

2007/4 Ethics In Missions

By B. S. Poh

The subject before us is “Ethics In Missions.” We are dealing with the principles of conduct in missionary endeavours. The dictionary definition of ethics is “the science which deals with morals.” And a “moral” matter is something “concerning character, behaviour, or actions, considered or judged as being good or evil, right or wrong.”¹ Our focus in this article is upon our attitude, behaviour, and actions - whether they are right or wrong - in the work of missions.

I trust we are people who take the Great Commission seriously, engaging in personal evangelism and church planting, at home as well as abroad. We harness our church members to this work, and we are constantly praying for, and nurturing, potential missionaries. We have a task to accomplish, and we are concerned to do it right. We do not believe in the Jesuit precept of “the end justifying the means”. Instead, we believe that not only must the end or objective be right, but the means to accomplish that end must be right. More than that, we believe that the motive or intention in us must be right. You see, then, that the end, the means, and the motive of all missionary endeavours must be right. This is quite a “tall order”, a stringent constraint, upon us. We will need some help to accomplish this.

Surprisingly, this is a matter that has not received any attention, as far as my knowledge goes. I have not found this issue dealt with in any missionary conference, nor in any book on missions. We know from our own experience, from the experience of brethren we are in fellowship with, and from the accounts in books, that some of the most unethical behaviour occur on the mission fields. There is an obvious need to address this subject.

Here, we shall endeavour to provide an awareness on this subject so that we may know how to behave ethically as we engage in the work of missions. I am hoping that, at the very least, an awareness on this subject will prepare us to face unethical behaviour from unexpected quarters. This article is anecdotal to a large extent, but I believe the principles involved are clear.

I. Factors That Should Govern Our Behaviour

1. The Bible: The word of God is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice. This is a key principle held by all Reformed Christians. It is, in fact, a mark of all true evangelicals, even though not all evangelicals are Reformed. We know, however, that the situation today is so confused, and there are many who call themselves evangelical but do not hold consistently to the authority of the Bible.

We say that the Bible is our only authority in all matters of faith *and* practice, but the reality is that many would apply the authority of Scripture to matters of faith only, and not to practice as well. They seem to hold to the idea that doctrine must be determined from the Bible, but practice is a matter of the *application* of doctrine, which is left to our discretion and judgement. The Bible, however, contains much that is of the nature of teachings on behaviour. The teachings may be in the form of: (i) precepts that bear directly on behaviour; or (ii) principles that are clear and unambiguous; or (iii) examples that are obvious.

In 2 Corinthians 10:12-18, we see the unethical behaviour of the false apostles who tried to alienate the Corinthian church against Paul, who was its founder. The false apostles invented false standards that they could meet, then proclaimed themselves superior for meeting them (v 12). Paul would not debase himself by imitating them in their boasting, but would rather speak of those things that are true and God-given (v 13). The false apostles had encroached into Paul's field of labour and attempted to take away the fruit of his labour by telling lies, by slandering, and by boasting (vv. 14-6 cf. v 10). Paul would rather not boast but seek God's commendation (vv. 17-18).

We see in this passage examples of unethical behaviour in the mission field, and Paul's persistence in behaving ethically, in contrast. The Bible teaches clearly principles of conduct in the work of missions. It is the objective standard of what is right and what is wrong.

2. God: The word of God directs us back to God Himself, teaching us that "whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). We do not want to forget that the God we serve is the true and living God, who is present everywhere, and who knows all things. We believe in a God who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient. Is this just a dogma, or is it a reality? I trust it is a reality with you. We are told in 1 Chronicles 28:9, "the LORD searches all hearts and understands all the intent of the thoughts."

We must do everything right before God's sight. Our objective must be right, our means must be right, and our motive must be right.

3. The moral law: We believe that the moral law of God, as summarised in the Ten Commandments, is of abiding relevance. We are not saved by keeping the law, but we are saved to keep the law. The law is a reflection of the holy character of God, and we who are His children are to reflect His holy character in our life and behaviour.

We often use the word "immoral" to refer to actions or behaviour that are wrong from the perspective of religion. Today, the word "immorality" seems to be used in the limited sense of sexual behaviour that is wrong from the religious point of view, but is generally regarded as acceptable by the non-religious. As for the word "unethical," it seems to have been detached from any religious standard of right or wrong. Instead, an action is regarded as "unethical" when it goes against an unwritten universal code of justice, honesty, and fairplay. Since this code is an unwritten one, and since the world is becoming increasingly relativistic, what is regarded as unethical to some may be perfectly ethical to others.

For the Christian, his code of conduct is the moral law of God. The breaking of the moral law is sin. Unethical behaviour is sinful behaviour. Lusting after a woman is committing adultery (Matt. 5:28). Being angry with a brother without a cause is murder (Matt. 5:22). The law of God is most stringent, because God is holy and perfect. The Christian cannot behave or act unethically without God knowing it.

4. *Our service to God:* Not only must we be faithful and zealous in serving God, we must seek to edify others and not cause them to stumble. In the process of serving God, we have an eye on how our actions and behaviour affect other people.

Positively speaking, we must seek to edify others (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23; 14:26). We want to be a good example, and an inspiration, to others (1 Tim. 4:12).

Negatively speaking, we want to avoid being a stumbling block to others (Rom. 14:13). There are weaker brethren who do not see things the way we do, and we may have to withhold ourselves from exercising our rights for their conscience sake. However, there is a limit to the withholding of our liberties, for we do not want to be controlled by the scruples of others.

5. *Christian character:* We focus on two sets of Christian graces: love and humility, and integrity and trustworthiness.

Love and humility concerns our character and how others perceive us. Christians have to love the brotherhood (1 Pet. 2:17). Love is warm affection towards others that seeks their welfare, even at an expense to oneself (1 Cor. 13:4-7). Humility is the opposite of pride. The Christian is an unworthy sinner who has been saved by God's grace, through faith in Christ. He is grateful to God, and compassionate towards men. He cannot think highly of himself and should, rather, esteem others as better than himself (Phil. 2:3-4).

Integrity and trustworthiness are qualities that affect our interaction with others (John 8:44; Rev. 21:8). A man of integrity is honest in his words, and transparent in his ways. He does not lie, but tells the truth. He does not need to conceal any corrupt or dishonest method of accomplishing something because there is no corruption nor dishonesty involved. A trustworthy person is responsible to the charge entrusted to him and seeks to carry it out faithfully. He can be relied upon to do the job well.

II. Applications To Missions

1. *The individual:* As a missionary, are you a man of integrity and trustworthiness? Can you be trusted with money? Will you go astray in doctrine? As a minister of the gospel, are you characterised by humility of heart and love for others? Do you serve God and look to Him to provide for your financial needs, or do you look upon serving God as a means of earning a living?

When you read any biography of William Carey, you will come across a strange character called Dr. Thomas. As a missionary, Dr. Thomas had a great heart of love for the heathens and lived

sacrificially. He, however, was rather irresponsible, lacked business acumen, and often got into debt. He was often pursued by creditors and became an embarrassment to those associated with him, including Carey. When confronted with a character like this, we have to ask, Is it right and good to get oneself into debt when engaged in missions? Romans 13:8 says, "Owe no one anything except to love one another." The question will arise in the mind of many whether it is right for Christians to take a mortgage from the bank to buy a house, or a loan to start a business. We will not discuss this here. The basic principle with regard to missions is that gospel work should not operate on financial debt, especially when owed to non-believers.²

Our churches in Malaysia support some pioneering efforts in other countries. We once had the disappointing and shocking experience of having a new church we supported turn to another Christian group when the pastor was offered better financial support. In our view, the pastor lacked integrity and was untrustworthy for he was so easily bought with money. We realised that it was just as well that the incident occurred early in our interaction with that church, rather than later. We questioned also the ethics of the Christian group that offered that pastor better financial support.

We once tried to help another pastor who was inadequately supported by his church. The members of the church were mostly poor. After much discussion and some investigation, it was agreed that we help that church to improve the financial standing by buying her a sow (a mother pig). The idea was that when the pig bore piglets, they could be sold at quite a handsome price each. During a festive occasion, it was decided by the church that the pig should be slaughtered, with the view of replacing it as soon as possible. The church tried hard to replace the pig, but failed. That was the end of our involvement with that congregation.

Another man in a pioneering situation bought a piece of land to erect a meeting place with money we collected for him, calling it RBC. We were made to understand that the initials stood for Reformed Baptist Church. Unknown to us, he canvassed for funds from other sources using the same initials for the church, but meaning something different from Reformed Baptist Church. After unsatisfactory explanation from him, we demanded that he return the money we had raised. He finally returned it, not taking into account the big depreciation in value of the money since the time the sum was given to him.

We know of a case in which a man attended training sessions organised by a group of churches and was later supported financially to be their missionary. Over a period of years, he gained the confidence of the supporting churches. One day, after receiving a substantial sum of money for a certain project, he absconded and was never heard of again.

These are instances that show a lack of personal integrity and ethics in missions.

2. Integrity in action: Two issues relating to ethics on the mission field are these:

(i) Should the missionary use money allocated for a certain project to finance a different project? I would say that if the money has been specifically designated for a certain project, it should not be used for any other purpose. We are, of course, not saying that funds cannot be temporarily interchanged in the process of implementing a number of projects, for that is purely an administrative matter. What

matters is that the sum collected for a certain project should be used accordingly.

(ii) What should a missionary do if his theological persuasion change with time? I believe the right thing to do is to inform the supporting church(es) about this. The churches founded by him on the mission field should be left unchanged and handed over to the supporting churches, which may then find other missionaries to replace him. Of course, there is the possibility that the supporting churches might just allow the original missionary take over whatever congregations that have turned to his new theological persuasion. It would be good if both the missionary and the supporting churches act with integrity and mutual respect, knowing that they are serving God, and not their own interests.

3. *Warrant for existence:* We move on from considering ethics in individual behaviour and the handling of money to ethics in interchurch relationships.

On the mission field, conflicting interests between churches of different denominations are encountered. Hudson Taylor encountered this in China, where the Roman Catholic Church had been active. Hudson Taylor forged cooperation between missionaries of various Protestant denominations, but there is no indication that he ever cooperated with the Roman Catholics. Having friends who are Roman Catholics is different from having cooperation with them in the work of missions. There is such a thing as biblical separation from those who are in serious errors and from apostate churches.

That raises the question, should we plant churches in areas where other churches exist? I would say, yes, and give three reasons for the warrant of our existence in that locality.

First, we know that “the harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few” (Matt. 9:37). This will be increasingly true with time because the number of people born into the world is always greater than those born into the kingdom of God. In any particular locality, there are always more people to be reached with the gospel than there are Christians to do it. I wonder, often, whether the combined effort of all the churches in any locality has been able to reach out to more than ten percent of the people.

Second, each local church has a duty to be “faithful until death” (Rev. 2:10). This is particularly so in an age when many churches are not too concerned about purity in doctrine nor about faithfulness in the Christian life. We are not promoting or encouraging denominational pride. Denominational pride is sinful, and must be repented of. It is divisive, making fellowship between churches impossible. Rather, we are discussing our duty to be faithful to our God which means, in practice, being faithful to His word. As a church, we have the intention to be faithful to God in doctrine and practice. We are normally unable to change other churches significantly to our view, and it would be a waste of time and effort to attempt to do so. We must plant churches that hold to our persuasion so that the truth is preserved and propagated, and so that like-minded Christians may have somewhere to go to.

Third, it is no sin to exist as a congregation separate from other churches. The Bible is our only authority in all matters of faith and practice. It is sufficient to guide us and to teach us the will of God. However, it is practically impossible to have perfect agreement on every point of doctrine and practice among sincere believers, while we are on this earth. We are not referring to those who are slack in the

faith, nor to those who are narrow-minded and unteachable, nor to those who are shackled by their church traditions and personal prejudices. We are referring to those who genuinely differ in their understanding of the Bible and, as a result, lead to the existence of churches of different convictions. The Bible does allow for differences between believers which might conceivably arise from unequal opportunities to learn, or unequal ability to understand truth, and unequal rates of spiritual growth. We read in 1 Corinthians 11:19, "For there must also be factions among you, that those who are approved may be recognized among you." We read in Phillipians 3:15, "Therefore, let us, as many as are mature, have this mind; and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal even this to you." (See also 1 Cor. 3:1-3; 12:4-5; Heb. 5:12-6:3; 2 Pet. 3:18). Differences exist among members of the same church; differences also exist among churches. Just as there are many families in a neighbourhood, there can be many churches in a locality.

Having argued for the warrant of existence of a church in any locality, we need to take into consideration the manner and spirit of church planting. Churches that are strong in the faith do not have to fear losing sheep to others. Instead, such churches are feared by others who are more fragile in their faith. By "strength of faith" we mean certainty in doctrine, and therefore in practice as well. We do not mean subjective feelings of faith, which are unreliable, even though it is a comfort to have such feelings which often do accompany a sense of certainty in doctrine. If we lose members who are not worth having, it is a blessing. There are those who are quarrelsome and contentious, who do not submit to the eldership of the church and attempt to impose their will on others at the expense of the unity and peace of the church. We should never be "hard-up," or anxious, for numbers. It is far better to have a small membership that is united and committed than to have a large membership that is constantly quarrelling within itself, and unable to accomplish anything of significance in God's service.

We are not afraid of losing sheep to others, and we do not want to engage in sheep-stealing. We should not be fishing from the pond of our neighbours, but rear our own fish instead. We should aim to reach out to the "raw pagans" with the gospel, and not seek to draw away members from other churches. There is no glory in gaining at the expense of other churches. Our gain by such means does not cause the kingdom of God to extend. And it causes the affected churches to be distressed and unhappy.

It is quite a different matter if believers from other churches come to us because they are hungry for the word of God, and have not been fed in their own churches. We do not steal sheep, but we have a responsibility to feed sheep that are hungry. Also, we are always ready to welcome those from apostate churches who are genuinely seeking the truth. We are referring to those who come from the Roman Catholic Church or from charismatic churches.

We must respect true churches that are not in error over fundamental doctrines, even though their doctrine may be defective in our view. While there is a warrant for our existence in their locality, we should avoid locating our meeting place immediately next door to theirs. If this is done, we are being unnecessarily provocative to those churches. It also opens us to ridicule, for the world would see us as divided and competing between ourselves. Let us resolve "not to put a stumbling block or a cause to

fall in our brother's way" (Rom. 14:13). "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the things by which one may edify another" (Rom. 14:19).

4. *Rivalry between churches:* Unhealthy rivalry often leads to unethical practices.

In the nineteenth century, Arminian revivalism in America destroyed the doctrinal distinctives of the Particular Baptists. The General Baptists and the Methodists were very active on the frontier. A certain Methodist preacher, called Cartwright, had won twenty-three persons to faith. As he moved on to preach elsewhere, the Baptists sent three preachers to round up the twenty-three converts for themselves. Cartwright, on being informed, quickly returned and managed to save his spiritual children from baptism by immersion. He did it by presenting himself for Baptist membership. At the last moment, he declared that he still believed in infant sprinkling, thus forcing the Baptists to reject him publicly. At the sight of his rejection, his twenty-three converts returned to the Methodist fold. I will leave it to you to figure out who had been right and who had been wrong. The incident clearly shows the unhealthy rivalry that existed between the Baptists and the Methodists at that time.³

5. *Unethical approaches:* While there are those who unethically "fish from their neighbours' ponds" to increase the size of their congregations, there are others who fish for mission possibilities in unethical ways.

We had the experience of a certain church whose pastor would never attend our annual Ministers' Conference, but who would always send his lieutenants. These men would come to fish for potential contacts, whom they would later visit with their pastor, with the view of starting new churches. A number of our friends were quite unhappy to be contacted that way. We finally made an appointment with that pastor and his men to lodge our protest. We thought they took the admonition well, but it turned out that they did not. We never invited that church to our Conference again.

We also had the experience of a Pastor A who came to our Conference and got to know Pastor B from a foreign country. Pastor A visited his new contact with the leaders of his denomination and attempted to win Pastor B over to their denomination by offering financial support. While others had succumbed to such overtures, Pastor B did not. He withstood them and the team left angry and disappointed. Pastor A, who initiated all this, never came to our Conference again.

The declared aim of our Ministers' Conference is to provide fellowship among like-minded people around the word of God. It also is a platform for learning and fellowship for the men we are supporting on the mission fields. Not all who come are of Reformed persuasion who, over time, would benefit from learning biblical truths. Others are missionaries who come by our invitation to be refreshed spiritually. It would be good if there can be mutual trust and respect among us. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Ps. 133:1).

6. *Help from abroad:* There are those who have a genuine desire to help churches in another country, and in that way be involved in missions. Here, too, one must tread carefully. Good intentions do not always translate into helpfulness or gospel advancement.

We know of foreign church groups that channel money to churches in third world countries in an unhelpful way. These foreign churches are relatively well off and are keen to be involved in missions. They respond to appeal for financial support too quickly, without examining the integrity of the people involved. By the time they realise that the money has been abused, a lot of harm would have been done. We know of many men who write to all possible Christian contacts overseas to get financial contributions. With the availability of computers and the advent of the internet, it is easy for third world countries to seek out addresses to write to. In fact, many who are “greedy for money” (1 Tim. 3:3) have refined their techniques such that they would not ask for money immediately in order to build up confidence. Instead, they would ask for theological training and for good Christian books. They can then put up a strong case for financial input later. It seems that they are capable of exercising more patience than the well-meaning but unwary Christians overseas!

In the book, “The Heavenly Man”, which I would recommend with qualifications, there is a striking passage which shows how overseas Christians can unwittingly cause harm to the local situation. Let me quote it:

“It is easy for a house church to split. Sometimes an outsider would come and spend time with a group of second or third-level leaders. They would hand out “support” money and their contact cards. Within a short time a new movement would be established. In their zeal to help, our foreign brothers were actually causing the house churches to split and be weakened. *‘For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge.’ Romans 10:2.*

I’m not saying it was purely the fault of our foreign brothers! Our own hearts were in error and we easily succumbed to temptation. I’m also not saying we don’t need or want help from Christians around the world. We do! We have tremendous needs and we pray that God will provide however he chooses, including through foreign Christians. But the motive in giving and receiving must be pure, and these gifts should only be given through the existing church leadership, so that the younger leaders are not tempted to use these gifts to usurp the authority of the leaders above them.”⁴

Actually, the need to channel gifts through the existing church leadership is a biblical practice. In Acts 11:30, we read of relief being sent to the brethren in Judea: “This they also did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul.”

We have our own stories of how foreign preachers have been unhelpful to our situation, just as there have been those who were helpful. These stories do not all revolve around money only. In fact, those that revolve around doctrine and attitude have upset us and harmed our situation more. There was a case in which a foreign preacher assumed too much and tried to play the role of advisor to our situation. The younger men, whom he had gotten to know after a number of visits, played into his hands and fed him with information, while he advised them on the actions they were to take. Imperceptibly, a wedge was driven between the people here, with the result that the fellowship here was

shattered. We have since learned that the same man had caused disharmony between the brethren in other parts of the world.

We have the case of a foreign preacher who approached us saying that he was passing our way to preach in a neighbouring country, and asked if he could come to us and be of some service. He, of course, introduced himself, dropping names of those whom we knew overseas. He came to us, then moved on to the neighbouring country. He did not realise that the people he was visiting were actually known to us. On exchanging notes later, we learned that that foreigner had written to our friends in the neighbouring country saying that he was coming to us and asking whether he could go to them and be of some service there.

We wish preachers were more honest. We, for ourselves, would not want to act unethically and unhelpfully in the missions situations we are involved with.

Conclusion

Much more can be said, and we have many more stories not yet told. I am sure among our readers are those who have similar stories to tell. This article is hardly a thorough treatment of the subject of ethics in missions, but I trust sufficient has been said to provide some food for thought. It is imperative that Christians engage in the work of missions with integrity. Our objective, methodology, and motive must be right. The true and living God knows our inner thoughts, attitudes, and intentions. There will be a day of judgement, in which all thoughts, words and deeds are exposed and called to account. We are serving God, not ourselves or our denominations. We are supposed to be disciples of Christ, who are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” Let us behave ethically.

The work of missions must continue - and continue at a more intensive pace. The elect of God must be called out by the gospel. Faithful churches must be planted. We must work while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work (John 9:4). May the Lord help us in the work of missions. Amen.

References:

1. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary of Historical Principles* (1968). Similar definitions are given in other dictionaries.
2. *William Carey*, by S.Pearce Carey, Wakeman; *William Carey*, by Kellsye Finnie, CM Publishing, 1986.
3. *Baptist Roots In America*, by Samuel E. Waldron, Simpson Publishing Company, 1991, pp 19-20.
4. *The Heavenly Man*, by Brother Yun with Paul Hattaway, Monarch Books, 2002, p. 234.

