PROCLAMATION

AND

RESPONSE

A Study of the History of the Christian Faith in Northern Thailand

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PREFACE

Since 1867 American Presbyterian missionaries have been working in the north of Thailand. As a result of their work, there has emerged a church which today has over 21,000 members. This small book is a study of the work of the missionaries and the development of the church among the northern Thai people.

There are three major themes in this historical study. The first theme is the essence of the Christian Gospel in the teaching of the missionaries and as it was understood by the Christian converts. It is argued that the Good News that the missionaries preached was not exactly the Good News that the people who became Christians in northern Thailand heard. This has important implications for what is the Gospel that Christians should be proclaiming today.

The second theme is closely related to the first: how the Gospel was communicated by the missionaries to the people in northern Thailand. This aspect of the study also has important implications for how the Gospel should be communicated today.

The third theme is who became Christians, and why. This theme has special significance for the identity of the Christian community in northern Thailand. It is an important resource for how the community should understand itself within the context of the predominantly Buddhist society in northern Thailand.

In the first three chapters of the book, the study of the missionaries' proclamation of the Christian faith, and the response to it, is placed with a chronological framework of some of the major events in the life of the Christian mission and church in northern Thailand. This chronological framework is important for a sense of perspective, and for understanding the background of the work of the missionaries and the growth of the church. However, little detail of the historical events, or of the people who played significant roles in them, is given here. This book concentrates on describing groups of people rather than individuals, and general movements rather than specific events. For more details of events and people, there are other historical studies of the church in Thailand, such as K. E. Wells, History of Protestant Work in Thailand 1828-1958. Some historical resources for further study have been listed at the end of the book.
The fourth chapter of the book reflects on the three major themes, and examines some of their implications for Christianity in northern Thailand today. Some of the principles that emerge from the three themes about the nature of the Gospel, its communication, and the nature of the Christian church are relevant, not only to northern Thailand, but wherever the Christian Gospel is proclaimed.

This book is one product of three years study of the church in northern Thailand. During that time, the author visited many of the churches in the area, where he conducted interviews with elders and pastors. He also worked with the theological students at the McIlvory Faculty of Theology, Payap College, where he has been teaching. The major source of information for the history of the church has been the Manuscript Division of Payap College, which is also the archives of the Church of Christ in Thailand. The author is very grateful for the assistance he has received from the Manuscript Division, and particularly from its head, Herbert R. Swanson. The contribution of Josephine Maclean in producing the illustrations, and Hazel Hughes in drawing the maps, is also gratefully acknowledged.

Since the first edition, much more study has been put into the history of the church in northern Thailand. Herbert Swanson's book, *Khrisak Phuang Nua* has revealed some of the details and nuances of history that this book glosses over. He has pointed, for example, to the social pressure upon those who have taken an interest in Christianity which has continued from the time of Prince Kaulorot of Chiang Mai. Swanson also clarified the internal problems within the church of effective leadership and the lack of nurture for the young churches. He has pointed to problems in the relationship between the mission and the church. All these factors have inevitably had a bearing on the proclamation of the Gospel and its response in northern Thailand.

Nevertheless, I believe that the major themes of this book remain valid and vital for all who would preach the Gospel. The Gospel must be shown to be relevant in the terms of the culture in which it is proclaimed. This is true, not only in northern Thailand, but universally. While the practical details and historical circumstances vary from place to place, the challenge of proclaiming the Gospel incarnationally, from within the culture, is of universal importance.

When people see the Gospel as offering a solution to their conscious needs and aspirations, they will turn to it. As long as the power of the Gospel is demonstrated, it will be effective.

At the same time, the paradox of the Gospel is that it is not essentially a call to successful living nor a series of techniques for overcoming problems. It is a call to follow in the path of the cross, in the service of others. Thus, while many are attracted to it because they see it meeting their needs and aspirations, it is important they move on from there in their understanding of the Gospel. Indeed, we will find that our needs are most fully met when we are employed by God in meeting the needs of others.

The pages of this book remind us that the call to the Christian life is a call to begin a journey. It is a journey in understanding as well as experience. As life is fulfilled, so it can be "lost" for the sake of Christ and His Gospel. (Mark 8:34, 35)

Philip J. Hughes, Wangaratta, Australia.
In 1863, two Americans, the Revs. Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson visited Chiang Mai, the major city in the north of Siam. Both men were missionaries of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, and had been working in Siam for the past five years. Daniel McGilvary had met some people from northern Siam when he was working at Perh Buri, in the south of the country, and he was fascinated by them. Now he and Jonathan Wilson were exploring the possibility of going to live in Chiang Mai to bring the Gospel to the "Lao people" as they called them.

The "Lao people" were closely related to the Siamese. Their language was similar, although far from identical. Their customs were similar. Like the Siamese, they were Theravada Buddhists. They are believed to have come originally from China. Chiang Mai was founded as the capital of a northern Thai kingdom in 1296 A.D.

The city of Chiang Mai was under Burmese rule for about two hundred years. The Burmese were finally driven out in 1775 with the help of the Siamese. Chiang Mai had been destroyed, but was re-established in 1796 as the capital of a vassal of Siam. The prince of Chiang Mai made regular trips to pay tribute to the king of Siam in Bangkok, but apart from that, he ruled Chiang Mai independently. Chiang Mai was the largest and most important of five tributary states in northern Siam. The others were Nan, Lampang, Lamphun, and Phrae.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, there was pressure on Siam from the colonial powers of Great Britain and France. During this period Burma to the west of Siam and Malaya to the south were incorporated into the British Empire. The French annexed Indo-China to the east of Siam. The colonial powers were anxious to develop their trading and extend their territories. Partly in response to this pressure, in order to preserve the independence of Siam, King Mongkut began the process of westernization and modernization. King Chulalongkorn, the next king of Siam, continued the process, and developed a strong, centralized bureaucracy to rule the country. Gradually this bureaucracy
took over the powers and functions of the princes in the northern Siamese states.

The visit of Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson in 1863 was not Chiang Mai’s first contact with Christianity. In 1844, two Roman Catholic priests had arrived to evangelize the people. After two months, however, the prince of Chiang Mai had forbidden the priests to evangelize any more, and had forbidden his subjects to become Christians. The priests had to return to Bangkok.

McGilvary and Wilson did not stay long in Chiang Mai on their first visit, but McGilvary and his wife returned to Chiang Mai, this time with the purpose of settling, on April 3rd, 1867. Jonathan Wilson and his family followed in February, 1868. The missionaries began teaching Christianity to the local people, who came with great curiosity to see these strange foreigners, and they did some elementary medical work as well.

By August 1868, the missionaries had made their first convert, Nan Inta. He was followed by a few others the following year. But in September 1869, trouble arose. Two of the Christian converts were killed on the orders of the prince of Chiang Mai. The warning was heeded by the local people. Suddenly the missionaries found themselves very alone and in fear for their own lives. Even their house servants deserted them.

The missionaries sent urgent letters to Bangkok asking for help. The Siamese government sent a royal commissioner to Chiang Mai, who was accompanied by two other American missionaries. The royal commissioner brought with him a letter from the king of Siam giving the missionaries permission to stay in Chiang Mai if they wished to do so. An audience was held with the prince of Chiang Mai at which McGilvary accused the prince of killing the two Christians. The prince admitted it, and added that he would kill anyone else who became a Christian. He considered that leaving the religion of the country was rebellion against him, and he would treat it as such.

McGilvary was advised by the commissioner and the other missionaries to leave, but he was determined to stay. He had a period of respite as the prince of Chiang Mai was required in Bangkok, where the British government had been making complaints about his unfair dealings with Burmese
foresters working in the Chiang Mai area. In fact, the prince died on the return journey from Bangkok, and he was succeeded by Prince Intanon. The new prince was willing for McGilvary and Wilson to stay in Chiang Mai.

Another crisis occurred in 1878 around the first Christian marriage. The family patriarch demanded the customary "spirit fee" for a feast to the family spirits of the young couple. The Christian couple refused to pay it, whereupon the family patriarch refused permission for the wedding. The Chao Uparat, the prince's half-brother, who was, in practice, more powerful than the prince himself, refused to support the missionaries and the young Christian couple. McGilvary decided to appeal to the king of Siam, King Chulalongkorn. He asked not only that freedom of Christian marriage be granted, but that there be freedom of religion in all respects. The application was granted, and full religious toleration was proclaimed. It was announced that, whoever wishes to embrace any religion after seeing that it is true and proper to be embraced, is allowed to do so without any restriction.

The missionaries were now free to preach Christianity, and the people were free to respond to the missionaries’ invitation to become Christians.

Development of Missionary Work

The initial response to the missionaries’ proclamation of Christianity was slow. In 1883, Carl Book, an adventurer and traveller, arrived in Chiang Mai. He records in his book about his travels that “after sixteen years’ labour, the mission claimed at the time of my visit only some seventy or eighty living converts”.

But, starting with the small group of converts, the mission work began to expand. In 1879, a girls school was opened by Miss Edna S. Cole and Miss Mary M. Campbell, offering the first formal education for girls in northern Siam. The girls had been excluded from the Buddhist education system which was available to boys through the temples. In 1890, the second church in the north, Bethlehem, was established at Sarapee, about fifteen kilometres from Chiang Mai. It was quickly followed by another church, Mae Dawk Dang at Doi Saket, an equal distance from Chiang Mai.

About 1885, the numbers of Christian converts began to grow more rapidly. While the official membership in 1883 was about 150, by 1894, it had grown to 322, and by 1897 was up to 884. By 1906, the missionaries reckoned that there were over three thousand Christians in the northern Thai church. By 1913, there were a total of twenty-three churches with five thousand members.

The work of the mission also expended in other ways. In 1887, a dispensary and temporary hospital were built in Chiang Mai. The following year a boys school was opened by Rev. D. G. Collins, destined to become the Prince Royal’s College, one of the most important schools in northern Siam. A permanent building for the first church in Chiang Mai was completed in 1891. The same year, the Rev. and Mrs. Dodd moved out to Lamphun, a small city about twenty-six kilometres from Chiang Mai. In Lamphun, Dodd supervised the first theological training school in northern Thailand.

In 1892, the mission began printing in Lao characters, a different script from that used in Siam. A special building was constructed to house the press, which was the first in northern Thailand. The press printed a great deal of materials for the mission, including Bibles, hymnbooks, tracts, and textbooks for the mission schools. It also handled a large amount of government printing.

McGilvary and other missionaries toured widely in the north. They travelled into Laos to the east, and into Burma and the Shan States in the north. Rev. Dodd took one extraordinary trip from northern Siam through China to Canton. In many places, the missionaries organized small groups of Christians who responded to their message. The first mission station in the north outside of Chiang Mai was opened at Lampang in 1884. Then other mission stations were founded: at Phrae in 1893, at Nan in 1895, and at Chiang Mai in 1897.

Numbers of northern Thai Christians were sent out into the villages for evangelistic work. For example, in the first three months of 1895, twenty-six men were sent into twenty-four different areas, paid by mission money. A radical change of policy, however, brought this to an end.
What was known as the Nevius policy, named after Dr. John Nevius, a missionary to China who formulated it, was adopted by the mission. This policy maintained that mission funds should not be used to pay native evangelists and pastors. The native churches should support their own people. One of the results of this policy was that the theological training school ceased operations for many years. The Thai Christians were not able support pastors of their own churches in most cases, let alone students in training. It was not until the policy had been relaxed in 1912 that the Thailand Theological Seminary was established on a permanent basis in Chiang Mai.

The Message of the Missionaries

The missionaries believed that they had “Good News” for the people of northern Siam. They saw themselves as bringing light into a place of darkness. They were bringing truth to replace false beliefs and superstitions. The essence of this Good News, as the missionaries proclaimed it, was the message of the possibility of forgiveness and freedom from sin. They spoke of One who had the authority to forgive sin, and of a Saviour who could redeem from sin everyone who believed and trusted in him.

The word which McLilvary and the other missionaries used for sin in the Thai language was baab. In the Buddhist context, baab referred to those deeds which had evil results. The people of north Siam were ready to agree that they were all “sinners”. Only the arahants, the Buddhist saints who were very close to entering nirvana, were free from baab or sin. They were also willing to agree with the missionaries that Buddhist commandments, such as the prohibition against taking life, were broken every day. This was evident from the fact that they all ate meat.

The missionaries found it harder, however, to convince the people of north Siam to take this sin very seriously. For many of the people, sin could be balanced against merit, as on a credit and debit balance sheet. One could make up for what one did wrong with some extra good deeds. The missionaries tried to emphasize that sin was something terrible because it was rebellion against God. God would punish those who sinned. But in the Buddhist system of ideas, the possibility of doing better next time was perfectly valid.
The missionaries continued to argue that the Buddha did not and could not forgive sin. He had said that people would have to bear the results of their deeds. The only hope for people was not to do those actions which had undesirable consequences. As McIlvray put it, according to the Buddha, all noble desire and vicious instincts ultimately had to be extinguished through asceticism and self-mortification. Making merit was not sufficient, even for the doctrines of Buddhism themselves.

In contrast to the Buddha, the missionaries claimed, Jesus Christ could forgive sin. McIlvray used legal ideas of Jesus paying a penalty or a fine that we should have paid ourselves to explain how Jesus' death offers forgiveness. He also used the idea that Jesus had "infinite merit" which could be transferred to anyone, and which would more than cancel out all the sins, or the demerit which a person had incurred. The northern Siamese people had traditions of a coming Buddha. He would be even greater than the last Buddha, and it was said that he would save all who saw him. Some of the missionaries took up these traditions. "The one for whom you have been waiting has already come", they said. "The coming Buddha is, in fact, Jesus Christ - and He will save all who take refuge in Him."

The missionaries spoke of salvation in terms of the forgiveness of sin, and also in terms of having eternal life and going to heaven. The two latter ideas were closely identified. McIlvray, for example, described eternal life as "an endless state of conscious existence which begins at death." Life in heaven would be unsurpassable bliss. It would be endless, like nirvana, and the person who entered it would never be re-born on earth again. But unlike nirvana, the individual would retain his conscious existence in it.

The word that the Christians used for heaven was swean. This word was used in Thai to describe the places that good people went to in between re-births on earth. The heavens were the homes of the gods, the Hindu deities who were a part of popular religion in northern Siam. There were believed to be many levels of heavens, the higher levels offering higher types of pleasures. The lower levels offered more sensual enjoyments and were more attractive to many people. It was probably with these types of ideas that the Christian heaven was identified, rather than with nirvana. The missionaries and Siamese people agreed that everyone had a spirit (or ciit-swean in Thai) which would survive death and would go either to heaven or hell. What the missionaries were offering was an escape from punishment for sin in hell, and permanent happiness in heaven. Heaven was often referred to as "the country of happiness."

Salvation was not only for the next life, but also for this life. Forgiveness of sin was supposed to bring release from despair and a happier state of mind. It also was considered to mean freedom from sin in this life. The lives of the new Christians would be changed. They would keep new, higher moral standards. There would be no more polygamy or drunkenness, for example. The new Christians would be clean and neat, both in appearance and in habits. They would be thrifty, and would not waste their money on gambling. They would have a new attitude to work. They would be ambitious and would show a spirit of industry and efficiency.

Not only would the lives of the Christians change, but the whole society would be affected. The missionaries spoke with enthusiasm of the coming "civilization", which would be the fruit of the acceptance of Christianity. One of the missionaries, Rev. Henry White, used the argument that mission work would lead to great civilization, both socially and industrially, as a prime justification for the mission enterprise. It was the Gospel which had made Great Britain into the greatest and mightiest Christian Empire on the face of the earth, he claimed. "What the Gospel has done for Europe it can do for her sister continent, Asia" - through conviction of sin, moral accountability, and the acceptance of Christ as Saviour.

In summary, then, the message of the missionaries was that the basic problem of mankind was sin. Jesus Christ provided the only solution and offered the only salvation. Salvation meant freedom from the consequences of sin and eternal life in heaven. Salvation would also involve a better, more moral life on earth, and a better, more civilized society. This salvation was available by believing in and relying upon Jesus Christ.
Jonathan Wilson
Born in 1830 in Pennsylvania, U.S.A. A class-mate of Daniel McGilvary, they went to Siam together in 1858. Work in Chiang Mai from 1868 to 1885. After a furlough, he moved to Lampang where he lived until his death in 1911. Translated and composed several hundred hymns in the Lao language.

William Clifton Dodd
Born in 1857 in Iowa, U.S.A. Sailed for Siam in 1886. Work in Chiang Mai until 1891 when he opened a mission station in Lamphun where he began a theological training school. In 1897 opened Chiang Rai station, and in 1908 developed mission work in Keng Tung, in the Shan States. In 1910 journeyed from Chiang Rai to Canton, China through the Yunnan Province. In 1917 was responsible for opening mission station in Yunnan Province, South China. Died there in 1919.

David Ghomley Collins
Born in 1855 in Ohio, U.S.A. Work in Chiang Mai from 1887. Founded the boys' school which became the Prince Royal's College. Managed the mission press. Had oversight of 4 churches in the Chiang Mai area. Died while on furlough in U.S.A. in 1917.

James W. McKean
Responses to the Missionaries' Message

Thousands of people in northern Siam heard the preaching of the missionaries, but comparatively few became Christians. There are several reasons why people did not flock to receive this offer of salvation. First of all, the people were not convinced that sin was as big a problem as the missionaries said it was. If one did something wrong, one could make up for it. One could do something good to compensate for one's misdeeds, such as by giving alms to a beggar, or by going to listen to the monks preaching in the temple. There was no need for a saviour from sin, such as the missionaries were offering. The people were not expecting to have eternal life when they died, but they were expecting to go to heaven for a while, and then be re-born. If they had done good in the last life, they would be rewarded with a pleasant experience in heaven, and with a better life when they were re-born on earth. They were satisfied with that.

There was a second, and perhaps more important, reason why the response to the missionaries' offer of salvation was small. The missionaries made heavy demands on those who became Christians. The new converts had to give up all their Buddhist practices. They would no longer be able to accompany their friends to the temple or participate in ceremonies with them. They had to renounce the Buddha, whose teaching they had respected, and in whom they had found refuge in the past. They had to give up all those religious activities which had given their lives meaning, and through which they had hope for the future. They had made merit in the past, and the results had been good. Why should they give up making merit? Their ancestors, for many generations, had followed the ways of the Buddha. Their friends, indeed, the whole society in which they lived, including the princes and kings, followed the ways of the Buddha. Those ways had been well tried and tested. If people did good, they received the benefits. Why leave Buddhism to become a Christian?

The people of northern Siam also believed in a great variety of spirits, to which they paid deference. The missionaries insisted that the new Christians renounce the spirits and cut all connections with them. According to the missionaries, the spirits were evil. For the people of northern Siam, it was true that some spirits could frighten one, and would catch one if they could. It was necessary to guard against these spirits with spells, amulets, and help from the Buddha. But not all the spirits were malicious. If they were given due respect, they would protect one and keep one from harm. They would guard one's property, and keep one safe when travelling. The spirits could also help in times of sickness. They had the power to cure sickness, just as they had the power to cause it.

For these sorts of reasons, many people did not accept the missionaries' offer of salvation. Especially during the first fifteen years of the mission work, only a few people became Christians. Carl Bock wrote in his book that, of these few, many of them "had embraced Christianity for the sake of temporal rather than spiritual benefits, being desirous of being redeemed out of slavery, or of getting paid for the employment which the mission afforded them".

Who were the Converts to Christianity?

There were some people who became Christians. By 1917, the missionaries claimed that two percent of the people within the area of the churches were Christian. Who were these people, and why did they become Christians? The historical evidence is incomplete as there are virtually no records left by the early converts themselves. However, cogent comments can be made on the basis of what the missionaries reported.

From these reports, it seems that many of the people who turned to Christianity did so because they saw God as having great power, greater than that of the local spirits. The missionaries spoke of God as a spiritual being. He was certainly like the spirits with which the people of northern Siam were familiar in that he could not be seen, but he was always present. One could pray to him and ask him for help and protection. He could cure illnesses and drive away other spirits. The one difference with this spirit, when the missionaries called Jehovah, was that he was much greater than any of the other local spirits. While other spirits controlled limited territories, there were no bounds to Jehovah's domain. While other spirits had limited power, the power of the Spirit Jehovah was very great.
There were some occasions when the local spirits were seen as malevolent and oppressive, when simple acts of placation were not enough to satisfy them. It was on these occasions that the transfer of allegiance to the higher and always beneficent spirit of Christianity could be experienced as a real liberation. The two types of occasions were when the spirits were causes of sickness, and when people were said to be unable to control their spirits and were accused of witchcraft.

The effectiveness of the medical work in evangelism was frequently noted by the early missionaries. The superior power to heal was seen as demonstrating that the missionaries had access to a power superior to that of the local spirits. L.J. Curtis, one of the missionaries, wrote,

"It is impossible to estimate the power for good of the medical work, for there is no way of reckoning the conversions resulting there from. Certain it is that it is one of the most efficient agencies in planting the gospel in the Laos country, for it breaks down the universal belief in the spirits."

From 1911 to 1913 there was a great epidemic of malaria in northern Siam. It was accompanied by famine. Dr. McKean, one of the missionary doctors, tells that, at first, people made a lot of offerings to the local spirits. But these did not help. The epidemic continued, and the famine grew more severe. The people became poorer through the cost of the offerings. Finally, as a last resort, many tried the Christian medicines which evangelists distributed, and turned to the Christian God. Large numbers of people became Christians at this time, some records indicating as many as two thousand people in the Chiang Mai area alone.

The missionaries helped a significant number of people who had been accused of witchcraft. The third church in the north, Mae Dawk Dang, was established around a group of people who had been persecuted for witchcraft. The following explanation of what happened is given by Dodd. He refers to "hungry spirits". They are often called pi ba in Thai.

These hungry spirits, so long as they were well fed, are supposed to be beneficent. But neglected and hungry, they become malevolent. Their patrons are no longer able to control them, and they take possession of other people in revenge upon their stingy patrons. These patrons are then accused of being witches and wizards. Unless some beneficent power intervenes [such as the missionaries], these poor unfortunate are driven from house and home.

If someone became ill in a village, the spirit doctor would be called in. He would go through a ceremony in which the sick person had to call out the name of the spirit which was causing the sickness. The person who was responsible for that spirit could be identified. In some cases, the homes of those people, and all their possessions, were burnt to the ground, and they were ostracised from the community. Other villages would not accept them because they were considered to be dangerous. Many such people found shelter among the missionaries who were unafraid of the spirits.

The Christian communities offered these people the chance of a new start, with practical material help and shelter. Sometimes these people came to live in the missionary compounds. One visitor to the mission at Chiang Mai in the 1880s, Holt S. Hallet, noted that sixteen families who had been accused of witchcraft were at that time residing in the mission grounds. Many of these people came to believe that Christ is more powerful than the spirits. They found a new peace and happiness, free from the curse of the spirits who had been blamed for their misfortune.

Some people were able to avoid ostracism and expulsion from the community by becoming Christians when first accused of witchcraft. It was recognized, even by many non-Christians, that Christians cut all connections with spirits, and placed themselves under a higher power. Another missionary, John Freeman, described what used to happen. People who had no prior connection with Christianity invited the elders or leaders of the nearest group of Christians to come and hold a service in their house. At this time, all the charms and spirit shrines in the house were torn down. By this act, the people declared that they had changed their allegiance and were now Christians. Freeman said that often, though not always, there was an end to the accusation and suspicion.

Help given to people accused of witchcraft was quite significant in the early growth of the church.
Through the accusation of witchcraft, said Dodd, "the devil has over-reached himself! and unwittingly driven hundreds, possibly thousands, to Christ."  

**Missionary Patronage**

There is one other factor which was important in people becoming Christians and remaining in the Christian community: the missionaries were considered to be good patrons. People attached themselves to the missionaries, and looked to them for help and employment, while accepting the missionaries' religion.

Up until the early twentieth century, there were two distinct classes of people in northern Siam: the lords or nobles, and the peasants. Each peasant was attached to a lord. The peasant would give the lord rice and would work for the lord whenever the lord required it. The lord, for his part, would offer protection. He would keep law and order, and would generally look after the peasants under him. A peasant could change his lord when he wished. Thus, a kind and genial lord who was able to offer benefits to his peasants, could gather round him quite a following.

The end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth were times of social change in northern Siam in which the old social system began to disintegrate. During this time, power was gradually transferred from the nobles in northern Siam to a new Siamese bureaucracy. The Siamese officials were sent to the north to take over the administration of justice, the collection of taxes, and the organization of public works such as the building of roads.

The prince of Chiang Mai and his ministers were paid good salaries by the Siamese government to offset their losses of power. But many of the smaller nobles had little recompense for their losses. Partly because of this, and partly because people were upset by injustices in the collection of taxes, a rebellion was organized in 1889.

There was a plan to attack Chiang Mai and to declare independence from Siam. The rebels marched on the city, but were put down before they reached it.

At this time, when the local lords were losing their power, and their ability to offer benefits to the peasants, a number of new groups were offering alternative patronage, particularly in the form of employment. There were new possibilities of advancement through positions in the new Siamese bureaucracy. There were Chinese traders and tax collectors offering some employment. There were the teak companies; and there were also the missionaries. The missionaries could offer employment through the schools, the hospitals, the press, as well as the churches. There were positions as evangelists, pastors, teachers, nurses and other medical staff, servants in the homes, watchmen for mission property, carriers for touring, cleaners, gardeners, and cooks. Between 1910 and 1915, there were at least several hundred people in the direct employ of the mission in northern Siam. The larger circle of missionary dependents, direct or indirect, would have run into the thousands.

The missionaries provided new opportunities for economic advancement. Unlike the lords, they also encouraged it. The lords had tended to discourage the peasants from becoming too wealthy, for they could become a challenge to the lords themselves. The lords would curb the ambitions of the peasants by "borrowing" from them. It seems that sometimes the lords also resorted to accusations of witchcraft in order to assert control. The missionaries, on the other hand, expected the new Christians to display a higher standard of living. They noted with approval "an upward striving in material things" amongst the new Christians.

The missionaries, of course, discouraged people from becoming Christians merely for temporal gain. This was one reason for the introduction of the Nevius policy, mentioned above. McGilvary related a case of a man who built a chapel, and then invited McGilvary to come. This man organized all the villagers to be there and to accept McGilvary's religion. He expected McGilvary to then hand out money to all the "converts" who did what this patron wanted and entered his new religion.

People who became Christians for the sake of financial gain were referred to as "rice Christians". Freeman maintained that there were none in the north of Siam. Yet he records that people did expect financial help. He says that money sent to relieve suffering in a famine in 1893 "opened the hearts of many ... to the gospel message". When direct financial aid to the churches was suspended under the Nevius policy in 1899, there was a drop
in membership in some places. It is likely that not a few converts expected some material gain from becoming Christians, even if this was not their only motive.

The Appeal of Christianity in the Pioneer Period

The Good News which the missionaries proclaimed was not the Good News to which the early converts responded. The message of the forgiveness of sins through Christ’s death on the cross met with little response. Sin was not a big problem in the minds of most people, and the people of north Siam believed they already had means for dealing with it.

There were disadvantages in accepting Christianity. It meant that one had to give up what had been valued in Buddhism. It meant that one could no longer seek the help of spirits in times of sickness, or ask for their protection. It also meant that one could no longer join with friends and relatives in the religious ceremonies which had made life fun and given it meaning. Indeed, becoming a Christian could provoke considerable opposition, not only from friends and relatives, but also from nobles and officials. It could lead to social ostracism.

However, there was an appeal in Christianity for some people. Particularly for marginal people, already ostracised from society, such as those accused of witchcraft, Christianity was Good News. News of the Christian God was also welcomed by people who were desperate – desperately sick, or in dire straits in times of famine. These people had tried all the resources within their culture to deal with their situation, and those resources had proved inadequate. To these people, Christianity offered Good News – good news of a great and beneficent spiritual Father. The power and beneficence of this spiritual being was demonstrated in physical healing, and in protection against troublesome spirits.

At the same time, there were other advantages in becoming a Christian. The missionaries were worthy patrons. They could offer employment, and they encouraged ambition. Through their patronage, a better life was possible.

CHAPTER 2

CHRISTIANITY AND SIAMESE NATIONALISM: 1916 – 1946

The Church Ceases to Grow

The period from 1916 to World War II was a step beyond the pioneering days of the mission. The last of the original four people who had pioneered the mission work in northern Siam, Mrs. McElvany, died in 1923. Dr. McElvany and Dr. Wilson had both died in 1911. The last new mission station, Chiang Rung in Yunnan, south China, was opened by the north Siam mission in 1917. There were few major institutions established in this period. The large schools, such as the Prince Royal’s College and Dara Academy in Chiang Mai, as well as most of the schools at other mission stations, such as Nan, Phrae, and Lampang, were well established by this time. The last new major medical institution had been the McKean Leprosarium, which was opened on an island in the Ping River a few miles south of Chiang Mai in 1908.

By 1916, there were many churches throughout northern Siam. Apart from supporting and maintaining these churches, a major task for the missionaries in this period was the development of an educated leadership for the churches and for the medical and educational institutions. There seemed to be little time for fresh evangelistic work or for the long tours that the pioneer missionaries had undertaken. The paternal care of the churches and institutions took most of the missionaries’ attention.

The fact that less evangelistic work was being done was regularly discussed at mission meetings. Plans were made, but there was little momentum for evangelism. One reason for the lack of enthusiasm was the lack of response to the missionaries’ preaching. Indeed, the churches in the north of Siam grew very little during this period. The rate of growth was less than that of the population as a whole, showing a loss of members from among the families of the Christians themselves.

In 1940, the official number of members in the Church of Christ in Siam was 9,712. The membership in 1920 was 7,967, which means that there was an increase in church membership of about twenty-two percent in a period of twenty years. During that period, the population of Siam
increased by about fifty-seven percent. The figures for Chiang Mai actually show a decrease. There were about four thousand members in 1915, but this dropped to 3,381 by 1920, and to 3,300 by 1940.

On the other hand, there was a general growth in the large institutions of the mission. The number of students in the schools which the mission in Siam ran increased from 1,596 in 1920 to 5,819 in 1940. During the same period, however, the number of schools dropped from fifty-nine to thirty-one. A number of small parochial schools were closed, but the large schools, particularly in Bangkok and Chiang Mai, grew considerably. Only one new hospital was opened during this period, bringing to ten the number of hospitals run by the mission in Siam; but the number of in-patients in these hospitals increased by 228% between 1918 and 1940.

There was a strong emphasis on evangelism and religious instruction in the schools. In the pioneer period, in the north of Siam, most pupils had been Christians. As the city schools increased in prestige, the numbers of Buddhist pupils increased, but few of them became committed to Christianity. According to one commentator on Siamese society, Virginia Thompson, boys would only tolerate the Christian flavor of mission schools for the sake of their educational advantages; and girls would accept it while there but forget it when they returned to their families. Graduation exercises at mission schools became known as "Good-bye Jesus Day".

Changes in the Situation in Northern Siam

Why did the church stop growing? It is easy to blame the missionaries. Some people have said that they were not evangelizing. Others have argued that the missionaries were not caring sufficiently for the young Christians. There may be some truth in these accusations, but there are also many other factors. It is helpful to consider those factors which influenced the first people in northern Siam to become Christians in the pioneer period. One finds that the situation had changed considerably; by the period after World War I, the factors which had been influential in the pioneer period were no longer significant.

In the pioneer period, a number of people had
become Christians because they had been convinced by the demonstration of God's power in healing. The work of the hospitals was now still increasing, but it was less persuasive evangelistically. The Siamese government was now involved in health work. A health officer had been appointed to Chiang Mai in 1915, and the government was soon involved in health education, in dispensing medicines, and in dealing with epidemics. A small government hospital was established in Chiang Mai. If the Buddhist government could use similar methods to those of the missionaries, it was difficult to attribute those methods of healing to the power of God.

There were no epidemics or famines during this period comparable to the one of 1911-1914. Smallpox had once crossed the country regularly in plague proportions, drastically reducing the population. In 1905, a vaccine plant had been organized at the mission hospital in Chiang Mai, and one hundred and fifty people were trained as vaccinators and evangelists. A widespread campaign had followed in which thirty thousand children were vaccinated against smallpox. This campaign made a significant contribution towards the eradication of the disease in the north of Siam.

Famine conditions in the north could no longer have the devastating impact they had had in the past since northern Siam was no longer cut off from the rest of the world by months of travel. The railway line had gradually been making its way north, so that by 1909 it was possible to travel from Bangkok to the northern edge of the plain in two days. By 1922, the steam train brought Chiang Mai within two days travel from Bangkok. In fact, one could travel by rail all the way from Singapore to Chiang Mai. Vast quantities of food could be transported quickly from one part of the country to another, and famines could be averted.

Accusations of witchcraft had led to a number of people becoming Christians, but this ceased to be a significant factor after the pioneer period. The government forbade making such accusations, and they ceased to be a common phenomenon. In 1925, there was a note from Chiang Mai in the magazine of the mission, Siam Outlook, that the missionaries had helped two men accused of witchcraft. But this was the first case for many years.

Missionary patronage was another factor in the pioneer period. Patronage continued to be important for maintaining the loyalty of the Christians, but ceased to be important in bringing new people into the Christian community. In a report to the Mission Board of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. by J. C. Millikan, who visited the mission in Siam in 1923, a comment is made about missionary patronage.

In at least one (mission) station it was regretfully admitted by the missionaries and apparent in the attitude of the church members that almost all the members of the local church were (present and past) servants in the homes of the missionaries, teachers or scholars in the schools, or other Mission employees, or members of their families. Millikan went on to say, "This is to the disadvantage of the work through its effect on the motives in entering the church and on the attitude of those who are its members."

But missionary patronage did not increase in the years which preceded World War II. In 1929, the number of Siamese pastors, evangelists, teachers, doctors, and nurses employed in the mission stations of the north was 227. These figures do not include the people employed in unskilled or part-time capacities, such as servants, watchmen, gardeners, and cooks. The number of Presbyterian missionaries working in Siam decreased from one hundred and six in 1920 to sixty-eight in 1940, largely due to the economic depression and the lack of money available in the U.S.A. for mission work. Correspondingly, the number of people employed personally by the missionaries as servants, watchmen, gardeners, and cooks would probably also have decreased. There was no extra patronize through employment which could be offered to Buddhists which might have helped to draw them into the Christian circle.

The Growth of Nationalism in Siam

During these years, there was a growing spirit of nationalism in Siam. Religion was one component of this nationalism. Being a Buddhist was seen by many Siamese people as being one aspect of being Siamese. Being a Christian was discouraged as linking oneself with something foreign and non-Siamese.
King Vajiravudh (Rama VI) succeeded King Chulalongkorn on the throne in 1911. He sought to foster a spirit of nationalism, involving devotion to nation, religion, and king. In 1915, a deputation team from the mission board of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. noted the change in attitude towards religion from that of King Chulalongkorn. The new king was definitely pro-Buddhist, and more anti-Christian. Buddhism occupied an important place in King Vajiravudh’s programme of nationalism.

In a speech which King Vajiravudh gave in 1916, he argued that it was unnatural for an Asian to become a Christian, just as it was unnatural for a European to become a Buddhist. Such conversions amounted to a repudiation of one’s ancestors and of one’s nation. Conversion, he said, was a sign of weakness, vacillation, and opportunism. The king argued that one’s religion was an essential element in one’s national identity. Religion and nation were inseparable.

The 1932 coup d'état, in which Thailand changed from absolute to constitutional monarchy, made little difference to this policy. But in the unstable period before the Japanese entered Thailand in 1941, the conjunction of Buddhism and nationalism was strengthened. The Chiang Mai mission reported in 1941 that the political, social, and economic pressure brought to bear on the Christians was not easy for them to withstand. Government officials had become Buddhist evangelists. They urged Christians to revert to Buddhism on grounds of patriotism and political expediency.

The Gospel was presented by the missionaries as a new, and thus, a foreign religion. Christianity was an alternative to Buddhism, and becoming a Christian meant rejected Buddhism, both in theory and in practice. A few missionaries did study Buddhism at some depth. Two of these spent most of their missionary careers in Chiang Mai. Howard Campbell knew Pali, and Kenneth Wells became acknowledged as an authority on Thai Buddhism, particularly because of his book, Thai Buddhism: Its Rites and Activities. These men were sympathetic and scholarly in their approach to Buddhism, yet they were struck by the differences between Christianity and Buddhism rather than by the similarities. They were comparing the true with what was inadequate, if not with the false. Some missionaries continued to be antagonistic to Buddhism.

Little use was made of Buddhist ideas or concepts in the proclamation of the Gospel. Christianity was not generally seen as the fulfillment of Buddhism except in the field of ethics. It was argued that Christianity raised Buddhist ethics to a higher standard, and, in addition, gave people a power for following the higher standard. But, in general, Christianity was presented as a set of doctrines or truths, which could only be compared as a whole set with Buddhism. Christianity was a "foreign" set of ideas: foreign in the sense that it came from America, and foreign in the sense that it did not fit the Siamese people’s ways of thinking.

The missionaries continued to emphasize that the basic problem of mankind was sin, and that they brought news of a Saviour from sin. The Siamese people continued to object that sin was not as serious as the missionaries said it was. They had always been able to make up for sin by making additional merit. What was wrong with that? The ideas that the missionaries preached about life after death, and about salvation, were different from their own ideas, and no more compelling.

The missionaries gradually became more conscious of the problem of the foreignness of Christianity. They saw the importance of separating Western ways from what was Christian. Christianity was no longer identified with Western civilization. One missionary who worked in the north, Lucy Starling, spoke of the long debate in her mind "as to how much of our Western ways could be taught to the people without weaging them away from the good things in their own heritage".

In 1923, there was a movement among the Chiang Mai Christians to found a National Siamese church, but there was insufficient support for the idea at that time. However, the importance of founding a national church under Siamese leadership became more urgent in the following years amid the rising tide of nationalism, and the lessening ability of the mission to support the church due to the economic depression.

A National Christian Council was formed in 1929 to organize the establishment of a national church. In 1932, this council started a Thai language church magazine, Church News. The first general assembly of the national Christian church met in April, 1934, and became the assembly of "The
First Church, Chiang Mai

This church was the first in northern Siam, founded in 1868 by Daniel McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson. The building was built by Dr. Cheek, a missionary doctor who went into the teak business, and completed in 1891. In 1868 a new church building was opened, and the building above is now used by Chiang Mai Christian School. The membership of First Church, Chiang Mai is the largest of any Protestant church in Thailand, of over 1,300.

Church of Christ in Siam. Thus the national church was born.

The formation of a national church was not adequate in itself to overcome the criticism that Christianity was a foreign religion. Carl Zimmerman, an American sociologist, wrote a report on the church in 1931 in which he argued that the church was psychologically foreign to Siam. He pointed out that the literature, music, art, architecture, and even many of the social customs practised in the church were foreign. He argued that the absence of concrete symbols in worship, and the very method of a confronting, aggressive, crusading type of Christianity were incompatible with the culture. In the past, said Zimmerman,

a person could not become a Christian according to the standards laid down by the missionary without becoming almost completely de-nationalized and de-culturalized from his own social system ... A Siamese Christian even today, can but give a part of his life to the social system created by the Christian church.

That other part of his community life is what makes him weaken.

Emphasis on Christian Purity

There was a strong emphasis on the maintenance of high moral standards among the Christians in this era. Combined with the foreignness of Christianity, the Christians tended to develop an identity as a separate and exclusive group. One aspect of the moral standards was temperance. A branch of the Temperance Union was founded in Chiang Mai in 1924. It had a four-fold concern: abstinence from alcohol, smoking cigarettes and opium, and from chewing betel-nut. In 1934, the Temperance Union in Siam had a membership of five thousand. This was a considerable number considering the total church membership was only 8,700.

The tendency for the Siamese Christians to see themselves as a small, exclusive group was further developed by John Sung. In 1938, Sung, a Chinese evangelist, was invited by Chinese Christians in Siam to conduct some revival meetings in Bangkok. Sung was invited to return a second time in 1939. This time he conducted meetings at a number of provincial centres, including Chiang Mai.

Sung's meetings are reported to have been highly
emotional affairs. Sung stressed the idea of a pure life consecrated to God. For him, sin was specific actions, and it was a common practice of his to name sins and ask people in the congregation to put up their hands in confession if they had committed any of them. He would ask such questions as "Do you hate anyone?", "Have you ever stolen anything or 'borrowed' something and 'forgotten' to return it?", "Have you ever committed adultery even mentally?", "Do you have habits of gambling, drinking, smoking cigarettes, using drugs, buying or selling lottery tickets, dancing, going to movies, or looking at pornography?", "Are there sins in your family relationships?", "Are you superstitious, or do you go to fortune tellers?", "Do you buy or sell on Sunday?".

Sung stressed humility and being willing to "sell our faces". He spoke of the chains of money, position, and thinking that we are good people, which keep us in sin. He spoke frequently about "the precious blood of Jesus" which has bought redemption from sin. Through the blood of Jesus, one can be forgiven, and can live a new, consecrated life in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Many Siamese Christians dedicated themselves afresh to God during Sung's meetings. Sung organized these people into evangelistic witness bands. He anointed them with oil, which was understood as some kind of ordination. These witness bands led to a small revival in some of the Chinese churches in Thailand, but there is little evidence to suggest that Sung's mission or the witness bands had much affect on Siamese non-Christians.

Sung was very critical of the missionaries. In conjunction with his emphasis on purity and separateness, not only from the world, but from Christians who were not pure, this led to widened divisions in the church and among the missionaries.

Founding of the Catholic Mission in Chiang Mai

Throughout the pioneer period, the Presbyterians had been the only Christian missionaries in the north of Siam. In 1914, two Catholic missionaries were sent from Bangkok to examine the possibility of founding a Catholic mission in the north, and they purchased land in Chiang Mai. In 1926, the bishop of Bangkok, Msgr. Perros, came to Chiang Mai himself to examine the opportunities. Eventually, in January 1931, two priests from the Foreign Mission of Paris arrived in Chiang Mai, and set up a small building on the land previously purchased.

Among the first converts to Catholicism in the north were a number of people who had been associated with the Church of Christ in Siam. This generated some antagonism between the Catholic and Protestant missionaries. In 1932, the Catholics founded two schools, a girls school, Regina Coeli, and a boys school, Montfort, which soon came to rival the Presbyterian schools, Dara Academy and the Prince Royal's College. The Catholics also established a smaller parish school. The Catholic missionaries were involved in some itineration, and in 1933, a priest was sent to Vientiane to minister to substantial numbers of inquirers there. But overall the Catholic church grew very little in the north of Siam.

World War II

In December 1941, Japanese troops entered Thailand, and missionaries in Chiang Mai had to flee across the border into Burma. Missionaries in Bangkok were interned under Siamese supervision until 1942 when they were sent back to the United States. The priest in charge of the Catholic church in Chiang Mai was moved out to Nan by the Siamese government.

The young national Christians were alone, and were under some pressure. Their ties with the 'enemy' Americans made their loyalty to the nation and the Japanese overlords somewhat suspect. Christians were pressured to renounce their faith, particularly if they had jobs with the government or in education. Most of the church buildings and institutions were taken over by the government. In Chiang Mai, the Prince Royal's college and Dara Academy, as well as the main city church, were closed and taken over by Japanese and Siamese soldiers. An antiaircraft gun was placed in the tower of the church, Chiang Mai. The mission hospitals were also either closed or taken over by the military.

There were some Christians who reverted to Buddhism during the war, but there are no accurate indications of the extent to which this happened. Many of the activities of the churches continued in small ways, often with people meeting secretly in homes. Some of the church leaders travelled throughout the country encouraging
the groups of Christians. The pressure on the Christian community decreased as Japanese power waned. Late in 1945, the Church of Christ in Siam sent a telegram to the mission board of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. urging the quick return of the missionaries.

Christianity in a Period of Growing Siamese Nationalism

There was one particular group of people in this period for whom Christianity did bring Good News: leprosy patients. These people were frequently shunned by society, but many of them found love and care within the Christian community. Up to the time of World War II, about one thousand five hundred leprosy sufferers had come to live at the McKean Leprosarium. There, they found physical help for their disease unavailable elsewhere. They also found a new identity. God did not reject them as people cursed by the sins of past lives. He forgave them and accepted them as his children, they were taught. Almost all the leprosy patients who came to live at McKean became Christians. Churches were also formed at clinics which were held for out-patients in several places in northern Thailand. Other churches began when McKean patients were moved into rehabilitation villages in the years preceding World War II. By the time of the war, the leprosy patients and their families constituted a substantial proportion of the Christian community in the north of Siam.

Most other people, however, found little to attract them to Christianity. No longer was the demonstration of God’s power in healing as compelling to them as it had been. The missionaries had few opportunities for helping people accused of witchcraft. There was almost no employment or patronage available for people who were not already members of the Christian community. Christianity was presented as the true religion, and a better alternative to Buddhism; but few Siamese people found the reasons for changing from Buddhist persuasive.

The fact that Christianity was seen as a foreign religion was a major obstacle to people accepting Christianity during this period of growth in the Siamese nationalistic spirit. If one was a Thai, one was naturally a Buddhist. It was stated by King Vajiravudh himself that Christianity was not the Thai religion. To become a Christian was considered by many people as a betrayal of one’s country. The Christians of north Siam, for their part, found some
CHAPTER 3
THE POST-WAR PERIOD: 1946 - 1982

The Changing Role of the Missionaries

A small number of missionaries returned to
Thailand almost immediately after the war. One
particular problem was that the Church of Christ in Thailand
was not recognized by the government as a body having the
right to own property. The property which the government
had taken during the war years from the church had to be
given back to the Presbyterian Mission. Kenneth Wells, for
example, travelled through several northern cities in
Thailand to receive property back from the government so
that the church could begin to use it again.

Dr. Edwin Cart, another Presbyterian missionary
who had been in Thailand before World War II, was authorized
to receive back the missing hospitals from the government.
He began to arrange for them to function again under the
church. The Church World Service sent an initial seventy-one
cases of medicine, and in the following one and a half
years sent a total of nineteen shipments of relief materials
worth U.S. 250,000. The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.
sent enough equipment for all the needs of a five hundred
bed hospital. Dr. Cart worked with government officials to
distribute these supplies throughout Thailand. Medical
supplies were urgently needed. Epidemics of cholera,
smallpox, and tuberculosis had broken out. Malaria
epidemics were so serious that in many areas rice fields
were not being planted. Supplies of medicine had become
very depleted during the war, and this help from the
churches in the United States was gratefully received.

Late in 1946 the mission board of the Presbyterian
Church in the U.S.A. sent a deputation to assess the
situation in Thailand and consider the future of mission work
in the country. The leaders of the Church of Christ in
Thailand and the members of the deputation agreed that the
goal was that the Thai church should be self-reliant. As a
step towards that goal, the missionaries would return to
cooperate with the national Christians rather than to direct
them.

Joint committees of Thai Christians and
missionaries were appointed to conduct the work of the

church. Ten years later, in 1956, the mission board of the
Presbyterian Church asked the Church of Christ in Thailand
to assume full responsibility for the joint committees and
appoint all the members themselves. The word "joint" was
dropped in the description of the committees.

On August 16th 1957, the American Presbyterian
mission was dissolved as an independent entity. A ceremony
was held at which the missionary personnel were put directly
under the charge of the Church of Christ in Thailand. This
meant that the missionaries were henceforth given their
assignments by the Church of Christ in Thailand instead of
the mission board, and were responsible to the church in
Thailand for their work. The term "fraternal worker" was
used instead of "missionary" for the foreign personnel who
worked with the Church of Christ in Thailand.

Although the Presbyterian Mission was abolished
as an entity distinct from the national church, a
large number of Presbyterian missionaries came to
Thailand. In 1949, the United Presbyterian Church listed
eighty-two people working in Thailand and receiving
salaries from them. Twenty Presbyterian missionaries came
from China in the early 1950s when that country was
closed to Christian missions.

A number of Catholic missionaries also came
from China to work in the north of Thailand. After language
training, a number of these men were stationed in small
towns where they built churches and schools. Other Catholic
priests began working among hill-tribe people, particularly
the Karen.

The Overseas Missionary Fellowship began work in
Thailand in 1951 after being forced to withdraw from China,
where their mission had been called the China Inland Mission.
In northern Thailand, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship has
worked mainly amongst hill-tribe people. The American
Baptist Foreign Missionary Society also began work among the
Karen people in northern Thailand in the early 1950s when
entry into Burma became difficult.

The Seventh Day Adventists began working in
northern Thailand at this time. They have worked with
tribal groups, particularly the Hmong, but also have some
Thai-speaking congregations, including one in Chiang Mai.
The Church of Christ, a fundamentalist splinter group of the American Disciples of Christ, has aggressively directed its mission at the members of the Church of Christ in Thailand. This group began working in Chiang Mai about 1960. They have tried to persuade members of the Church of Christ in Thailand that they are not following the Bible, particularly because they use musical instruments in their churches. In some places, the Church of Christ has managed to create splits and form their own groups. One of their missionaries claimed that about sixty-five percent of their membership in the north of Thailand had transferred from other Christian denominations.

The Pentecostals began working in Chiang Mai in 1963. A Thai Pentecostal pastor from Bangkok led the work with the support of two missionaries, one from America and one from New Zealand. At the present time, there are two Pentecostal groups in Chiang Mai. The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada support one, while the Finnish Free Foreign Mission is supporting the other. Both of these Pentecostal groups have a number of rural congregations associated with them. All of these rural groups are small, the largest having about fifty members.

The total number of Thai people in the Chiang Mai and Lamphun provinces associated with the Catholics, the Seventh Day Adventists, the Church of Christ, and the Pentecostal groups amounts to about two thousand people. If the numbers of those who have transferred from the Church of Christ in Thailand, and Christians who have moved into the area from other parts of Thailand, were excluded, the figure of two thousand would be significantly lower. The impact of these groups on the Buddhist community in northern Thailand has been small.

Comparatively few Presbyterian missionaries have concentrated their efforts on evangelistic work since World War II. A few have worked in pastoral positions in Thai churches, but most of the missionaries have worked with institutions associated with the Church of Christ in Thailand. A number have lectured in the Thailand Theological Seminary in Chiang Mai. Others have been involved in education at schools such as the Prince Royal's College and Dara Academy. More recently, a number have been involved in Payap College, a tertiary institute founded by the Church of Christ in Thailand in 1974. The Thailand Theological Seminary and the McCormick School of Nursing have become faculties of this new college, which is located in Chiang Mai. Payap College also offers degrees in liberal arts and business studies. In 1981, almost half of all the Presbyterian fraternal workers in Thailand were working at the college.

Other missionaries have been involved in medical work. Some have been doctors at hospitals such as McCormick in Chiang Mai and at the McKean Rehabilitation Institute, as the McKean Leprosarium in now called. Other have been involved in agricultural development work, and others with the production of literature and Bible correspondence courses.

Because many missionaries have had positions of leadership, they have continued to exercise considerable influence on the church. However, by the end of the 1970s, almost every institution associated with the Church of Christ in Thailand, and almost every aspect of the work of the church, was under Thai leadership.

There has been a recent decrease in the numbers of Presbyterian fraternal workers in Thailand. In 1966, there were about eighty, but by 1980, there were only about twenty. The foreign contribution to the budget of the Church of Christ in Thailand has also decreased. In 1965, the foreign contribution amounted to about fifty percent of the total budget of the church. In 1980, it was about twenty-seven percent.

Evangelism in Northern Thailand

Much of the evangelism associated with the Church of Christ in Thailand has been conducted by Thai people since World War II. Immediately following the war, the church grew rapidly. Many Christians who had wavered under pressure during the war returned to the church. Many new converts entered the church. The 1945 deputation team from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. reported that there were 599 converts in the San Sai area just outside of Chiang Mai, and 207 in the San Sai church, alone. Later, Francis Beatty, a young missionary in the Chiang Mai area, reported that the people had been fired with an evangelistic spirit. The result was a gain in church membership of about fifteen percent in little over a year.

Rev. Puang Akkapin, the moderator of the Church of
Christ in Thailand, and the Rev. Thongkham Pantupongse, the head of the Bureau of Evangelistic and Church Work, travelled around the churches. They held seven day evangelistic campaigns, showing films and preaching. These campaigns led to a significant increase in the membership of the church. Most of this occurred before many missionaries had returned to Thailand after the war.

Morale was low in Thai society at this time. A sense of vulnerability lingered from the war. Foreign troops had entered the country and had moved freely within it. Another Asian nation had demonstrated its superiority in power and technology. Towards the end of the war, food and clothing became scarce. Medical supplies ran out, and there were epidemics of disease. There was a feeling of instability in the country as the leadership of the Thai government changed hands in several coups. The mysterious death of King Mahidol in 1946 shocked the country and contributed to this sense of instability. The Americans, on the other hand, were held in high regard at this time. They had won the war and had defeated the Japanese. They had refused to consider Thailand an enemy. Now they were helping to provide medicine and education for the Thai people. The 1946 deputation from the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. reported one government official in Chiang Mai as saying, "When we learned America had not declared war on Siam though Siam had declared war on her, we knew America was just. When we knew of the atomic bomb we knew America was ahead in science and education, so we want our sons to go to the mission schools." After the war, the association with America increased the prestige not only of the mission schools, but also of the Christian church.

There was growth not only in the churches but in all aspects of the activities of the Church of Christ in Thailand at this time. The hospitals, such as McCormick in Chiang Mai and the McKeown Leprosarium, were restored and substantially expanded. There was a heavy demand for education at the mission and church schools. The Prince Royal's College and Dara Academy, for example, expanded rapidly. The Prince Royal's College opened in 1946 with one hundred more students than its pre-war enrollment, and was turning away many others. Among its students were sons of government officials and wealthy Buddhist families. The district organization of the Church of Christ in Thailand in Chiang Mai encouraged individual churches to open their own schools, and new schools were begun at Fang, Bethlehem

church, Bethel church (which closed in 1953) and at the McKeown Leprosarium.

The rate of growth in the churches declined after the initial post-war period. Francis Smeek gave the membership of the church in the Chiang Mai area as 4388 in April, 1947 during the period of rapid growth. By 1970, the official membership in the same area was 5,763. The increase in the church was about thirty-one percent, while the population in the area had increased by eighty-seven percent over approximately the same period. The church was still failing to keep those born into the Christian community within its orbit.

There was another significant spurt in growth in the membership of the Church of Christ in Thailand between 1972 and 1975, particularly in the Chiang Mai area. The Church of Christ in Thailand set the goal of doubling its national membership between 1970 and 1974. Special campaigns were held to this end. The membership in the Chiang Mai district is recorded as increasing from 5,763 to 7,404; an increase of twenty-nine percent. The membership of the Church of Christ in Thailand in the north grew from 15,168 to 18,949. Since 1975, there appears to have been little increase.

Today, in 1982, when the Catholics, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and the Church of Christ are included with the numbers in the Church of Christ of Thailand there are approximately thirty thousand Thai Christians in the north of Thailand. The population of the area is approximately four and a half million, which means that the Christians amount to less than one percent of the population. These figures do not include the hill-tribe people, of whom considerable numbers have become Christians.

Christian Apologetics in Thailand

Both Christians and non-Christians in Thailand have generally seen Christianity as a religious system. Its doctrines are internally coherent, but can only be accepted or rejected as a whole system. As a system, Christianity can be compared and contrasted with Buddhism, to which it provides an alternative religious system. It has been common to recommend Christianity by defending it against Buddhism.

For some people, the ultimate contrast between
Buddhism and Christianity lie in their attitudes towards God. Theravada Buddhism does not consider that there is a god in the Christian sense. Rather, it exalts people to rely on themselves, and to find ultimate meaning and peace within themselves. In contrast, Christianity exalts people to rely on a Power outside of themselves. It teaches that people cannot cope alone. They need God, and there is a God who is willing and able to help them.

The argument for the existence of God from the nature or "design" of the world has had some popularity among Christians in Thailand. They have argued that the world is so complex and so well integrated that there must have been a Designer and Creator. The world could not just have happened to be the way it is by chance. There must have been a God who created it.

Apart from the claim that Christianity is the true religion because it teaches about God, Christianity has also been recommended for other reasons. It has been argued, particularly by some missionaries, that only Christianity can successfully oppose Communism. Buddhism cannot withstand Communism's drive and power, they have said. It has not been able to do so in Vietnam, Cambodia, or Laos. Christianity is necessary to keep the Communists at bay in Thailand.

It has also been argued that Christianity is the most suitable religion for a country in the process of modernization. Christianity has a sense of history that Buddhism does not have, and this sense of history is relevant to a country going through rapid changes. "The knowledge of a God of history who guides the destinies of men and nations" is important to give people a sense of meaning and purpose in the midst of change. This, some have argued, Buddhism can not do. Buddhism tends to withdraw from change, and looks for salvation outside of the flow and flux of life.

Furthermore, it has been argued that Christianity is world-affirming, and that this is appropriate for an age in which this present world dominates the consciousness. Because of the belief that God has created the world, Christianity can see it as something positively good. Material things may be regarded as good and useful. Life in this world can be, and ought to be, positively enjoyed. Buddhism, on the other hand, so it has been argued, seeks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Church Groups</th>
<th>Number of Churches</th>
<th>Number of members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Church of Christ in Thailand:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 1, Chiang Mai - Lamphun</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>6331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 2, Chiang Rai - Phayao</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 3, Lampang</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1166</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 4, Phrae - Uttaradit</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 5, Nan</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1820</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District 14, Chiang Mai</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Catholic Church of Thailand, Diocese of Chiang Mai (Thai congregations)</strong></td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2652</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Totals</strong></td>
<td>133</td>
<td>23,294</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are also churches of the Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostals, and Church of Christ in the area, apart from many hill-tribe groups of Christians, but statistics are not available.

salvation only outside of this world which it considers to be a place of suffering.

Because of this positive attitude to the world, it has been argued that Christianity provides the best basis for education and science; the inquiry into what God has created. The belief in God as the source of goodness and truth leads Christians who love the truth, to want to investigate and understand God's creation. Indeed, it has been suggested that science has arisen from the Christian beliefs that there is a system to the world, and that the world follows unchanging laws.

In such ways, Christianity has been treated as a complex, integrated system of beliefs. This system has been compared and contrasted with Buddhism. It has been argued that the Christian system is true in the light of the nature of the world and human historical experience, and that the Christian system is most appropriate for a nation engaged in a rapid process of modernization and trying to combat Communism.

While defending Christianity in these ways, the heart of the Christian system has remained the idea of salvation from sin. The missionaries have continued to claim that the basic human problem is that of sin, which is rebellion against God. Salvation means overcoming this rebellion and being reconciled to God. This is what Christianity offers.

Christianity has continued to be a foreign system of beliefs, and a foreign religion to most Thai people. Buddhism is considered to be the Thai religion. Despite the fact that the Church of Christ in Thailand and the Catholic church in Thailand are largely under Thai leadership, many people still regard them as foreign institutions.

Correspondingly, there has continued to be social pressure on Thai people not to become Christians. In the "Thailand Annual Report for 1954", Horace Ryburn, the field administrator of the Presbyterian Mission in Thailand, stated, "It remains true that personal sacrifice is the price that most Thai must pay for their Christian faith. Family isolation and estrangement often follow baptism. Community pressure throws up a definite barrier, and any desire to advance in government service must be given up."

As cities such as Chiang Mai have grown since World War II, all sorts of influences have entered through tourists, foreign business people, foreign military personnel, and other channels. In some areas of life, society has become more pluralistic, and community pressures to conformity have weakened. Some anthropologists have commented on the growing secularism of people in Chiang Mai. Yet, one still hears of family and community opposition to individuals who are interested in becoming Christians. Christianity is still a foreign religion to Thailand, and Buddhism is the Thai religion.

Who are the Christians in Northern Thailand?

Who, then, are the thirty thousand Christians in northern Thailand? Why are they Christians? There are still some people who leave Buddhism to become Christians. What is it that attracts these people to Christianity?

Today, many of the people in the Christian community are people who have been born into Christian families. For some of these, Christianity has been their families' religion for four generations. Many of these people live in Christian villages or in Christian sections of villages. Others live in the cities and work at Christian institutions, such as the schools and the hospitals. Christianity is their religion, and they are part of Christian communities, just as Buddhism is the religion of many other people.

Christianity gives these people meaning. It teaches them how they should live. It teaches them about God and his love. It teaches them that God helps them to live according to his standards, and that they can find happiness and blessing by living that way. It teaches that they can depend on God in times of trouble.

A questionnaire was given to several hundred Christian and Buddhist students who were studying at Payap College in 1981. One question asked what were the reasons why religion was important to them. Ten reasons were suggested which the students rated in terms of their importance to them. It is interesting that for eight out of the ten reasons for the importance of religion, the
responses of the Christians and Buddhists were very similar. Buddhism was important to the Buddhist students for the same reasons that Christianity was important to the Christian students. Both religions were said to give their adherents a sense of well-being and happiness. Both Christians and Buddhists said that religion was important to them in teaching them how to live and giving them a sense of meaning in life. Both religions gave opportunities to their members for helping other people.

Although Buddhism and Christianity fulfill similar roles in the lives of their adherents, there are some people who convert from Buddhism to Christianity. Who are these people, and why do they leave Buddhism to become Christians? Today it is hard to identify particular groups of people who have become Christians, as it has been possible to do in the past. Some leprosy patients who go to live at the McKean Rehabilitation Institute become Christians, but not all do. The social stigma and ostracism of leprosy patients is less marked today, and the McKean community is not so tightly knit as it was. Many leprosy patients stay at McKean only a short time. Others are treated as out-patients, and many who are treated at clinics never go to the McKean Rehabilitation Institute.

Instead of identifiable groups of people becoming Christians, there are individuals here and there. Some of these are people who have experienced the care and concern of Christians, particularly when facing some problem of one kind or another. There are people who find a home in the Christian community through friends and relatives, or for a variety of other reasons.

The results of the questionnaire among students, and of interviews conducted in the churches, suggested that there are few people who respond to the Gospel because of its message of salvation as the forgiveness of sin, even though this continues to be a common theme in evangelistic campaigns. For the Thai Christian students, forgiveness of sin was seventh out of ten reasons for the importance of religion, and more important to the Christians than to the Buddhists. In contrast, for a group of missionaries associated with the Church of Christ in Thailand who completed the same questionnaire, forgiveness of sin was the primary reason for the importance of religion.

In interviews, elders and pastors of over thirty churches in the north of Thailand were asked what the members of the church thought that salvation was. Some of the elders and pastors said that the members thought of it as "eternal life" or as "life in heaven." Other spoke of salvation as "happiness." A few said that it meant freedom from sin or from judgment. The elders were then asked how the members thought that Christianity gives salvation. It was something that God gives out of his love, most said. A few said that it comes through faith in God, or through following Christian teaching. No one mentioned Jesus, or his death on the cross.

The word for salvation which is used by the Christians in Thailand has no religious meaning in Buddhism, but is the common word for escape. One suspects that its meaning as a religious term is not very clear to many Thai Christians, and is not very important in the ways in which they think about religion. A comment to this effect was made in a thesis by a student at the Thailand Theological Seminary. He wrote,

This word [salvation] does not make sense to most Thai Christians, even to the writer himself who was born in a Thai Christian family. Salvation is of no interest at all; what is expected in a Christian life in the hope of a future life, a life after death, a life with Christ in Heaven if we walk carefully with him in the present. That means if we keep morals and follow them carefully, trying to do only good things. This idea is also possessed by a large number of Thai Christians.

If it is not salvation that is important and attractive about Christianity to those people who respond to the Gospel, what is it? In the graph on page 48, there are two significant differences between the Christians and the Buddhists. The first difference has to do with the importance of the forgiveness of sin. The second difference is that Christianity offers its followers a relationship with a Spiritual Power. For many people, this is the crucial difference between the two religions. It is when people feel that they can no longer cope by themselves. When they need help from outside of themselves, that Christianity offers Good News. Christianity is attractive to people in trouble, for it tells them that they can turn to God and depend on his help.
A recent crusade in Chiang Mai exemplifies the attraction of the Spiritual Power available in Christianity. In March 1982, the large sports stadium in the city was crowded with thousands of people who came to listen to a Christian evangelist. It was not the educated or wealthy people who were there, but the poor and the sick. There were villagers from miles around Chiang Mai. The crusade had been advertised as "Miracles, Miracles". An important part of the meetings were sessions of healing. It was remarked by some Thai people that what the evangelist did was similar to the spirit mediums who work in Chiang Mai to whom people go in times of sickness and other problems. The evangelist told people that all they had to do was to believe in his lord. Then he asked the lord to come and heal the people. Even the word lord is similar to that used by the spirit mediums to talk about the spirits they claim work through them. A number of people witnessed at these meetings that they had been healed. Several thousands of people indicated that they were interested in Christianity.

It was the power of the Great Spirit Lord which was attractive in this recent crusade in Chiang Mai, just as it had been in the pioneering days of the missionaries. God is understood implicitly as a Great Spirit. He is both powerful and loving; and he is willing to help those who need him and believe in him. He is worthy of patronage.

This is the Good News of Christianity for many Thai people.

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Key:
* A group of 42 missionaries associated with the Church of Christ in Thailand
* 71 Thai Christian students at Payap College not studying theology
* 386 Thai Buddhist students at Payap College

* Indicates a statistically significant difference between the Payap Buddhist and Payap Christian students at 5% chance level or better

Source: "Questionnaire about Life and Values" distributed February, 1981,
CHAPTER 4

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

An Allegory of the Past and Future of Christianity in Northern Thailand

Overlooking a city in northern Thailand is a great mountain, the mountain is covered by trees. Indeed, it is but only the trees that cover it. On the top of the mountain is a cloud, which adds a sense of mystery and awe to the mountain.

One day a group of foreigners came into the area. They settled at the foot of the mountain, where they built fine houses of teak and stone. They cut down the trees in wheat. They grazed the cows on the field they had prepared. From the cows' milk they produced cheese, and from the wheat they made bread.

The foreigners tried to give the cheese to the local people who lived in the city. No one there had ever eaten cheese before. The foreigners told the people that it came from the holy mountain. It would give the people new life if they ate it. There was just one condition, the foreigners made. They must eat only the cheese and the bread that the foreigners made.

Some of the local people tried the cheese, but almost no one liked it. Most people did not eat the cheese any more, despite all the good things that the foreigners said about it. They said the rice had been sufficient for them all these years, why should they change to eating bread and cheese? But there were a few people who enjoyed the bread a little, and who were willing to eat a little cheese from time to time for the sake of the bread. But the foreigners did not like people just to have cheese occasionally, nor would they permit them to have the bread without the cheese. They would only give the bread and cheese to those people who were willing to eat both all the foreigners said.

There were a few people who were sick and who were willing to try anything that might cure them. The foreigners gave them some bread and cheese, and some of these people found that it did in fact help them to get better. They liked the bread much more than the cheese, but they gradually came to accept the cheese too. They began to eat just bread and cheese, and stopped eating rice. There were also some people who were starving, and who were willing to eat anything. These people also began to eat bread and cheese regularly in place of rice. So, a small community of people who eat these foreign foods developed. They found the bread and cheese most edible though, and most easy to eat, when they cut them up into tiny pieces the size and shape of grains of rice, and eat them with their fingers rather than with the foreigners' knives and forks.

The people of the city thought that the bread and cheese eaters were a little odd, and that they ought to eat rice like normal people, as their ancestors had always done. Many of the bread and cheese eaters left the city, and went to live with the foreigners. They built their homes at the foot of the mountain next to those of the foreigners, and they learned how to make bread and cheese too. They would go into the city from time to time to persuade other people to eat cheese. But after a while, the community of bread and cheese eaters stopped growing, and even a few of their children left the community to re-join the rice-eaters. After a hundred or more years, the foreigners began to leave, and the local bread and cheese eaters took over the roles of operating the business, of making the bread and cheese.

The bread and cheese eaters were working in the field on the side of the mountain one day when they noticed that amongst the trees on the other side of the fence that the foreigners had erected, there were some beautiful fruits growing. They crossed the fence and began to explore the side of the mountain. They found more fruits: mangos and pineapples, pomelo and watermelon. These fruits were much more palatable than the bread and cheese. They were fruits that the local people in the city knew and enjoyed. The bread and cheese eaters began to think: not only the cheese and bread, but other fruits could be grown in the rich soil on the side of the mountain. It would take a lot of work, but they could begin to cultivate these fruits too. They could clear more ground. They could choose the fruits that were most wanted by the people in the city, and could
produce them. They could distribute them in the city. The
goodness of the mountain soil would be in those fruits as
well as in the bread and cheese. And those people who ate
the fruits would also have new life.

What is the Gospel?

Throughout the history of the proclamation of
Christianity in northern Thailand, the missionaries have
emphasized the message of the forgiveness of sin. They have
maintained that the basic cause of the human predicament is
sin: all human problems can be traced back to sin as the one
root cause. They have understood sin as the state of man
in which he is alienated from God. From McGilvary on, the
missionaries have proclaimed that Christianity offers a
solution to this fundamental problem. The Good News of the
Gospel is that sin can be forgiven. Because of the death
of Jesus Christ on the cross, human beings can be reconciled
to God.

This message of salvation as the forgiveness of
sin, the cheese in the allegory, has meant little to most
people in northern Thailand. Most Thai people see sin as
those actions which break either the religious or civil law,
or which show disrespect for one's seniors, rather than as a
state of affairs in which human beings are alienated from
God. They do acknowledge that many people do sinful things,
and that these actions cause problems in Thai society.

However, Buddhism does provide opportunities for making up
for what one has done wrong. If one makes extra merit, it helps to redress the balance of one's good and evil deeds.

The ideas about sin as alienation from God are
strange to most people in northern Thailand. One becomes
alienated from another person by being disrespectful to that
person. How could they be disrespectful of God if they do not know even who he is? God is as remote and as
foreign to most northern Thai people as is the king of
Spain—if there is one. Why should they be interested in
God? Their religion is Buddhism. Buddhism has served their
ancestors and friends very well for many centuries. It has
given instruction for living, resources for facing personal
problems, and hope for the future. It would be an insult to
one's ancestors and friends to give up Buddhism.

The Gospel of the forgiveness of sin that the
missionaries have proclaimed has not been heard as Good
News by most northern Thai people. What they have heard
has a sound to them like some strange, foreign ideas.

Yet, some people in northern Thailand have become
Christians. They have heard a message of Good News. What
is it that these people have heard?

Most of those who have become Christians have
heard a message about a powerful, spiritual being who is
concerned about them, and who is willing and able to help
them when they need help. They have heard the Good News
about one who is willing to be their spiritual patron, and
who is both able and willing to bless them. This was the
Good News that the people accused of witchcraft heard in
the pioneer days. This was the Good News that many people
who have been desperately ill have heard, particularly, but
not only, in the pioneer period. This is the Good News that
many leprosy patients have heard through the work of the
McMahan Rehabilitation Institute. This is the Good News that
some people still hear today, particularly people who feel
they cannot cope any longer by themselves and who need
someone powerful on whom they can lean for support.

The Good News of the Gospel in northern Thailand
has been the news of a God who has power over malicious
spirits, and a God who can heal sicknesses and diseases.
The Gospel is the Good News of acceptance of people who have
been rejected by society; the news of patronage and support
for people who felt they needed help. In the terms of the
allegory, there have been people who have found the bread
of forgiveness offered to be sustaining and life-giving food.

But is not the Gospel about the salvation which is
the forgiveness of sin? Is not the message that Christians
must preach the message of Jesus' death for redemption from
sin? Some people would say that those people who have not
yet heard the message about the forgiveness of sin, or who
have not understood it, have not yet heard or understood the
Christian Gospel.

In the New Testament, there are four gospels.
Each of the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John are
complete presentations of the Good News in themselves. They
were not written to be put together in one book so that they
could supplement each other. They are all different:
written for different groups of people at different times.
Each gospel is different, according to the ways of thinking,
the needs, and the situation of the people for whom it was written. The Good News that Jesus brought has many sides, and can be approached from many directions.

For some people, the message of the forgiveness of sin is the best news that they could possibly receive. For others, the message of a loving Father God who cares for the sick, and accepts those who have been rejected by society is Good News. For others again, who are oppressed and exploited, the message that God will reverse the social order, uplifting the oppressed, and putting down the oppressors, will be Good News.

Jesus announced his mission by reading from the book of Isaiah.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.

One does not proclaim liberty to the blind, or the recovery of sight to the oppressed. Jesus spoke to people in their own language, in terms of their particular situations, and according to the needs of those situations. The history of the proclamation of Christianity in northern Thailand has shown that God still speaks to people in their particular situations. It has shown that the Gospel is wider than the forgiveness of sin.

Communicating the Gospel

The missionaries who have come to northern Thailand have believed that they had a specific message to proclaim. They had learned the content of that message in their home countries. They had travelled to Thailand, and learned the Thai language, so that they could translate the message, and pass it on to the Thai people. But the historical study has shown that the message that the northern Thai people received was not exactly the message that the missionaries preached. It has been the Good News of spiritual power and help that has been received, rather than the message of salvation as the forgiveness of sin.

It is a basic principle of effective communication that one must begin where people are. If one expects others to understand a message, that message must be couched in language which they understand, using words with which they are familiar. In order to persuade people that a message is true and valid, one must begin with what those people already believe is true. Then one must show that those beliefs that are already accepted entail the truth of the message one wants to present. If people do not accept the premises with which one begins, they are not likely to accept conclusions that are drawn from those premises.

The missionaries to Thailand assumed that they knew what the problem of the Thai people was: the problem of sin. The missionaries also had the solution to that problem: the forgiveness of sin through the death of Jesus Christ. But they were not able to persuade people that their solution was valid, because they did not start with the beliefs that the Thai people had themselves about their situation. The Thai people were not convinced that the death of Jesus was the solution to all their problems because they were not convinced that the root cause of all their problems was sin. At least, even if sin was a problem, it was certainly not the all-encompassing problem that the missionaries said it was.

The people who became Christians did so, not so much because they were convinced by what was said, but because of what they saw happening. They saw demonstrations that God could meet particular problems, and it was these demonstrations which convinced them. People believed in the Christian God when they, or members of their families, were cured of sicknesses. People became convinced of the power of God when malicious spirits no longer bothered them. People accepted God's love when they themselves experienced acceptance into Christian community.

If the Gospel must be expressed in different ways for people in different situations, the Gospel cannot be presented as a simple statement transferred directly from one cultural situation to another. What a missionary has experienced of the Gospel in his or her situation in the homeland is not necessarily relevant to the people he or she has come to teach. If the Gospel is related to people's situations, then one must study those situation to know what is the Gospel for those people. One must begin by analyzing what people believe are the problems they have, and the
needs they face. One must find out what their concerns are. Then, one can ask, does Christianity have anything to say about these situations? Is there Good News in Christianity for people facing these specific problems? Does the Christian faith relate to the concerns that people have?

Students at Payap College, who completed a questionnaire in 1981, indicated that they were very concerned about injustice in the society. They were also concerned about finding work, and not having enough money. Interviews in villages in northern Thailand conducted in the same year indicated that many villagers are concerned more about work than anything else. They want opportunities to earn money so that they can buy the goods they want. Another major concern among both students and villagers was family life. Many people were concerned about conflict in families and tension in family relationships.

What does Christianity have to say about these concerns? Does it have any Good News to offer? More importantly, are Christians able to demonstrate a solution to these problems, or that they have resources for dealing with them? Are there resources within the Christian faith for dealing with problems of injustice and unemployment? Does Christianity have anything to offer with respect to patterns of family life? In terms of the allegory at the beginning of this chapter, one may ask, are there other fruits which grow on the mountain of the Christian faith, which need to be cultivated and distributed? When it is clearly seen that Christianity has viable resources to help people to cope with the problems of their situation, then the Christian Gospel will be seen as Good News.

Being a Christian in Northern Thailand

The appeal of the Gospel in northern Thailand, particularly in the pioneer period, reminds one of the times of Jesus. People flocked to Jesus because they saw his power demonstrated in miracles. Jesus healed the sick, and fed the hungry. He exorcised malicious spirits, and touched and helped the untouchable lepers. That was a great start, and the people wanted to make Jesus king. But Jesus was not going in that direction. He was on the road to the cross. He called people to follow him, not to positions of power and authority, but into sacrificial service. There were few of the people who were impressed by Jesus' power who followed him to the cross.

In northern Thailand, people who have become Christians have found that there is more to Christianity than the news of a powerful, spiritual lord who is willing to help in times of trouble. They have found that there is, in Christianity, a complete set of teachings about how they should live. Indeed, the theme of most sermons in northern Thai churches is that Christianity describes how we should live from day to day, and how we should follow the will of God. Christians are reminded that God will help them if they rely on him. They will receive the benefits and blessings of follow God's teaching.

Working out what it means to be a Christian is a continual process. It is not possible to arrive at a final answer and be able to say that now we know what it means to be a Christian. The historical study has shown that God's Good News comes to people in their situations. God continues to speak to Christians in their situations. Basic principles, such as the principles of loving God and loving one's neighbour, have to be applied to different situations and circumstances. As Christians reflect on problems and potentialities of their circumstances, God leads them to change their situations, to deal with problems and to actualize potentialities. As situations change, so God speaks again in each new context.

The Christian life is often compared to a journey. This image illustrates the fact that the Christian life is not static, but is a continual process of following God within the context in which one finds oneself. One can compare the church today with the children of Israel in the desert. Under the leadership of Moses, they had left Egypt. They had committed themselves to a journey in which God would guide them. And God did guide them, as a pillar of fire at night, and as a cloud during the day. But the children of Israel had not yet entered the Promised Land. They could not relax and say that they were already there. Salvation was not yet complete. Each day, they had to follow wherever God led them.

Jesus spent three years teaching his disciples and leading them into new ways of thinking and new ways of living. On the night before Jesus died, he told his disciples that he still had many things to teach them, but they could not take it all in at that time. He promised to send them the Holy Spirit who would continue the process of teaching, and who would lead the disciples to a fuller
understanding of the Christian faith and its implications for life. This process of teaching, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, is still continuing in the church. Christians believe that the Christian way of life cannot be reduced to neat formulae, or to something like keeping the ten commandments. The Holy Spirit leads Christians as they examine their situation and that of the people around them, and as they attempt to apply the resources of the people around them, and as they attempt to apply the resources of the Christian faith to those situations.

In the terms of the allegory, one might say that the holy mountain of the Christian faith must be explored. The mountain is too large for us to get to know all of it, lead people to discover new fruits which grow on the mountain, which will bring healing to people.

What it means to be a Christian in northern Thailand is not only a matter of exploring the mountain of the Christian faith, but is closely related to the question how should Christians relate to non-Christians. In terms of the allegory, the question is how should the bread and cheese eaters relate to the rice eaters?

Of the following four pictures, the first three reflect ways in which Christians have seen the Christian community in northern Thailand. In the first picture, the bread and cheese eaters are seen as the vanguard of a movement. One day, everyone will give up eating rice, and will begin eating bread and cheese. This was the way that the missionaries of the pioneer period saw the Christian community in northern Thailand. The Thai Christians were the first of a movement in which the whole of northern Thailand would become Christian. The northern Thai Christians were to be the first people to adopt the new civilized ways of living that went with Christianity. They were to be educated in Western fashion. They would use new Western medicines. They were to exhibit new standards of living. The missionaries believed that soon the rest of northern Thailand would follow these first converts.

The vision of northern Thailand as a great Christian civilization began to fade at the time of World War I. In the West, the war itself shattered many illusions about the greatness of Western civilization. In northern Thailand, the church membership ceased to grow, and even some children from Christian families rejoined the Buddhist community. Meanwhile, many of the products of Western civilization had been adopted without the acceptance of Christianity. The idea of the Christian community in northern Thailand as the vanguard leading the way to a new Christian civilization was no longer plausible.

In the second picture, the bread and cheese eaters see themselves as a select group. They have accepted the life that comes from bread and cheese, while everyone else has rejected it. The Christian community sees itself as a pure remnant, saved from an evil society. They witness to their salvation by being different and by being separate from the world that is "lost". They do not smoke or drink alcohol, or buy and sell on Sundays. They believe that they can witness by keeping high moral standards, showing how different they are from most people. The Christian community which visualizes itself in this way does not expect to change the whole society; but they go out regularly into the evil world to find a few converts and bring them back into the fold of their little group. They may not be able to save society, but perhaps they can save a few individuals from society.

It has been noted that John Sung implicitly encouraged the Christians in northern Thailand to think of themselves in this sort of way, as a remnant who had been saved from an evil society. It was natural for the Christian community in northern Thailand to adopt these ideas. They had already separated themselves from the Buddhist society. They were a minority group which was not growing, and which was suffering comparatively little impact on society as a whole. They needed a way of justifying their separation from the rest of society and of explaining why they were different from other people. These sorts of ideas of the church as a pure, separated remnant, whose major task is to keep themselves pure and to make brief visits into the evil world in order to bring back others into the Christian community still exists among some northern Thai Christians today.

But there is a third picture which is implicit in the thinking of some Christians in northern Thailand today. In terms of the allegory, these people see bread and cheese as an alternative to rice, and not necessarily a food that should replace rice. Bread and cheese is better and more tasty for those who have come to enjoy it, but rice is also
a life-giving food. The Christian community is an alternative to the Buddhist community. Both Christianity and Buddhism are good religions, and both teach their followers to live good lives. Both religions point the way to salvation. The two religions are alternative routes to the same terminus. The Christians who think this way may describe Christianity as a higher and better route, but they would not agree with those who see the Buddhists as people who are "lost".

There is another picture that Jesus used to describe his followers. He said that they should witness by doing good work: by their fruits they would be known. Jesus meant that Christians should bear fruits by serving other people, particularly the poor, the lame, the blind, the oppressed, and others who could not repay. By cultivating the fruit of the Christian life, which is shared with the whole community. Christians can make life better for other people. It is when people experience the concern that Christians demonstrate that they have for one another, that they will praise God.

Bread and cheese are not the only foods which grow on the mountain of the Christian faith. There are many fruits which can be cultivated, which will give sustenance to the hungry and healing to the sick. These other fruits need to be cultivated and distributed. There are many resources in the Christian faith which need to be developed, and which can help to give life to people in northern Thailand. Christians have a responsibility to share with the wider society the resources that they have been given.

FOOTNOTES

3. Ibid., pp.78 - 82.
5. McGilvary, p.185.
8. "Record of a Year's Work in Chiangmai, The Mother Station and just past Fifty Years Old", Laos News, 14:1, January 1918, p.9
13. Freeman, p.31 - 32
Statistics are taken from the Record of Actions of the Siam (Thailand) Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Bangkok: Boon Ruang Press. It was published annually by the mission before World War II, and lists the actions passed by the mission, and reports of the mission committees.


"Chiang Mai Station Annual Report, 1941", in the records of the American Presbyterian Mission, Manuscript Division, Payap College, Chiang Mai.


C. C. Zimmerman and Mrs. Geo B. McFarland, "Report on Siam, 1951", in Maen Research Papers, Manuscript Division, Payap College, Chiang Mai.


Freeman, pp. 119 and 164.


Siam Outlook, 9:1, January 1933, p.54.

J. C. Millikan, "Report of Visit to Siam, 1923", in Maen Research Papers, Manuscript Division, Payap College, Chiang Mai.

Statistics from Record of Actions of the Siam Mission.


"Chiang Mai Station Annual Report, 1941", in the records of the American Presbyterian Mission, Manuscript Division, Payap College, Chiang Mai.


C. C. Zimmerman and Mrs. Geo B. McFarland, "Report on Siam, 1951", in Maen Research Papers, Manuscript Division, Payap College, Chiang Mai.


The name Thailand officially replaced Siam in 1939. Following the war, Siam was used again for a short while. Thailand became the official name again in 1949. Thailand will be used throughout this chapter.


These statistics are taken from the Church of Christ in Thailand, Report of the Thirteenth General Assembly of the Church of Christ in Thailand, 1-6 December 1974, p.84.

For example, Kenneth E. Wells, Theravada Buddhism and Protestant Christianity, Chiang Mai: Thailand Theological Seminary, 1963, p.23.


Herbert Grether, To Friends Under the Bodhi Tree from Those Under the Cross, published only in Thai, Bangkok: Church of Christ in Thailand, 1975, pp. 10f, 21f, and 42f.

Ibid., pp.31-32.


Sixty-two percent of the Christian students at Payap College who completed the questionnaire given to all Payap students apart from those studying theology in 1981 said that the teachings of Christianity and Buddhism were similar. Seventy-two percent of the same Christian students said that both Buddhism and Christianity pointed the way to salvation. The large majority of Buddhist students agreed with these ideas.

A number of missionaries who have worked in northern Thailand, particularly during the pioneer period, wrote books describing the people of northern Thailand and the mission work among them. These books include the following:


To this list must be added:

Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., Siam and Laos as Seen by Our American Missionaries, Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1884. A collection of essays written by missionaries in Siam and north Siam.


Other valuable resources include the following journals.

Laos News, quarterly journal of the Presbyterian mission in north Siam, issued from 1904 to 1919.

Siam Outlook, journal of the Siam Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., following the union of the Siam and Laos (north Siam) missions in 1920. Printed quarterly from 1921 to 1941.

Church News, Thai language magazine of the Church of Christ in Thailand, which has been published regularly since 1932, except during World War II.
The Manuscript Division, Payap College, has copies of all the books and journals mentioned above. It also has some other important collections of historical materials, including the following.

Records of the American Presbyterian Mission (1841 - 1978), which include missionary correspondence, reports, minutes, and financial and property records. Records of the Church of Christ in Thailand (1928 - 1980). The manuscript division is the official archives of the Church of Christ in Thailand.

Records of the Board of Foreign Missions, Siam Mission (1840 - 1910) - in microfilm form - including letters and reports from many of the missionaries who worked in north Siam in the pioneer period. This last collection of materials is also available at the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., which also has other papers and records of the mission in northern Thailand. It should be noted that both the Presbyterian Historical Society and the Manuscript Division of Payap College have restrictions on access to recent documents. For the Manuscript Division, this restriction applies to all personal papers which are twenty-five years old or less.

There have been a few general descriptive historical works on the Protestant church in Thailand, including:


There are a number of books and articles which discuss Christianity in Thailand, either from the point of view of its history, or from the point of view of its relationship to Thai culture and Buddhism. Among them are:


Laurence Judd, Chao Rai Tai: Dry Rice Farmers in Northern Thailand, Bangkok: Suriyaban, 1974. An anthropological study by a missionary comparing animistic, Buddhist, and Christian villages, and nothing the effects of religion on everyday life.


For a full bibliography of materials on Thai Christianity, see Philip J. Hughes, Thai Culture, Values, and Religion: An Annotated Bibliography of English Language Materials, Chiang Mai: Manuscript Division, Payap College, 1982.