REVERSE MISSIONS
by Dr. Charles A. Maxfield

I happened to be present when a new denominational executive from back East met with the Dakota Indian pastors of my denomination. The executive gave a speech that went something like this:

> The old days of missionary paternalism are over. We're not going to try to tell you what to do any more. You know best what your churches need. I am here to help you. I want to know how I can help you.

The Indian pastors got into a huddle. After a few minutes the huddle broke up, and a spokesperson for the group said something like this:

> We've decided. We know how you can help us. We want to have a revival. A good revival like in the old days, with an evangelist who will call our people to a commitment to Christ.

I thought I could see the executive's face drop. Perhaps he thought they would come up with something with smoke and feathers, or at least drums. But, without enthusiasm, he did help them set up some revivals.

Do we really want to hear what the people in our former mission churches have to say? They often sound like our grandparents in the faith (add as many "greats" before grandparents as you need), and we are uncomfortable with their piety and language. If we are to hear our partners in the former mission churches, we need to examine our adolescent rebellion against the faith of our grandparents.

In the Nineteenth Century missionaries went out from our churches, which we today call "mainline" but which then were called "evangelical." The missionaries shared their faith. They wanted to share the gospel without imposing our cultural norms. But faith always comes embedded in a cultural expression. The new Christians embraced that faith. Out of love and respect for the messengers who brought them new life in fullness, they often imitated the practices of the missionaries in church life.

This all happened before the West encountered the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy. The evangelical faith of the Nineteenth Century missionaries was not Fundamentalist. It was post-millennial, not pre-millennial, in eschatology. They didn't believe in the "rapture;" they believed in the Kingdom of God. They believed that God was bringing into existence a golden age of peace. And God would use us as the means of doing this. This golden age would be marked first by the spread of the gospel, but also by advances in health, education, and freedom. This was a time when the words *evangelical* and *liberal* were sometimes used as synonyms.

Fundamentalism has had an impact on the church in all parts of the world. But,

more often, our partners from the newer churches are speaking out of this pre-Fundamentalist Evangelicalism.

Because we in mainline Protestantism find much of Fundamentalism to be repulsive, we are uncomfortable with this older Evangelicalism. Have we thrown out the baby with the bath water? Nineteenth Century Evangelicals did place emphasis on a conversion experience. Influenced by revivalism, they could at times use methods of psychological manipulation. But it is still basic to our faith to turn to God and to make a commitment to live for and with Christ.

When I was working on my doctorate, I did give one lecture to the introductory Church History class - the lecture on the Nineteenth Century missionary movement. The students tended to be critical of the missionary movement, citing the "prime directive" of *Star Trek:* to not interfere with the internal development of alien civilizations. The missionaries, of course, had not seen *Star Trek*. They did know the "grand object" of missions: to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. While not setting out to alter culture, they understood that the gospel would lead to changes in the communities they entered. In my lecture I tried to put the missionaries into their historical context, and I thought I was generally sympathetic to the missionaries. After the lecture, one student came up to me, and said, "Why are you so hard on the missionaries? They were good people." The student was from Ghana.

These were close to the same words I heard from a member of the American Indian congregation I served in North Dakota. One of the church board members was constantly criticizing the missionaries. Privately, Martha said to me, "I don't know why C. Is so hard on the missionaries! They were good people." Martha then went on to cite examples of the missionaries getting scholarships for young people to go to college, providing rides to a distant hospital so people could visit their relatives - and many other acts of kindness.

For the most part, the missionaries were good people. They embodied the love of Christ by deed as well as by word. With our parochialism of the present we condemn, using standards that were not theirs.

They weren't perfect. They were often blind to the spiritual gifts of the old religion. They were not sensitive to the extent to which their gospel was embedded in their cultural experience. But the result of their labors is a Christian church - a community of people who turned away from their cultural environment and turned to Christ. Their existence is a challenge to us to do the same.