

The *Theology* of Faith missions

These non-denominational mission organizations go where established churches can't or won't go, but their non-denominational approach does affects their theology.

by Johan D. Tangelder

For the founders of faith missions, outreach was not an afterthought. Their love for the Lord Jesus Christ, their longing to know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering (Phil. 3:10) led them to make missions their priority. Hadn't Jesus said that professing love for God, without obedience to Him, is no love at all (John 14:21)? Did He not command "make disciples of all nations," and "preach the Gospel?" Though these founders knew that the task would cost blood, sweat, tears, and even lives, they were determined to blaze a trail for the Gospel in places where perishing souls hadn't heard the message of salvation even once. They were quickened in their pioneer work by William Carey's watchword: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."

Priority one: winning souls

When the founders of faith mission developed their theology before they began their actual work, their focus was solely on rescuing the perishing. The church on the mission field played hardly any role in their theology, simply because there were no churches in the mission field. The problem they had to solve was, first of all, how to reach the unreached. Faith missions saw the heathen as suffering, not primarily from poverty, ignorance and disease, but from not knowing Christ. This meant evangelism must have the priority and conversion was therefore the primary motive. This did not and does not exclude endeavors to alleviate suffering from poverty, ignorance and disease but changes in social conditions were viewed as the fruit, the consequence of individual conversions.

Unfortunately, in prioritizing missions this way, they divided body and soul. Social involvement became an appendix to missions. Count Nicholas von Zinzendorf (1700-1760), the father of the eighteenth century Moravian missionary movement, would send out his Pietist missionaries with only one aim, "to win souls for the Lamb."

Faith missions were convinced that everyone who, for whatever reason, does not believe in Christ is eternally lost. Prairie Bible Institute, the most important faith mission school in Canada, formulated it thus: "If we believe that all are lost without Christ, we'll give our lives for the perishing millions." And Klaus Fiedler, author of *The Story of Faith Missions*, notes that in current faith mission publications, there are no hints that non-Christians might find a way of salvation within their own religions. Nor are there any hints that those who never had a chance to hear the Gospel have some other way of salvation. Because there is no other way, it is the Christian's duty to reach everyone with the Gospel.

For many faith missions, therefore, the sole purpose of their existence is the winning of souls. Evangelism and missions are elevated above all other Christians' tasks. They say that human beings are "saved to serve," and this service involves only missions and evangelism.

But while evangelism and missions are certainly the Christian's sacred duty, it is by no means

our only duty! Elizabeth Elliot (the widow of Jim Elliot, a missionary who was speared to death by the Aucas in Ecuador) writes in her first novel, *No Graven Image*, that while in Sunday school she learned from the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, “that the chief end of man is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” In a missionary service in another church than her own, she heard, “that the chief end of man is to stop as many as possible of the millions from perishing.” In her book, which is a critique of faith missions, she describes how people on the field speak in terms of “souls,” cities in terms of “need,” and church meetings in terms of “attendance.”

Arminianism/Calvinism side by side

Faith mission leaders didn't speculate about the ways and means of God's eternal wisdom in the matters of salvation. The issue of predestination was not discussed because these mission leaders were heavily influenced by Arminianism. Current faith mission theology does not view conversion as a human achievement, but as God's gift, which people may accept or may not accept. Fiedler observes that in an applied mission theology there is no double predestination. “The offer of salvation is for all, and it is assumed that everyone can accept it. That is Arminian practice, which often runs hand-in-hand with a Calvinist conviction of election. That doctrine is, however, not part of preaching but of praise.” As faith missions became organized, they did not choose, with few exceptions, between Arminian and Calvinist theologies. There was a saying attributed to D.L. Moody: “I am an Arminian up to the cross, a Calvinist beyond.” L.E. Maxwell, founder of the Prairie Bible Institute, taught that “Arminian” and the “Calvinist” texts expressed different aspects of the same truth, conditioned by the fact that the various letters of the New Testament were written to answer concrete problems. The Africa Evangelistic Band, which was strongly impacted by Arminianism, did not make Arminianism obligatory. They said: “In any case, young people preaching all over the country having had only two years of Bible College are not expected to be theologians. Their desire is that souls get saved – be it Calvinistically or Methodistically.”

Church structure and unity

Faith mission theology was often revolutionary because of its shift in emphasis. Traditional theology was taken for granted, but ecclesiology (the doctrine of the church) was not considered important. Faith missions never produced an ecclesiology of their own. Because of the influence of the Brethren movement, they admit no congregational unity beyond the local congregation. Furthermore, as interdenominational missions, faith missions have to accept all church denominations. The individual and not the corporate nature of the church is stressed.

The way they view it, churches don't create unity, but individual Christians do. Christian unity always means cooperation not of churches, but of *individuals* belonging to different churches. Faith missions believe that unity in Christ is not to be sought, but that it exists, regardless of denominational affiliation, just as it had existed in the early church. Their unity, therefore, is not between denominations, but between *individuals* who love the Lord. According to them that is sufficient ground for the most intimate Christian fellowship, the breaking of the bread (the Lord's Supper). Differences in doctrine can coexist within this *individual* unity. In other words, sincere love for the Lord, latitude in doctrinal views, and acceptance of, but lack of concern about, denominations define their unity. Although denominational affiliation is not considered important, every faith missionary is expected to have a positive relationship

to his or her Protestant church. If a missionary wants to change his or her denomination, no objections are raised. It is a matter of private concern.

When faith missions started their work in Africa, they did not do much thinking on church structures beyond the congregation level. They had not given it much thought at home as they expected the Lord's second coming to be near. Furthermore, they never expected their work to be as numerically successful as it turned out after a few decades. Missionaries established churches more on their experience with their faith mission organization than on Scripture. "While the missionaries may have thought, and even taught," comments Fiedler, "with a congregational approach, they organized their missions more or less with a presbyterian approach, while usually there was also a strong episcopalian figure in the field leader. The churches did not pattern themselves after the New Testament, nor after the *ideals* of the missionaries, first of all, but after their organization. The place of the annual missionary conference is taken by the Synod, the Great Assembly taking place every one to three years."

Sacraments were secondary

Because evangelism had priority, reaching the unreached areas of the globe as speedily as possible, the sacraments/ordinances were of secondary importance. Furthermore, since they were interdenominational, faith missions had to cooperate with churches adhering to mutually exclusive doctrines, such as the Baptists and the Presbyterians. They felt it to be more important to put all their effort into the main task of the church – outreach – rather than discuss doctrinal differences about the sacraments. By accepting both infant baptism and "adult" believers' baptism, they ignored for example the Reformed concept that baptism can never be repeated as well as the Baptist conviction that infant baptism is no baptism at all. Consequently, they treated two mutually exclusive doctrines as both being right. They also accepted the individual's freedom to change from one position to another: for example, re-baptism of believers previously baptized as infants is considered a matter of personal preference. The faith mission founders personally had clearly opted for "believers" baptism, which for almost all of them meant re-baptism, as they had been baptized as infants.

Sudan United Mission missionary Johanna Veenstra's (1894-1933) approach to the mode of baptism was unique and worth telling. The new believers in Lupwe-Takum district in Nigeria naturally accepted whatever the missionary taught them. Veenstra had been the leader for ten years and her views on doctrine and church practice often prevailed. Her biographer notes that in this way a Reformed tradition was planted there. When the questions of small children and their relationship to the church had to be faced she called the believers together and explained the Reformed view on infant baptism and the concept of the covenant. Afterwards she arranged for a Baptist minister to place before the same group his view on "adult" baptism. These new Christians considered these two views for a year and, then, not long before Veenstra's death, decided in favor of the Reformed view of the covenant. Interestingly, the Baptist pastor baptized the first thirteen children in August 1933.

Although faith missions placed little practical emphasis on the Lord's Table, they could not ignore it. They took it for granted and didn't interfere with the doctrine and practice of communion of their supporting churches, accepting them all. They could do this because fellowship and Christian service for the early faith missionaries were more important than one's view on communion. The communion practice, therefore, depended on the theological background of each missionary. For the missionaries, conversion/ faith was the precondition for participating in communion, and baptism did not

suffice. The question arose: How could people participate who were converted but not baptized? In general only baptized believers could participate, but there were exceptions. The Emmanuel Mission working in what was then Spanish Morocco admitted unbaptized believers to communion. It gave as reason that for many believers in Muslim countries, baptism was a difficult proposition, which should not be pressed on missionaries. But also in this matter there was no unanimity. The North Africa Mission (now Arab World Ministries) shared this conviction, but did not draw the same conclusion.

The faith mission churches established have no theology of communion of their own different from that of their missionaries. The low appreciation of the sacrament is not only shown by the fact that it is celebrated rarely in more out of the way congregations, but also by the few who participate. In the Africa Inland Church, which is the fruit of the labors of Africa Inland Mission about 5-10 per cent of church attendees remain for communion to be celebrated. In the Churches of Christ in Nigeria, the fruit of the mission work of SUM, the percentage is similar.

The Unfinished Task

Over the past century and a quarter, faith missions played a leading role in reaching those who had never heard of Jesus. Their zeal for winning the lost, the sacrifices made, and pioneering in some of the most difficult regions of the world is admirable, and an inspiration for all Christians.

But their task is still unfinished. The challenge of the unreached is ever growing. Of the 6,145 billion people on earth, more than two billion have yet to be evangelized and, with worldwide population growth, the number of unreached keeps growing. Many faith mission organizations are taking up the challenge. Some of the most international faith missions today are Worldwide Evangelization Crusade (WEC International), Sudan Interior Mission (now SIM International), and Overseas Missionary Fellowship, with branches in many countries and an ever-increasing share of non-Western missionaries. Many of *Reformed Perspective*'s readers are acquainted with Wycliffe Bible Translators, International (WBT), founded in 1934 by L.L. Legters and William Cameron Townsend. The founders envisioned making God's Word available through vernacular translations. WBT has become a multinational organization dedicated to reaching the marginal people of the world to fulfill the Lord's Commission. In cooperation with churches, Bible societies, and missions, teams from over twenty nations have provided Scripture in over twelve hundred languages in seventy different nations.

Evaluation

Since I could only give a brief sketch of the history of faith missions and their theology, my evaluation will also be brief. First, from the Biblical point of view, mission work rightly belongs to the churches as their members meet for consultation and prayer, and are directed by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God. However, we should recognize that the sovereignty of God is not frustrated by the failure of churches to spread the Gospel to the unreached. No one will deny that God raised up Luther, or Calvin, or John Knox, or Jonathan Edwards, or William Carey, or Hudson Taylor, or Karl Kumm to do His work in extraordinary times. But ideally the church, and not the missionary sending agency as such, is God's instrument for sending forth missionaries. A mission society can neither displace nor replace the church though it may be called upon to act in place of the church. The latter was recognized by the Dutch statesman and church leader Groen Van Prinsterer (1801-1876) who advocated support

for church missions rather than a mission society. He commented that mission work is the business and task of the congregation. He pointed to the Jerusalem and Antioch churches as Biblical examples the modern churches should follow.

Second, faith missions have fostered a one-sided presentation of the Gospel. The sole reason for their existence was to win lost individuals for Christ. They interiorized the Gospel, tried to avoid controversy by truncating theology into a few simple affirmations. But the Gospel includes much more than a concern for individual redemption. It takes on cosmic dimensions. The heart of the Gospel is the confession that Jesus Christ, crucified, risen, and ascended, is the Lord of the world, of all of life. The Gospel of the Kingdom speaks with authority to rich and poor, to politicians and academics, to labor and economics; nothing falls outside Jesus' reign. Dr. Roger Greenway rightly warns: "When Christian mission fails to teach and operates from this perspective, a form of Christianity develops that treats religious faith and morality as individual matters and leaves the public square unaffected. Churches may grow in size and number but if they fail to educate members to apply kingdom values to society at large, they fail in their role as lighthouses of the kingdom and they set the stage for suffering, violence, and revolution." I believe that the desperate situation in many African nations where the Gospel is preached can be partly blamed on the lack of discipling Christians. Someone commented, "In Africa Christianity is a mile long and an inch deep." Thankfully, faith missions are now awakening to their failure to address the broader implications of the Gospel for the plight of the poor, social injustice, political corruption and oppression, and racial tensions.