

Paper Proposal  
36th Annual Meeting, Wesleyan Theological Society

"That They May Be One": The Call to Missions and the Struggle Over Power

Introduction: Brief discussion of the nature of power and its place in society.

- Power comes in many forms and can be expressed in ways both subtle and bold. It is, and always has been, the chief means used by the secular world to define success, regardless of the area of endeavor.

- Power, and the quest for it, permeate every level of human society, from the conflict between the world's largest nations to the spat between siblings. The acquisition of power puts the holder at a distinct advantage, creating the beneficial climate in which the holder's agenda is advanced, his prestige is increased, and his defenses against future reverses are enhanced.

- Power is not merely a secular phenomenon. It is the object of all human desire, the sought-after means by which fallen humans hope to improve their lots in life. As such, power is also an aspect of religious life, one which involves multiple layers of interaction and manifold opportunities to be used both for good and for not-so-good, for furthering the kingdom of God and for impeding its advance.

Body: Discussion of the types of power at play in the missionary enterprise.

- Divine power. Always and everywhere, the ultimate source of power in every Christian endeavor is rightly acknowledged to be Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Indeed, no missionary, no matter how eloquent, sincere or culturally sensitive could lead non-believers to the Truth without the power of that Truth having been made manifest through the Good News of Jesus Christ by way of the Holy Spirit. Every missionary must recognize that s/he can not compel another into genuine conversion -- that power rests with God and with the individual, to whom God has given the gift of free will, a staggering power in its own right. This divine power has granted to each missionary the privilege and opportunity to share the Gospel with others. (Examples of compulsion vs. invitation in history, inc. perhaps the Saxons, the natives of South America.)

- Human power - missionary (In addition to the above-mentioned spiritual power granted by God and to the obvious misuse of every kind of power)

1. The power of the sending culture, which accompanies the missionary when s/he enters a different culture, and which can affect the missionary's ability to tease out the home culture's trappings from the essential Christian message. The missionary must disassociate the two in order to relate to the host culture and find effective ways of communicating the Gospel in terms that are not familiar. This includes recognizing the value of each new culture as being an expression of God's good creation.

2. The power of the sending culture, as exhibited by the missionary, to influence the receiving culture, both in terms of the Christianity being transmitted and in larger, societal ways. This can occur even if the missionary does not

force the acceptance of his/her home culture as part of the Christian "package" simply because it is so difficult to completely dissociate oneself from one's own upbringing. Examples include everything from the adoption of missionary "fashion sense" and the use of European music and Latin liturgical language to the much larger and thornier issues which impinge on local social, cultural and political issues such as polygamy, a caste-based social order, a totalitarian political regime, etc.

3. Concurrent with this power to influence and "conscientize" indigenous peoples comes the missionary's power to EMpower the local populations, to spur them to action in fighting injustice, immorality and cruelty, as well as to encourage the building of a truly indigenous church. The first type of empowerment leads to local resistance and even national legal and political action in the fighting of practices and systems that devalue, denigrate and abuse people. Examples include the opposition to female circumcision, suttee (Hindu widow-burning), foot-binding, child marriage, as well as the establishment of medical and educational programs to benefit the poor and disenfranchised. Liberation theology is another example which often has strong political and economic components dealing with the use and ownership of land and one's own labor. The second type of empowerment revolves around the translation of the Bible into the vernacular, the training and subsequent independent practice of indigenous pastors, who can create and staff a culturally-appropriate style of church hierarchy/management free of missionary authority, and the incorporation of existing religious and cultural elements in this new expression of Christianity.

4. The problem of missionary power as related to identification with colonial or imperial political or economic forces which exercise control over the areas in which the fields are located. This association is truly a two-edged sword: a) the missionary can act and speak to defend and promote the interests of his/her flock by being received as an equal in the power-holder's domain. Of course, these same power-holders can choose to use the missionaries to further their own ends, often without the conscious complicity of the missionaries, who can not or do not grasp the long-term repercussions of short-term "victories," and b) the missionary can come to be so closely associated with the oppressor that s/he forfeits the prophetic voice by which the Church is recognized. Christianity is reduced to an arm of the state and the missionary to its agent. (Unhappily, examples abound in Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas.)

5. The problem of knowing when the missionary must relinquish power to the local church, even if the situation is grim, to allow daughter churches to assume their rightful places as adult members of the international church. This results in the disarming of any paternalistic tendencies and it grants the indigenous churches full dignity. This relates to the missionary problem of powerlessness truly to share in the lives of their flock (comment on accompaniment in Catholic South America), to prevent increased suffering as a result of giving the people a voice and a desire to fight for good, and to fight the flock's battles for them. Too often, missionaries stay too long, enfeebling the local churches and silencing the very voices that they have encouraged.

### Human power - local/indigenous.

1. Due to the free will granted each individual, as well as to the failings of even the most devoted Christian servant, the indigenous peoples to whom missionaries go have the power to reject all or part of the Christian message.

2. If the message is accepted, the new indigenous church has the power to adapt Christianity to meet its own cultural parameters, sometimes going well beyond the missionary's expectations or desires. Certainly, theological boundaries must be established, beyond which adaptation can not go without abandoning Christianity for some new religious system. Yet the missionary and his/her sending church/organization must carefully consider any limitations that they seek to impose on the new Christianity as it emerges. (Don't deny one set of cultural expressions for another.)

3. The indigenous people and culture have the power to change the missionary every bit as much as the missionary has the power to change them. Missionaries often come back from the field with expanded understandings of Christianity, with a new perspective on their home cultures and a new respect and love for their host cultures, etc.

### Case Studies:

1. Methodist missions to colonial United States, especially focusing on African and African-American members and on women. Included will be a glimpse of the ways in which the mission, once an "established" church, failed to meet the needs of these two groups, both of which had responded so enthusiastically to the mission.

2. The rise of AICs (African Independent Churches) out of mission churches that drew converts but failed to sustain them.

### Conclusion:

We must be ever vigilant not to engage in a struggle with God over the power to make converts. We might do well to identify and monitor the human "power-brokers" whose authority can become authoritarianism and whose assistance can become compulsion, crushing the seeker and silencing the called. We must recall, as Wesleyans dedicated to the notion that "they may be one," that God alone is sovereign and that all of God's children are invited to worship Him in their own ways, in their own tongues and with their own leadership. Christ has called us to witness to the world of His Lordship, and not of our own.