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CRISIS IN MISSIONS—The Discussion Continues

By Charles E. McGowan

One of the most revealing commentaries on the current missionary crisis in the Presbyterian Church, U. S., was written last summer by the Reverend Dwight Linton, missionary to Korea. The article, first printed in "Contact" and later in the PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL, was sobering and may have served to initiate a much needed debate in our Church.

The author pointed out that the current crisis in missions is seen in two areas. The most pressing crisis is in the realm of finances. With inflation running rampant in many areas of the world and a severe downward trend in benevolence giving in our Church, the Board of World Missions is in dire straits and finds itself having to abolish programs and projects and reduce its staff at home and abroad.

The second area of crisis, personnel, is related to the first in some respects. Linton observes that whereas the Presbyterian Church, U. S., had 567 missionaries on the field in 1965, that number has been cut to 467 in 1970. The 1971 budget calls for a possible further reduction to 353 missionaries. It was also noted that while the Church could possibly produce medical, educational, and administrative missionaries, there has been a notable decline in applicants to serve as evangelistic missionaries.

What has caused this turn of events in our Church's missionary efforts? Certainly our denomination, in spite of inflation, has the potential to financially underwrite the missionary work of our Church. Indeed the standard of living of the citizens of our country has continued to increase. Yet, the financial resources of our Board of World Missions are declining.

Problem Theological

Linton maintains that the problem has deep theological roots. It is his conviction that a subtle liberal trend in our denomination, which he calls "Neo-orthodoxy", has permeated the life of the Church. One of the results of this trend toward the left is our current crisis in missions. The new theological emphasis, he contends, does not produce a mission-minded church, nor does it produce missionaries with a zeal to see people led to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. The missionary programs and activities generated by this new theological emphasis are ones which, if they are not contradictory to Biblical Christianity, do not give a proper place for the evangelization of the lost. The end result of this shift has been a Church that will produce neither enough funds to support our program nor missionary personnel who will go beyond our shores with a burden to preach the Gospel. He believes that unless a reversal is made our Church must prepare for further reductions in our missionary program and staff.

Dr. Street's "Memo"

Dr. T. Watson Street, Executive Secretary of our Board of World Missions, responded to Linton's article by writing and distributing throughout the Church a four page "Memo to Ministers". It was his purpose to "furnish additional information in regard to some of the matters delineated" in Linton's article. He then addresses himself to ten areas that he feels are debatable in Linton's article.

Dr. Street's "Memo" has been widely read. Not only has it gone to each minister and missionary in our denomination, but it has been included in packets of material used for study by various leadership groups in the Church. It is the subject of discussion on at least one of our seminary campuses. This debate is a healthy exercise for the Church if it is done out of a genuine concern to see the crisis in missions resolved. Perhaps the lack of honest discussion on the issues is one of the contributing factors to the existence of the crisis.

Memo Diversionary

There needs to be, however, a response to Dr. Street's "Memo". The initial reading has a certain soothing effect which diverts us from the central issues raised by the Linton article. Correspondence and discussions with several missionaries leads one to the conclusion that Dr. Street's response is totally inadequate in answering the questions raised by Linton. Indeed, if the "Memo" is to be given as the only reply to the questions and is to be used as a basis for justifying many questionable directions in which our missionary efforts are taking, then it is imperative that more be said.

Dr. Street begins his "Memo" by discussing the agony which the missionaries are now experiencing in the present crisis. The implication is that the missionaries' agony is due primarily to the reduction of funds which affect their work. No doubt this does create a feeling of agony, but discussions and correspondence with missionaries indicate that the agony is primarily due to a shift of emphasis in the Board. One missionary wrote that the agony comes because the "Church is supporting some work that not only fails to further the Gospel, but actually hinders its propagation in some cases." This agony is intensified as he realizes how the equalization process in the Church has effected the local church back home. The church that has for years been supporting him is now faced with the question: "Can we continue to support this missionary through the Board of World Missions in light of the fact that the equalization process forces us to support the programs and projects that we are convinced hinder the furtherance of the Gospel or at least do not contribute to the proper work of missions?" The missionary, who may not be in agreement with certain programs and directions of the Board, has always been encouraged as he realizes he is supported by churches who share his burden and emphasis. Now with the local church, because of the ethical problem of contributing through the equalization process, withdrawing its support the missionary feels that nobody cares.

Local Church Dilemma

The agony of this dilemma is felt equally as strong by the local church back home which has a strong missionary concern. In some cases the tie between the church and the missionary is strong. It is not easy to cut off funds knowing that the ministry of the man whose vision they share is suffering as a result. Yet, the church feels, in a sense of the word, "blackmailed". If they support him they must do so through the equalization process and that money will contribute to the continuance of many programs that they cannot in good conscience support. The end result of all of this has been a feeling of frustration, despair, bitterness, and distrust.

Yet, equalization is not the real culprit in the current state of affairs. The basis of the problem is again to be found in the underlying theological stance of the Church. If the local church had confidence that the Board's programs, policies, and priorities were clearly designed to fulfill the Great Commission, then equalization would be no problem. Whether my funds went to a particular missionary would not be that important. They would be used to underwrite the Church's concern for world evangelization. But, the fact is that the Board has established priorities, programs, and policies which, in the opinion of the conservatives in the Church, are unworthy of support. If the equalization process were abandoned, the tensions would be greatly reduced. The conservative could then be given opportunity to cast their vote by supporting certain work and not supporting other work. The problem would then solve itself as the Church speaks its mind.

Missionary Evangelism

The foregoing comments are basic to a discussion of Dr. Street's "Memo". There are several specific points made in the "Memo" to which closer attention should be given. In the first place the matter of evangelism and the sending of evangelistic missionaries is discussed. Linton is quoted concerning the fact that only two evangelistic missionaries have been sent to Korea in the last nine years. Though the statement is quoted, the fact is never answered. The notable people who have served on the Board and staff of the Board who have had a keen interest in evangelism are discussed. But the "Memo" does not answer the question raised by Linton.

Contrary to the assumption of the "Memo", Linton was not accusing the Board at this point. He was discussing a problem in the Church. The Church has not produced evangelistic missionaries. It can produce educators, medical personnel, and administrators. It has had difficulty in producing evangelistic missionaries. Why?

Beyond this basic approach which really misses the point Linton desired to make, Dr. Street goes on to say, and rightly so, that the Presbyterian Church cannot undertake the task of evangelizing Korea. This must be the task of the Korean Church. As we assist the Korean Church, however, our form and direction of assistance will reflect where our priorities lie. A pastor in this country is not in a position to draw conclusions concerning this. Missionaries in Korea are in a position to draw conclusions, however, and they have. Linton and other missionaries in Korea question whether the Board is as interested in the work of evangelization as in other work where humanitarian goals are primary. While it is imperative that our missionary enterprise follow the humanitarian example of Jesus, it is also imperative that all that is done be done out of a sense of urgency to fulfill the Great Commission.

Evidence would indicate that the missionary enterprise of our Church does not take seriously enough the matter of evangelism as we classically understand it. There are cases reported by missionaries of our Church sending out specialists for short terms who give no indication of a desire to share the Gospel. No doubt these persons give their pledge to be faithful to the Gospel, but actually becoming involved in evangelism on the field is another matter. In some cases language is a problem, but in other situations there appears to be a lack of understanding of the content of the Gospel or an indifference to anything other than practicing the particular skill which they have. It is not expected, of course, that every missionary be a street preacher. But is it wrong to expect an overwhelming concern to see the person to whom one is ministering come to know Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord?

Are Missionaries Heard

A second matter of importance is dealt with in the "Memo" which has to do with the Board and staff listening to the missionary. Linton feels that the "missionaries opinion doesn't amount to a row of beans almost 100 percent of the time regarding decisions made in Nashville." The "Memo" answers this by pointing out that this is a common feeling among all groups having relationships with the Board. The "Memo" then goes on to cite statistics as to how the Board took 55 affirmative actions on 63 recommendations from the mission meetings of 1968, 1969, and 1970.

It is important to note that Linton has not always felt this way. He grew up in Korea in a missionary home. He himself has served in Korea for seventeen years. It has only been recently that he has come to feel that the Board does not listen. Great distance, long separations, and inadequate communications are not the problem as Dr. Street asserts. In fact, these are less a factor today than 10-20 years ago. There must be another reason.

Crucial Decisions

In a recent letter, Linton commented on this matter of listening as discussed by Dr. Street. He noted that the statistics cited are very misleading. Some decisions are crucial while others are minor. Yet, all of these decisions of the Board affecting the local mission and missionary are weighed equally in the statistics. Linton cites an incident in 1963-64. In 1963, the Korean mission recorded its objection to a certain foundation principle for Church-mission relations in Korea. In 1964 the staff ignored that objection and laid the foundation for Church-mission relations. The foundation principle has radically affected the picture for the missionary in Korea. Linton submits that one decision like that would off balance one hundred "affirmative responses" of the nature of small decisions that are made in response to mission requests such as changing the name of a special asking.

Church World Service

Church World Service in Korea was cited by Linton as a case in point. For years both the Korean Church and the Korean Mission has requested that the corruption around Church World Service in Korea be cleaned up or that CWS be discontinued. Dr. Street describes the efforts to have changes made. But the crucial and necessary changes have not been made. Yet, Church World Service continues to be supported in Korea by our Church. In commenting on this matter in response to the "Memo", Linton said: "He should have never mentioned Church World Service. There is so much 'dirt' that almost any missionary out here can dig up on Church World Service that if I were in his place and was not able to say that 'we have cut off funds', I simply would not mention it."

A more recent incident regarding Korea has taken place which gives weight to Linton's feeling that the missionaries' opinion does not count. At the October meeting of the Board the question of merging Taejon College (PCUS) with a college in Seoul (UPUSA) was discussed. Reports are that our Korean mission never voted for the merger. The two missionary representatives from Korea were opposed to it. But indications are that negotiations and contacts with the government had gone too far to let the Board or the mission in Korea have any voice in the decision. So, the Board gave its executive committee power to approve the merger or to do almost anything else it wanted to do with the school.

Ecumenism

A third item must be mentioned regarding particular points made in the Linton-Street discussion. Linton calls into question the study of Red China as a part of the 1970 missions emphasis in our Church. He noted that the study book, "Understanding China and the Chinese People" was very pro-communist and thereby took a biased political position. Dr. Street responds by first of all saying that in accomplishing our mission we cannot forget 700,000,000 people, no matter where they are or their political ideology. Obviously, Dr. Street missed the point. At no place did Linton advocate ignoring 700,000,000 people. His thesis was, 1) that we have no accurate information about the people in Red China and their internal problems, and 2) that our Church should not enter into the field of propaganda for political purposes (the book advocated admission of Red China to the United Nations and general sympathy for the communist government in Red China). Dr. Street never answered the charge that the book in question does that.

In discussing the Red China study emphasis, the "Memo" pointed out that the study was planned and implemented by the major denominations in our country. This comment opens the entire area of ecumenism and our Board's involvement in ecumenical projects. Of course, one opens himself to misunderstanding if he dares to discuss this issue, but it must be discussed.

If one is to take Christianity seriously he must also take ecumenism seriously. At every point Christians must seek to make visible their unity by cooperation and merger where such is possible. The problem lies in the fact that ecumenical activities are not necessarily Christian activities, nor are they always faithful to essential Biblical principles. It is obvious that at times our involvement in certain ecumenical efforts are a hindrance rather than a help to performing the mission given by Christ. Both the Red China study and our support of Church World Service in Korea are definite cases in point.

The "Memo" attempts to de-emphasize the Boards emphasis on ecumenism by citing statistics regarding funds. The "Memo" states that "less than 10 percent of our funds and less than 10 percent of our personnel are involved in ecumenism." This argument is a faulty one, however. Financial support is by no means the most accurate or important measure of the Board's emphasis on ecumenism or of any form of work, for that matter. Evangelistic work never costs as much as medical or educational work. But if such work is to be done it must be paid for. Each type of work has its own financial standard. In the case of ecumenism, its costs are usually hidden. Cooperation with an ecumenical national Church is support of ecumenism.

The "Memo" asserts that the Board should place great emphasis on the movement for Christian unity and two countries, Korea and Japan, are cited where there are several Presbyterian denominations. Of course Christian unity is an important goal whether it is by organizational union or cooperative work. But if the unity does not penetrate to the Scriptural essentials of faith and purpose it is not Biblical unity. In fact, this brand of ecumenism weakens rather than strengthens the churches concerned. It is to be granted that much of our ecumenical work is valid and should be pursued with vigor. Yet, the flavor of the type ecumenism referred to by Linton and reflected by the 1970 Red China study and the Church World Service in Korea give little evidence of worth in terms of performing the mission given by the Lord Jesus.

Conservative Society Needed

Thus far specific items in the Linton-Street discussion have been examined. Two items of broader importance and of more basic concern remain. The first of these has to do with Linton's suggestion that an Assembly approved missionary society be established. Noting that there is a large group within the Church who strongly disagree with present policies, priorities, and programs of our Church's missionary effort, he sees this as an avenue for conservative missionaries and churches to be actively involved in missions with a good conscience and still be a part of the Church. The Church of England is cited as a precedent for such an arrangement.

Dr. Street admits that there is no requirement that a Church must have a Board of World Missions. He points out that before the 1830's the Presbyterian Church carried on mission work through independent voluntary missionary societies. He quickly defends the concept of a Board of World Missions, however, as being in the tradition of the Presbyterian Church. He then brings the late theologian, Dr. James Henley Thornwell, to his defense. Thornwell, according to Dr. Street, "led our Church to the position, that the Church is its own missionary society and that the Church uses as its agent a committee or board of the Church responsible to the Church, reporting to the Church, and controlled by the Church."

Thornwell Opposed Boards

It is unfortunate that Dr. Street turned to Thornwell to defend the concept of Boards. History has in fact, recorded Dr. Thornwell's strong opposition to Boards. Dr. W. C. Robinson, professor emeritus of Church History, Columbia Theological Seminary, has noted that Dr. Thornwell was vigorously opposed to the Church establishing and acting through Boards. This opposition continued through the last twenty years of his life, specifically from 1841 til his death. On one occasion, Dr. Thornwell wrote: "I believe that Boards will eventually prove our masters unless they are crushed in their infancy. They are founded upon a radical misconception of the true nature and extent of ecclesiastical power." (Palmer, *Life and Letters of Thornwell*, page 223.

The Assembly's Ad Interim Committee on Restructuring Boards and Agencies has also noted Thornwell's opposition to Boards in their research. A study paper of that committee pointed out that Thornwell believed that independent societies had the weakness of choosing their own direction irrespective of a member denomination. But Thornwell did not feel that the establishment of Boards was an improvement. He served on several Boards in the Church and noted their weakness. 1) He felt that they did not meet often enough to allow Board members to really maintain control. 2) The staff of Boards become "the Church" for the Church, and are not answerable to the Assembly. 3) The Boards become "confidential agents" for the Assembly "acting upon their own suggestions and their own views of expediency and duty, without pretending to wait for positive orders from the General Assembly." 4) The Boards become so "intolerably arrogant in the exercise of their unlawful dominion, that they speak of the true judicatories of the Church as their auxiliaries."

Thornwell held that the Presbyteries were competent to do their own mission work and he preferred that Presbyteries do it rather than Boards. He did not object to the principle of the Assembly undertaking the management of the missionary work, provided that its control was direct through a mere executive committee. Obviously, Thornwell would strenuously object to the systems of Boards in the Church today.

Dr. Street concludes his "Memo" by commenting that an independent agency is unnecessary since the present Board serves the whole Church and is responsible to the whole Church. This is precisely the point that Linton and many others in the Church are making. The Board does not serve the whole Church and the degree to which it does is decreasing steadily. That should be obvious by the discussion generated by the Linton article. Linton is not asking that the Board be dissolved. He simply asks for the assembly to grant permission for a missionary society to be established to serve that part of the Church who cannot in good conscience continue to participate in the present missionary program.

This is less than the best solution. The best solution would be a return to a Biblical approach to missions which may return the work of missions to the Presbytery as Thornwell suggested. But until that happens something must be done to underwrite the work of the missionary on the field and to increase our total missionary effort.

Missions Crisis Theological

The last item to be discussed is no doubt the most important and most basic. Dr. Street says early in his "Memo" that "there is simply no escaping the fact that the theological situation has changed in the last eighteen years and that there are real theological differences in our Church." That Linton's basic position would be admitted to be true is interesting and admirably honest. He is not willing to admit, however, that this shift in the theological stance of the Church is the root of our crisis in missions.

As one studies the world mission scene today, however, it appears that Linton's argument is valid. Where is missions thriving today? The missionary enterprise is prospering among those denominations and independent missionary societies who hold to a vigorous conservative theology and places emphasis on the urgency of fulfilling the Great Commission. The missionary efforts that are languishing are those movements and denominations who have been swept by a new theology which undercuts the authority of the Bible, defines reconciliation in humanistic terms, weakens the doctrine of the person of Christ, questions whether or not a person is lost without personal faith in Jesus Christ, and places emphasis on humanitarian programs rather than world evangelization. The verdict seems to be in. Linton appears to be right. A liberal theology will not result in a Church with a heart for missions.

But perhaps the most crucial comment in the "Memo" is that our "differences are different points of view within the acceptance of what is basic: confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour." This is where one might be tempted to say: "Well, what's all the fuss about? Dr. Street is right. We're all Christians so let's stop arguing." That simplistic approach, however simply glosses over a large festering sore in the Church and refuses to acknowledge its possible deadly effect.

Full Confession Necessary

It needs to be said in light of this statement in the "Memo" that our Church is a confessional Church and our confession is more than "Jesus Christ is Lord and Saviour". We have a Confession of Faith and other doctrinal standards that our ministers, elders, deacons and missionaries have accepted before God. They have promised to do their work in accordance with them. In them there is only one view of the Gospel and Scripture expressed. There are many who wish to change these standards by revising or eliminating much of them. This indicates dissatisfaction with their content or with the idea that they are binding.

To close his treatment of the admitted theological differences with the bland statement that they are "different points of view within the acceptance of what is basic: confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour" is unfortunate. It indicates an unwillingness to discuss the basic thesis of Linton's article: that "neo-orthodoxy" does not produce missionaries or a mission-minded church. Until this issue is dealt with, the "Memo" has not really made any remarks that are relevant to the matter being discussed.

Dr. Street's suggestion that the simple confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour as the only thing really necessary amounts to saying that this confession alone is to be considered basic. It appears that he is saying that the rest of our Church's doctrinal standards can be left to personal opinion because they are relatively unimportant. Are those in our Church who expect more than this "basic" confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour of their ordained ministers, officers, and of all their missionaries unreasonable?

This bland dismissal of our differences is a very serious matter. It denies the foundation principle of confessional churches—that the official confession of a Church is the standard for its ministers and officers. To undermine this principle is to undermine the Church's very structure. If this "basic" confession is sufficient for ministers, officers, and missionaries, let us deal with the matter with integrity and change our confessional standards and ordination vows through the established courts of the Church. But until the change occurs, the confessional standard of our Church continues to be more than a simple confession of Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour. The Confession of Faith is the standard. If the Board of World Mission's view is reflected in the "Memo" statement, then it would seem to be unfaithful to its vows and mission.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be said that Linton's basic concern was not to attack the Board of World Missions. He attempted to call attention to a condition in the Church at large which is creating, among other things, a crisis in missions. The approach that the "Memo" took, unfortunately, indicates that the Board and staff saw the article as a personal attack.

No matter how many words are exchanged, we continue to experience a crisis in missions. Refusing to face the issues will not solve the crisis. Neither will defensive arguments. The Church must honestly determine whether Linton's basic thesis is true. Has the shift to the left in the theological scene of our Church been the factor in the decline in missions? If it has, then are we willing to re-affirm our historic theological commitments to a faith that is thoroughly Reformed and evangelical in doctrine and Presbyterian in polity in order to see the work of missions again flourish and get on with the task of fulfilling the Great Commission?

STANDING FOR THE FAITH

A little more than a year ago 500 ministers of the PCUS declared themselves in the Declaration of Commitment making it known that they would not go with those leading the downward and leftward movement of our denomination, but that they would stand for the Reformed Faith, Presbyterian Polity, and the integrity of the Bible as the word of God written. Many others have joined their ranks, including some 325 Sessions.

After the many undesirable actions of the 110th General Assembly, the significance of the position taken by these Churchmen United became even more evident. Now church courts are also taking a stand.

At the fall meeting of Presbyteries that immediately followed the Memphis Assembly, ten Presbyteries took action saying they would stand by the ordination vows and not forsake their creed, their property, nor their polity by joining with the United Presbyterian Church USA. While there was a variety of wordings used by these Presbyteries, the essence of their resolutions was the same. Like the signers of the Declaration of Commitment, they too will stand for the Faith as Presbyteries. It kind of makes you want to join them, doesn't it?

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