
MISSIONARY TEMPTATIONS | *Deception for the Sake of the Gospel?*

By Benjamin B. Warfield¹

I suppose we all recognize that missionaries are the cream of Christians. They may say with Paul, in the whole length and breadth of his meaning, that unto them the grace has been given to preach unto the heathen the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. iii. 8). They are the bold and faithful spirits who bear the banner of the cross courageously to the front. We who abide at home hope that we are at home by the will of God and to his glory; but we cannot withhold our admiration from those whom God has chosen to form the advance-guard of his conquering host. We recognize that these “picked men” are the *elite* of the army of the cross. Their bearing justifies this recognition. There is not a body of men in the world of equal numbers who so thoroughly meet the trust reposed in them and the lofty sentiments entertained toward them by their fellow Christians.

So exalted is our well-founded appreciation of the character of missionaries in general that it comes with something of a shock to us to discover, as we are now and then led to discover, that even missionaries are, nevertheless, men, and are sometimes liable to the temptations, and shall we not even say, the failings, that are common to men. In the difficult situations in which they have been placed, they have exhibited, in general, a wisdom, a faithfulness, a power of adaptation, a devotion, which seems almost superhuman, and which can be accounted for only as the fulfillment of the promise with which the Lord accompanied their marching orders—that he would be with them to the end of the world. But in the midst of this general marvelous success, we find just enough of shortcomings to warn us that there are dangers attending the work of the missionary which it is requisite to face and to guard against. . . . The dangers I wish to speak of are . . . such as attend the work missionaries are called on to do, and such as show themselves in the manner of its prosecution. Here, too, the greatest danger is that we may fancy there is no danger. To be forewarned is to be partially, at least, forearmed; at all events it places it in our power to forearm ourselves. . . .

And is there not yet another form of moral danger to which the missionary may be exposed, suggested to us here—a danger lest in his zeal for propagating Christianity, he may be misled into the use of doubtful means of obtaining access to the heathen? Those who are acquainted with heathen lands, or even those who have a tolerable knowledge of missionary history, will understand at once what an ever present temptation stands before the messenger of glad tidings to obtain an opportunity to make them known by some act of *finesse*, which may all too easily pass into an act of deceit. Sometimes the country is closed to the open proclamation of the gospel, and the temptation arises to obtain access to its population under color of some other profession. One may at least go as teacher or physician, and while pretending to impart only secular learning, con-

¹ Excerpted from, “Some Perils of Missionary Life,” *The Presbyterian Quarterly* (July 1899): 385-404; reprint in *Selected Shorter Writings of Benjamin B. Warfield—II*, edited by John E. Meeter (Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1976, pp. 497-498, 511-513.

vey also that knowledge which is unto salvation; while pretending to no more than heal the body, minister also to the diseases of the soul. There is no one of us, doubtless, who would contend that the messenger of Christ is bound by human law in matters of this kind; it is for us, too, in this late day, to say with all boldness, “We must obey God rather than men” (Acts v. 29). But we must see to it that we do obey God, and must not cast aside his great law of truth, in order to carry the truth to others. The point is not whether we shall boldly proclaim the gospel in the face of all adverse force, or quietly propagate it in defiance of all adverse human enactments; but the point is whether we shall teach it under color of doing something else, under an implied or even express promise not to teach it. A missionary, we will say, has long tried to gain entrance into a land closed to the gospel; an offer comes to him to take charge of a Royal University, we will say, with the express provision that if he takes charge of it he obligates himself not to make his position a means of Christian propagandism. Ought he to accept such an offer? That is *prima facie* itself a serious question. How far does it involve an open renunciation of his Christian duty? But the point now is, if he does accept it, can he permit himself still to teach Christianity? A more subtle form of the same danger faces multitude of missionaries. Take the case of Korea a few years ago:

It should be premised here that every one of the ministers from the United States to the Court of Korea has construed the treaty between the two countries to mean that the work of teaching and preaching Christianity is not allowed. It provides that men may live in the capital for the purpose of studying the language, and it is under cover of this provision that missionaries are now resident in the country.¹

That is an ominous and disagreeable word: “under cover of.” And the narrative runs on to point out that the first Presbyterian missionary to Korea “was not known at first as a missionary,” but “went ostensibly to practice his profession as a physician”; that his standing as a missionary was unknown even to the United States minister, under whom he served as physician to the American legation; that it was by his “shrewdness” and the “discretion” of his immediate successors that a beginning of Christian missions was made—and so on. I have no intention of passing a condemnation on these brethren. One would better, before doing such a thing as that, examine all the circumstances on the ground. But is there not an unpleasant flavor in the mouth as we read such an account? Do we not feel that it would require great discretion indeed—possibly more than you or I possess—to preserve our integrity as servants of the God of Truth, in such trying circumstances? No wonder that the narrator calls it “a hard position in which to be placed.” Its hardness consists, however, not in the choice of whether we will break the law of the land in order to preach Christianity, but whether we will keep the law of Christ in preaching it.

Take the situation in Japan. For traveling in the interior, passports have been necessary—to be secured from the central government. “A very uncomfortable thing about these passports,” writes the Rev. M. L. Gordon, M.D., “is that they are granted only ‘for health or scientific purposes.’ Because of this fact, some missionaries are unwilling to use them for evangelistic touring, and so confine themselves to the vicinity of the open ports.”²

All honor, we say, to such missionaries. A keen and high sense of honor is itself an evangelizing endowment. We condemn no one. But if you and I were there, might we not find ourselves in danger of “doing an evil that a good might come”? And may we not be sure that God will smile on those who seek to serve him, though even to the apparent hurt of the cause they love?

² In his *An American Missionary in Japan*, p. 88.