

- Congregational Missions -

The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions

A Historical Precedent

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Throughout the course of its history, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions has been inextricably tied to Congregationalism.

The Board has always been closely related to the Congregational Christian Churches of the United States. The meeting in Bradford, Massachusetts where the Board was born was a meeting of Congregational ministers. The Board's first missionaries were ordained Congregationalists and were commissioned for missionary service in a Congregational church. Through the years the Board has leaned heavily - and primarily - on Congregational church folk for support. Most of the leadership of the Board has come from Congregational sources. Most of the candidates for missionary service have been Congregational young people.¹

In its role as the major mission thrust of Congregationalism, the American Board has served as a barometer of change within the denomination. The changes in Congregationalism in America have been reflected 1) at home, 2) in the mission field, 3) within the American Board itself, and 4) in the evolving policy and purpose of missions.

The purpose and intent of this paper is to:

- 1) establish the historical roots of the American Board.
- 2) show the American Board's concept of missions, and how its strategy of missions has evolved in the course of its history.
- 3) demonstrate the necessity and validity of the historical precedent set by the Board's founders.

4) show how that precedent still applies today and how it may be integrated in contemporary Congregational missions.

- Roots -

The missionary zeal was kindled in the hearts of our forefathers before they came to the new land. It was passed on to their children, and through them it continued. Governor Bradford tells us how the men of Plymouth discussed this very subject, while in Holland; and among the "weighty and solid reason" for the voyage, he affirms there was "lastly - and which was not the least - a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancing of the Gospel of the Kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world; yea, though they should be but as a steppingstone unto others for the performing of so great a work."² These words were prophetic.

The Massachusetts Bay Colony had the mission zeal as well. The royal charter declares the same "principal end of the plantation" - "to win and incite the natives of that country to the only true God and Saviour of mankind."³ The mission fire was characterized by fearless preaching in even the worst of circumstances. It was evident in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York.

The commitment of the early settlers is characterized in that within a year of the landing at Plymouth, Elder Cushman informed his friends in England of the "tractable disposition" of the Indian youth. As early as 1643, John Eliot had been through "varieties of intercourse with them, day and night, summer and winter, by land and by sea," and had had "many solemn discourses with all sorts of nations of them,

from one end of the country to another."⁴

- The American Board, Beginnings -

The beginnings of the American Board were not unaffected by the historical context in which it was born. It was the time of the Second Awakening, news of the Orient had been seeping back into New England during the early years of the Awakening. It was the era of clipper ships and Pacific trade, and every ship that returned to Salem or Boston, brought tales of distant lands and strange people. Furthermore, exciting reports of William Carey's pioneering missionary venture in India were being published in the religious press.⁵ As the result of a spiritual revival which swept college campuses in the late 1700's, new missionary passions warmed the hearts and minds of many college students.⁶ It was in this context that one event ignited the fire of missions at Williams College in western Massachusetts in 1806. Samuel Mills was the leader of a group of students who called themselves The Brethren. One day they were walking together, discussing and praying about the state of the world and their part in it. A sudden rain storm broke out, forcing them to seek refuge in a haystack. In that impromptu meeting, their hearts were moved, and they resolved to become America's first foreign missionaries. "We can do it if we will" became their cry.⁷ A number of The Brethren enrolled in Andover Theological Seminary. It was there that Samuel Mills and others so moved as he was, requested permission to address the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts in 1810, to express their desire and present a letter to that effect, which had been prepared by Adoniram Judson.

"The undersigned, members of the Divinity College, respectfully request the attention of their reverend fathers, convened in the General Association at Bradford, to the following statement and inquiries.

"They beg leave to state that their minds have long been impressed with the duty and importance of personally attempting a mission to the heathen; that the impressions on their minds have induced serious, and, they trust, a prayerful consideration of the subject in its various attitudes, particularly in relation to the probable success, and the difficulties attending such an attempt; and that, after examining all the information which they can obtain, they consider themselves as devoted to this work for life, whenever God, in his providence, shall open the way.

"They now offer the following inquiries, on which they solicit the opinion and advice of this Association. Whether with their present views and feelings, they ought to renounce the object of mission, as either visionary or impracticable; if not, whether they ought to direct their attention to the eastern or western world; whether they may expect patronage and support from a missionary society in this country or must commit themselves to the direction of a European society; and what preparatory measures they ought to take previous to actual engagement.

"The undersigned, feeling their youth and inexperience, look up to their fathers in the church, and respectfully solicit their advice, direction, and prayers.⁸

"Adoniram Judson, Jr.

"Samuel Nott, Jr.

"Samuel J. Mills,

"Samuel Newell."

The presentation of the paper was followed by a frank and full statement of their views and personal experience, and the process through which they reached their decision. The result was the appoint-

ment of a Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the advice that the young men put themselves under the direction of this Board.⁹

Earlier influences had had their effect. Samuel Mills had heard of the work of the Connecticut Home Missionary Society among the Indian tribes to the West. His father had told him of the work of John Eliot and David Brainerd. He had also heard of William Carey's exploits as a missionary in India. The Brethren's objective was "to effect in the persons of its members a mission or missions to the heathen."¹⁰ This objective coming as a result of pouring out to one another and to God the sorrow of their hearts over the moral darkness of Asia.¹¹

Enthusiasm that was high in 1810 was dealt a blow when the General Association advised the young missionary advocates to diligently pursue their studies and humbly wait the openings and guidance of Providence.¹² That decision was upheld at the first meeting of the American Board, some ten weeks later, in Farmington, Connecticut,

At this point, the group sought alternatives. Judson was sent to England to confer with the London Missionary Society, with intentions of seeking their support if American support was not forthcoming. As it was, it was 1812 when Rev. and Mrs. Adoniram Judson, Rev. and Mrs. Samuel Newell, Rev. and Mrs. Samuel Nott, Rev. Gordon Hall, and Rev. Luther Rice set sail from Salem, with India being their destination.

Motivation for the endeavor stemmed from the conviction that came at Williams College. The God of Christianity was the God of creation, the Lord of the earth. He must be made known, not only to Indian tribes in North America, but also to the entire non-Christian world.¹³ There are two other elements from which this movement originated, and which have pervaded and molded the whole policy of this Board. The first is, a transcendent estimate of what belongs to Christianity in

its relation to a future life; that is, of essential and spiritual Christianity, as compared with modes and forms, and all that in which evangelical Christians have agreed to differ. The second is, a transcendent estimate of the cross of Christ as a reformatory power, as compared with any education or civilizing, or reforming process, aside from that.¹⁴ In light of these, the aims are thus stated: "our aim is simple, spiritual, grand; and we have been guarded, as fully, perhaps, as such an enterprize can be, from sectarianism and ecclesiasticism. Our means have been simple and spiritual, and we have been guarded from much complication with secular schemes and side projects of partial reform."¹⁵

- the Extent of the Mission Outreach - Fields -

At the Hartford meeting of 1812, there was a good deal of discussion on the types of missionary work to be undertaken in addition to the mission to India already launched. Four types of field called for missionary activity: 1) peoples of ancient civilizations, 2) peoples of primitive cultures, 3) peoples of the ancient Christian churches, and 4) peoples of Islamic faith.¹⁶ To this list was another added later, aesthetic secularism.¹⁷

Among the people of ancient civilizations, the outreach extended to India (1813), China (1830), and Japan (1869). Missionaries in these areas were faced not only with ignorance, poverty, and disease, but also superstition, magic, corruption, and cruelty. The "wisdom of the East" was hard to locate and was not germane to the Gospel of Christ. The Hindu, Buddhist, and Confucian concepts of God were in striking contrast to the personal God apprehended through Christ.

These concepts had, as it were, crystallized or sterilized religious thinking.¹⁸

Among peoples of primitive cultures, the outreach extended to the American Indians (1817), the Sandwich Islands (1820), Africa (1833), and Micronesia (1843). The monumental nature of the undertaking is seen not only in the distances involved, but in the cultures encountered. In the Sandwich Islands, the people practiced polygamy. Two thirds of the children, probably, were destroyed in infancy - strangled or buried alive. Human sacrifice was practiced.¹⁹ In Africa, nothing was too low to worship. Slavery was the most ancient inheritance of the country. Polygamy of the lowest, loosest kind was universal.²⁰

Among the peoples of ancient Christian Churches, the outreach extended to the Ottoman Empire (1830), Mexico (1872), Spain (1872), France (1946), and Italy (1820). Among Muslim peoples, the outreach extended into Turkey, to Arab, Persian, and Turkish Muslims (1820), and in the Phillipines, to the Moro Muslims (1903).

- The Purpose and Stages of Mission Activity -

From the beginning, the American Board has been an evangelical movement, itself the product of the evangelical revival of the early nineteenth century. It was organized for a purpose which was often explained as a three-point program: to preach the Word, to translate and distribute the Bible, to promote the study of the Bible.²¹ The object was the salvation of man by means of the simple gospel, by word of mouth, from the pulpit, from individual to individual. Their aim was the furtherance of the great purposes for which the Redeemer came down from heaven.²²

The stages of mission activity consisted of :

- 1) The Pioneering Stage
 - a. to establish provision for needs - home, food, etc.
 - b. to learn the language, translate the Bible, set up printing plants.
 - c. open schools.
 - d. conduct Christian worship.
 - e. establish good relations with governmental authorities.
- 2) The Training Stage
 - a. After forming Christian community nucleus,
 - b. set up group to train them in catechisms, preaching, and teaching.
 - c. continue until convert-trainees are able to assume leadership.
- 3) The Fellowship Stage
 - a. Missionary no longer central director-master.
 - b. considered a colleague.
- 4) Ecumenical Stage
 - a. the building of the body of Christ.
 - b. the promotion of Christian brotherhood.²³

The training stage is where the aim of the mission really begins to take shape. Briefly stated, this principle places responsibility for carrying forward the mission of the church in every area upon the people of the country.²⁴

- The Seeds of Change -

Difficulties arose with the acquisition of property. To manage property required time and attention.²⁵ Priorities struggled with one another. At times the simple evangelistic objective was buried in a multitude of related though lesser involvements²⁶ such as mission administration, training of local leaders, translation of the Scriptures, and the printing of Christian literature. Doctrinal issues, such as the Andover Controversy, raised many questions with

regard to the qualifications and training of missionaries. The great objective became redefined, placing greater weight and emphasis on educational, medical, and social services.

In 1932, a report was prepared entitled "Rethinking Missions, a Layman's Study After One Hundred Years".²⁷ The report effectively pointed out the growing divergency within the American Board. Its statements and recommendations speak for themselves:

- The main purpose of mission is to plant the Church in all the world. Missionaries should recognize, encourage, and seek to preserve good in other religions. Cooperating with other religions in a common quest for fuller and more complete religious faith. Missionaries should not attack the weaknesses in other religions, but exhibit positively the virtues of Christianity in life and deed. They should expect the continuance of the other religions for an indefinite period, and work with them for the common good.²⁸

- The old assumption that the purpose of the missionary was to overthrow the non-Christian faith as false, and substitute wholly for them Christianity, the true religion, is false. The Christian is a co-worker with the forces which are seeking for righteousness within every religious system. We desire the triumph of final truth, we need not prescribe the route.²⁹

- Recommendations - Move away from doctrine focused religion toward religion focusing on the vital issues of life for the individual and the social environment in which the individual lives. Put an end to sectarianism and denominationalism, promote united action. Place the emphasis on preparation for the practical, social, and human. Emphasize those things which confront a spiritual leader in the actual world of the present time.³⁰

The report signaled the firm position of liberalism in the American Board. The spirit was far from what was reflected by Abiel Holmes, of Cambridge, Massachusetts, in an anniversary discourse in Boston in 1808. In it, he hailed the approaching day, "when the Pagan idol-

ater shall cast his idols to the moles and to the bats; when the Indian Powows shall be silenced by the songs of Zion; when the Vedas of the Hindoo and the Koran of the Mohammedan shall be exchanged for the Holy Bible; when the religion of Brahma, the Institutes of Menu, the rites of the Lama, the Zend of Zoraster, and even the laws of Confucius, shall be superseded by the glorious gospel of the blessed God.³¹

To this day, the spirit of theological divergence has pervaded the American Board as well as Congregationalism. This fact must be confronted squarely if the mission of the church is to be carried out.

- The Past as Prologue -

Comparing the present period of the church, with the apostolic, we come to two very different results respecting our own age. One is, that the facilities enjoyed by for propagating the gospel throughout the world, are vastly greater than those enjoyed by the apostles. The other is, that it is far more difficult now, than it was then, to impart a purely spiritual character to missions among the heathen.³² As the need for change in mission strategy has presented itself, the American Board has been equal to the task. This is seen in the fact that the American Board's position regarding evangelism in recent years has been marked by its amplitude. The witness of the social center, the clinic or hospital, the school - the selfless service of missionary and national Christian, - has been felt to be important as well as the witness and preachment of the word.³³ The missionary is a personal God-directed force in his community, a witness in a unique way to what God has done and is doing for him and society through Christ.³⁴

S. C. Bartlett has said, "No man can rightly apprehend the new dispensation of mission without some knowledge of the old; for the holy zeal of Mills and Judson stands interlocked with the labors of Brainerd and Eliot."³⁵ Although the strategy of mission must evolve and change to meet the needs that confront it, does the concept of missions change? Has the challenge of the Great Commission been lifted? Are we no longer called to make disciples and to cultivate obedient faith? Do we, as members of the global village, face challenges less great than the apostles or the founders of the American Board?

Missions that does not deal with the practical needs of the individual (i.e. medical, educational, social) will ultimately drown in a lake of irrelevant spirituality. Missions that does not deal with the spiritual, sublimates the intent and integrity of the gospel, and becomes essentially something less than mission. The Christian mission is ~~the~~ only valid mission because it is capable of doing both.

One cannot deny the wisdom and beauty of many passages in the Scriptures of the non-Christian religions, especially Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. One cannot deny the wisdom and beauty in the lives of many adherents of non-Christian religions. There is one thing, however, which Christians can assert, not, to be sure, without contradiction, but without disloyalty to truth: The moral and spiritual transformation that takes place in the life of a person who comes to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Master, God as the loving and forgiving Heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit as Teacher and Guide is characteristic of a genuine Christian community. It is seldom, if ever, seen elsewhere. It is in the realm of the will even more than in that of the mind that faith in Christ merits attention. Redemption from sin and a sinful life is a fact of experience so often demonstrated in the Christian community that it assumes the character of proof

of God's search and concern for man rather than man's search for God.

Paul hit the nail on the head when he said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith." (Romans 1:16). Add to this the fact that ethical principles which derive from Christ's teaching, when released in society through the transformed lives of individuals and in other ways, start processes of moral and spiritual reformation and set up standards of action which under favorable circumstances work toward moral regeneration on community levels. In other words, the Christian gospel is both individual and social.³⁶

The American Board was constituted not on denominational, but on broad Christian principles.³⁷ In light of this, Congregationalism has a rare opportunity to engage itself in effective mission, today. The theological balance that presents itself, can be the source of renewed fuel to the mission fire. The theological mix may also enable us to minister to the whole person in a way never before possible.

Let us use the past as prologue. The historical precedent established by the founders of the American Board is as significant and relevant today as it was in 1810. The Great Commission of the Lord Jesus Christ still stands. Let us not lose sight of our objective. Let us apply our resources, abilities, gifts, and energies, so that we may press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called us heavenward in Christ Jesus.

"Shall we, whose souls are lighted
 With wisdom from on high, -
 Shall we to men benighted
 The lamp of life deny?
 Salvation! -- O, salvation!
 The joyful sound proclaim,
 Till earth's remotest nation
 Has ~~l~~learned Messiah's name."³⁸

We can do it, if we will!

Footnotes

- 1 Goodsell, F. F, You Shall Be My Witnesses, Boston, 1959, p. 138.
- 2 Bartlett, S. C, Bartlett's Sketches of Missions, ABCFM, 1872, p. 2.
- 3 IBID
- 4 IBID, p. 175.
- 5 Hudson, W. S, Religion in America, Charles Scribner's Sons, N. Y. 1973, p. 156.
- 6 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 6.
- 7 IBID
- 8 Strong, W.E, The Story of the American Board, ABCFM, Pilgrim Press, 1910, p. 4.
- 9 Memorial Volume of the First Fifty Years of the ABCFM, ABCFM, 1863, p. 50.
- 10 Strong, The Story of the American Board, p. 7.
- 11 IBID
- 12 IBID, p. 9.
- 13 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 6.
- 14 Memorial Volume, p. 19.
- 15 IBID.
- 16 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 12.
- 17 IBID, p. 27,28.
- 18 IBID, p. 19.
- 19 Bartlett, S. C, Historical Sketch of the Missions of the ABCFM in the Sandwich Islands, Micronesia, and the Marquesas, ABCFM, Boston, 1880, p. 5.
- 20 Bartlett, S. C, Historical Sketch of the Missions of the ABCFM in Africa, ABCFM, Boston, 1880, p.2.
- 21 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 33.
- 22 Annual Report of the ABCFM, 1811, p. 29.
- 23 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 28ff.

- 24 Goodsell, F. F, They Lived Their Faith, ABCFM, 1961, p. 59.
- 25 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 34.
- 26 IBID.
- 27 Rethinking Foreign Missions, ABCFM, 1933, -this is a pamphlet
is an explanation of the larger work.
- 28 Rethinking Foreign Missions, p. 6.
- 29 IBID.
- 30 IBID, p. 18.
- 31 Anderson, R. History of the Missions of the ABCFM in India,
Congregational Publishing Society, Boston, 1874, p. 3,4.
- 32 Missionary Tracts of the ABCFM, T. R. Marvin Press, Boston,
1853, p. 1.
- 33 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 40.
- 34 IBID.
- 35 Bartlett, Bartlett's Sketches of Missions, p. 1.
- 36 Goodsell, You Shall Be My Witnesses, p. 283.
- 37 Brown, W, History of the Propagation of Christianity Among the
Heathen, William Blackwood and Sons, Edinburgh and London, 1865, p. 5.
- 38 Memorial Volume, p. 5.

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