

BHR 5:78-80 (2008)

Dan Crawford, *Thinking Black*, and The Challenge of a Missionary Canon

Mark S. Sweetnam

The Journal of Ecclesiastical History, vol. 58 (2007) pp.705-725

I agree with Mark Sweetnam about contemporary postcolonial scholarship. As he rightly says, it tends to stereotype the missionary as 'a two-dimensional metonym for ignorance, repression and hypocrisy' (Sweetnam's words). He appeals to scholars to engage more thoroughly with missionary texts such as Dan Crawford's *Thinking Black*. Only then will they be able to see the missionaries as rounded, historical figures.

Having said this, I am not altogether happy with Sweetnam's portrayal of Dan Crawford's place in the history of mission, nor indeed with his attempt to allocate a special place to the Brethren within the missionary movement as a whole. To deal with the second first: Sweetnam isolates, correctly to my mind, three features of the Brethren missionary movement which the movement itself claims are its distinctives. Firstly there is 'dependence on God', though clearly that is a term which needs defining. Secondly, there is the claim that the missionaries did not take part in 'politics' and were therefore not likely to be overtly 'empire building'. Thirdly, he believes that there was a strong emphasis on cultural literacy: learning the language, adapting to local ways and respecting local leadership.

Almost all the Protestant missionaries, however, aimed at these approaches. Can one imagine a missionary not being in favour of dependence on God, for example? The question is: how did this work out in practice? It is also my impression that virtually all missionaries avoided government if they could. (This is certainly true of India, the field I know best.) They varied in their opinion of the imperial project (Dan Crawford himself was sympathetic to British imperialism) but as far as actually getting involved with government is concerned, they kept as far away as possible, unless conscience dictated otherwise. In point of fact, the early Brethren missionaries in Africa did get involved with 'politics', in the sense that they felt it their duty to

protect their African contacts from the inroads of white colonialism. In this sense you could make out a case that these particular Brethren missionaries, Arnot, Swan, Crawford etc., were more likely to be 'political' than some of their contemporary missionaries from other backgrounds. As for cultural literacy, this was a widespread, indeed near universal, aim among nineteenth-century missionaries and goes right back to William Carey and before him to the Moravian and Pietist missionaries of the eighteenth century.

What then of Dan Crawford? I think we should distinguish between the man and his influence. There is no doubt that Crawford was an exceptional person, indeed an outstanding missionary. There are some wonderful passages in *Thinking Black*, a book still worth reading today. His acceptance that God could speak through dreams in the contemporary African situation and his sheer enjoyment of 'dancing before the Lord' by the African congregation are two wonderful examples of his openness and catholicity. So is the challenge that he throws down to the hegemony of chronological Enlightenment narrative. (There is a great quotation from Tilsley's biography about this.) So is Crawford's delight in the new insights into Scripture provided by African terminology. There are many other examples.

Crawford's exceptionally sympathetic character and his vivid insights are there for all to read in his book. But in terms of the history of mission are we to take him as typical or untypical? Sweetnam would like to have it both ways, but I think the latter is true. Crawford was unique, and his work may not give us 'a most important insight on the outworking of Brethren principles on the mission field'. I have certainly encountered a number of Brethren missionaries, even in our supposedly enlightened times, who seem to be working from different principles than Crawford's! Despite *Thinking Black*, Crawford was just one among many who influenced the movement, and not the most important. Many streams no doubt flowed into a book such as W.E.Vine's *The Divine Plan of Mission*. Certainly to speak of a 'Crawfordian approach' is to go much too far.

Jonathan Ingleby