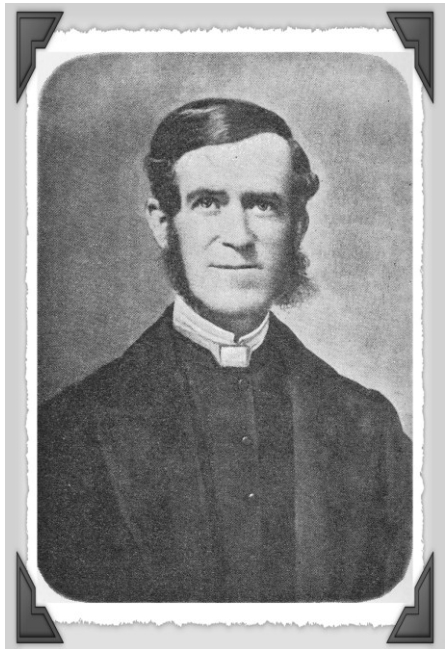


John Geddie and the South Pacific: Timeless Mission Principles

Jack C. Whytock

Prince Edward Island, on the Atlantic coast of Canada, is often referred to, somewhat romantically, as “The Cradle of Missions” in Canada.¹ Unfortunately, while it may be quaintly discussed, little contemporary relevance is found. There was a day, however, when such a title was appropriate. That was during the time of Rev. John Geddie and his contemporaries.

My purpose in this lecture is to use Geddie as the central thread for all which follows while allowing several important missiological matters to be raised in the course of what otherwise might be viewed as a biographical lecture. The study will commence with the theme of the preparation both of the man and of denominational structures for mission. The second aspect of such preparation rarely receives



attention. From here we will proceed to the call of Christ to the islands; then to Geddie’s methods and his perspective on conversion – faith and practice. We will conclude by addressing final applications and contemporary challenges.

¹ I am uncertain who actually first coined this phrase, “The Cradle of Missions”, in reference to Prince Edward Island. The Island is somewhat shaped as a “cradle” in the ocean, and I take “cradle” to mean a place of new life, hence for a new endeavour – foreign missions.

1. The Theme of Preparation: the Man and the Church Family

John Flavel correctly defined providence as comparable to reading Hebrew – it is read backwards (at least from the perspective of a native English speaker reading Hebrew). And so it is with the life of John Geddie. We have the distinct benefit of reviewing his life after the fact, and from this perspective we can see how God prepared the man.

John Geddie was born in Banff, Scotland, in 1815 to parents who served a key role in Geddie's preparation for unusually blessed missionary service. (What a place for our consideration – the home from which God has each gospel worker come.) His parents belonged to the evangelical movement of Scottish Christianity at the beginning of the nineteenth century. His mother came from Secession Presbyterians, the free-offer preachers; and his father was converted through the preaching of the Haldane brothers and was a Congregationalist while in Scotland. Thus, ecclesiastically the Geddie home was decidedly evangelical and spiritually acquainted with God's work of revival. We also know that his father, a clockmaker, was a man of reliability and conscience concerning his debts. He was led to emigrate to Nova Scotia partly because of poverty. Thus John Geddie was only one year old when he came to Nova Scotia with his parents. Many feared that the small lad would not live. (Even as an adult, John was only 5 feet tall.) Yet he survived the journey, and his parents dedicated him to the Lord's service at this early age.

The family went to Pictou, Nova Scotia, in 1816 where they quickly became involved with one of British North America's leading evangelical Presbyterian ministers, Rev. Thomas McCulloch. The following year proved to be significant in Nova Scotia as the two Secession branches, popularly known as Burghers and Antiburghers, united into one church, the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia. It was a thoroughly evangelical body, which had overcome some of the ecclesiastical squabbles of the past. It proved to be a rich environment spiritually for the Geddies. John's father became an elder and a leader in the mid-week prayer meeting. He also kept abreast of foreign missions conducted by the London Missionary Society (LMS), in which the Seceders in Scotland were also active. He shared letters with his family from LMS missionaries to the South Sea Islands about the gospel work there. (What an example for fathers – going to prayer meetings, praying, reading to their children, filling their souls with a passion for Christ and missions!)

Pictou was blessed with one of the best dissenting academies in Nova Scotia. Students were sent there from across the region and even

from the Caribbean to sit under the “headmaster”, Thomas McCulloch. John Geddie took his education there, following a classical arts and sciences curriculum carefully modeled upon the University of Glasgow, McCulloch’s *alma mater*. Then, at age nineteen, he commenced his theological studies in the Theological Hall of the Pictou Academy. McCulloch, the sole professor, not only taught theology but was also the conduit of information for the missions literature he received from his “agent” in Scotland, Rev. John Mitchell. While in the theological hall, Geddie formed The Students’ Missionary Prayer Meeting, although he was the youngest student there. At an early age he possessed an unusual vision and zeal, and by the age of twenty the marks of spiritual preparation for his life’s calling were already evident.



Combined with this was the training received through the help he gave his father making clocks in Pictou. We will see the importance of this later – sound learning and solid spirituality combined with a wonderful practicality in his upbringing and his approach to life. The development of all these traits was preparing him for his future ministry.

John Geddie was licensed in 1837 at age twenty-two and spent the next twelve months supplying vacant pulpits while continuing to help his father. In 1838 he was called to Prince Edward Island to New London and Cavendish. Almost immediately he began a missionary prayer society in these congregations, and he started collecting money to be sent to the London Missionary Society. I believe this young

preacher may have been mentored by an elderly retired minister in his congregation, Rev. Pidgeon, who many years earlier had been sent to the isolated villages of Prince Edward Island as an LMS missionary. So often, when we look back, we can see that God has put us alongside the right encouragers! I believe this is exactly what happened in New London for this young minister.

Next came a wider influence, reaching out to other Island churches, as he began prayer meetings and received collections for missions. These were novel ideas in the villages, but he received the support of his ministerial colleague down the road in Princetown (Malpeque), Rev. John Keir. In 1840 these Island churches jointly collected over £17 and sent it to the LMS. Then Geddie went a step further – he appealed to the Presbyterian Church of Nova Scotia to start her own foreign mission work. This idea was viewed with much suspicion. After all, how could just thirty-five congregations embark on such a plan! Only the Moravians, it was said, had ever undertaken such a thing. In essence, the church courts “smiled” at his proposal. Nonetheless, Geddie was planting the seeds, and in 1843 the idea of a foreign mission of the thirty-five churches was put forward at the Synod by Geddie’s ministerial neighbour. The Synod sent the proposal down to the three presbyteries for their consideration and asked them to report back the next year. In 1844 only the PEI Presbytery sent back a positive report, including a full document explaining why. (I suspect it was composed by Geddie and Keir.) I quote it here in part:

The motives which impel to action...are numerous and weighty. The glory of God calls us to it. The command of God calls us to it. The reproaches of those who have gone down to perdition unwarned calls [call?] us to it. And last, not least, the spiritual deadness that prevails among our Churches, which is, perhaps, a judicial retribution for the indifference, which we have so long shown to the spread of the Gospel, calls us to it....²

The motion was put before the Synod of 1844, and it passed twenty to fourteen. A Board was appointed, and immediately work was begun

² R. S. Miller, *Misi Gete, John Geddie: Pioneer Missionary to the New Hebrides* (Tasmania, Australia: The Presbyterian Church of Tasmania, 1975), 14. I have inserted several direct quotations into this lecture from Miller’s book, which is chiefly a primary source document of Geddie’s journal and the best book available on Geddie’s missionary vision and work.

by corresponding with missionary societies to obtain information in order to find a field of service. The 1845 Synod heard that the Board was ready to proceed to “select a field, and negotiate with candidates,” and the vote this time was thirteen to twelve. Later that year, the South Pacific was decided upon as the field of service, specifically the islands of New Caledonia. Next a missionary was sought. As none was forthcoming, John Geddie offered himself together with his wife, Charlotte. His congregation at first refused to release him, no doubt in part being convinced of the fool-heartedness of the location! It took two meetings before they would agree to let him go.

After his resignation, Geddie commenced an interim period of training – one not set up by a missionary training institute but by himself. He obtained an old printer and learned typesetting by printing a sermon, “The Universal Diffusion of the Gospel”, taken from Revelation 14:6. This was widely distributed. No doubt Geddie learned both how to be a printer and how to educate folks about gospel work! (Quite ingenious, I think. You need printing/typesetting skills for the field – learn them before you go.) Next, he studied medicine for several months for reasons he himself explained:

A knowledge of medicine is valuable to missionaries, not only on their own account and that of their families; if judiciously employed, it may be the means of gaining them favour in the eyes of the nations. If I can be instrumental in doing good to their bodies, I know nothing more likely to open up a way of access to their souls, and furnish an opportunity of recommending to them that Divine Physician, who alone can heal the soul from the malady of sin.³

His next practical training was to learn about house construction and boat building. It would all be necessary, as he would not be able to take a team of labourers with him. Often when the LMS sent a team to a place, such as to the South Seas, they included not only ministers but also a carpenter or a bricklayer. Thus Geddie was preparing himself somewhat in the style of an LMS team. His preparations reflected a careful sensitivity to the needs of the future mission on the South Sea Islands.

Now his youthful reading of geography and missionary life in the South Pacific was being shown to have had a remarkable purpose – the preparation of a missionary. But in July of 1846 the final test came

³ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 16.

when the Synod met to formally recognize his appointment. The debate was intense. Finally when the vote was taken, only two voted against it. Years later one of the ministers who voted against it confessed on his deathbed that this was one of the great errors of his life, and he requested that such word be sent to Mr. and Mrs. Geddie! (We do not always have complete unanimity within the Church, and these trials from quarters where we least expect them can be our greatest burden to bear. How difficult it is for Christians to admit the wrong decisions they have made. We can only applaud this man's confession.)

The final step was to secure a ship's passage to the South Pacific for himself, his wife and his two young daughters. We find a striking and revealing feature in the final farewell services in Halifax, Nova Scotia. In addition to one of the Synod ministers, there was also a leading Baptist and a leading Wesleyan Methodist minister speaking. Thus, the sending forth of the Geddies was a matter of interest not only for the Presbyterians, but also for other evangelicals across the Maritimes. As they set sail on November 30, 1846, Geddie's parting comments were:

In accord with the Redeemer's command and assured of His presence, we are going forth to those lands where Satan has established his dark domain. I know that suffering awaits me. But to bear the Redeemer's yoke is an honour to one who has felt the Redeemer's love.⁴

With such realism, only the love of Christ could offer sufficient motivation to go forth!

The trip seemed to go on forever! First they traveled to Boston and from there had time to visit New York and New Jersey. Wherever John Geddie went, he stirred up folks for the call of missions. He met with different mission boards, the Senate of Princeton Seminary and various preachers. His last North American service was in Newburyport, Massachusetts, where he preached from the pulpit built over the bones of George Whitefield. Finally they boarded a whaling boat, departing from Newburyport on January 28, 1847, having to cut through the harbour ice while leaving. Whaling ships were certainly not noted for their pious atmosphere; yet, undeterred, Geddie held Sunday services, began a Bible class and taught the uneducated cook to read and write.

⁴ Eugene Myers Harrison, "John Geddie, 1815-1872, Messenger of the Love of Christ in Eastern Melanesia," p. 2, <http://www.wholesomewords.org/missions/biogeddie.html> (September, 2005).

What a man for redeeming the time, ever the ambassador of Christ Jesus!

The ship did not reach Cape Horn until April 23rd and did not manage to clear the Cape until May 13th! From there the Geddies made it to the Sandwich Islands, where they spent seven weeks. These weeks proved to be another segment of the training course in Geddie's preparation. He delivered letters to the missionaries there, tasted of their hospitality, met with the natives and observed the state of their new-found faith.⁵

There was one final element yet to be added to his "training course" before reaching the final destination. This was gained in going to Samoa. Here his general learning and language studies intensified, as Samoa had a resident LMS missionary, Rev. A. W. Murray (Geddie had read Rev. Murray's reports while living on Prince Edward Island!), and a LMS medical missionary, Dr. Bullen, with whom Geddie stayed and from whom he learned much about tropical diseases. Within five months Geddie was preaching in Samoan. Thus these few months on Samoa proved invaluable. In addition, a "Conference" of missionaries was organized where they discussed the best place for the Geddies to begin working in the South Pacific. A wonderful harmony between the senior LMS missionaries and the church missionary, Geddie, prevailed in determining the best way forward. A good arrangement was settled upon whereby the Geddies would labour with the LMS missionaries in commencing a mission on the islands of the New Hebrides.⁶

While in Samoa Geddie undertook some printing and bookbinding for the LMS, and at the same time he trained a Samoan believer to use the press after his departure. It is an encouragement to read of the unity, cooperation and love amongst these believers. I wonder how we fare in comparison today?

The relationship of John Geddie to the church he pastored and to his Hebridean LMS connections raises several significant missiological questions concerning the work of the missionary societies in conjunction with denominational missions. First, was it not really the missionary societies, some denominational and some not, who were at the forefront of the modern missionary movement? Yes. Was there not a very close, cooperative understanding amongst many Bible-believing Protestants of the time? Yes. We should be careful, then, to give credit where credit is due and not ignore much of the truth of this aspect of missions. Today some church historians and Christian leaders

⁵ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 25.

⁶ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 26.

completely ignore the real history of the role of the missionary societies in missions in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Instead, a quick dismissal is made of “para-church” groups. To do this is to ignore the obvious historical contributions of previous generations.

Second, as this particular mission developed, it became more denominationally controlled; however, this appears to me not to have been by conscious effort. In fact, it would appear that the transfer of control was a non-issue. Furthermore, the Church was essentially “brow-beaten” into its task of missionary effort because of the Society inspired work. I believe the position of John Geddie supports my thesis that the societies pressed the Church to move forward. In addition, I fail to find any clear articulation of attack on the London Missionary Society or its work by any of the great names associated with the South Pacific Mission in its time – names like Geddie, Inglis and Paton.

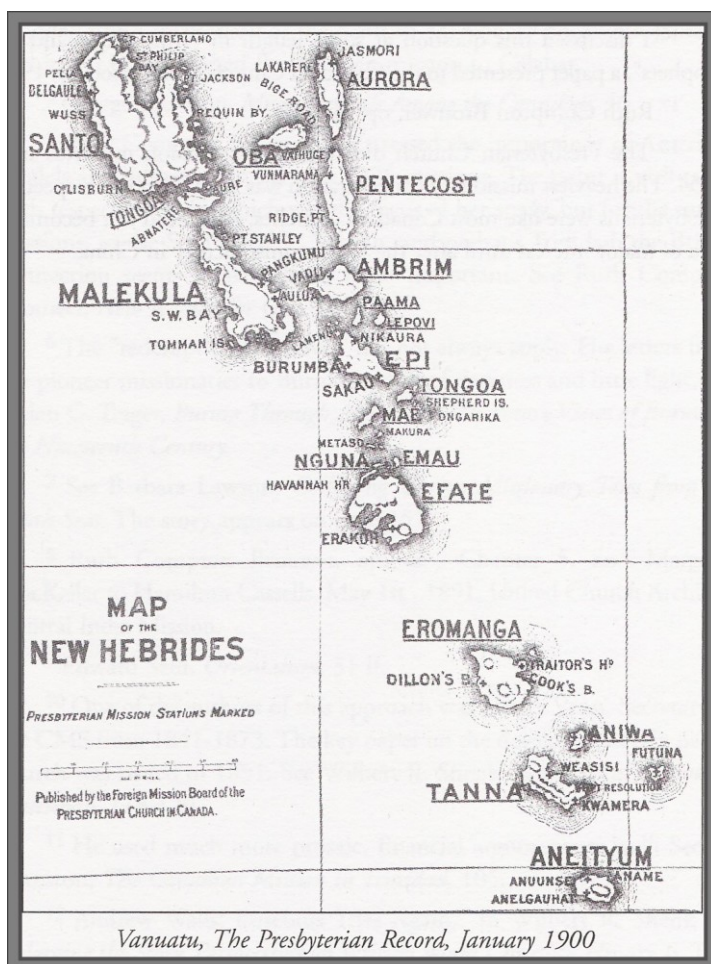
2. The Call to Christ and the Islands

I now want to present a picture of life on the South Pacific Islands in 1848 at the time when John Geddie commenced his labours there. We will then examine universal principles in mission work and church life which I believe this picture forces us to consider.

Geography

The region of the South Pacific to which Geddie went has been called by various names – South Pacific Islands, Oceania, Pacific Islands, Polynesia, etc. It consists of 1,500 islands. These can be divided into three main groupings: Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia. This lecture *technically* concerns the Melanesian group of islands. These are north of Australia and include the island groups of Fiji, Santa Cruz, New Guinea, New Hebrides (Vanuatu), New Caledonia and the Solomon Islands. These islands range in size from New Guinea, the second largest ocean island in the world, to the very small rock islands which may not be inhabited year-around. The islands are populated by a vast array of tribes. Captain James Cook’s written reports about the discovery of many of these islands stimulated evangelical Protestants in Britain in the 1790s to seriously consider evangelization there. This specifically led to the formation of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in 1795, whose stated purpose was to evangelize Tahiti “or some other of the islands of the South Sea”. I want to emphasize this point because John Geddie and John Paton were not the first missionaries to these islands; rather they built upon soil tilled by the LMS.

⁵ What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe--as the Lord has assigned to each his task. ⁶ I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. (1 Cor. 3:5-9, NIV)



The Morality of Tribal Life

Christianity came into conflict with numerous aspects of tribal custom and religion. One conflict was in regard to the wives and young children of a deceased husband/father. Women lived in degradation among the heathen as well as in superstition and false spirituality concerning the after life.

If the husband died before his wife, the “wife was immediately strangled to death so that her spirit might accompany his to the next world, and any children too young to take care of themselves suffered the same fate as the mother. If there was a grown son, he was expected to perform the act of strangulations.”⁷

Let me illustrate by a story from May, 1852. John Geddie was on another island preaching while his wife, Charlotte, had remained behind on their island, Aneityum. A father on Aneityum, whose son and daughter had recently become Christians, had died. They feared for the life of their mother, a non-believer, so they got other Christians to help them save her.

The woman was adamant that she should die and protecting her meant taking her bodily from her first refuge and depositing her in another. She escaped from that one as well and the Christians surrounded her in her new refuge until her husband’s body had been, as was the custom, buried in the sea, and she was out of danger. [The woman later challenged Mrs. Geddie:] “Why did you save my life and not let me be strangled when my husband died? Who is to provide for me and this child?” Mrs. G[eddie] told her she was strong and able to work....⁸

The woman eventually became a Christian and repeatedly thanked Mrs. Geddie for saving her life.

Cannibalism proved to be another tribal custom practiced on most of these South Pacific Islands. This was not just the execution and eating of white foreigners; it occurred as well within the tribes and between tribes.

The natives confessed that they considered human flesh the most savoury of foods. It was considered proper to eat all the

⁷ Harrison, “John Geddie,” 4.

⁸ Geoffrey Johnston, *Missionaries for the Record* (Belleville, ON: Guardian books, 2005), 31-32.

enemies killed or taken in war. It was a common occurrence for chiefs to kill some of their own subjects to provide a cannibal feast, if the bodies of enemies were not readily obtainable. The missionary [Geddie] knew a man who killed and ate his own child!”⁹

John Geddie tells of Yakanui, a chief on Aneityum who was known as the greatest cannibal on the island, coming to visit him. This chief had killed and eaten many of the children in his district, to such an extent that there were few left. Yet he was attracted to Geddie. He was subdued, a fear came over him and the school established by Geddie in his district continued on. It was said the people were able to sleep again at night.¹⁰

Others gave their lives before cannibalism was extinguished. Among these were three who answered Geddie’s pleas for more missionaries to help him in the labour there. These three went forth from Prince Edward Island – Rev. and Mrs. George N. Gordon, and later Rev. Gordon’s brother, Rev. James D. Gordon – and all three were murdered by the cannibals. The blood of the martyrs marked the advancement of the gospel! A few short years later, those same murderers surrounded the mission house to protect the next missionaries from Nova Scotia, the Robertsons, because they were to be likewise murdered by other tribal members. What a transformation – from cannibal murderers to Christian protectors!¹¹

Sexual customs and practices among the darkened heathen on the South Pacific Islands were very degraded and corrupt, as Geddie and others discovered. There was almost no sexual moral code. One place this was reflected was in the inability of the missionaries doing translation work to even find a word for adultery in translating the seventh commandment. Their customs included such things as men and women, boys and girls bathing together naked and with all kinds of fondling practices; men sleeping with any woman whenever they pleased; and when a man was sick, his wife sleeping with his brother.¹² The reality of unfaithfulness being so rooted in the culture and not being viewed as sin posed great difficulty in the Church. Celibacy of single workers was a concept mocked and not understandable to the

⁹ Harrison, “John Geddie,” 4.

¹⁰ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 193; Harrison, “John Geddie,” 6.

¹¹ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 249.

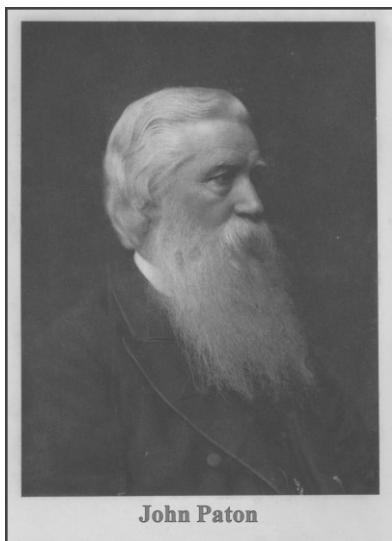
¹² Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 220.

natives. Unless one sees Jesus as Lord of sexuality, the lord will be pleasure, not God.

And here we see a universal principle in missions addressed in Acts 15:20, “Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood.” This surely settles the matter. In the first century, as Gentiles were converted and brought into the church, sexual immorality in their culture was addressed and forsaken, for they were now a new people called to holiness. This is not a new issue. Acts 15:20 was about mission work in the first century, Geddie’s work in the New Hebrides in 1848-1872 was about mission work, my labour in Canada is about mission work and your labour wherever you may be is about mission work. That work must also teach and set the Council of Jerusalem decision before all converted people.

3. Geddie’s Methods

John Geddie developed a plan whereby Aneityum would be his base island, which it proved to be from his arrival at the end of July, 1848, until the time of his death in 1872. First he needed more help. He sent letters to the Presbyterians in Nova Scotia and in Scotland to send out helpers. Likewise, he sent letters to the LMS asking for their assistance.



John Paton

Slowly more workers arrived. The first of these was John Inglis, who joined Geddie from Scotland in 1852, followed by John Paton in 1858, who also responded to Geddie’s pleas.

In Geddie’s strategy for his work, we note several key factors. First, he was diligent in the evangelization of his island, Aneityum. He did this in part by frequent tours around the island, itinerating both to have personal conversations with the natives and their chiefs and to preach. These itinerate tours often put him in danger from spears, clubs and stones; he was hurt several times, but he persevered.

Another integral part of his evangelization strategy was the development of schools around the island. It was essential to teach the natives to read to enable Bible translation to be of value. Upon his

arrival Geddie had immediately set to work to master the native language and reduce it to writing; by December, 1849, he was able to report:

An elementary book has lately been issued from our Mission press. The book numbers twelve pages, and about 2,000 copies have been struck off. I have expended much time and care on this little book, and it has been subjected to so many revisions of my native pundits, that I hope no material errors will be found in it. In this little book I have inserted some thoughts on the following subjects: – God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, Angels, Adam and Eve and the Fall, Sin, Salvation by Jesus Christ alone, Death and Eternity. The printing of this little book has given a fresh impulse to our scholars, and all are anxiously pressing on, that they may soon be able to read it.¹³

Geddie also formed communicants' classes which allowed him to give in-depth training on a more intimate level. Note his journal entry for 14 February, 1854, six years after landing on Aneityum:

Met today with candidates for admission into the church. Made arrangements to meet weekly. Nohoat [a chief] and Nimtiwan [an old warrior] are among them. I trust that both these men are influenced by love to Christ in their desire to profess him. Their outward conduct, so far as I know, is good, but God only can judge the heart. I fear to admit any who would bring dishonour on Christ and his cause, and yet I fear to keep the children's bread [Lord's Supper] from any of X's people. May I enjoy divine guidance in all things relating to the Saviour's cause.¹⁴

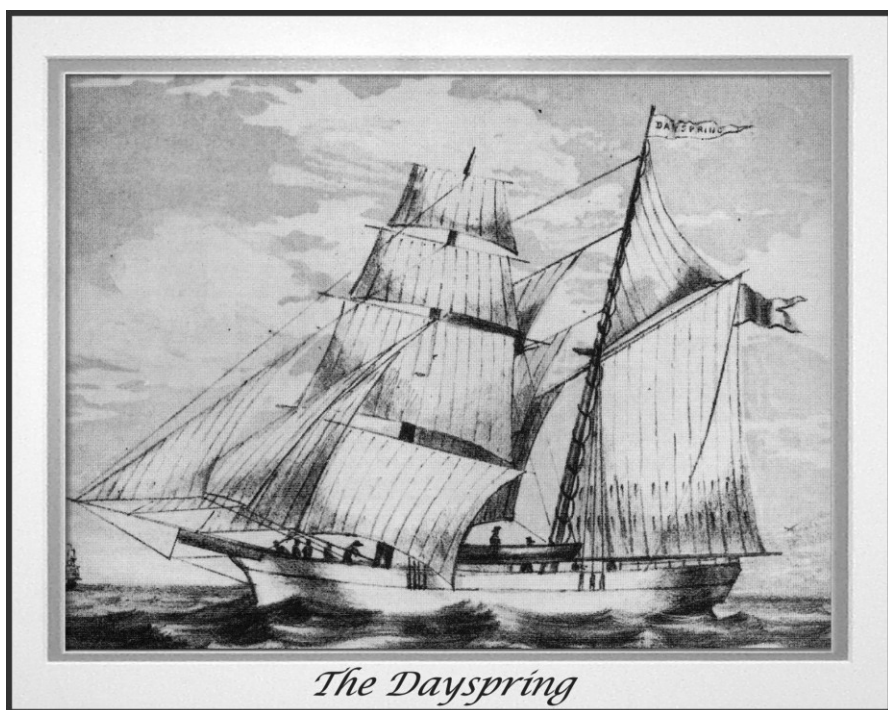
The schools and classes were for both children and adults. Generally Geddie found the women and boys the best students. These schools were initially led by lay-teachers (in addition to Mrs. Geddie) who were from other South Pacific Islands and had been trained by LMS workers. The lay-teachers were Polynesian but from different tribal groups from those on Aneityum. Therefore, although they did not know the language, they had a closer cultural identification with the natives. This

¹³ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 62-63.

¹⁴ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 176-177.

employment of other native teachers, and later missionaries, allowed larger areas to be reached and the single missionary, Geddie, to carry on and oversee a far more effective ministry. However, from Geddie's perspective, this was to be a temporary measure. He was grateful to have other natives from neighbouring islands labouring here, but his goal was to see the island natives raised up and trained as teachers and ministers to their own people.

As the work advanced on Aneityum, Geddie moved forward in his



The Dayspring

missionary strategy and began going to adjacent islands. However, transportation often proved difficult, as the mission initially had to rely upon the LMS boat, the *John Williams*. Again, he would leave native lay-teachers to commence schools and Sunday services in the new places. This was like a bulwark of evangelistic beginnings. Eventually Geddie was able to secure a ship – the *Dayspring*, built primarily by money raised by Sunday Schools and sent out in 1863 from Nova Scotia. The vessel indeed provided a tremendous aid for this mission in the New Hebrides.

These native workers likewise needed on-going training, and this, too, was Geddie's work. He would have them give a short message at

services/meetings and give feed-back. We find an illustration from his journal entry of Feb. 13th, 1854.

Spent this day in visiting some of the outstations. Went first to Iteg, and examined the school. The attendance was good and the natives seem to improve. Went next to Imkalau where many of the people are still heathen. Nohoat, Topoe, Nimitiwan and other natives were with me. It was some time before we could collect the people. Those who did not wish to see us hid themselves in the bush. Some of them were discovered by our party who went in search of them and were persuaded to come & listen. One man was spied out on a tree.

Nohoat almost lost his patience when speaking to these people, said if it were not forbidden, he and his brother chiefs would punish them for adhering to their heathenism, his address was good in other respects. Topoe and Nimitiwan spoke much to the same effect. The addresses of Topoe are always good, for there is so much of Christ in them. I said a few words also and told the people that I hoped soon to visit them again.¹⁵

These native teachers also began to model the Christian life to the natives, which in itself was critical to the advance of the gospel among the heathen on these islands.

Bible translation work was another very important facet of John Geddie's missionary work, as was the printing of hymns and catechetical materials for instruction. As early as Nov. 16th, 1848, Geddie could report:

For some days past I have been engaged in putting our printing press in order. I have already struck off some copies of our first hymn in this language, which the poetical genius of Mr. Powell [LMS fellow missionary] has furnished; two others are in the press...I expect next week to strike off some sheets of alphabets, syllables and words for our schools. The teachers at the several out-stations are waiting anxiously for these, that they may commence their work of teaching."¹⁶

¹⁵ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 176

¹⁶ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 42-43.

By the end of the first year, Geddie's work on a catechism in the native language was far advanced and translation of Scripture had commenced.

Before leaving Geddie's methods, it should be said that he was a man who took great care to nourish himself spiritually while abundantly busy feeding others. I believe this needs to be underscored as critical to Geddie's approach. True, his reading often had the additional benefit of helping the natives, but blessings are usually two-fold. In perusing his "Journal", one finds constant reference to his meditative reading:

Feb. 8th

The reading of a precious tract this evening and translating the closing verses of Matt. xi suggested some precious and profitable thoughts. May not this be a device of Satan to alienate my heart from invitations to come to him. I will take him at his word, and venture my all on him. None ever yet perished who touched the scepter which he holds out to sinners.¹⁷

Feb. 12th

Finished reading the life of Felix Neff today. I feel humbled when I compare my labours in the Redeemers cause with that of other men. Had the Aneiteumese a Neff what a great work might have been done among them. I cannot suppress the thought at times that I am occupying a place that might be far better filled by others. As far as I know my own heart I love the missionary work and would not be happy out of it, but it is far too honourable, too spiritual, too heavenly for me. I think however that I am in the way of duty, and I will labour according to my ability and leave the result to God. The Master whom I serve can accomplish his own gracious purposes by the humblest means.¹⁸

4. Geddie's Perspective on Conversion: Faith and Practice

The first year or two of ministry was very slow. At the main station where the Geddies lived, the average Sunday attendance the first year was ten, mainly women and children! The second year the average attendance rose to forty-five, and the third year the average was eighty.

¹⁷ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 175.

¹⁸ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 175-176.

The fact needs to be borne in mind that these records are of the main or central station. There were other outlying stations that were developing as Geddie ministered.

We can see through the following statements that Geddie was far from despondent: “Though our trials have been great, yet our progress as compared with that of other missions has been encouraging, and we see much in the past history of the work to awaken thankfulness to God whom we serve.”¹⁹ And again:

...The attendance for the last five or six weeks has been about eighty. Should things progress in the same ratio, there is reason to anticipate a brighter day for this island, at no distant period. Many of the natives have abandoned their superstitions, and are now earnestly enquiring what they must do to be saved...

The little party who have abandoned their superstitions are objects of deep interest, and awaken our most anxious solicitude. How very peculiar and perilous is their situation! They have not yet any portion of God’s word in their own language, and on verbal instructions, communicated very imperfectly to them, they are entirely dependent for their knowledge of saving truth. May Israel’s Shepherd feed them and keep them!²⁰

Geddie began to have some applications for baptism, and this also brought him great encouragement. Rather than immediately proceeding, he first consulted the missionaries of the London Missionary Society for their opinion. Geddie was recognizing the role of the LMS in this region and believed that, “as Salvation does not depend on baptism delay in my peculiar circumstances may be the best course”.²¹ A delegation of LMS missionaries did arrive and fully confirmed Geddie’s judgment that these candidates for baptism should be baptized. How wonderful to see such a testimony of labouring together!

In reading the record of Geddie’s first four years of missionary ministry, one is led to conclude that this was very much a preparative period of ministry. Geddie was faithfully labouring and carefully establishing what constituted true Christian belief and ethic. In

¹⁹ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 75.

²⁰ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 75.

²¹ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 89.

addition, it was not just the natives that needed the gospel; it was also sorely needed by the white traders. In Geddie's words: "The awful depravity of the traders among these islands must be witnessed to be known. Their wickedness is one of the greatest barriers to the extension of the gospel on this island. *The licentiousness of the natives is less than that of our own countrymen*"²² (italics mine). There was no doubt in Geddie's mind that these traders were a source of great discouragement. They engaged in promiscuous sexual relations with the native women, were often drunk, cheated people of sandalwood and tricked young boys into traveling with them, often never to return.

Missionaries are hated by most of [the?] white men who frequent these islands. The grounds of this dislike are our exposures of their licentious and abominable practices. But He who is for us is greater than those who are against us. The cause of Christ will triumph at last notwithstanding all the efforts that are made by the heathen and our own countrymen to arrest its progress. It is sad to think that men from Christian lands should be among its worst opposers.²³

Allow me to make a contemporary application. Western business or secular aid workers labouring in a nation alongside of western missionaries often represent two totally opposite worldviews and lifestyles. At times this can become confusing to the nationals.

Today conversion is "taboo" in most historical assessments of nineteenth century missions.²⁴ The new interpretation revolves around seeing the "natives" as moving from polytheism to monotheism. This is true, but it fails to deal with heart and moral transformation. Slowly Geddie's mission turned into a large-scale "people movement", and it is exactly with this for which much of modern scholarship has little sympathy. An awakening amongst a large group of people is viewed as a shift in theistic belief. I see no evidence from Geddie or in this people movement that developed in Vanuatu that this was anything other than a general spiritual awakening. Geddie and others describe it as "the working of the Lord".

²² Miller, *Misi Gete*, 89.

²³ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 67.

²⁴ Those interested in this theme of conversion in mission, both individual and people group, should read the recent interview article on Andrew Walls which is included in the Select Bibliography on page 50 at the end of my article "From 'Out of Africa' – a Global Christian Perspective".

Geddie's message clearly gave prominence to vital gospel truths: sin and grace, the Fall, God's love, the atonement, the work of the Holy Spirit, the necessity of a new heart, the doctrine of salvation and the necessity of a holy life.²⁵ In Geddie's message and ministry there was a unity between faith and practice. (See page 63 and my comments on sexual teaching.) It was not legalistic, but balanced. It was also a ministry which discerned that western, white worldviews were not entirely representative of Christianity.

V. Lessons to Learn From

- The Lord raises up key individuals as leaders to awaken the Church to her great missionary mandate. They challenge the excuses and theology that cause others to fail to take up this mandate. They have a vision in their hearts for the fields of this world and are prepared to persevere amidst the ridicule of the Christian community. They are prepared to work patiently to stir the Church to her calling. We need young leaders to be raised up once again with such a passion. Let us pray.
- Missionary team conflict is not a modern problem; it is an old problem. One must not gloss over the missionary team conflicts which arose in the South Pacific. We must not just read biographies and autobiographies without probing and asking some difficult questions. I have yet to find any evidence that Geddie ever used "gunpowder" or guns to advance his ministry. Geddie and John Paton, however, did have some serious words about this issue. There is a growing opinion that Paton may have been less than judicious in some of his methods. The first man in print may not have all the answers. We need to consider carefully the methods of all the "greats" of the missionary enterprise of the nineteenth century and be prepared to drop our romanticizing. For all of this, Geddie sets before us the humble, catholic spirit – more easily identified than emulated.
- All too often the employment of native lay-teachers has been underestimated in missionary methods. Geddie's use of these native lay-teachers was critical to the advancement of the gospel in the South Pacific. They were the "bridge-head" for John and Margaret Paton on Tanna. Sometimes our desire to assess everything by our modern structures as superimposed upon

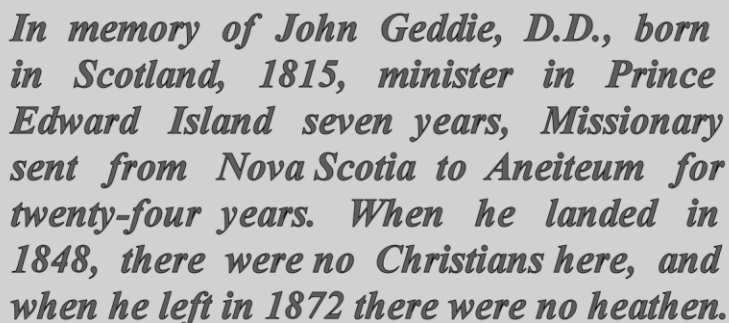
²⁵ Miller, *Misi Gete*, 337.

historical missions fails to give prominence to structural methods which must be recognized and commended, even if they do not quite fit *our* neatly packaged structures.

- I will not re-summarize here the prominence which Geddie gave to vital gospel truths. This is not always easy to achieve, but I sense that Geddie concentrated on the prominent gospel themes. I see no indication that he attempted to add to the gospel.
- Geddie never became a world-wide missionary statesman like John Paton. He lived much more “in the shadows”. Each has his place in the history of Christianity. One is a foot, the other the mouth. I sense that John and Charlotte Geddie, pioneer missionaries, have been forgotten by the wider Church. They can teach us so much.
- John Geddie represents a missionary who bridged the “divide” between the great missionary societies and the Church emerging out of her slumber. Failure to recognize the tremendous role played by these societies is to be less than accurate with the story of modern missions. The Lord works in wondrous ways His will to perform.
- I am ever amazed how an individual has a country or location placed upon his heart and it becomes his singular burden. This happened with Geddie while he was on Prince Edward Island when he read of Rev. A. W. Murray’s visit to Aneityum. And so began a burden for that island while Geddie lived on an island literally on the other side of the world. I still believe in the call of God and the burdened heart. I realize it may be out of fashion to say such today.
- There is something about Geddie’s character and personality which one finds coming through continually. Some would call it love, but I think it is much more than that. There was a manner toward people which often disarmed those to whom he ministered, a humility in his manner towards the natives which they sensed. He possessed a “common sense” towards people and ministry. There was a fire and a passion for people in his whole carriage. Church planting and missionary endeavour always work through real people. God does use personality, and

some individuals have that evangelical, bridge-building manner which is used in kingdom extension.

This short study of John Geddie is more than a biography of a missionary. Principles in mission, church planting and kingdom work can be found as we examine his life, and from such we can all learn and benefit wherever we are called to labour around the world in our day.



In memory of John Geddie, D.D., born in Scotland, 1815, minister in Prince Edward Island seven years, Missionary sent from Nova Scotia to Aneiteum for twenty-four years. When he landed in 1848, there were no Christians here, and when he left in 1872 there were no heathen.

A tablet behind Geddie's pulpit in the church in Anelcauhat, Vanuatu, and also on the church wall in New London, Prince Edward Island.

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