

SELF-SUPPORT IN THE CHURCH IN THE MISSION FIELD

WHILE it is still too soon to speak of the final effect of the war on missionary finance, it is clear that, in some missions at any rate, there is already urgent need for the exercise of every possible economy, and that large retrenchments will be necessary in the near future. It has been strongly urged that the history of missions gives no cause for discouragement in regard to this problem. At the same time, we are bound to remember that no war in history is comparable to this one. Since the last great European war the credit system has been vastly extended, and no one can foretell what the ultimate effect upon invested funds will be. The actual number of men engaged and the daily cost of this war far exceed anything which has been known in any previous conflict. It may be that Europe will prove to have powers of recuperation beyond anything which could be foretold. It may be that the spirit of self-sacrifice called out by the war will manifest itself in other directions, and especially in the service of the kingdom of God. But, even if these results are achieved, it is scarcely possible that there will not be some time of serious financial depression before missionary and other philanthropic work receives again the full measure of support which had been given to it in the years immediately preceding this catastrophe. There is little doubt, therefore, that in all mission board rooms in Europe, and even in those in America, the problem of how to retrench without serious loss to the work will be more acute than it has ever been before.

When this issue comes up for discussion, much will depend upon the way in which the members of the boards

face it—upon the foresight and statesmanship of missionaries and missionary leaders. On the one hand, it is possible to adopt a policy of retrenchment all round, every piece of work being starved, and the whole suffering together. On the other hand, it may be possible to see ways in which the withdrawal of foreign support under this strong compulsion may be turned to the advantage of the work as a whole, and made the means of developing in the mission field a fresh spirit of self-reliance, and of calling forth stronger leadership.

During the few months preceding the outbreak of hostilities in Europe, the present writer was engaged in a somewhat extensive investigation into the problem of self-support. The work in sixteen different mission fields was brought under review. Experienced missionaries were interviewed, and notable books on the subject of self-support were studied with care. It is in the hope that some thoughts arising out of this investigation may prove suggestive at the present time that this paper is prepared.

Every missionary thinker will realize at once that the problem of self-support is not an isolated one. It has the most intimate relationship to the further question of self-government. It is impossible fully to discuss either question without relation to the other. At the same time one result of the investigation has been to show that the relationship is not quite so simple as might at first appear. There is a wide difference between the various mission fields. In some cases it has been found advisable to put foreign money into the hands of native leaders, and this has proved to be the means of developing a spirit of self-reliance. In other cases the native Christians themselves prefer that the money subscribed by them should be put into the hands of the foreign missionary, and are more willing to give when he has the control of it, the development of self-government in the native church seeming, in these cases, to lag behind that of self-support. In this paper, therefore, in the main the subject of self-support will be dealt with by itself, leaving

on one side the various problems connected with the relation of this subject to that of self-government.

The question of self-support, moreover, relates itself to each of the various classes of work carried on by the missionary society, and the problems connected with each class are distinct, though interrelated. In the present paper it is not proposed to deal with the self-support of institutions, although many facts bearing on this subject have been studied during the investigation of the whole question.

I. It is important always to keep clearly before our minds the ideal towards which missionary work should move. This ideal, so far as it relates to our subject, should be nothing less than the complete financial independence of the church in the mission field. The church is the permanent organization of the future. The mission is temporary, and the missionary is called upon to plan definitely for the time when he must withdraw and leave the church in the mission field to carry on its work alone. It is clear, therefore, that the term 'self-support' should include the erection, renting, upkeep and current expenses connected with all buildings used for church purposes, the payment of all allowances made to native workers, the provision and maintenance of schools, colleges and training institutions, the carrying on of hospitals, production of literature, and, in short, the support of all branches of work needful for the building up of the church and the spread of the kingdom of God. It ought to be the practice of the missionary committee frequently to ask itself whether definite progress is being made towards this end, and whether the various methods employed are definitely tending in this direction.

II. It is not enough, however, for us to state the ideal. We all more or less consciously hold it. What we are called upon to do is to formulate a definite policy for its accomplishment. It must be admitted that very frequently boards and individual missions have carried on their work for years without any such clearly recognized policy. To

the present writer it seems clear that the duty of the home board is to lay down, in consultation with its missionaries, a definite line of policy, which should be arrived at after considering the best experience of the mission field, and steadily maintained over a period of years. The personnel of the mission will change. The missionary is himself so closely occupied with the details of the work, and often almost overwhelmed with the amount that has to be got through, that it is small wonder if sometimes he loses sight of the ultimate ends, and unwittingly surrenders some important principle. It is for the home board to watch the situation from the point of view of an agreed policy. It cannot direct in detail the work on the mission field, but it can give that amount of general oversight to it which will ensure the maintenance of a steady policy, and point out to the missionaries any cases where it seems as if the policy were being forgotten or neglected. If the board is to fulfil such a function, it seems necessary that it should watch itself most carefully to see that it does not become swamped in details which are better left to the judgment of those on the spot. In a review of the various mission fields in which especial progress has been made in the direction of self-support, it becomes evident that this progress has not been dependent simply on the length of time during which the mission has been at work, nor does it stand in any clear relationship to the economic condition in the particular country. It is the deliberate conviction of the writer, after studying the situation carefully, that the predominating factor in most of the cases has been the adoption of a well thought out policy, and steady adherence to it.

III. The third point which seems to be perfectly clear from a consideration of the facts is that the best progress has been made in those missions in which the principle of self-support has been introduced from the very beginning. It is frequently urged that the people are too poor to contribute. In the last analysis the attainment of self-support is not a question of financial ability.

It would seem to be a fact that Chinese Christians rarely contribute to the church what they formerly spent on idolatrous rites. The district of Hweian is said to be the most poverty-stricken in Fukien, with few rich Christians, yet in 1912 these Christians gave on an average 3.40 dollars per annum for strictly church purposes. Wealthy Christians are not, therefore, a *sine qua non* of progress in self-support.¹

In nearly every case we have investigated, the pioneers in self-support have had to face the plea of poverty.

The objection is so plausible at first sight that thousands have been deceived by it; and even he who afterwards became a champion of self-support admits frankly that he too was deceived by it for a while, and did not try to make the people do as much toward self-support as would have been good for them. . . . That people in mission lands are often very poor no one will deny; but the question is, Are they so poor that we have any right to deprive them of their self-respect? ²

In one mission at least in China even those who enrol themselves as regular inquirers are expected, on doing so, to become regular subscribers to church funds. Thus they are led at once into the practice of the Christian grace of liberality. As soon as a local congregation is organized, it ought to begin on the basis of self-support, paying its own way. If any exception is made to this, it should be understood to be purely temporary, and the congregation put upon a temporary basis.

Here is a typical piece of experience :

How soon should an independent local church ³ be formed? To this the Harpoot missionaries (Armenia) gave a markedly financial but practical answer: 'Not until there are enough true Christians, and other hopeful inquirers, to pay at least a half of the pastor's salary,' and as ten families could easily do this, as we have already shown, this requirement was certainly not an unreasonable one. But still the question will arise, should they make a money test so prominent in a matter that at first sight seems to be wholly spiritual? The answer is that they were far-sighted enough to see that no church can long maintain a healthy spiritual life if organized on a short-sighted and unbusinesslike basis; and so, after applying the spiritual tests

¹ *Chinese Recorder*, 1914 (May), pp. 263-4.

² W. H. Wheeler, *Self-Supporting Churches*, p. 192.

³ As here used the phrase 'local church' means what is spoken of in the body of the paper as a congregation.

and cautions of which we have already spoken, they were careful to insist on this money test as an added essential to a permanent and thriving work.¹

IV. Another question of importance is the standard set by the mission in regard to expenditure on buildings and similar objects. Mr. Roland Allen has well stated the point in the following words :

By taking large supplies with us to provide and support our establishments and our organizations, we do in fact build up that which we should be most eager to destroy. . . . By supplying what they cannot supply we check in them the proper impulse to supply what they can supply.

There is admittedly another side to the question. The standards of life are very low in many mission lands. Part of the missionaries' work may well be to improve these. It may be quite right to set up a standard of comfort which will stimulate the natives of the country to desire better things. To have a beautiful and durable church building may give greater dignity to worship, and thus be to the glory of God. To have everything well done, which generally means costing a little more than the minimum, gives satisfaction to the missionary and is appreciated by the convert.

While, however, these and other objects which can be attained through the free use of foreign funds are in themselves desirable, they can be gained at too great a cost. A poor rough building in the style of the country may do more for the development of a truly indigenous church, and for the fulfilment of the missionary's ideal, than a beautiful or ornate building which satisfies his sense of the fitness of things, but is built with foreign funds. We must be careful not to sacrifice the greater for the lesser good. Meeting in the house of a convert, renting with local funds an ordinary native house, or being content with building an inferior church or chapel may be the path of true statesmanship, even when funds are available for a much more ambitious scheme. The duty of the home board would seem

¹ W. H. Wheeler, *Self-Supporting Churches*, p. 197; a most suggestive treatment of the subject.

to be clear in such cases. Local considerations may appear to be overwhelmingly in favour of the erection of such a building. A chance of purchasing property suddenly presents itself; the congregation is exceptionally poor; last year's crops were a failure; some interested friend is willing to supply the needed funds. Over against all the local and temporary arguments the board must set the permanent policy, and see the problem in relation to a larger aim. It must help the missionary to be true to his own purpose, to resist, if need be, the local pressure for the sake of an ultimate good which the people themselves can but dimly see.

V. As a general rule, it would seem that funds subscribed by the members of the church on the mission field should be held by a native treasurer, and not put into the hands of a missionary or passed through the mission accounts. In some mission fields this is peculiarly difficult because the native Christians are not so ready to trust one of their own number, and it may be difficult to find a trustworthy man. Such difficulties have frequently been met by the appointment of a small committee, or by the missionary acting merely as a bank to be drawn upon by the native treasurer. The almost inevitable effect of the missionary becoming treasurer is to continue a spirit of financial dependence, and to suggest that the funds are contributed to him or to the mission for use on behalf of the church, rather than to the church itself for its own free use. Though at first more liberal contributions might be made to the trusted missionary, in the end the sense of ownership and responsibility will stimulate generosity.

VI. The problem of the payment of native workers is, of course, a very thorny one, in reference to which much has been written and many divergent views are held. It is, nevertheless, a crucial part of the general subject. Probably the largest portion of the funds spent on evangelistic and church work go in this way, and any considerable relief here would make, in many missions, a very marked difference in the cost of the whole mission.

Some missions pay no money at all from foreign funds for the salaries of evangelistic and church workers. Some give proportional grants which are administered by local native committees, these being frequently arranged on a diminishing scale. Some make a difference between evangelists and pastors, or between lay and ordained workers. In such cases the regular pastor or ordained minister may be supported by the congregation, either in whole or in part, and in the latter case the difference may be supplied either from the mission or from the local church funds available for the help of weaker congregations. There are other missions in which regularly ordained ministers are usually supported by the mission, with the exception, perhaps, of relatively wealthy congregations. In these cases there may be a large amount of voluntary lay work, or work rendered by persons receiving some small payments in order to free them for a part of their time. Such payments may be drawn from local or from foreign funds. There is, no doubt, a clear distinction between the pastor who is related to a single congregation and the evangelist who, in some cases, as in Madagascar (in the missions of the London Missionary Society, the Paris Society and the Friends), is more like a rural dean with a group of congregations under his care, or usually is a touring preacher visiting places in which no regular congregation has been established. The wide difference in actual practice, as well as in the nomenclature used in different mission fields and by different communions, makes it peculiarly difficult to discuss this question in a way which will not lead to misapprehension in some fields. It is possible, however, to give some of the main reasons urged in support of the method of payment of native workers by foreign funds, and some of those which are urged upon the other side, and to leave the reader to apply these to the particular conditions obtaining in his own sphere of work.

In favour of paying adequate salaries from foreign funds the following considerations are urged :

(a) The highly trained men who pass through our universities and theological colleges in the mission field have reached a standard of living which is proportionate to their education. This is often far above the standards obtaining in the Christian community generally. We cannot expect from poor and ignorant Christians a salary which would enable a man to live in much greater comfort than is possible for those who support him. Yet his needs are legitimate. He must buy books ; he must educate his children at least as well as he has himself been educated. He cannot do the kind of work expected of him if he live in a tiny house where he has no privacy. He must mix on equal terms with other men of education. To do this involves expenditure on clothing and entertainment quite beyond the limits of the income which his parishioners would or could provide for him.

(b) If, moreover, good salaries are not forthcoming, the young graduate will be tempted to forsake the Christian ministry and enter some calling where he can supply these legitimate needs. This involves very serious loss to the mission which has spent large sums upon his education.

(c) We have also to remember that the calling to the Christian ministry is a high one. It should be on a level with any other profession. When a minister is put upon a wholly inadequate salary, the status of the profession is lowered in the eyes of the general public. Frequently the teacher, who may be less highly trained, is better paid, and the impression gains ground that his is the more worthy vocation.

(d) A fourth point which has been hinted at above is the relation of the pastor to the congregation. Men of little education and narrow outlook cannot be expected to give the same consideration to the well trained minister as would be given by a committee of missionaries. Difficulties may arise that are very difficult of adjustment. What we should regard as natural requirements they may think of as needless luxuries.

(e) In addition to the above considerations which refer primarily to the problem of the paid pastor, we have to remember that in the early years of missionary work there are few, if any, native converts upon whom to throw such a responsibility, and that the missionary needs some help in the proclamation of the Gospel. Is it to be expected that among the very first converts there will be found those who can voluntarily give this help? The missionary's great ambition is to evangelize the people among whom he lives as speedily as possible. To wait until he has a sufficient body of adherents to support native evangelists, or to rely in the first place only upon voluntary help when foreign funds are available, seems almost like criminal negligence on his part.

When we come to consider what is to be said upon the other side of the question, the arguments are no less strong, and no right decision can be reached without giving full weight to this side of the question also.

(a) The grave danger of dependence upon foreign funds has already been referred to. Missionaries are not wanting who regard the American dollar and the English pound as among the chief enemies of the church. A spirit of subservience easily springs up. The relation of employer to employed is not by any means conducive to the full development of that other relation of pastor to flock which should be characteristic of the missionary in dealing with his converts. How many a missionary looks forward with dread to the monthly pay-day, to the weary round of complaints about money matters! How soon he becomes irritated with the mean and grasping spirit shown by some who should be the spiritual leaders of the flock, and how hard it is to correct this in the right way when he is himself the paymaster who has to watch with jealous eye the finances of the mission!

(b) In not a few cases, unfortunately, there has grown up a mercenary spirit in the church. There is a feeling that Christian service is simply a thing to be paid for.

The voluntary offering has often been checked, and persons who have means of their own have even held aloof from giving Christian service because they or their relatives did not wish to be regarded as sponging on the mission, a conclusion almost certain to be drawn by the outsider when they were known to be undertaking regular responsibilities in connexion with it. The idea of the church as a foreign organization is surely intimately connected with this system. Many missionaries strongly maintain that the whole missionary enterprise is thereby lowered in the eyes of the educated natives.

(c) There is a further grave difficulty connected with the system of employment by the mission, whether of evangelists or pastors. Where lucrative positions are open under certain conditions, there are sure to be some who are ready to profess more than they have actually experienced in the hope of obtaining these. This is much more difficult to detect in persons belonging to another race, and there can scarcely be any mission which has not some record of men put in positions of trust as servants of the mission who have proved to be working simply for their own ends. If no native Christians were employed by the mission for Christian work, it might be necessary to wait longer before entering some open door, but when the entry was made it might be with better hope of real success.

(d) It should also be pointed out that in those missions which have taken an advanced position in regard to this matter, there do not appear to have been nearly such great difficulties in the way of securing the best men for the work of the church as might have been expected on theoretical grounds. Perhaps we have been too slow to attribute to our native Christians that spirit of heroism and self-sacrifice which is only waiting to be called forth if we expected more of them. The missionary often gives up a great deal in going out himself. Has he not done a wrong to his own converts in not demanding an equal self-denial from them?

What is of supreme importance is so to arrange all our

work as to create the sense of proprietorship in the church on the mission field. We come from a strange land, with a strange language and strange customs. In many countries we represent the ruling race. Every missionary knows how hard it is to combat the idea that Christianity is a 'foreign religion.' Yet this idea must be overthrown in the minds of the people if the church is to develop on healthy lines. Where pastors and evangelists are the paid servants of the foreigner, they are regarded as preachers of an imported faith. As soon as they become the servants of the native church, or if they work voluntarily, a strong argument is provided on the other side, and one which readily appeals to those outside the church.

VII. There remains one further point. No doubt many would agree that new congregations should be established upon a self-supporting basis, but find it difficult to effect a transition where the church has already been established on other lines. The inquiry has shown that such a transition has certainly proved very difficult, but is by no means impossible. Splendid results have followed where the task has been resolutely taken in hand. In one case a missionary absolutely refused to receive grants from home, as he found it impossible to arouse the congregations to take up their responsibilities as long as it was known that foreign funds could be obtained. Some outside stimulus appears at times to be needed, and it is possible that the stringency due to the war may supply this in certain cases. On the whole, it would seem that a bold handling of the problem is the best, foreign funds being stopped at once or decreased by a large percentage each year, say 20 to 25 per cent. When the natives realize that there is a choice between raising the funds themselves and losing their pastor, they are roused to activity and real self-denial. Some cases have come to light where individual congregations have collapsed altogether in the process, but it is clear in such cases that the spiritual life of the community had already reached a very low level.

Let no one suppose, says Dr. Wheeler,¹ that it was easy for us to take and hold our position. By holding fast to the idea that the independence of the churches is inseparable from self-support and then making every possible appeal to their manhood and their Christian feeling, we at length succeeded in gaining for the ideal a permanent lodgment, as we hope, in the minds of the people and pastors; but no one who has not done the difficult work can realize at what expense of effort and nervous energy it was accomplished. It required line upon line, and precept upon precept, repeated sometimes till the brain and the tongue wearied with the tiresome repetition.

While it is clear that much more might be done on these lines in some mission fields, one must also recognize the wide differences which exist in local conditions. The chief thing is to face the question in a large and courageous spirit. The greatest mistake is to accept a system which has been handed down without fully considering all that it involves. The object must always be to secure the larger and the permanent good of the church. It is the part of the home board to face, and to help the missionary to face, and keep constantly to the front the larger issues involved.

The problem is complex and not to be solved on *a priori* grounds. We need to bring under review the experience of the whole mission field, and to study the secrets of success in the most advanced missions. As the missionaries themselves and the home boards give consideration to the grave financial difficulties which may arise in the near future, we need that faith which can convert our difficulties into stepping-stones towards better things.

We need also to remember that finance is not the one and only condition of success, and that the extent of our work is not solely determined by the funds at our disposal. Perhaps if we could but learn the full lesson of this dark hour in our history we should emerge with so much deeper and grander a conception of our message, with so much larger faith and hope, with so much truer a love that with only a fraction of the money we might do a vastly better work than anything hitherto accomplished in the history of

¹ *Ten Years on the Euphrates*, p. 107.

missions. We have been shown in an appalling way how much we have yet to learn of Christ here in the West before we can truly call our life Christian. It may be that we shall be led to trust far less to our splendid machinery and organization, to all the multiple agencies of the modern mission, and shall find a fresh and living inspiration in seeking to breathe a new spirit into all our work both at home and abroad.

In the change of values and of emphasis which would result, a light would be shed also on the problem of self-support. It would cease to be merely a problem in missionary statesmanship, and would be solved by the overflow of that spirit of spontaneous generosity which is bound to come when men and women are really set on fire by divine love. No missionary problem can be solved merely according to scientific principles, however carefully sought out and applied. They are problems of personality and life, and the full solution can only come with the larger influx of spiritual life. In the belief that after this night of sorrow there will dawn a new day of joyous and exuberant life, we can look forward with confidence to a deeper and more lasting solution of this problem than the best which has been hinted at in this paper.

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