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## **An Evaluation of the Growth and Expansion of the Protestant Missionary Movement in the United States**

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Over the past century, America has stood out as a world leader in global Protestant missionary efforts. Between 1880 and 1930, the foreign mission enterprise involved tens of thousands of Americans abroad and millions at home; and it exceeded most other benevolent organizations in size and resources.<sup>1</sup> American career missionaries abroad increased threefold from 11,000 in 1935 to 35,000 in 1980.<sup>2</sup> By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States supplied the majority of missionaries and over half of the financial support for Protestant missions worldwide.<sup>3</sup> How did America arise as a world leader in missionary activity?

By reviewing and analyzing salient historical details, several reasons can be surmised for the growth and expansion of the Protestant missionary movement in the United States.

## **Historical Background**

Though the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century offered a great deal toward the reshaping of the church, a proliferation of missionary effort was not one of its immediate effects. Thus, it is interesting to note that the first Protestants who fled persecution in Europe for the freedom of the New World were strongly mission-minded.

The Puritans, who sought after God's glory above all else, exemplified this mindset. These pioneers had an authentic sense of God's sovereignty that caused them to see their colonial adventure as a grand mission that was important in God's design in history.

When Native Americans began converting to Christianity, the new settlers were convinced that the worldwide reign of Christ was at hand.

The evangelistic efforts of John Eliot and Cotton Mather among the native Indians would be followed by such notable figures as David and John Brainerd. These men, like so many other settlers, exemplified an ideal that would not soon be lost on generations of Americans: turning the wilderness into a paradise.<sup>4</sup>

As history would prove, this "wilderness" was far broader in scale than the forested land that met the eyes of the first New England immigrants. The world itself would soon become the wilderness for Americans to tame.

Though the early settlers certainly maintained eschatological aims, their immediate focus was upon taming the wilderness directly before them, which often went hand-in-hand with the conversion of Native Americans. Unfortunately, the Europeans' thirst for land often superseded their desire to convert the heathen. The pioneers themselves were naturally unchurched, for the rapidly expanding frontier produced a fragmented civilization.

The Great Awakening in the 18<sup>th</sup> century helped to bring organization to the near chaos.<sup>5</sup> Not only was the Awakening important in shaping the Christian nature of the new nation that was about to be born, but it was instrumental in creating new theology that would directly shape future missionary activity.

### **Jonathan Edwards**

The key figure in the Great Awakening was Jonathan Edwards, whose theology has been credited as “the most profound expression of the fresh and vigorous impulse that flavored missionary thought and activity through the next seventy-five years.”<sup>6</sup> His was a theology of evangelism that compelled all to come to God by their own free will. Edwards was particularly effective in relating missions to God's great work of redemption, and thus set the stage for an onslaught of missionary activity following the Revolution.<sup>7</sup> Samuel Hopkins followed in Edwards' footsteps and added another important component of missionary theology known as “disinterested benevolence,” which can be defined as an entirely unselfish desire to serve God and man. The missionary task thus gained esteem as the highest and most “disinterested” task in which a Christian could be involved.<sup>8</sup>

The Great Awakening ended up only serving as a spark for the missions flame and not the fire itself, as New England soon found itself tied up in an all-consuming conflict with Old England.

### **The Second Great Awakening (1795-1810)**

Following the Revolution, attention was once again drawn to taming the frontier immediately to the west. The Americans were in no place to mobilize for evangelizing the world when they needed to be re-evangelized themselves, given that less than 10% of the population belonged to congregations following the war.<sup>9</sup> What America needed was another revival – and that is exactly what they received at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The Second Great Awakening (1795-1810) has been called the most influential revival of Christianity in the history of the United States.<sup>10</sup> The scope of this essay does not allow for recounting the history behind the notable itinerant preachers of this time, such as Charles Finney and Francis Asbury. Suffice it to say that the Second Great Awakening was immensely significant for joining evangelical religion to social reform,<sup>11</sup> and for multiplying the Methodists and Baptists, who would rapidly form their own missions societies. At least to a certain degree, after the Awakening the churches were successful in keeping up with the westward movement of American civilization.<sup>12</sup> Thus, the Second Great Awakening prepared the way for a century that would become known as “Protestant America.”

## **The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Zealous Evangelism**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century in America was marked by zealous evangelism both at home and abroad. During the first three quarters of this great century, believers maintained an optimistic outlook on the prevailing of Christian values in whatever culture the Truth of the Gospel was preached. Each denomination thus became a great missionary organization, and every member was a missionary.<sup>13</sup> Though the following decades would severely test this positive outlook, the Puritan aspirations for paradise in the wilderness proved to stand the test of time and trials.

### **Looking Toward the East**

With the vision firmly in place, it wasn't long before Americans turned their eyes away from the western wilderness and began looking toward the east.

The history of overseas missions from America has humble beginnings. During a rainstorm in the summer of 1806, Samuel Mills and several other students from Williams College held a meeting sheltered by a haystack in which they committed to taking the Gospel overseas. Mills and other friends from this prayer meeting went on to Andover Seminary, founded in 1807 as the nation's first full-fledged theological school. There, in 1810, they created a more formal organization to achieve their goals: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. By 1812, ABCFM had dispatched the first American missionaries to India and the Far East.

### **Adoniram Judson**

Adoniram Judson was among the first contingent of five who went to India in 1812, and he worked as a missionary for nearly 40 years in Burma. Americans were strongly interested in his work, "indicating that confidence in the spread of the faith in America was broadening to include eager anticipation of its spread elsewhere."<sup>14</sup> This common vision was instrumental in putting cracks in denominational barriers.<sup>15</sup>

### **D. L. Moody and Other Revivalists**

Not even the Civil War dispelled the idealistic goal of evangelizing the United States and the world, and Protestants at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were optimistic about reforming society.

The turn of the new century wasn't lacking in revivalists, even as pluralism marked the continued Westward expansion. Dwight L. Moody can be admired for his great concern for saving lost souls and the simple Gospel truth he promoted.

Likewise, A. T. Pierson accomplished no small task when he recruited 3,000 young people for missionary service and founded the African Inland Mission in the final years of the 1800's.

Many other notable figures could be mentioned from this time,<sup>16</sup> not the least of which being women, who comprised 60% of the nation's mission force.<sup>17</sup>

## **Zeal for Evangelization of the World**

President William McKinley even went so far as to tie Protestant missions with the expansion of the United States, claiming that he entered into war with Spain over control of the Philippines largely so that they might be Christianized.<sup>18</sup>

## **1900s - Great Century of American Missions**

Although the Protestant character of America would decline in great measure during the tumultuous years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the 1900's can still be known as a great century of Protestant missions. American missionaries have had a significant part to play in shifting the center of Christianity from the West into the Third World.<sup>19</sup>

By the time of the great missions convention in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910, "missionaries from the United States and Canada made up about one-third of the 21,000 Protestant missionaries worldwide. By 1925, half of the world's 29,000 missionaries were Americans or Canadians. In that year there were more than 3,300 American missionaries in China alone."<sup>20</sup> The Ecumenical Movement that grew out of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century heralded greater inter-denominational cooperation in missions, and a growing concern for the social needs of the Third World.

## **After World War II**

After World War II, economic prosperity in America provided denominations and churches with resources for mission activity that were missing during the Depression era. Independent evangelical agencies began springing up, and the following decades would see a shift from missionary affiliation with mainline churches to affiliation with new independent agencies. By 1985, 90% of the nearly 40,000 American career missionaries were so affiliated.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, large missionary conferences have sprung up since WWII to challenge people for missions, including Urbana and the International Congress on World Evangelization at Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. Out of this continuing conference emerged Third World evangelical movements focused on unreached people groups.<sup>22</sup>

## **The Focus on Unreached People Groups**

The focus on unreached people groups over the last several decades has fueled new goals for the evangelization of the rest of the world. This lofty aspiration has united evangelical mission agencies in a fresh way. Though these organizations did not succeed in their initial goal of entering the last unreached group by 2000, today American Christians are working toward a worldwide effort of completing the Great Commission by 2025.<sup>23</sup> Though Protestantism has not

had significance influence on shaping American culture since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the Puritan ideal of turning wilderness into Paradise seems to linger on.

## **Rationale behind the Missions Movement**

By evaluating American history, a number of religious and societal factors can be isolated as prime movers in America's mission enterprise. Though this list is not exhaustive, the following factors do help to account for the character and growth of the Protestant missionary movement over the past three centuries.

### **1. Strong Emphasis upon the Bible**

Dillenberger and Welch have pointed out that the zeal of the missionary movement beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century can only be compared with the earliest centuries of the church.<sup>24</sup> This should not be surprising, since the early church and the missionary model provided in the New Testament have been a major impetus in American Protestant missions. Americans have largely followed the pattern set by the Reformation of rejecting the history of the Church and returning directly to the Bible as their only source of inspiration. In reading the pages of Scripture, they found overwhelming motivation for advancing the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

Over the centuries, Americans have had an insatiable appetite for Scripture. Between 1777 and 1957, over 2,500 different English-language editions of the Bible were published in the United States.<sup>25</sup> By 1956, the Library of Congress' catalogue of books on Scripture contained 63,000 entries; and the wave of new Bible translations and commentaries has not subsided to the present day.<sup>26</sup> It is significant to note that the staying power of the Bible has far outlived Protestant America, and thus the Good Book remains today as a central agitator of the hearts of American Christians toward Great Commission work.

### **2. Manifest Destiny**

The first Pilgrims arrived in the New World with a mission that has dominated the American mindset ever since. This mindset has commonly been known as "Manifest Destiny," which may broadly refer to the perceived virtue of American people and their institutions, and their God-ordained destiny to spread these institutions for the redemption and remaking of the world.<sup>27</sup> While Manifest Destiny usually refers more specifically to the Westward expansion of the United States, the values behind the mission can be applied to America's worldwide mission enterprise.

Manifest Destiny factors into a "wilderness and paradise" theme that has dominated American missionary theology.<sup>28</sup> The Puritans and scores of immigrants after them arrived in the New World to face a literal wilderness, which they sought to tame in an effort to create a paradise free from the oppression of their former homes. However, social freedom was not the ultimate goal.

As mentioned above, the Puritans had an authentic sense of God's sovereignty that caused them to see their colonial adventure as a grand mission that was important in God's scheme in history. They literally believed that they, as God's chosen people, were planting the Kingdom of God into the New World; and their early success in evangelizing the Indians encouraged their sentiment that God was about to bring His great design to completion.

Eschatology was central in their thinking, and even though the early settlers were preoccupied with a literal wilderness before them, history shows that they did not lose sight of the ideal of ushering the Kingdom of God into the wilderness of the entire world.<sup>29</sup> It is not without warrant to say that the missionary character of the American church developed from the day the Pilgrims first disembarked at Plymouth Rock.

Subsequent American history has shown how "Manifest Destiny" has influenced the American Protestant mindset to this day. Prior to the Great Awakening, Cotton Mather promoted missionary activities of global proportions. Coming out of Puritan stock, eschatology and missions were central to his message; and while he focused on evangelism to Indians, he firmly believed that God's purpose included the whole world.<sup>30</sup>

Coming out of the Great Awakening, Samuel Hopkins worked in opposition to slavery, and believed that "slavery's demise was part and parcel of the triumph of Christ over all nations."<sup>31</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century that followed with its great influx of missionary activity retained the Puritans' sense of going into the wilderness to grow and preserve the church.

The end of that great century shows the Puritan ideal to still be very much alive, even among America's top leadership. President William McKinley entered into war with Spain over control of the Philippines largely so that they might be Christianized; and Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana repeated the Puritan message when he said that God "marked the American people as His chosen nation to finally lead in the regeneration of the world."<sup>32</sup>

There is no doubt that Americans, in both a religious and non-religious sense, have felt that they have a special obligation to save and renovate the world.<sup>33</sup> This has been seen in the past century in the secular realm through America's involvement in wars and bringing humanitarian aid to the Third World; and in the religious realm through continued efforts to "finish the task" of global evangelization.

### **3. New Theology of the Great Awakenings**

A third factor that turned America into a thriving missionary base was the new theology that arose out of the Great Awakenings. These Awakenings underlined man's depravity and the absolute necessity of experiencing new birth, thus redefining Christianity with voluntary membership, and serving as an impetus for church planting and missions.

The idea of election was expanded so that anybody could come to Christ by their own free will, and said in fact that God was calling everyone to repent. This Arminian flavor to salvation and

the individualistic winning of converts one by one to Christ fueled worldwide missions, as the idea that only the elect will be saved was replaced by the idea that anyone could be saved.

Furthermore, the Great Awakenings encouraged laypeople to be involved in spiritual duties, rather than relying only upon an elite clergy. Everybody was encouraged to have a part in missions, whether in going or giving or praying. Revivalists preached the dignity and significance of all people of all classes, and were especially instrumental in restoring the dignity of women, who ended up becoming the predominant mission force from America.<sup>34</sup>

Moreover, the eschatological dimensions of the revivals strongly influenced missions, as had been the case with the Puritans in the past. The preaching of Jonathan Edwards particularly manifested this quality as he related missions directly to God's great work of redemption.<sup>35</sup> Not only did this emphasis make missionary activity sound exciting and appealing, but it placed urgency on the task of evangelization, since the end was very near.

### **Disinterested Benevolence**

Coming out of Edwards' revival, Samuel Hopkins added additional appeal to the missionary task through his concept of "disinterested benevolence," which became a slogan of America's missionary movement in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century.

As explained above, disinterested benevolence was completely unselfish love: a desire to serve God and man without any self-interest. The missionary task was considered the highest and most "disinterested" task in which a Christian could be involved.<sup>36</sup> Disinterested benevolence drove missionaries like Adoniram Judson with an intense sense of duty to their cause: unselfishly sacrificing home, comforts, and family in order to bring the gospel to the "poor heathen."<sup>37</sup>

Hopkins essentially believed that there would be paradise and peace on earth once Christianity spread over the whole world, resulting in "universal benevolence and disinterested affection."<sup>38</sup> This high ideal with eschatological ramifications, coupled with the renewed value of all people to receive and to spread the Gospel, can be directly tied to the great missions thrust of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

## **4. Other Societal Factors**

Many other factors can be mentioned to help explain the expansion of American Protestant missions. American democracy itself expresses values of missionary endeavors. Ideally, American democracy is meant to give value to every person, and afford everyone an opportunity to succeed and share in the good things of life. Missionaries extend this ideal to people around the world, who also deserve to be given opportunity to improve their lives spiritually and materially.

From a practical standpoint, the affluence of America has simply provided more resources for churches to use in the work of missions. Also, American Evangelicals have been world leaders in



widespread literature distribution, and mass communication has been significant in the propagation of the Gospel.

Finally, educational institutions in America have historically thrust great numbers of people into missions. The American Sunday School Union, founded in Philadelphia in 1824, funneled missionaries into unevangelized areas of the country and provided materials for weekly lessons. They succeeded in starting well over 70,000 new Sunday Schools during the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>39</sup>

It was believers who led the way in establishing higher education in America. Harvard, Princeton, and scores of other schools were founded on missionary principles and impulse.<sup>40</sup>

Under the watchword, “the evangelization of the world in this generation,” the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions recruited tens of thousands of volunteers in colleges and seminaries for foreign missions, and thousands actually became missionaries.<sup>41</sup> Though America today is more secularized, all of the above factors still play into American missions involvement today.

### **Missions Expansion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

To conclude, it is appropriate to spend a little time considering how missions from America will proceed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Already there has been a significant shift of the missionary hub of the world from the West to the East. It is becoming increasingly evident that America itself is still a mission field, and more resources need to be poured into the wilderness at home. Missions activity is also taking on a new shape as more liberal ecumenical denominations move away from world evangelization in favor of religious tolerance and social justice and advancement.

At this early stage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is uncertain how these factors will play into the growth or decline of Protestant missions from America. However, there is no doubt that the factors which characterized the growth and expansion of Protestant missions in the past will continue to influence missions in the future, and will almost certainly ensure that the United States will remain one of the world leaders in missions outreach. Whether the mission activity is conducted at home or abroad, and whether or not the flavor of the message is social or spiritual, Americans today still possess a sense of their Manifest Destiny. There are yet many frontiers that must be tamed.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> William R. Hutchison, *Errand to the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> John Dillenberger and Claude Welch, *Protestant Christianity Interpreted Through its Development* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 173.

<sup>4</sup> Charles Chaney asserts that “No theme is more persistent in American missionary theology than ‘wilderness and paradise’ (Charles L. Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America* [Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1976], 3). He goes on to elaborate that the wilderness/paradise concept “is useful in giving meaning to history. It explains the present age, i.e., wilderness, and it defines the goal sought after, i.e., paradise. In the hands of inspired men, it was most valuable in helping the Church understand its place and purpose in the world. Especially for the churches of Colonial America, scattered as they were along a narrow beach, and strung out before a vast, literal wilderness, this motif took on added significance” (4).

<sup>5</sup> Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 189-90.

<sup>6</sup> Chaney, 57.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 81

<sup>9</sup> Noll, 166.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>13</sup> Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1976), 118-121.

<sup>14</sup> Noll, 185-7.

<sup>15</sup> Chaney, 180.

<sup>16</sup> E.g., One of the most notable and visible promoters of missions at this time was Robert Elliott Speer (1867-1947), who wrote nearly seventy books and hundreds of articles on the topic. He said that “Christian missions will be necessary so long as Christ is the only savior of humanity” (Noll, 291).

<sup>17</sup> Noll, 293.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> In 1900 around 85% of Christians lived in the West; at the end of the century, over half of Christians lived in the Third World (Noll, 533).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 533-34

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 534.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 535.

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Wycliffe Bible Translators is working toward starting a Bible translation in every remaining people group by 2025. If they continue progressing at their current growth rate, they will accomplish this goal by 2039 (Vision 2025, “Vision 2025 – Progress & Task Ahead – Timeline,” Wycliffe Bible Translators, [http://vision2025.org/progress\\_BTtimeline.html](http://vision2025.org/progress_BTtimeline.html) [accessed May 7, 2007]).

<sup>24</sup> Dillenberger and Welch, 177.

<sup>25</sup> Noll, 401.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 407.

<sup>27</sup> William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1996), 61.

<sup>28</sup> Chaney, 3.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 50-52

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>32</sup> Noll, 293.

<sup>33</sup> William R. Hutchinson, *Errand to the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>34</sup> Women made up 60% of the nation’s missionary force in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By the turn of the century, 41 women’s missionary societies were supporting over 1,200 missionaries. Women could often take more leadership on the field than they were allowed by the culture in the States (Noll, 294).

<sup>35</sup> Chaney, 68.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>37</sup> Hutchinson, 150.

<sup>38</sup> Chaney, 149.

<sup>39</sup> Noll, 229.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Missions and the American Mind* (Indianapolis, National Foundation Press: 1949), 9-10.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

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