of preaching sermons and getting people to join his Church. Of course they know his work involves travels and dangers - look at David Livingstone! And the missionary may have to turn builder or medicine man on occasion. But most of all he preaches to ignorant, uncultured natives.

Let's see if we can give something that will help to correct this distorted view. It is not enough to say that it is wrong. It is not enough to remind people that the world is changing and that we are

not living in the days of Livingstone. We need to paint a truer picture of what a missionary is and does.

THE NEW MISSIONARY

The first task of the new missionary is to go to school. It might seem that after all his years of preparation in the homeland he would now be ready to begin his ministry. But it is not so. In most cases he still has to learn the language of the people to whom he is going to minister. And it is no small task.

In fact, because it is such a task, there are always some who try to short-cut language study. More than ever since World War II there have been many who have tried to carry on a ministry through interpreters. From some places, as Japan, they have sent home marvelous reports of the success of their efforts. When some have questioned whether the results were not more apparent than real, they have become indignant. One young student, a member of a youth team, vehemently insisted that they had wonderful results - he had seen them himself! How could he know what was going on in the minds of the people, when he couldn't understand a word they said?

Interpretation has its values. It is useful when the people are so interested in the speaker himself that they are anxious to get any sort of message from him. It isn't the message so much as the speaker who interests them. It is also useful when the speaker has a message whose importance they recognize and which they can't get in any other way. They know they won't get it perfectly, but at least they will get some of the main ideas.

Speaking by interpretation is always a poor substitute for speaking in the language of the people. I remember with amusement the introduction a Central American pastor gave me to his congregation, a congregation that had had to listen to a number of interpreted messages during the preceding months. In concluding his introduction he remarked, "You will be able to understand him. He speaks our language!"

To realize the ineffectiveness of the interpreted message, just put yourself in the place of the other person. Suppose a Buddhist missionary came to your community to try to win converts for his faith, but he could not speak English. Since he has come from an oriental country, you might be curious to see and hear him for a time or two. You would have to sit twice as long as usual to get his message, since he first says a few things in his own tongue and then the interpreter tries to tell what he means in English.

If the interpreter is too fluent in his interpretation, you wonder just how much of his own ideas he has put in. Or if the interpreter is a convinced Buddhist, and so can interpret with fluency, you wonder why he doesn't do the preaching himself. Except, of course, that a foreigner attracts the curious. And if the interpreter is obviously very careful to interpret accurately, and so rather awkwardly, what happens to the oratory, the fine reasoning, the warm passion of the speaker? These are things that can't be interpreted on the spur of the moment.

And of course if interpretation is not very effective in evangelizing, it is much less so in teaching, in building up and guiding a newly founded Church, etc. Yet these things are most

important in sound missionary work. There is really no substitute for the accurate learning of the native language by the missionary. Shortcuts are really blind alleys.

There are various ways in which new missionaries learn the language. The best way is usually the language school. Sometimes a large mission, like the China Inland Mission, conducts its own language school. At other times, as in India, the language school is a sort of joint enterprise, and missionaries from all missions attend. The language school has several advantages. It usually has a carefully planned course, experienced teachers who give full time to the job, and no other obligations to distract the new missionary from his main job of learning the language.

For French, Belgian and Portuguese territories in Africa, the missionaries have to learn at least two languages. They must know the language of the government as well as that of the tribe in which they work. This usually means language study in Europe for perhaps a year before going on to Africa.

In many other cases missionaries are taught on their stations by the senior missionaries or by nationals hired to do the teaching. Unless the national is adept in both languages it often works out best to have a missionary teach the grammar, while the national teaches pronunciation, conversation and language.

Of course there are some languages that have not yet been reduced to writing and for which there are no grammars written. Here the missionary has real need for the special linguistic training available in the homeland. Also he must expect that it will take him much longer to learn the language than others who have the advantage of grammars, dictionaries, teachers, etc.

The length of time for language study varies. Some languages are more difficult for Americans than others. In the Spanish language school at San Jose, Costa Rica, the normal period is one year of three fifteen-week terms. The students spend at least four hours a day in the classroom. At the close of the three terms, if the student has done satisfactorily, he is considered ready to enter the work. He is still far from having a complete mastery of the language, but he has a good working basis. His mission may require further study and reading on the field.

Sometimes people who never had to learn another language wonder why it takes so long. They think there must be some easier way. They point to the fact that little children seem to "pick up" a language in a short time and wonder why older people can't do the same.

There are several reasons. Little children often get a better pronunciation than their parents because their habits of pronunciation in English are not so fixed that it is hard for them to adjust to new sounds. Then, too, they are not so afraid of being embarrassed. They try to mimic the words and expressions they hear, repeat them over and over to themselves, and blurt them out at every opportunity, even when they don't fit. What if they do make a mistake? No one takes them seriously and it helps them to learn.

But aside from this little children are very limited in their conversation. If the missionary were willing to confine himself to childish prattle he wouldn't need to study so long. A proper use of the language, however, in presenting the profound truths of the Gospel calls for much more than this. After all, how many years do we have to study English in our schools to become acceptable ministers of GOD's Word? Even though we started to speak it before we were two years old.

What most Americans fail to realize is that learning another language isn't just learning a new set of words to take the place of our English words. Language is a means of expressing thought. And the thoughts of other people are not always similar to our thoughts; neither do they use the same manner of expressing similar thoughts.

For instance, we have a common word "to lack." But Holman Bentley tells us that in a certain tribe in the Congo there is no one word that bears that meaning. If you mean "to lack something you never had," you use a different word from the one for "to lack what you once possessed." Americans studying Spanish are always confused by the fact that a Spanish-speaking person never "likes" anything; instead, the thing "is pleasing to him."

So the new missionary is faced with the problem not only of memorizing a completely new set of words, with an entirely different sort of pronunciation, but of learning new patterns of thinking and new ways of expressing thought. Through the language he begins his job of getting into the life of the people. He must understand them, and they must understand him, or else his ministry will be in vain.

We have dealt rather extensively with this first task of the new missionary. This is because it is so little understood or appreciated at home, and yet is so vital on the field. If we were to pick out one of the most glaring weaknesses in the missionary enterprise as a whole, it would certainly be the failure of so many missionaries to get a good command of the native thought.

But the new missionary has another important job. It is to learn to know the people. At the same time that he is studying the language, he is learning something about the people. But he needs to know more. Sometimes a veteran of many years will say, "I suppose we never do get to think just the way the people do. Maybe that's why we're not more effective."

But whether the missionary ever does get to think just exactly as the people do, he tries to understand them as best he can. That is an important part of his ministry. He must try to follow CHRIST, the master missionary, in this, identifying himself as much as possible with the people to whom he is sent. If he doesn't entirely succeed, we still know that he has probably gotten closer to the heart of the people than any other outsiders.

It is no wonder that missionaries on furlough sometimes speak of the people as "my people" and "my tribe." It is perhaps less often that the people speak of the missionary as one of themselves. Yet one Presbyterian missionary in Shantung had the experience of being adopted as a daughter into a Chinese family. And in Japan a missionary won popular approval by attending classes in school with Japanese children so that she might learn their language better.

The missionary doesn't think of his learning to know the people as a job. It isn't a subject that he can very well study in the classroom. Yet it does take a good deal of time and attention.

He soon finds that you can only learn to know them as you come into personal contact with them. He must visit much with them in their homes. He must eat with them, perhaps dipping his fingers into the same bowl of food. He must enter into their sport, where it doesn't conflict with Christian principles. He must also enter into their sorrows - you can learn more about the people at a wake than at a Church service. He must welcome them into his own home and perhaps spend

long hours talking - about nothing in particular.

It all takes time, time that impatient Americans often think could be better spent at more productive tasks. But this is the very foundation of productiveness. You must win the confidence of the people if you want them to trust your message. And confidence is not something that can be won overnight, especially by a foreigner.

JUST LIVING

Often the missionary doesn't want to tell the folks at home about this, for fear they won't understand. In fact he sometimes finds it irritating to himself and wishes he could do more about it. But in spite of his desires he has to keep on spending a lot of time and energy with the details of just living.

What we mean is this. We scarcely realize in the homeland how convenient life has been made for us with a multitude of aids to living. It is not only with such ultramodern helps as electric dishwashers, garbage disposal units and air conditioning. It is rather the many conveniences that we take for granted.

Not many of our young people today know what it means to clean and trim a kerosene lamp. They flip a switch and have light. When they want a drink, they go to the faucet or the water cooler, with never a thought as to the purity of the water. They can buy all of their food in one store, most of it in cans or jars. If they do any baking or canning, it is through economy or preference, not need. We even buy our bread already sliced.

These are just some of the common things. In fact, the only thing that keeps other items from being more widely used than they are, such as vacuum cleaners, refrigerators, etc., is a lack of money. Even in remote areas they can all be had from the mail order house.

And what of the missionary? Sometimes he can have some of these helps, too. Where he can, so much the better, but often he can't. The only way to have electricity in many mission stations is to put in your own plant. This sounds easy, but have you ever tried to keep an electric light plant in regular operation for a long period of time, without a repairman nearer than a day's journey? Even if you're a competent mechanic yourself, it will take some of your time.

And drinking water. Boiling the water for drinking is just routine for many a missionary family. And sometimes it has to be both filtered and boiled. That takes time. Even the stove may be a problem. Of course gas stoves and electric stoves are out. Kerosene and gasoline are often used, but they do need attention, with often a clogged generator to clean or replace, or a troublesome wick to attend to.

And then the food. How often the missionaries remember with longing the corner grocery in the homeland! Of course if there is a daily market the missionary can go there and see what is available. Though sometimes his wife will have to wait until he gets home to know what they will have for dinner. It saves time to hire someone else to do the marketing but not money. And naturally, there are not many prepared foods!

In more and more mission fields the automobile is proving its usefulness as roads are being built. But again automobiles mean repairs. and repairs take time. But for all that, even in the old days, when most missionaries counted themselves fortunate to have a good horse or mule for traveling, it took a lot of time to feed and care for these animals.

What we have tried to do here is to give some impression of the many "chores" that occupy so much of a missionary's time.

We have only touched the fringe, and of course we know that the situation is different in every field. But if you ask any missionary you will find that he has to spend a lot more time than he wants to, just on the details of living in a foreign land.

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