

The Contribution of Henry Venn to Mission Thought

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Background Perspective

To appreciate Henry Venn's contribution to mission thought and practice we must first get perspective on the period in which he lived. Venn was born 10 February 1796 and died 13 January 1873. He spent virtually his entire life in close association with the missionary movement. His father presided at the organizing meeting of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) in 1799 and Venn himself served as Honorary Clerical Secretary of the CMS 1841–1872. The title 'honorary clerical secretary' might suggest Venn played only a minor part. In fact, early in his tenure as a secretary, he moved to center of stage and continued to occupy a commanding position the rest of his life.

By 1850 the 'science of missions' had not yet been developed. Some mission leaders had been urging that a more studied and orderly approach to mission questions was needed. For example, in a rambling introduction to William Swan's *Letters on Missions* published in 1830, William Orme observed 'it is surprising that some work on what might be called the philosophy of missions, has not yet appeared.' By 'philosophy of missions' Orme meant 'a condensed view of the knowledge and experience which have been acquired during the last thirty or forty years'.¹ He proposed further that such a survey ought to treat of the most productive fields, effective methods, proper mission organization, missionary training and preparation, and patterns of mission organization in the field.

It is worth noting that what Orme felt was needed was a manual on the conduct of missions, not a theology of mission. The terms which had gained currency during this period were philosophy of missions, theory of missions, and, after 1860, science of missions. Lack of agreement as to the term to be used and its meaning may stem in part from the fact that in English no single word or phrase conveys precisely what *Missionswissenschaft* in German or *missiologie* in French do. What was intended was the formal study of missions.² Eventually, 'science of missions' came to mean the process by which principles and

policies for the conduct of missionary work were identified and elaborated. In the United States the term 'philosophy of missions' gained favour rather than 'science of missions'.³

In the whole of Kenneth Scott Latourette's seven-volume *History of the Expansion of Christianity* the word 'theology' appears only two or three times and never in relation to the theological basis for the prosecution of the Christian faith. R. Pierce Beaver has characterized the seventeenth century understanding of mission as being simple and straightforward: 'Christians for the sake of the glory of God and out of compassion for wretched, perishing heathen neighbours were doing God's work in giving the saving gospel to these neighbours'.⁴ The question was not one of *what* but *how*. During the following century theories of mission began to evolve, but no one presented a systematic and comprehensive treatment of mission theory.

Rufus Anderson (1796–1880), senior secretary of the American Board of Commissions for Foreign Missions, preached a sermon in 1845 entitled, 'The Theory of Missions to the Heathen'.⁵ Anderson's major book, *Foreign Missions*, published after he retired from the secretariat, presents his philosophy, rather than theology of missions.⁶

This failure to develop the formal study of missions may appear puzzling. Certainly it was not due to a paucity of materials. Missions had generated an abundance of reports, correspondence, and official documents. Some missionary writings such as David Brainerd's *Journal* became popular devotional literature. This not only enhanced the image of the missionary as a person of exemplary piety and spiritual discipline but also defined motives for mission. In spite of the availability of such materials, no formal theology of mission or theory of mission had been produced even though Protestants had been engaged in missionary activity since the seventeenth century.

One reason for this failure to develop formal study of missions was the attitude of the academics toward missions. Henry Venn was a long-standing critic of the university because of the less than congenial reception missions received there. In 1868 on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the Cambridge Church Missionary Association, Venn recalled the first stirrings of support for missions at Cambridge. The coterie of missions supporters raised the first subscriptions in 1813, the year William Wilberforce won his struggle in Parliament to open India to missionary work but they did not form the Association until 1817. Venn notes with pride that his name was among those freshmen who subscribed in 1813. During this time two New Zealand Maoris lived in Cambridge while Samuel Lee reduced their language to writing. 'Hence was', comments Venn, 'in one sense, "Missionary efforts" of a noble kind *in the University*; but, like a plant in an uncongenial soil, it struck no roots and soon withered'.⁷ Missionary spirit was feeble during this period.

Venn saw the problem as one of misplaced priorities and wrong values. On various occasions, even within the CMS itself, Venn heard remarks such as 'A man of so many accomplishments should go out as a Chaplain and not as a Missionary: he will have greater influence in the cause of Christianity'.⁸ Venn continually countered this powerful centripetalism – always insisting that the work of missions was second to none other and required the finest in intellectual gifts and training that the church had.

One of Venn's contemporaries echoed these views. Alexander Duff (1806–1878) reflected on his student days at St. Andrews University in the 1820s: 'I was struck markedly with this circumstance, that throughout the whole course of the curriculum of four years not one single allusion was ever made to the subject of the world's evangelization'.⁹ Duff made this observation when he was actively promoting inclusion of the study of missions in the university curriculum. On his first furlough from India, Duff had laid the groundwork for this proposal in his book of addresses, *Missions the Chief End of the Christian Church* (1839). Despite such eloquence and fervour, the study of missions did not easily gain entry to the academy.

The great German mission leader who did much to win a place for the study of missions in the university later in the nineteenth century, Gustav Warneck (1834–1910), blamed this state of affairs on sixteenth century Reformation leaders. He insisted their theology lacked missionary perspective.¹⁰ Seventeenth century scholastic theologians compounded the problem by their preoccupation with defining and preserving pure doctrine. It was not a soil in which missionary vision and motivation could thrive.

The nineteenth century remained captive to this traditional mindset. The university did not recognize the study of missions as a legitimate academic pursuit. Missionary training schools emphasized practical preparation for service. Thus the study of missions received little impetus from either the academic community or the mission activists. Despite this lacuna some small first steps were being taken. Spurred by the example of missionaries such as William Carey (1761–1834), the first several generations of missionaries, many of whom were themselves of humble origins and without recognized academic credentials, began to produce linguistic, ethnographic, and religious surveys of merit.¹¹

While the ground continued to be prepared and some seeds were sown, formal study of missions remained inchoate. A survey of the period 1810–1890 shows that in the United States from 1810, the beginning of the foreign mission movement, until 1890 no more than a half dozen books on the theory and theological foundations of missions were published. But from 1890–1918 forty-three such books

appeared.¹² A comparable situation obtained in the British Isles and Europe.

One further point needs to be made. Whether one reads Alexander Duff's proposal for a 'Chair of Evangelistic Theology' or William Orme's plea for a 'philosophy of missions' the bias is toward a study of the ways and means of conducting the Christian mission. The biblical and theological foundation could be assumed to be intact. This generation of mission leaders was thoroughly orthodox in theology and felt no need to reconceive theology itself from a missionary perspective.

This was also the age when European culture was not self-critical. Indeed, the superiority of western civilization could be assumed. The editor of the *Missionary Register*, Josiah Pratt (1768–1844), caught the mood of the times brilliantly in his maiden editorial:

You are now a favoured nation: your light is come: the glory of the Lord is risen upon you: all these heathen rites have ceased: the blood of the victims no longer flows: an established Christian Church lifts its venerable head: the *pure Gospel* is preached: ministers of the sanctuary, as heralds of salvation, proclaim mercy throughout the land – while civil and religious liberty has grown up under the benign influence of the Gospel, that sacred tree, the leaves of which are for the healing of the nations.¹³

It was much too early to talk about theological innovation or realize that 'the pure Gospel' was carried in earthen vessels which would be challenged by the new churches.

Venn's Assessment of the Situation

Henry Venn was always respectful toward leaders of past generations. He revered his grandfather namesake, one of the eighteenth century Evangelical Revival leaders, and appealed frequently to the judgements and dicta of his father and other CMS founders.¹⁴ Venn believed the earlier generations of missionaries had pioneered and laid a solid foundation for the formation of new churches round the world.

But this phase of pioneering had passed. Now the task was to investigate this experience in order to discover basic missionary principles revealed through it. Venn wrote to missionary Henry Townsend in Nigeria in 1852: 'The fact is we are only beginning at home to understand the true principles of Mission work'.¹⁵ He repeats this comment in a letter to Rufus Anderson in 1854. Anderson had visited Venn in London while enroute to the Middle East and India. Anderson handed Venn a list of questions concerning mission philosophy and practice, and Venn replied in a lengthy and forthright letter. Venn concluded that letter with a comment at once shrewd and

self-deprecating that 'while the present era is one for the development of Missionary principles in action, it is also one of incompetent theorizing. . .'¹⁶

Evidently Venn was dissatisfied with the slow progress being made in identifying and codifying principles of missionary action. In 1859 he repeated his earlier statement, citing as his authority 'a secretary of a kindred Missionary Society, of large experience, lately entered into rest, that Missionary Societies were still in the era of the investigation of first principles; that it would be some time yet before the great societies would have ascertained the most effective modes of missionary operations, the right organisation of the native churches, and various other fundamental missionary principles'.¹⁷ Venn leaves no doubt that he held the missionary society responsible for fulfilling this assignment; but he did not suggest how this work was to be done – except by his personal example and that of colleagues in other societies.

Toward a 'Science of Missions'

In January 1867 Venn wrote a long letter to the Bishop of Kingston in which he reviewed the course of the development of the church there. He began the letter with the assertion 'that the Church Missionary Society has withdrawn its operations from the Island of Jamaica at too early a period'.¹⁸ Briefly, the facts were these. The CMS began working in Jamaica in 1826 with the purpose of preparing the slaves for emancipation. Government granted emancipation in 1832. The work of the mission reached a high point in 1840 and the CMS withdrew in 1842. When Bishop Spencer arrived to take charge in 1843, a year after CMS's withdrawal, he already noted deterioration in the Jamaican churches.

In his letter Venn did not call attention to the fact that the Society had been in deep financial crisis in 1841 and acted rather summarily to make adjustments in its operations in order to lighten the financial burden. Jamaica was one of the programme's set on its own. The committee used high-sounding rhetoric to ease the shock. The official statement said the Society intended 'to deliver up each station a well-cultivated plot in the missionary field, thickly set with fair and fruitful trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, in which the Gospel may be preached from generation to generation, until time shall be no more'.¹⁹ The Committee had had to make hard choices, and Jamaica seemed to be one field able to make it on its own.

With the benefit of twenty-five years experience, Venn could not but draw comparisons between Jamaica and Sierra Leone where the CMS maintained an active interest. Indeed, Sierra Leone during these

years had been the major proving ground for Venn's whole mission policy and there was progress to show for it. By contrast, following CMS's withdrawal in 1842, the Jamaicans had fallen steadily behind. After twenty-five years only a few West Indians had become teachers and a single black minister had been ordained.

In Sierra Leone and West Africa there were more than one hundred teachers and catechists in 1867 plus twenty-five ministers, a black bishop, and the Niger Mission was managed and staffed entirely by Africans. To further emphasize his point, Venn observed that in Sierra Leone local incumbents, supported by the people, cared for the nine parishes; and a grammar school headed by a local principal served a hundred pupils. Although he did not review the policies the CMS followed the past twenty-five years in Sierra Leone, Venn implied – with justification – that the outcome in Sierra Leone was not by accident. It was the result of deliberate effort.²⁰

In view of such a comparison, Venn said: 'It becomes a question of very deep interest in the science of modern missions, How is the sudden collapse of the bright prospects of the Jamaica Mission to be explained?'²¹ He discounted the mere fact of the transfer of responsibility from the CMS to the Jamaica diocese. Venn puts his finger on a single cause: the lack of a trained indigenous leadership. 'The congregations were not organised *upon the principles of a native Church*', he insisted.

Venn can point to sociological and psychological reasons for this fact. It is one thing to organize a new church in a colony like Canada or Australia where the constituents are Europeans having a long association with the church. It is quite another matter to form a church among a people whose cultural and religious history is entirely different from that of the missionary. The missionary represents a powerful culture which is bringing under its sway most of the peoples of the world.

In the face of such facts, Venn observed: 'It may be said to have been only lately discovered in the science of missions, that when the missionary is of another and superior race than his converts he must not attempt to be their *pastor* . . . if he continues to act as their pastor they will not form a vigorous native Church, but as a general rule they will remain in a dependent condition'.²² Such dependency stunts development.

Venn had formed deep convictions about the need for the new church to be given its autonomy as early as possible. Out of his study of Francis Xavier he concluded that Xavier's fatal flaw was his insistence that his converts respect his authority. He constantly inculcated the supreme merit and advantage of implicit obedience to himself, insisted Venn.²³ Instead the new church needs to receive encouragement as early as possible to try its own wings and move toward self-responsibility.

While he accepted the need for church order under a bishop in an established church, Venn drew a distinction between the missionary situation and the settled church. He had long pointed to the absence of ecclesiastical laws governing the work of missions. Indeed, it is doubtful whether he really believed such canons could be drafted. He argued that 'That work is so varied, and its emergencies so sudden, that the evangelist must be left to act mainly on his own responsibility and judgment'.²⁴ Here Venn reveals his evangelical predilection for wide latitude for the voluntary agency and the episcopacy as the capstone of the ecclesiastical edifice, not its foundation.

Both Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn had drawn a clear distinction between the missionary as pioneer and the 'native' pastor. Anderson made this his first point in his 'Theory of Missions to the Heathen' in 1845. Venn stated this principle succinctly in his landmark policy statement in 1851, 'The Native Pastorate and Organization of Native Churches': 'In all questions relating to settlement of a native Church in any mission field, it is important to keep in view the distinction between the office of a *Missionary*, who preaches to the heathen, and instructs inquirers or recent converts – and the office of a *Pastor*, who ministers in holy things to a congregation of native Christians'.²⁵ They could marshal the authority of experience for their position.

In the case of Jamaica, when the CMS withdrew it did not mean that all Anglican missionary priests left the island. On the contrary, most of them remained at their posts. They now answered to their diocesan rather than to the Society. More important the missionary had now become pastor, with predictable results. Venn did not hesitate to counsel the bishop as to a solution: prepare Jamaicans to pastor Jamaicans. With the Jamaican church having suffered decline for such a long time, Venn suggested preliminary steps which must be taken to prepare suitable candidates for theological training. But he never lets go of his basic point. Jamaicans must be trained to pastor their own people.

Venn as Working Missiologist

In the preceding section we have reviewed at some length an important example of how Venn approached missiological issues. The example could be multiplied out of his long tenure showing how he restlessly searched for new insights and principles by which to conduct missionary work.

Venn disciplined himself to be a student of missionary history and current experience. He studied Moravian missions in the eighteenth century. He undertook a study of Francis Xavier which consumed his

leisure time for more than a decade. This effort eventuated in a 326 page book. He used Xavier's experience as a backdrop against which to forge and refine his own approach to missions.

He read widely in contemporary missions periodicals. He fraternized with mission leaders on the Continent such as Dr Wilhelm Hoffmann, director of the Basel Missionary Training School. He maintained close ties to colleagues in London through the London Secretaries Association which met monthly from October to April each year.

Of special concern to Venn was to build faithfully on the foundations which the organizers of the Church Missionary Society had laid. He attempted to distil from the early documents their principles and clarify their policies for the benefit of later generations. He held up these principles and policies as the basis for evaluating current performance.

Venn insisted that his missionaries write regular reports on their work. Suspicious of sentimentalism and glosses, he encouraged his colleagues to report as honestly, fully and accurately as possible. The discipline of writing regular reports was a means of self-criticism which could lead to growth and improvement.

Throughout his thirty-one years as Honorary Clerical Secretary, Venn wrote instructions to all outgoing missionaries. Eighty-seven of these were read at public valedictories.²⁶ When missionaries could not be present for these public occasions, Venn wrote personal instructions to them. Typically, these instructions are a mixture of exhortation, astute missiological advice, policy pronouncements, and pointed personal instructions.

Venn read assiduously incoming field reports. He had an unusual ability to discern fresh insights and synthesize his findings into policy statements. Venn approached missions pragmatically. Although he was constantly looking for principles of missionary action, he did not treat these discoveries in a doctrinaire manner. Thus he maintained an open mind and always believed that further insights were waiting to be discovered.

Venn's Missiological Vision

We now want to examine more closely the vision Venn had of the mission of the church. We have already come across aspects of this vision but we need to bring it more sharply into focus.

The Indigenous Church as Goal. At the heart of Venn's vision was the indigenous church. If he deserves to be remembered as a leader of missions it is above all because he, along with some of his contemporaries, saw with utter clarity that the goal of a mission was the

emergence of a church out of the soil and soul of a people. This was a new insight for missionary thinking in the nineteenth century.

Protestant missions were born out of the pietist movement on the Continent and the evangelical revival in Great Britain and the United States. These renewal movements stirred the flames of passion, in Count von Zinzendorf's phrase, 'to win souls for the Lamb.' This zeal called forth heroic self-sacrifice on the part of scores of sincere missionaries. The weakness in this movement was its spiritual concept of the church.²⁷ This lack of appreciation for the local, visible body of Christ effectively under-valued the importance of ecclesiastical structure, leadership and corporate life. The result was an inherent dependence by the new believer on the missionary. This dependency was spiritual, material, and psychological. Dependency does not develop in a vacuum. It is the fruit of the interaction between stronger and weaker individuals or groups. It is often subtle and difficult to discern.

Venn's insight into the problems of dependency did not come to him full-blown. As noted above, he read widely in missions journals and was conversant with the thought of his day. For example, as early as 1817 Josiah Pratt featured an article in *The Missionary Register* which argued that the missionary should work in such a way that converts to the Christian faith would learn to assume financial support for their own affairs. The writer said,

The Christian church must give the impulse, and must long continue to send forth her missionaries to maintain and extend that impulse; but, both with respect to Funds and Teachers, a vast portion of the work will doubtless be found ultimately to arise from among the heathen themselves; who, by the gracious influence which accompanies the Gospel, will be brought gladly to support, as the Christian Church has ever done, those Evangelists whom God, by His Spirit, will call forth from among them.²⁸

This did not constitute a statement of theory of missions, but it did push missionary thinking in new directions. The young Henry Venn who joined the CMS in 1819 was soon being exposed to such currents.

When Venn was appointed Honorary Clerical Secretary *pro tempore* in 1841, the Society was in the throes of serious financial crisis. During the previous several years CMS had allowed programmes to grow out of proportion to its financial resources. Suddenly, financial collapse seemed imminent. A special committee investigated the records and recommended stringent measures to be taken. This episode had a catalytic effect on Venn.

The crisis pointed up three crucial facts. In the first place it revealed the degree of financial dependency of the mission churches. A

growing array of institutions as well as leadership of the mission churches – evangelists, catechists, and teachers – depended wholly on subventions by the Society. Second, the possibility of being forced to cut off all financial support raised the question as to the fate facing these churches if they were suddenly to be set adrift. Third, Venn observed that the oldest CMS mission, Sierra Leone, after thirty-five years still had few Africans in positions of leadership and not one as yet ordained.

The CMS issued a statement in December 1841 announcing their intention to place greater responsibility on local resources. The statement read, in part, 'It has always been a recognised principle of the Committee, in carrying on the operations of the Society, that Native Converts should be habituated to the idea, that the support of a Native Ministry must eventually fall upon themselves; as, in their heathen state, they have been accustomed to bear the expense of Heathen Ministrations'.²⁹ In their statement the CMS admitted that the present crisis added urgency to the implementation of this principle. What was now needed was a comprehensive policy and plan to put this into effect. But none was yet ready to hand.

This episode marked the beginning of a development that would not reach a climax until 1866 when the CMS issued a pamphlet entitled *The Native Pastorate and Organization of Native Churches*. This pamphlet illustrates the way policy and theory evolved in Venn's mind. The first part of it, 'Minute Upon the Employment and Ordination of Native Teachers', was issued in 1851. Its second part appeared ten years later as 'Minute on the Organization of Native Churches.' The final section was adopted in 1866 as a progress report of what had been accomplished as a result of the two earlier policy statements. The three papers were then combined and released as statement of policy in 1866.

This pamphlet effectively enshrines Venn's most important conceptual contribution to mission theory. He never found time to prepare the kind of compendium which Rufus Anderson compiled. His insights are scattered among the dozens of policy statements, pamphlets, and several thousand letters which he wrote.

Later generations have remembered Venn primarily as a father of the 'three-selfs' formula: self-supporting, self-government, and self-propagating.³⁰ Unless we see the formula in its historical context and understand the way Venn applied it, we will fail to appreciate its significance.

We have already observed the crucial importance the financial crisis of 1841 had for Venn. That experience pointed up the vulnerability of a church which was dependent on external financial support. He continued to speak of the importance to the new church of achieving financial independence. In 1846 he told the Islington Clerical Meeting: 'The Church Missionary Society has long given its most earnest

attention and most strenuous support to plans for preparing and educating a Native Ministry, and for introducing a *self-supporting principle* into the Native Churches'.³¹ As a part of the CMS Jubilee Fund, the Society established a Jubilee Fund, one-fourth of which was to 'be employed in assisting Native-Christian Churches to support their own Native Ministers and Institutions'.³² Self-support went hand-in-hand with an indigenous ministry. The ultimate goal was for the church to achieve selfhood. Venn perceived this to be foundational to the integrity of any church.

The next major step came with adoption by the CMS of the 'Minute on the Employment and Ordination of Native Teachers' in 1851. Venn has increasingly come to see that the missionary had a tendency to abandon the apostolic role for that of pastor. Having established a congregation, the missionary was loathe to surrender leadership to someone else. Therefore, the missionary should keep in mind the goal:

Regarding the ultimate object of a mission, viewed under its ecclesiastical aspect, to be the settlement of a native Church, under native pastors, upon a self-supporting system, it should be borne in mind that the progress of a mission mainly depends upon the training up and the location of native pastors; and that, as it has been happily expressed, 'the euthanasia of a mission' takes place when a missionary, surrounded by well-trained native congregations, under native pastors, is able to resign all pastoral work into their hands.³³

With this statement Venn tried to delimit and focus the work of the missionary as well as place priority on the development of an indigenous ministry. His corollary concern was that the missions structures should not overshadow the church. He insisted that the mission organization should be viewed as a temporary scaffolding, to be dismantled once the church was fully organized and functioning. The mission's mandate was to keep looking to new frontiers or 'regions beyond'. Above all the local church should become missionary in its self-understanding.

In 1855 Venn delivered instructions to outgoing missionaries in which he used the well-known triad. He did not discuss the formulation, but he devoted a section to 'the exciting of a missionary spirit in each Native Church' – the foundation for self-extension. He reported: 'That Committee have lately been made more than ever aware of the fact that Native converts do not generally lay themselves out to bring over their countrymen to the truth'.³⁴ He attributed this situation to the fact that the missionaries have conveyed the notion that evangelization was reserved for the missionary or salaried evangelist rather than encouraging every member to assume this responsibility.

Venn's vision for the indigenous church was a direct answer to the

deformities which he had observed in mission-founded churches which had been 'kept in leading-strings by their missionaries'.³⁵ He held before his missionaries the ideal of a church possessed of a healthy self-reliance.

This ideal did not draw on biblical or theological insights. Indeed, it may appear unbiblical in its strong emphasis on *self* rather than relationship. But it grew in response to the concrete situations of churches founded by missionary agencies struggling for spiritual maturity. The formula had a two-fold thrust. On the one hand, it served as a prod to missionaries to keep their sights clear and check their tendencies toward too much control. On the other hand, it provided a means of testing whether a church was developing in a balanced manner. It riveted attention to the church rather than individuals.

As often happens, the solution to one problem creates new ones. The three-selves formula offered an important corrective, but in the process it introduced a new distortion. The Bible makes the kingdom of God – not the church – central to the gospel proclamation. 'Repent', said Jesus, 'for the kingdom of heaven is at hand' (Matt. 4:17). Although Henry Venn had a strong sense of the interdependence between all churches, his formula has frequently been used in a way that denies the ecumenical nature of the church universal.

The three-selves subsequently made an impact in directions Venn would have found surprising. Venn's influence on the emergence of nationalism in West Africa has been increasingly recognized. By promoting the training of Africans and insisting on their competency in managing their own lives, he helped combat the effects of racism and gave the Africans needed self-confidence. The church in China, struggling against charges that Christianity is a foreign religion, has since 1949 continually emphasized its 'three-selves' character.

Proclamation as key principle. Venn stood firmly for a 'reformation' spirit which permeated the very constitution of the CMS. He stood against tendencies and positions associated with the Anglo-Catholic tradition. For him evangelicalism was that stream within the Church of England which attempted to restore the Reformation heritage with its emphasis on the classic doctrines of salvation by faith alone, the need for individual conversion, a warmly personal faith, and 'experimental religion'. This tradition placed strong emphasis on proclamation of the Word.

In instructions to missionaries delivered in July 1872, Venn assessed the current situation. He noted the ferment the world was in as the result of scientific advances and the communications revolution then in progress. The old order was being shaken. In such a historical moment, Venn said, the missionary duty of the church was 'to testify to a kingdom which cannot be moved, and to be the Lord's witnesses

unto the uttermost part of the earth'.³⁶

What implications, asked Venn, do these changes hold for missionary work? Do they call for new approaches as old ones are made obsolete? Is there one method which remains incontrovertible because experience has vindicated it?

Venn answered the last question with a firm yes. He insisted that the New Testament established the method and subsequent experience had confirmed it. He then described that method in the words from Acts 2:47: 'And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved'. Venn went on: 'If it be objected that this is a statement of God's work, not of man's, we reply that herein lies its value as a directory for our efforts; for human agency can then only hope to be successful when it lies in the direction of Divine efficiency'.³⁷ Apostolic experience portrays a pattern: in response to the Word preached, people respond and are joined into a community. It is God who opens the human heart to the Word; it is God who incorporates into his body those who believe.

The apostolic method is simple, suggested Venn, but we humans complicate things. 'The Word preached . . . is a seed to be planted and allowed to grow, a seed which, once rooted in the soil, will not fail to be reproductive'.³⁸ He urged that the missionary make this apostolic precedent the organizing principle for all work. To do so would focus on the importance of a clear message. It will preserve one from the 'fallacy of statistics' – from assuming that mere numbers are an adequate measure of progress in the church. Rather the emphasis should be on the quality of the life of discipleship. The goal should be the deepening and strengthening of the life of the community as the starting point for witness to the world.

Venn had a broad view as to the efficacy of the Word. It encompassed all of life – personal and social, church and world. In one of his most eloquent statements, he said:

This is the leaven, which, introduced into the bosom of a nation, with such a minimum of effort in the first instance that it appears to be lost, gradually diffuses its salubrious influences so as to ameliorate the condition of the whole mass, advancing nations from barbarism to civilization, developing the energies of man, inducing industrial effort, and astonishingly improving his temporal condition.³⁹

Such conviction as to the power and scope of the Word obviously demanded that that Word be given prominence in all areas and forms of witnesses. This was a full-orbed evangelical vision.

The Holy Spirit as agent. We have already noted that Venn worked inductively to discover missiological insights and principles. The growing edge of Venn's thought late in life, and therefore not fully developed, concerned the Holy Spirit as the primary agent of mission.

In what were likely the last instructions which he personally delivered to missionaries, Venn spoke in 1871 of the changes he had witnessed over the course of fifty years association with the CMS. 'The difference of views and feelings consists chiefly in this', he said, 'that we entertain very moderate expectations of the success of all human agency, but greatly enlarged expectations of the working of the Spirit of God, for the conversion of the world'.⁴⁰ He candidly admitted that the sending out of missionaries no longer excited public interest as it once did. And the results, humanly speaking, of the efforts over these years had often not been satisfactory. What Venn had observed was that efficient organization or highly trained missionaries were not enough. The Spirit of God is not bound by the human. The Spirit was using many channels through which to convert the world.

The example of Madagascar had profoundly impressed him as an experience containing important lessons about the Holy Spirit and 'spontaneous expansion'. The Madagascar story aroused great interest in the early 1860s. The London Missionary Society had sent a mission there in 1820. Their missionaries published the New Testament in the vernacular in 1830 and baptized twenty-one converts the following year. In quick succession the government became openly hostile to the Christian faith, forbade its citizens to become Christians, officially banned Christianity and then expelled the missionaries in 1836. When missionaries were readmitted in 1861, everyone was astonished to learn that approximately half the population was now Christian. This happened despite intense persecution and the absence of missionaries.

By the late 1850s Venn had become frustrated with the problems of institutions and mission compounds. In an exchange of correspondence with India missionary C.F. Schwarz in 1859 he observed that mission work was undergoing rapid change, 'all in the direction of giving up the old system of station establishments and the education of heathen children: the chief success is with Adults and to setting each Adult convert to work in speaking to others as soon as they received any light in their own souls'.⁴¹

He attacked the 'station system' with vigour in his 1861 policy statement. In a passage that anticipates the views of Roland Allen two generations later, he speaks directly to the work of the Holy Spirit: 'I am fully aware of the variety of operations in the work of God's Spirit. Every field of labour has its own characteristics. I abhor the notion of judging of all by one standard. But there are general principles which apply with modifications to different phases of the work'.⁴²

Venn did not set spirit in opposition to structure. Rather he was keenly interested in discovering structures and patterns that opened the way for the operation of the Holy Spirit. To the Rev. C.C. Menge

in India, Venn urged that he form converts into small groups of enquirers. 'One such knot of enquirers if the Spirit of God be with them is worth many catechists, because it contains in itself the elements of *United Christian Action* and *self-extension*'.⁴³ He contended that such small groups can evangelize their neighbours. As they grow they should divide and form new small groups. A further advantage of this approach was that it thrust responsibility upon the local believers and kept the missionary in the background.

The self-awareness with which Venn worked is noteworthy. He told Menge: 'I am aware that I am touching upon a great subject, and a new view of Missions. But I have gathered my thoughts from a careful comparison of the normal system with the fields where there has been rapid extension, such as the South Sea Islands, the Karens, New Zealand, Madagascar, etc.'⁴⁴ He of course knew full well that often his toughest critics were his own missionaries who were not entirely open to these new ideas.

Conclusion

Henry Venn's reputation as one of the foremost mission leaders of the nineteenth century rests primarily on his contribution to the concept of the 'indigenous church' as the goal of mission. But his boundless confidence in the power of the Word constantly stimulated and sustained him in his arduous labours. He seemed to take an increasingly unconventional, perhaps even daring, view of the work of missions as he shifted his attention to the role of the Holy Spirit as primary agent of mission. This led him to caution against relying too much on missions structure and programme and to urge greater respect for the unexpected interventions by the Spirit. Two generations later Roland Allen would launch a major attack on the missions system on precisely these lines.

NOTES

- 1 Introduction to William Swan, *Letters on Missions*, Westley and Davis, London 1830, pp.ix-x.
- 2 Olav Guttorm Myklebust, *The Study of Missions in Theological Education*, 2 vols., Egede Instituttet, Oslo 1955, I, p 28.
- 3 Robert E. Speer, *Missionary Principles and Practice*, Fleming H. Revell, New York 1902, chapter VI is entitled 'Science of Missions'. Speer makes a case for developing such a science because of 'the absence of any body of accepted principles governing missionary operations'. Speer's book proved influential in giving coherence to missions thought in his generation. World War II marks the end of the writing of books on this theme.

- Edmund Soper's *The Philosophy of the Christian World Mission*, Abingdon, Nashville 1943 and Harold Lindsell, *A Christian Philosophy of Missions*, Van Kampen Press, Wheaton 1949 are the most recent statements of philosophies of missions. Lindsell later wrote *Missionary Principles and Practice*, Fleming H. Revell, Westwood, NJ 1955. During the past generation the theology of mission has been the dominant theme in missiological writing.
- 4 R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *Pioneers in Mission*, William B. Eerdmans Co., Grand Rapids 1966, p 22.
 - 5 R. Pierce Beaver ed., *To Advance the Gospel*, William B. Eerdmans Co., Grand Rapids 1967, pp 73–88, 'The Theory of Missions to the Heathen'. Anderson's outline included 4 points: 1) The vocation of the missionary who is sent to the heathen is not the same as that of the settled pastor; 2) The object and work of the missionary are preeminently spiritual; 3) This method of conducting the missions is the only one that will subjugate the heathen world to God; 4) This is the only method which will unite the energies of the churches.
 - 6 Rufus Anderson, *Foreign Missions: Their Relations and Claims*, Scribner and Company, New York 1869.
 - 7 Henry Venn, 'Growth of Missionary Spirit and Effort in the University of Cambridge During the Past Fifty Years', *Church Missionary Intelligencer* NS 6, 1870, p 350.
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Cited by Myklebust, *op. cit.*, p 168.
 - 10 Gustav Warneck, *History of Protestant Missions*, Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, Edinburgh 1901, pp 8–24.
 - 11 Cf. A.F. Walls, 'The Nineteenth Century Missionary as Scholar', in Nils E. Bloch-Hoell, ed., *Misjonsskall og Forsker glede*, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo 1975, pp 209–21.
 - 12 Charles W. Forman, 'A History of Foreign Mission Theory', in R. Pierce Beaver, ed., *American Missions in Bicentennial Perspective*, William Carey Library, South Pasadena, CA 1977, pp 69–140.
 - 13 *The Missionary Register for the Year 1813*, I, p 8, cited by Max Warren, *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History*, SCM, London 1965, p 42, italics mine.
 - 14 Venn produced various sketches of CMS founders: Appendix II of Sermon Preached at Josiah Pratt's Funeral (1844); Address to Committee on Occasion of Jubilee (1848); The Founders of the CMS and the First Five Years (1848); Address on Taking Possession of the Committee Room in the New Mission House, March 7, 1862; Providential Antecedents of the Sierra Leone Mission (November 1872, the last article Venn wrote before he died).
 - 15 2 Dec. 1852 (CA2/L1). These reference numbers indicate the file where the letter is to be found in the CMS archives.
 - 16 6 Sept. 1854 (G/AC/17/2, 1838–53, pp 437–43).
 - 17 Instructions to Missionaries, 14 Oct. 1859, in W. Knight, *The Missionary Secretariat of the Rev. Henry Venn* Longmans, Green and Co., London 1880, p 486. In a letter to Rev. C.W. Isenberg, 22 Aug. 1855 (CI3/L3), pp 13–15, Venn had stressed the importance of the 'three principles' and

then added: 'Many of us who have long taken part in the guidance of Missions are looking with deep interest at the reports and suggestions made by such men as Dr Anderson, Mr Underhill, Mr Wylie and others. The present seems to be an era of the establishment of "Missionary principles" '.

18 Ibid, p 211.

19 Ibid, p 212. Venn quotes from the *XL1st Annual Report*, p 115. Cf. Eugene Stock, *History of the Church Missionary Society*, 3 vols., CMS, London 1899, I, p 482.

20 Succeeding generations have judged Venn's success variously. At one extreme is the position Stephen Neill has taken against Venn: 'the first attempts to carry out the principles of Venn's dictum proved almost wholly disastrous. The establishment of the "Native Pastorate" in Sierra Leone in 1860, with the complete withdrawal of the missionaries from participation in the affairs of the pastorate, inflicted on the Church a paralysis from which a whole century has not availed to deliver it' (*A History of Christian Missions*, Pelican, Harmondsworth 1964, p 260). T.S. Johnson, the first Sierra Leonean to reach the rank of bishop only in 1937, takes the opposite position that missionaries, *contra* Neill, did maintain control far too long, and that at the expense of the maturing of the church. Eugene Stock in reaches a more measured judgement, calling Venn's Sierra Leone experiment a qualified success (*op. cit.*, II, p 445-49). In 1867 Venn was drawing a comparison between two concrete cases, Sierra Leone and Jamaica. The contrast was obvious. Venn can hardly be held accountable for the way later generations applied, or misapplied, his insights and policies.

21 Ibid., p 215.

22 Ibid., p 216.

23 Henry Venn, *The Missionary Life and Labours of Francis Xavier*, Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts, and Green, London 1862, p 146.

24 Ibid.

25 Knight, *op. cit.*, p 305. Rufus Anderson discussed this point in *Foreign Missions*, p 111.

26 See the studies of these instructions: Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Henry Venn's Instructions to Missionaries', *Missiology* 5, 1977, pp 467-85; and Wilbert R. Shenk, 'The Missionary and Politics: Henry Venn's Guidelines', *Journal of Church and State* 24, 1982, pp 525-34.

27 Cf. Peter Beyerhaus, 'The Three Selves Formula - Is It Built on Biblical Foundations?' *International Review of Missions* 53, 1964, p 393.

28 Reprinted in *Panoplist and Missionary Magazine* 13, 1817, pp 279-85.

29 'Address of the Committee on the Financial Situation of the Society', *Church Missionary Reporter* 13, 1842, p 18.

30 As to Venn's role in originating this formula, especially in relation to Rufus Anderson, see Wilbert R. Shenk, 'Rufus Anderson and Henry Venn: A Special Relationship?' *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 5, 1981, pp 168-72.

31 Henry Venn, *The Present Position and Future Prospects of the Church Missionary Society*, CMS, London 1846, p 17, italics mine.

32 'Address of the Committee', *Jubilee Proceedings*, CMS, London 1848, p iii-iv.

- 33 W. Knight, op. cit., 'Minute on the Employment and Ordination of Native Teachers', p 307. Note that Venn did not coin the phrase 'euthanasia of a mission'. He borrowed this from someone else. He of course never intended this to mean the phasing out of *mission*. Rather he understood every specific mission to have its own timetable for completing its work, after which it was to be terminated and resources released for a fresh start elsewhere.
- 34 Knight, op. cit., p 431. A document written about 1872 (based on internal evidence) entitled 'Native Church Organization' gives a succinct and fresh statement of the Venn vision. Although it appears Venn did not write it, the document faithfully reflects his thought.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 'Instructions to Missionaries', *Church Missionary Intelligencer* NS 8, 1872, p 241.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 'Instructions to Missionaries', *Church Missionary Intelligencer* 8, 1857, p 155.
- 40 Knight, op. cit., pp 531-6.
- 41 4 March 1859 (CI3/L2), p 129-31.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 17 March 1860 (CI3/L2), p 150-52.
- 44 Ibid.

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