The Church of Jesus Christ, especially its missionary arm, has generally understood the transformation of society to be an essential part of its task. While the focal point of mission has always been to communicate the Good News of Christ, calling people to repent and believe and be baptized into the Church, Christians have always understood their mission to be fulfilled in teaching the nations “to observe all things” that Christ has commanded. Expectation of people obeying Christ has always fueled hope that the culmination of this process of evangelization would bring about transformation of the social situations, the physical conditions, and the spiritual lives of believers. Sometimes changes were remarkable, at other times disappointing.

But even when there was great cultural misunderstanding and error, the desire to bring individuals and societies more into conformity with the kingdom of God has remained an integral part of mission.

Often missionaries moved into cultures which were already undergoing change. They helped produce some of that change, often channeling it positively, or working against some of its harsher aspects. Missionaries often envisioned a model of transformed communities that looked suspiciously like those they had known in their own cultures; however, there is no doubt this transforming dimension was an essential aspect of mission, and for the most part, beneficial.

Monasticism: Communities of Preservation and Transformation

Nearly all missionaries during the period from the fourth to the eighteenth centuries were monks. Though most of the monastic movements were expressly missionary, others were not, but nearly all of the monastic movements brought about significant social transformation.

There were dozens of monastic movements, among them were the Benedictines and those movements which were born out of them, the Nestorians, who moved from Asia Minor into Arabia, India, and across central Asia to China, the Orthodox, who went north into the Balkans and Russia, the Celts, who arose in Ireland, then moved into Scotland and England, and back to the continent, and later, the Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits.

Even though the Benedictines were not purposely missionary, they and the other groups moved into areas where the Christian faith had not yet penetrated, forming communities which modeled and taught the Faith to the “barbarian” tribes moving into central and Western Europe. The original intent of monasticism was to encourage men to develop lives of discipline and prayer, far from the concerns of normal life. But the monasteries and the soon-to-follow women’s houses became self-sustaining communities organized around rules for daily life which included both work and worship. Work was both manual and intellectual, in the fields and in the library. This was a revolutionary concept in the ancient world where manual work was seen as fit only for slaves. Monks also became scholars, thus for the first time, the practical and the theoretical were embodied in the same persons. So the monks have been called the first intellectuals to get dirt under their fingernails! This helped create an environment favorable to scientific development and the monasteries became centers of faith, learning, and technical progress.

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Monasticisms contribution to learning is well known, but its impact on agricultural development is not as widely recognized. Hannah wrote that in the seventh century “it was the monks who possessed the skill, capital, organization, and faith in the future to undertake large projects of reclamation over fields long desolated by the slave system of village life...and the barbarian hordes.... Immense tracts of barren heath and water-soaked fen were by the monasteries’ hands turned into excellent agricultural land.”

In the twelfth century the Cistercians withdrew from society and cultivated new land in deserted places. They worked out new methods of agricultural administration and became the greatest wool producers in Europe, furnishing the raw material for the textile industry.

The Nestorians, who flourished from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries, moved across central Asia into India and China. Christians in the West know little about this remarkable movement because most of the fruit of its labor was lost. Yet as one scholar noted, “Nestorian missionaries introduced letters and learning among people who were previously illiterate, including Turks, Vigurs, Mongols, and Manchus, all of whom are said to derive their alphabets from Syriac, the language of the Nestorians.”

Orthodox monks from the Eastern Church did the same. Ulfilas moved north of the Danube in the fourth century and was the first to reduce a northern European language to writing, doing so, of course, to translate the Scriptures. In the third century the Armenians were the first national group to adopt Christianity, and in AD 406 their language was reduced to writing so that the Scriptures and other Christian literature might be made available. Constantine (later known as Cyril) and his brother Methodius went to the Balkans and devised two alphabets used to translate the Scriptures and establish the Church. The Cyrillic script is still in use in Russia today.

When Patrick returned to Ireland from England he initiated the remarkable Celtic missionary movement that would continue for centuries, and which would be a source of missionary zeal and learning. His spiritual descendants moved from Ireland to Scotland, then to England, across the channel to the low countries, and finally into central Germany.

They were later instrumental in the conversion of Scandinavia. They combined a deep love of learning, spiritual discipline, and missionary zeal. As a result “Ireland became literate for the first time in Patrick’s generation.”

The great monastery at Fulda, founded in the eighth century by St. Boniface from this tradition, became the main center of learning for much of Germany.

During the Carolingian Renaissance under Charlemagne, the monasteries of the Celtic tradition were again the major centers of education and change. Hannah wrote, “On the whole they were able to achieve their destiny as Christian leaven in a rude society, to implant and preserve a Christian culture like a cultivated garden amid a wilderness of disorder.”

Forerunners of the Protestant Missionary Movement

For nearly two centuries after the Reformation Protestants engaged in very little missionary activity outside of Europe. But in the late sixteenth century several movements arose, the members of which sought to renew the Church and carry the Reformation further, from doctrine into life. These movements would form the launching pad of Protestant missions, and included Puritanism, Pietism, Moravianism, and the Wesleyan/Evangelical revivals.

The Puritans focused on conversion and a more authentic Christian life. They also developed the first Protestant mission theology. Two of their greatest mission advocates were Richard Baxter, an effective pastor and prolific writer, and John Eliot.

Eliot went to New England and became an effective missionary to the Algonquin Native Americans, translating the Bible into their language and forming a number of Christian villages. Rooy wrote of him:

He traveled on foot and horseback, taxing his strength to the utmost...to bring the gospel to the natives. He brought cases to court to prevent defrauding of Indian land, pleaded clemency for convicted Indian prisoners, fought the selling of Indians into slavery, sought to secure lands and streams for Indian use, established schools for Indian children and adults, translated books, and attempted to show a deep humanitarianism that accompanied their concern for salvation.

Pietism laid the foundation for greater changes, and just in time. In the seventeenth century the Thirty Years War had devastated Germany. Misery abounded, class differences were exaggerated, the level of Christian under-
standing and life was low, and the Lutheran Church was dominated by the State. The truth of faith was seen in terms of propositions rather than experiential or ethical event or demands. Thus, between the irrelevance of the Church and the widespread despair and atheism brought about by the Thirty Years War, Christianity soon lost its healing and transforming power.7

Philip Jacob Spener, influenced by Puritan writers during his theological studies, found the situation of his parishioners deplorable when he became the pastor in Frankfort. He began to invite groups into his home for discussion of the sermon, Bible study, prayer, and mutual support, thus initiating a movement its opponents called Pietism.

Spener insisted that Christianity consisted not only of knowledge, but must also include the practice of the Faith. Along with his emphasis on the necessity of the new birth and a holy life, he included a great concern for the needy.

A. H. Francke was Spener’s successor as leader of the movement. He taught that rebirth should lead to transformed individuals and then to a reformed society and world. For him faith and action were inseparable. He demonstrated this to a remarkable extent in his influence at the University of Halle and his parish at Glaucha. Piety meant genuine concern for the spiritual and physical well being of one’s neighbor. So the Pietists fed, clothed, and educated the poor. Francke established schools for poor children, including girls, a novelty at the time. He also founded an orphanage and other institutions to aid the poor. These were supported by faith alone and became the model later for the ministry of George Mueller in Bristol and the China Inland Mission.

The first Protestant missionaries to Asia came from the Pietist movement. Influenced by his Pietist court chaplain, in 1706 Frederick IV of Denmark sent two men from Halle to his colony in Tranquebar, India. Bartholomew Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plutschau were the first of about 60 Pietists who went to India in the eighteenth century. Ziegenbalg, who remained until his death in 1719, was remarkably holistic in his understanding of the task. He studied the religious beliefs and practices of the Hindus, translated the Scriptures, planted a church, advocated the ordination of Indian pastors, set up a printing press, and established two schools.

The greatest of his successors, C. F. Schwartz, not only built up the church but worked with orphans and became an ambassador of peace between Muslim rulers and the British. Arriving in 1750, he remained until his death in 1798. A great German missiologist wrote that “Pietism was the parent of missions to the heathen…also of all those saving agencies which have arisen within Christendom for the healing of religious, moral, and social evils…a combination which was already typically exemplified in A. H. Francke.”8

The Moravians, with roots both in the Pre-Reformation Hussite movement and Pietism, were one of the most remarkable movements in history. Known for their 24 hour, 100 year prayer watch, they were a highly disciplined, monastic-like community of married men and women devoted to win “souls for the Lamb.” During their early years, one of every 14 members became a missionary, often going to the most difficult fields.

The fourth stream leading to the Protestant missionary movement flowed from the Wesleyan/Evangelical revival in England, with John Wesley as its best known leader, and the First Great Awakening in North America. Since the awakening in North America was in many respects an outgrowth of Puritanism, we will examine only the movement in England.

Even before their salvation, the Wesleys and the other members of the “Holy Club” at Oxford showed concern for the poor and prisoners. At the same time they pursued the spiritual disciplines which earned them the name, “Methodists.”

John Wesley began to preach immediately after his conversion in 1734. While the clear focus was on evangelism and Christian nurture, especially among the neglected poor, he wrote, “Christianity is essentially a social religion, to turn it into a solitary religion is indeed to destroy it.”9 The impact of the movement on social reform in England is well known. Robert Raikes started Sunday schools to teach poor children to read and give them moral and religious instruction on the only day of the week they were not working.

Others organized schools among miners and colliers. John Howard tirelessly worked for reform of the appalling conditions in local prisons, then moved Parliament to pass laws for prison reform.

Evangelicals worked to regulate child labor in the emerging factories and promoted the education of the masses. A group of wealthy Anglican evangelicals at Clapham, a suburb of London, spent their time, for-
tunes, and political influence in a number of religious and social projects, including the long and successful campaign of William Wilberforce and others, to end slavery in the British Empire. The Church Missionary Society, the greatest of the Anglican societies, was established in 1799. Several other societies were established, all motivated by the revival.

The Protestant Missionary Movement

William Carey is rightly called “the Father of Protestant Missions,” even though others had engaged in such missions earlier. In 1792 he formed the Baptist Missionary Society; the following year he sailed to India. His writing and example were the catalyst in the creation of similar societies in Europe and in the United States, leading to what has been called “the great century” of missions. His primary goal was to lead people to personal faith in Jesus Christ and eternal salvation; however he saw no conflict between that goal and his other activities in education, agriculture, and botany.

Carey labored widely to withstand social evils and bring change in Asia. He was better known as a horticulturist around the world than as a missionary. He fought valiantly against the practice of infanticide, the burning of widows, the inhuman treatment of lepers (who were often buried or burned alive), and the needless deaths at the great religious pilgrimages of the time. He also founded Serampore College, which was established primarily to train pastors and teachers, but also provided for the education of others in Christian literature and European science.

False Recognition

Many nineteenth century missionary movements labored intentionally for social transformation, most without recognition, except at times in a false and negative light. For example, at Andover Seminary, Samuel Mills and his colleagues from the Haystack Prayer Meeting took the initiative in establishing the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions in 1810. One of the early fields chosen was Hawaii (then known as the Sandwich Islands). Those early missionaries were maligned by James Michner; but the reality was much different from the picture he painted. Their major focus was the conversion of men and women to Christ and the gathering of converts into churches. But they also worked to protect the Hawaiian people from the sexual and economic exploitation of the sailors and traders who came to the islands.

The missionaries worked to end infanticide and other destructive practices. After a few decades the islands were dotted not only with churches, but with schools in which Hawaiian children were taught by Hawaiian teachers. Several years later others devised a system of writing the language using Roman characters, translating the Bible and various textbooks. By 1873 they had published 153 different works and 13 magazines, along with an almanac in the local language.

A Striking Comparison

Many lesser known missionaries have demonstrated great concern for the totality of human need. One of them was Willis Banks, an obscure Presbyterian evangelist who worked in a backward area of southern Brazil. He built the areas first brickyard, brought children to live with his family, taught them to read, and then sent them back to teach others. Using a home medical guide, he treated infections, tuberculosis, malaria, worms, and malnutrition.

Banks introduced better methods of agriculture and care of livestock. He build the first sawmill in the area and constructed machinery to cut silage. An anthropologist who visited the area 20 years after Banks’ death gave a striking illustration of the resulting community development. He visited two isolated villages, both situated in virtually identical circumstances, with inhabitants of the same racial and cultural backgrounds. The village of Volta Grande was Presbyterian and had benefited from Banks’ evangelism and leadership. The people lived in houses of brick and wood, used water filters and in some cases had home produced electricity. They owned canoes and motor launches for travel to a nearby city and cultivated vegetables along with the traditional rice, beans, corn, manioc, and bananas. They had two herds of dairy cattle and produced and consumed milk, cheese, and butter. They received and read newspapers, had the Bible and other books readily available, and all were literate. The community had pooled its resources to build a school and donated it to the State with the stipulation that a teacher be provided and paid. Consequently there was an excellent primary school there and many of its graduates continued their studies in the city. Religious services were held three times a week even though the pastor could visit only once a month.
The inhabitants of Jipovura, the other village, lived in daub and wattle houses with no furniture. They engaged only in marginal agriculture, and did not boil or filter their water. They had no canoes, used tiny kerosene lamps for light, and were mostly illiterate. A school had been donated to the community by a few Japanese families who had once lived in the area, but the people showed no interest in maintaining it and had ruined the building by stealing its doors and windows. Leisure time was filled by playing cards and drinking the local sugarcane rum. Alcoholism was common.

Virtually all missionary movements in history have been concerned about social transformation in one way or another. It has been seen as part of the ministry of communicating and living out the gospel. Major emphasis has been placed on education, health care, agriculture, and ministries of social uplift for girls, women, and other neglected and oppressed members of society.

**Establishing Education**

Educational institutions usually had three goals: to prepare leadership for the church, to be an instrument to improve society, and to evangelize non-Christian students. Degrees of success varied, but include the following examples:

- The tribal groups of Northeast India, which became heavily Christian beginning late in the last century, have the second highest literacy rate in the nation.
- In 1915 illiteracy among nominal Roman Catholics in Brazil was between 60 and 80 per cent, while that of Protestants (who normally came from the poor) was one fourth of that figure.
- Most schools in Africa during the colonial period were established by missionaries. Leslie Newbigin pointed out in the 50s that in a 400-page United Nations document on education in Africa, not a single line revealed the fact that 90% of the schools being described were there because of missionaries.
- Many of the outstanding universities in Asia were the result of missions, including Yonsei University and Ehwa Women's University in Seoul.
- Reporting on the educational work of the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast (Ghana), the Phelps-Stokes Commission reported in 1921, “The educational effort of the Basel Mission in the Gold Coast has produced one of the most interesting and effective systems of schools observed in Africa…. First of all their mechanical shops trained and employed a large number of natives as journeymen…. Secondly the commercial activities reached the economic life of the people, influencing their agricultural activities and their expenditures for food and clothing.”
- In addition to the primary and secondary mission schools, teacher training institutions were established to expand educational opportunities.

**Bringing Medical Care**

Early in the movement a limited amount of medical knowledge was often regarded as necessary for evangelistic missionaries. But by the middle of the last century fully trained physicians were being sent to the field. The first was Dr. John Scudder, sent by the American Board to India. His granddaughter, Dr. Ida Scudder, later established perhaps the greatest of all missionary medical centers at Vellore, India. Dr. Peter Parker introduced eye surgery into China. His successor, Dr. John Kerr, published 12 medical works in Chinese, built a large hospital, and was the first in China to open an institution for the mentally ill. Presbyterians in Thailand established 13 hospitals and 12 dispensaries.

**Touching the Neglected and Oppressed**

Along with educational, medical, and agricultural ministries, others focused on some of the most neglected and depressed members of their societies. Half of the tuberculosis work in India was done by missions, and Christian institutions took the lead both in treatment and the training of workers among those afflicted. Missions also took the lead in working with lepers in several Asian countries, and established orphanages for abandoned children.

A few missionaries went beyond social service and attacked the political and social injustices of colonialism. A celebrated example took place in the Belgian Congo at the turn of the century. Two Presbyterian missionaries from the United States observed the forced labor of the Africans in the rubber industry, and published articles calling the monopolistic economic exploitation “twentieth century slavery.” This garnered international attention; the missionaries were sued for libel, with the suit finally dismissed.
Serving Women

One of the most significant results of Christian missions in many societies came through their role in ministering to and raising the status of women. In many of the cultures women were relegated to a very low status and had almost no rights. Missionaries, usually single women, evangelized them, teaching them to see themselves as children of God. Then girls and women were encouraged to study, develop their gifts, and in some cases, enter profession such as education and medicine.

Focusing first on the evangelization of women in cultures where men could not have contact with most women, the missionaries soon branched out into educational and medical work with women. Soon women were employed as lay evangelists, called ‘Bible women,’ especially in China and Korea. Even though they were not yet given equal status with men, these faithful workers had a powerful impact not only on the growth of the Church but on the status of other women. When the first Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea in 1884 and 1885, a woman had virtually no status in society except as the daughter of her father, the wife of her husband, or the mother of her oldest son. By the middle of this century the world’s largest women’s university had been established in Seoul and its President, Dr. Helen Kim, was recognized as one of Korea’s greatest educators as well as a leader in evangelization.

Women missionaries from the United States initiated the first medical work for women in India and China, established the first girls’ schools, and eventually founded nursing and medical schools for women. This had a powerful impact on the medical care of women, as well as their status in society. As a result medicine is among the most prestigious professions open to women in India, and there are thousands of women physicians in that nation today. Dr. Clara Swain, the first woman medical missionary appointed to a field, arrived in India in 1870. Beaver makes it clear that Swain and others saw no separation between their medical and evangelistic work. Their manifestation of loving concern for their patients as individuals, and their mediation of the love of God in Christ for persons were as important as their scientific knowledge and technical skill. The writings and speeches of the women medical missionaries make it clear that they considered themselves evangelists.13

The story goes on. The Christian mission movement has had dramatic positive impact on every continent and continues to do so in even greater ways. Even though the basic aim of many of these mission efforts was to call people to faith in Him, and plant the Church, the effects of those efforts has been seen to eventually extend to every part of the societies in which the church has been planted.

There is much to disappoint and admire in the record; but overall, the Christian movement is bringing a measure of fulfillment of God’s promise that Abraham’s descendents would bring blessing to all the families of the earth.

End Notes

12 As reported by Ralph D. Winter. Winter, p. 199.