

COMMUNICATION

To the Editors:

I read with interest Thomas E. Jessett's "Christian Missions to the Indians of Oregon" in the June number of *Church History*. As a person who has just finished writing a doctoral dissertation covering that area ("American Churches and American Territorial Expansion, 1830-1850") I was pleased to find someone else who felt it important "to correlate the efforts of the various individuals and denominations involved, in the light of the economic and political situation." The attempt to relate Christian missions to the Indians of Oregon to the worldwide outreach of the Church and white civilization in the nineteenth century also was appreciated, for all too often historians have overlooked the wider scope and have dwelt too much on Oregon missions as a subject in itself.

At the same time, however, I found myself disturbed by several aspects of the article. In addition to factual errors there was also questionable documentation and doubtful interpretation. In light of the discrediting of church historians which followed the critical attacks on the "Whitman Legend," it is important that we adhere to the strictest canons of historical research in presenting the story of Christian missions in Oregon, and it is for this reason that I feel impelled to write.

There are at least two errors of fact that need to be corrected. The first is the citing of 1834 as the year when Jason Lee secured an appropriation of forty thousand dollars from the Methodist Episcopal Church Board of Missions for the extension of that denomination's Oregon missions (p. 150). According to the account of one of the secretaries of the Mission Board four thousand dollars had been appropriated for the missionaries in September and October 1833 and another one thousand dollars was deposited for the use of the mission in October 1835.¹ In the intervening

months Jason Lee had written at least four letters to the Board but there was no indication that he asked for or received a sum of forty thousand dollars although he did request additional missionaries and supplies.² The sum of forty thousand dollars was the amount appropriated for the Oregon mission as a result of Mr. Lee's return trip to the United States in 1838-39, and one of the reasons he remained in the East so long was to engage in a speaking tour to help raise part of that large amount. Thirty thousand dollars was appropriated by the Mission Board late in 1838 and an additional ten thousand was voted in the spring of the next year.³ With this large appropriation Jason Lee was able to secure the personnel and provisions which formed the reinforcements of 1840 to which the article referred.

A second factual error was made when Mr. Jessett concluded that all Protestant missions to Oregon ended with the Whitman massacre in 1847 (p. 155). It is true that Protestant missions to the Indians closed after that event, but all Christian missions to Oregon did not cease at that time. On the contrary, Protestant missions continued to be carried on for the swelling white population coming from the United States. *The Methodist Quarterly Review* for April, 1847, indicated the continuing effort:

. . . The Oregon mission, now embraced in our own territory, has been reduced to three or four missionaries, whose work is not likely to differ greatly from that on our frontier settlements, though it is hoped that a few Indians may yet be gathered by their labors.⁴

The same sentiment was reiterated in the *Annual Report* of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church the next year.⁵ And at the denomination's General Conference in 1848 the mission stations in Oregon were incorporated into a new Oregon and California Mission Conference which became a regular jurisdiction of the Church.⁶ The withdrawal of the

American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions after the Whitman massacre was offset by the arrival by June, 1848, of the first missionaries sponsored by the American Home Missionary Society.⁷ Moreover, two Baptist missionaries had started work in Oregon a year earlier.⁸ Thus, while Protestant missions to the Indians ceased after 1847, missions to the white settlers continued and expanded after that date.

What appears to me to be questionable documentation occurred in several places in the Jessett article. It has been my understanding that one cites his sources for information that is not common knowledge and that by checking a person's footnote references one will find the specific original information which a writer presents. Using this criterion, I assumed that I would find the source for Jonathan S. Green's visit to Oregon (p. 148) in *The Missionary Herald*, volume XXIII, pages 396-397, as cited in footnote two. But upon checking that source I found only that a missionary had been assigned to visit Oregon "if practicable" and no mention of Jonathan S. Green or the outcome of his visit. The rest of that citation correctly described the dual goal of sending missionaries and of assisting in planting a Christian colony in Oregon, but it would help scholars if the source of the other data also were given.

At another place (p. 151) Mr. Jessett cited two hundred and fourteen pages in Samuel Parker's *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains* as the source for specific data he presented. Since I did not recall his understanding from reading that work, I reread it to determine the legitimacy of his argument.⁹ In the process I discovered that the information about Whitman's turning back for reinforcements after arriving at the Green River Rendezvous occurred several pages earlier than the first page cited in the footnote for the article, that many of the pages had no bearing on the subject and that much of what Mr. Jessett wrote was his own interpretation and not what Parker had said.

For example, Parker did not evidence surprise at finding Indians who had beliefs that were similar to Christianity; he simply listed their beliefs and did not say whether he thought they were like or unlike Christianity.¹⁰ It is true that the missionary found a man of the Spokane tribe who had been educated at the Red River school but he did not list his name, and while it may be reasonable to infer that this was Garry in light of other information we should be aware that all this data was not given by Samuel Parker and came from some other source.¹¹ The same is true of the statement that the visiting missionary was "much impressed with the superior moral behaviour of the Indians of the tribes which had sent young men back to the Red River and adopted the primitive Anglicanism they had brought back as compared to that of the tribes he saw on the lower Columbia." Such a comparison was made by Parker,¹² but it did not mention that the differences were attributable to the influence of young men who had returned from the Red River with primitive Anglicanism. In short, it appears that Mr. Jessett used Samuel Parker to bolster his own interpretation of the influence of Anglicanism in early Oregon rather than as a source of specific information deriving from Parker himself. In the process he used a blanket citation for very specific data and left an erroneous impression with his readers.

And that brings me to the matter of doubtful interpretation, which is the most difficult aspect of the article to assess. It appears to me, despite the stated purpose of relating mission history to economic and political events, that the article really attempted to revise the general understanding of the origin of Christianity among the Indians of Oregon so as to give greater credit to Anglicanism. This is a perfectly legitimate endeavor in itself, but the author in both his title and stated purpose professed to attempt something much more substantial: he said he wanted to discuss Christian missions to the Indians of Oregon (p. 147). Having assumed that task,

Mr. Jessett opened himself to the charge of lacking a sense of proportion, for no person who is familiar with the history of Christian missions in Oregon can conceivably brush off the Methodist effort in two brief paragraphs while spending two pages in relating the significance of "primitive Anglicanism" upon the natives. Nor does balanced judgment justify the inclusion of references to the influence of that primitive Anglicanism in relation to the work of other missionary groups, when the story of each effort is already highly telescoped in the presentation. I refer here to the interpretation imposed upon Samuel Parker's data (p. 151) to which I have already alluded, to Spalding's observation that Indians called him a "'Black Coat'" (p. 151), to the fact that Spokane Garry did not cooperate with American Board missionaries (p. 152), to the use of the term "'Black Gown'" in reference to the Roman Catholic missionaries (p. 153), to the concern to verify in Catholic sources that the first references to Christianity came as a result of what Mr. Jessett theorizes was the influence of a handful of Indians educated in "primitive Anglicanism" at Red River (p. 153), to the virtual justification of the Whitman massacre because "it was probably the most humane in Indian history" and due to the fact that the Indians "considered themselves Christians" (p. 155), and to the author's final evaluation which twice mentioned the impact of the training of the young Indians at Red River (p. 155). Such an interpretation may be valid and important as a revisionary effort, but it is hardly justified under the title "Christian Missions to the Indians of Oregon," which gives readers the impression that they are reading in brief compass the history of such a topic. Far less attention should be given to the Anglican role proportionately if the true perspective of Christian missions to the Indians of Oregon is to be achieved.

And, finally, it should be mentioned that the "dichotomy between the missionary and the settler" to which Mr.

Jessett referred was more subtle than he indicated. The dichotomy arose not simply from a difference between missionaries and settlers, but more from the dual nature of the missionary motivation of the Protestant Churches, which, in the years when missionaries went to Oregon, directed that *both Christianity and civilization* be carried to new territories.

Frequent references to the Church's role in Christianizing and civilizing the Indians are evident in the sources dealing with early Oregon. Mr. Jessett rightly called attention to the plan of the American Board to establish another "Plymouth colony" (p. 148) as early as 1827, but he misinterpreted the purpose. It was intended not simply to Christianize the Indians and settle the country with whites, but rather to plant "Christian institutions on the shores of the Pacific."¹³ The purpose was not only to convert the natives to the Christian faith but also to provide a moral foundation in Oregon for both the Indians and the expected white immigration from the United States. Samuel Parker expressed the same idea. "It seems apparent to any observing Christian," he wrote, "that the present is the favorable time for the introduction of the gospel and civilization among the natives of this wide interior."¹⁴ He advocated sending "practical farmers" and "artisans" as well as missionaries among the Indians, and he believed that some tribes at least were "waiting to be instructed in the arts of civilization, and in Christianity."¹⁵

The Methodist Episcopal Church also envisioned the same dual motivation for its missionaries. In its *Annual Report* for 1836 the Missionary Society pointed out that the missionaries in Oregon had constructed housing and cultivated farms as well as started religious instruction for the Indians so that the natives might be reclaimed "to the blessings of Christianity and civilized life."¹⁶ At the time the concept of "Missionary Colonization" was not limited to Oregon alone but also was attempted at a Methodist mission

in Siam. Thus, *The Christian Advocate and Journal*, which was the official organ of the Church, declared:

The project of introducing colonies of Christians in missionary stations among the heathen, is obtaining the notice of those engaged in the benevolent effort 'of evangelizing the world.' It strikes us that such a plan would be productive of the most favorable results. . . .¹⁷

Jason Lee evidenced the close relationship between proclaiming the gospel and introducing civilization when he asked that white women be sent out to set a domestic example¹⁸ and especially when he expressed the need for a civilized colony to serve as a base to sustain the missionaries in their preaching and teaching activities. In his celebrated letter to Caleb Cushing, January 17, 1839, Lee wrote:

The exclusive object of the mission is the benefit of the Indian tribes west of the Rocky mountains. But to accomplish this object, it is found necessary to cultivate the soil, erect dwelling-houses and school-houses, build mills, and, in fact, introduce all the necessaries and helps of a civilized colony. . . .¹⁹

This sentiment was the mature judgment of Lee after he had been on the scene in Oregon several years, for on his way to that country he had opposed any plans of colonization.²⁰ Apparently he was influenced shortly after his arrival by the ideas of Dr. John McLoughlin, the Hudson's Bay Company prefect, who was convinced that the Indians should be converted from their nomadic life as well as from their paganism. By 1836 McLoughlin wrote to a friend that he was pleased that the Methodist mission was teaching the Indians how to farm as well as teaching them religion, "which will Enable [sic] them to live as Civilized men—and which is the only Rational plan to be followed with Indians. . . . In short teach them Agriculture While they are instructing them in Religion."²¹

When engaged in a plan to civilize as well as Christianize the Indians it was easy for the missionaries to move

subtly from a primary concern for evangelism to a dominant desire for colonization. The dichotomy to which Mr. Jessett referred occurred so inobtrusively because developing a civilization was an integral part of the missionaries' plans almost from the outset. Protestant missionaries to Oregon were convinced that it was their task to convey their way of life as well as their faith and it was a subtle shift that led them to become more involved in the secular aspects of life than in converting the natives of the Pacific Northwest. Christianizing and civilizing the Indians were two horns of a paradox that were fine when held in proper tension, but when that tension was overbalanced a distortion resulted that produced the dichotomy which brought the missions to the Indians of Oregon to a close.

While I appreciated the overall orientation of Jessett's article I felt that some word had to be said to correct the errors embodied in it. In a scholarly journal of the integrity of *Church History* there should be more careful data and documentation, and generally there is. When one is aware of such errors it is necessary to point them out for the benefit of other scholars as well as for Mr. Jessett. It is good to find a continuing interest in the work of Christian missions in Oregon and perhaps Jessett's article is a new step toward fitting the events associated with those missions into the broader field of the expansion of Christianity and western culture in the nineteenth century and toward relating them to the larger social, economic and political circumstances of which they were a part. A closer look at the dual motivation for such missions may be one of the areas worth pursuing further at a future time.

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1. "A Document of Mission History, 1833-43," edited with an Introduction by Robert Moulton Gatke, *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, XXXVI (1935), 74-75.
2. *Ibid.*; "Methodist Annual Reports Relating to the Willamette Mission (1834-1848)," Introduction and Notes by Charles Henry Carey, *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, XXIII (1922), 305.
3. "A Document of Mission History," *loc. cit.*, pp. 79-80; *Zion's Herald* (Boston, Mass.), December 26, 1838.
4. (New York, N.Y.), XXIX, 295-296. This is a continuation of *The Methodist Magazine and Quarterly Review*.
5. *Annual Report of the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1848* (New York: Printed at the Conference Office, 1848), p. 36.
6. *Journal of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1848* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1848), pp. 39-40, 121-122.
7. *Twenty-Second Report of the American Home Missionary Society* (New York: William Osborn, 1848), p. 92; Colin Brummitt Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier. With Particular Reference to the American Home Missionary Society* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1939) p. 273.
8. *Annual Report of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, 1847* (New York: American Baptist Home Mission Rooms, 1847), pp. 58-60.
9. I was unable to secure the 1838 edition Mr. Jessett used, and that I had read earlier, but in checking some of my notes from that edition with the second edition printed in 1840 I discovered only two or three pages difference in pagination and I reread more than enough to compensate for this discrepancy. Samuel Parker, *Journal of an Exploring Tour Beyond the Rocky Mountains, Under the Direction of the American Board of Commissions [sic] for Foreign Missions, in the Years 1835, '36, and '37* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Published by the Author, 1840).
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 190-195, 230-232, 235, 241-242, 245, 252-253.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 291. He might have referred also to Asa Smith's letter to David Greene, dated August 27, 1839, quoted in Clifford Merrill Drury, *The Diaries and Letters of Henry H. Spalding and Asa Bowen Smith Relating to the Nez Perce Mission, 1838-1842* (Glendale, California: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1958), p. 107, or to other works that substantiated his point.
12. *Op. cit.*, p. 277.
13. *The Missionary Herald* (Boston, Mass.), XXIII, 397.
14. *Op. cit.*, p. 255.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 244, 306.
16. "Methodist Annual Reports Relating to the Willamette Mission," *loc. cit.*, p. 307.
17. (New York, N. Y.), August 19, 1836.
18. *Ibid.*, extra edition published July 1, 1836.
19. *H. E. Report No. 101, 25th Congress, 3rd Session*, Appendix H, pp. 3-4.
20. Letter of Jason Lee written July 1, 1834, when he was first on his way to Oregon, *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York, N. Y.), September 26, 1834.
21. McLoughlin to Edward Ermatinger, February 1, 1836, "Letters of Dr. John McLoughlin," with Introduction by T. C. Elliott, *Oregon Historical Society Quarterly*, XXIII (1922), 368.