



Beautiful People Who Smile¹

Ted Ward

We were on a jet airliner high above the East China Sea on the way to Manila via Taipei. Knowing of my interest in missions, my partner wanted to bring the topic of missionaries into the conversation. So he asked, “How well are missionaries adjusting to the new international conditions?”

Like so many other specialists in government and international relations, he was curious about missionaries. What turns them on? What makes them run?

Much of our conversation since leaving Osaka had been concerned with the attitudes that overseas Westerners now face. We were on our way to a five-nation Southeast Asian conference on rural education. As the two American consultants invited by the Asians, we would be dealing with the new spirit of nationalism that is today’s basic “fact of life,” especially in the small and rapidly developing nations. We must learn how to handle this new sense of pride and confidence among people in the “poor” nations. What about missionaries? “How well are missionaries adjusting . . . ?”

There was a long pause while my thoughts took a journey through time. In the distant haze off to our right lay Shanghai. My heart turned toward those ancient cities and mighty rivers of China. In childhood, my first images of “foreign” were shaped by my mother’s Aunt Mabel. Because of her, I had early come to know that missionaries are flesh-and-blood people. To me, missionaries were beautiful people who smiled. They were people who spoke with warmth and kindness, who liked little boys but who seemed to like Chinese people even more. They occasionally sat back in large chairs to tell marvelous tales of dark, winding, crowded alleys in huge cities; of bandits and kidnappers hiding in caves along rural roads. But missionaries were people who had to be begged to tell these stories. If you let them alone, they talked instead about Jesus. From such stuff missionaries were made.

Now missionaries no longer take weeks or months to travel back and forth. They no longer “bury themselves for a lifetime.” They seem to show up back home with frequent regularity. Today, many missionaries live in settlements where they are outnumbered (20 to 1, in fact) by American oil people, bankers, business representatives, salesmen, government specialists, and diplomatic staff. The missionary is rarely a white-faced oddity any more.

Making sarcastic remarks about missionaries is a popular habit, but those who know what they’re talking about sing a different tune! These servants of God are there to give something. To be fair about it, serving is not exclusively a missionary act; there are thousands of humanitarians whose compassion for people and whose commitment to world peace and international harmony drive them to devote years of their lives to international service.

To say that Aunt Mabel was in China “to get converts” would be to miss the point. She was there to share Christ. The Gospel of Jesus Christ was the most important thing in the world to her. Nothing was more valuable. She wanted to share the one great treasure of her life.

The cynics say, “What a waste! All that missionary investment in China and nothing to show for it.” Wait a minute! Think of what God did! The Chinese Christian communities in the years of the missionaries were like little ingrown pockets on the vast face of Asia. They became dependent on the missionaries for spiritual nourishment and even for funds from the Western world to relieve their

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poverty. The missionaries of that time could see the dangers in creating such dependency, but they didn't know what to do about it. God changed all of that in his own time and in his own ways.

"Wasted" missionary effort in China? Hardly. All over Asia, wherever the Chinese Christians fled to escape the purges, the influence of the Gospel is felt and seen.

Not long ago, sitting at dinner in the home of the publisher of a major newspaper—a Chinese man now a citizen of the Philippines—I could hardly pull my eyes away from a huge wall panel that read: "Christ is the head of this house, the unseen guest at every meal." The panel was oversized, by American standards, covering a large section of a long wall, and the panel was red and gold. Its message was bold for all guests to see! The first time I ever saw that motto on a wall—in childhood—where was it? Yes, in Aunt Mabel's dining room. Could it have been that across the miles and the years there was a linkage? Was this Christian Chinese home a third or fourth generation of those early-century missionaries I had known as a child?

Aunt Mabel was a nurse. She was tall and straight. Even today in my mind's eye I see her bending over or stooping down. She served, and she bent down to do it. Here is a clue to missions. In many, many places of the world today Christianity is established. Christ is known and his church is planted. The missionary today walks as a servant of the church, a servant on call to assist as requested.

Westerners, in general, are more likely to see themselves as superior and as possessors of resources that other people want. They tend to play the role of "grand giver" with reasonable ease and pleasure. But missionaries must play the role of "humble helper."

International careers now operate with a new set of rules. Missionaries are not exempted from the new rules. Many missionaries today see themselves in a time similar to the time of the Apostle Paul, always needing to move on; always ready to turn the reins over to someone local. It takes a special kind of courage—and a sense of humor—to build a career on such "uncertainties."

Yes, today is different. Today the alert missionary needs to keep one step ahead of the times. How exciting! So, many really bright and able young Christians are taking short-term missionary assignments. First-hand experience with what God is doing in other countries is a spiritual encouragement for the Christian's own development. It is so much like the days of the early church, as described in the Acts of the Apostles. God is raising up his faithful in many lands. Christ is building his church! God did not intend that his missionaries should make themselves indispensable to a particular area. They are to keep moving on! It is the awareness of this Biblical truth that makes missionaries able to cope with the new and aggressive forms of nationalism.

Although I've seen relatively few alarmists among missionaries, many are quite skilled at reading the political signs. Today's veteran missionaries have lived through a great transformation. People who originally went into foreign lands to bring the Gospel have needed now to become encouragers and co-workers, serving under the leadership of local church people. In several of the countries in which missionaries serve, the local churches are now raising funds to send out their own missionaries.

They all serve the church of Jesus Christ, missionaries and converts alike. In the matter of faithfulness to their purpose, missionaries have not changed. To preach the Good News of Jesus Christ in every corner of the world—this goal still motivates and energizes (and there's a long way to go.) Only the methods and relationships have changed.

So, my partner in the DC-8 asked me in all seriousness, "How well are missionaries adjusting to the new international conditions?" After a thoughtful pause, I replied, "Most of them, I believe, are handling the situation well. They know why they are there."

Are there still missionaries out there? You bet! How are they getting along? Very well, and please remember to support them!