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The Story of Faith Missions

Klaus Fiedler

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This book will already be well known to those readers who are experts in mission history. It remains well worth calling the attention of other readers of *BAHN Review* to its existence in case they do not know of it.

It chronicles the origins, growth, characteristics and structure of the 'faith missions'—those nondenominational missionary organisations which were stimulated by the revivals of 1859-1873 and which took up the baton from the classical denominational missions that had been the product of the evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century. The book leaves something to be desired by way of structure and final polish: and in part because of the author's own location, it focusses on the work of the faith missions in sub-Saharan Africa, whereas in the last 125 years, scarcely any part of the globe was neglected by them. But it should be of particular interest to readers of this *Review*, not only because many of the faith missions continue in lively existence today—some of them such as the New Tribes Mission and Operation Mobilisation were founded only comparatively recently—but because so much of the ideology of the faith missions is attributable directly to contact with the first generation of Brethren.

The faith principle itself, that of direct guidance and provision by God, was acquired by the early leaders from Anthony Norris Groves via George Müller. The premillennial eschatology, whether of the historical or futurist variety, was acquired from Darby and others such as Andrew Jukes, mediated through Henry Grattan Guinness, who was briefly in the 1860s an elder of Merrion Hall, Dublin. This eschatology itself proved a powerful motive for evangelism, whether in the faith missions or in the Brethren, the goal being to preach the gospel everywhere, particularly to the unreached, in order to hasten the Lord's return. The willingness to use every gift—whatever the class, educational level and even gender of the giftholder—reflected on the one hand Brethren emphasis on every-member ministry and multiplicity of spiritual gift, and on the other the Brethren disdain for both ordination and intellectual education (hence the need to create new practical training institutes, Bible schools, and missionary training homes which, for many years at least, offered neither an academic education nor ordination).

These decisive influences were not, however, taken across neat into the faith mission movement. They were refracted through two prisms which were of equal importance to the development of the Open Brethren themselves. First, there was the 1859-1873 revival. This was not only a spur to evangelism and missionary endeavour. It also, as in almost all revivals, liberated women at least for a time into new opportunities for Christian service, including the preaching of the gospel. This lived on following the revival in the new freedom for independent missionary work by single and married women both in the faith missions (some of which were founded and led by women) and in Brethren missionary work (so that by the 1880s and 1890s Brethren assemblies were commending and Echoes was accepting single

women to missionary work in the most dangerous places). Secondly, there was the influence of the holiness movement of the late nineteenth century – in which female spirituality and leadership was likewise prominent. The Open Brethren benefited from the holiness movement alongside the faith missions, as can be seen from looking at the spirituality of many who gave themselves to missionary service in fellowship with Echoes in the period 1880-1939 and possibly beyond.

The early leaders of the faith missions took something else of crucial historical importance from Open Brethren ideology: nondenominationalism. This proved to be a problematic value. It was in fact on this issue that the parting of the ways came between the Brethren and many of the early leaders of the faith missions, including Hudson Taylor, Henry Grattan Guinness, and A.B. Simpson. Here we can perhaps see the contingent influence of individual events. At the time in the 1860s, Open Brethrenism was undoubtedly struggling under pressure from Darbyite theology with its strong denominational not to say sectarian, bias. There was plenty of sectarianism itself in Open Brethrenism in the period up to 1939 and beyond, or at the least ecclesiological smugness. Against this, many in evangelicalism, not just the faith mission leaders, reacted badly, even against George Müller (witness, the remarks early in the autobiography of Samuel Smith, the evangelical Liverpool MP).

Be that as it may, the faith missions prized nondenominationalism above almost everything else. Practically, it meant that the faith missions leaders sat very lightly to denominational loyalty. Fiedler has a telling table setting out the denominational pilgrimages of some twenty of the key leaders (some of whom got through five or six denominational affiliations in their adult lives). It is no surprise that Henry Grattan Guinness turned to Anglicanism in his dotage, though I wonder if he was not always heavily influenced by his female consorts and in this case influenced by his new young wife, Grace Hurditch who was no lover of the Open Brethrenism in which she had been brought up. To this extent, the faith missions leaders anticipated the tenuous denominational loyalties evident in evangelicalism today.

The sentiment had wider practical implications, and some odd consequences in the longer run, consequences which would probably have surprised the founders. Nondenominationalism meant that they tended to eschew both sacraments and ecclesiology. The proclamation of the gospel and the response of faith was everything. Though many had under Brethren influence opted for (re)baptism themselves, they had no policy on the matter for the churches that were founded as a result of their leadership; to have had one would have been divisive, seeing that missionaries were drawn from both paedo-baptists and baptists. Similarly, matters relating to the Lord's supper were adiaphora. Nor did they adopt any policy towards other wider matters of ecclesiology: their emphasis was on the relation of the individual to God by faith and on the individual's membership of the single (and invisible) church of God united in space and time. Not only was organisation beyond the local church unimportant, as for the Brethren, but so also was the local church itself unimportant – for the leaders and the missionaries, the mission itself was the church, both synodical and local.

Fiedler describes the curious results that this had in Africa. The comity system, under which the colonial administrations allocated particular areas to particular missions, thus continuing the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio*, ensured that the

mission was bound to create both local churches and an area church. Having no firm ecclesiology, they created churches in the image of the mission itself, with the leadership and the missionaries as the hierarchy and pastorate of a centralised church which was curiously at odds with the congregational sentiments and individualism of many of the faith missionaries. Moreover, the faith missions adopted a curious interpretation of Roland Allen's indigenous church principles which they admired so much—that these precluded outside financial help for the local churches that mission created (how they could have reached such a conclusion in the light of 2 Corinthians 7-9 is a mystery). This hampered the development of indigenous pastoral care and church leadership, and contributed to a situation in which the indigenous church was led by people not considered educated enough for ordination (when both the missions and churches got round to adopting the principle of institutional ordination which the founders had rejected in favour of the 'mighty ordination of the pierced hands').

The combination of holiness teaching and insouciance about baptism and the Lord's supper also ensured churches in which only a small percentage of church people were baptised and in which the Lord's supper was rarely held, in part because of lack of institutionally ordained people to preside. At the same time, sub-Saharan attitudes to Christianity ensured that the area churches of the comity system became 'folk churches' comprising the great majority of the population, many of whom had not had the personal experience of Christ which the faith missions considered essential to conversion and membership of the universal Church of Christ. A more graphic illustration could scarcely be given of the problems that can result from the principle of nondenominationalism and neglecting to construct a coherent Biblical ecclesiology.

This is not to suggest that the faith missions' sentiments of nondenominationalism were unworthy, nor that they were wrong to give priority to the reality of saving faith over and above the acts of baptism and the Lord's supper, nor to suggest that differing and tenaciously held ecclesiologies have not sometimes led to the division of the church, nor that institutional ordination does not raise Biblical questions. But it is questionable whether it can be right to regard ecclesiology as a matter of supreme indifference and time spent in trying to establish a Biblical ecclesiology as wasted. Those who lead churches, rather than having the luxury and heartaches of confining themselves to evangelism, know that it is not as easy as that.

It is interesting that the two areas in which ecclesiological principles were applied in some of the faith missions with the passage of time were institutional ordination on the one hand and the ministry of women on the other—the two being linked, of course. In the latter area, the tendency was gradually to limit over time the freedom previously accorded for women's ministry, on the grounds that at best it was blessed only because men were not available to undertake the task (in some faith missions candidates of non-white race were also rejected for somewhat similar reasons in the first part of the twentieth century). As Fiedler wryly notes, in respect of the ministry of women, 'Usually, holiness theology lost and Brethren theology, in one guise or another, won.' (p. 301).

There can scarcely be any better example of this than the experience of the British Syrian Mission, which became first the Lebanon Evangelical Mission and then a constituent of the present-day Middle East Christian Outreach. As the centennial history of the mission records, the mission was founded by a well-to-do British woman at the peak of the 1859 revival in response to Druze atrocities against the Christian community of the Lebanon. For nearly one hundred years the mission was staffed by expatriate women, with local evangelism and schools work being undertaken by male and female converts, so that the evidently-able mission director in the fifties was a woman, as her predecessors had been. But in the 1930s the decision was taken that on Biblical and practical grounds men should be introduced into the mission, with the usual longer-term results for female leadership.

As is to be expected from an academic work, Fiedler's volume is copiously referenced and the footnotes are a mine of information in themselves. Not all the volumes cited in the footnotes are included in the bibliography. The book is also strengthened by the number of very useful chronologies, tables and schematic analyses.

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