

FACING THE PROBLEM OF THE MISSIONARIES' CHILDREN

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At a recent conference the following question was put to some missionaries: "Why are some missionaries' children such brats?" Such bluntness provokes reactions. It is not the purpose of this article to assume the role of the missionary parent and defend or excuse. Nor will it be to join in the spirit of the person who asked this question. Our aim will be to direct attention to the over-all problem that this rather tactless question brings up. While no one solution can be given, a frank discussion and some positive suggestions may be of help. One missionary parent, when approached on the subject said, "I cannot give you any of the answers, but I can tell you a lot of the problems."

This article is not being written to arouse undue sympathy for missionaries and their children, nor to increase the height of the "pedestal" that they are often placed upon. More than missionary families are involved here. The pastors and the congregations that support missions have a definite stake in the well-being of their missionary families. Therefore, the purpose here will be to point out some of the particular problems that missionary families face, as parents and children, in the years they are on the field, and to view the complications that develop upon return to the States.

When a missionary couple goes out to the mission field, its witness to Christ and the Christian life is more than that of the two individuals. Something else has been added. It is their joint witness as a Christian family. Here is a place where one and one makes more than two.¹

These words from the pen of a recognized authority on missions point out the value of Christian family life on the field. In certain areas of the world family ties are very weak according to Biblical standards. A missionary mother in New Guinea describes this when an oil company representative appeared to recruit workers.

Real drama took place at the water's edge during all this . . . I can't see how some of these married men can go off without more than five minutes' thought, to be gone for so long. Three of them have wives expecting babies within a month or less. They do not seem to feel any responsibility toward their families even though they are Christians and love them.²

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In some Roman Catholic countries one of the most common criticisms made by the people of their priests is that they are not men who know from personal experience the normal responsibilities and problems of family life. Thus the children in a missionary family are a definite asset in the gaining of confidence among the people and in winning them to Christ.

We have purposely begun this part of the discussion from the positive side. Yet since our purpose is to look at some of the problems, we must turn to them. From the physical standpoint of rearing a family in a foreign land there are usually some aspects of diet and sanitation that take more care and effort than is so in the homeland. Yet for the most part, most missionary homes today can be made as safe as they would be in the States.

Contrary to popular opinion, the greater problems lie in the realm of character formation and discipline. One of these is the training of the children to feel responsibility for work in the home. In some fields all of this type of activity is done by domestic servants, because it is the custom, and because the parents need to be free for missionary work. The children grow up without sharing in the household tasks. This may be carried over into the mission boarding school where again all the menial tasks are done by hired help, because it is cheap and is the custom. The child reared in this atmosphere will very likely contribute to the "brat" image later on.

Another problem not limited to the mission field, yet no doubt heightened by conditions there, is that of responsibility to the home and to the work. The missionary father will find himself a member of a greatly under-manned team, or in a spot where everything depends on him. How can he spend the time he should in the home and in the family? On the other hand, the missionary wife who becomes a mother finds she has to curtail the work she feels she came to the field to do. This can build up frustrations. The following words by a missionary parent are helpful.

The question of whether to put the child or the job first is misleading. If the Lord has given both, and they seem to conflict, commit them both to Him anew. If both cannot be done together, He will give the grace for leaving one or the other as He directs. Not the God-given work, not the God-given child, but God Himself must have priority. If you are one of those to whom He has permitted the joy of caring for both simultaneously, thank Him and pray a little more for those children and parents who must be separated earlier than you and yours have to be.³

Another cause for difficulties for the missionary family begins on the field and comes to light upon return to the States. It might be called "totem pole-itis." There may be a sincere effort to live in the foreign country as "your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). Yet the American finds an admiration shown for his gadgets, a deference shown for his ideas and a dependence on his ability and experience. The missionary may fight against it, but he will often find himself and his family the "top-man-on-the-totem." Once back in the States, a very real adjustment must be made. Rather than being at the top, he will no doubt find that he has much to learn.

Without a doubt, one of the most serious problems for missionaries is the education of their children. On the field there are three solutions. The child can go to the local schools if there are any. This allows him to live at home, yet he receives formal instruction in the language and culture of the country. Such a step often encourages better relations between the missionary and the people. Yet each family has to consider the possible disadvantages of an unfavorable moral atmosphere, discrimination where an official religion is taught in the schools, and perhaps inferior academic standards.

A second possibility for schooling is the boarding school. A mission-operated one may have the disadvantage of being small and understaffed. While a school operated by a number of cooperating missions may overcome this problem, it may have to sacrifice doctrinal standards and discipline. In some large foreign cities where there is extensive American commercial investment there may be secular American schools. To send missionary children to them may be academically beneficial, but often spiritually detrimental. In any case, the child will be away from home. He will have the benefit of contact with children of his own background, but he will be experiencing at perhaps too early an age the break-away from his own parents and home.

A third means of schooling on the field is to teach the children at home. One of the finest aids for this is the Calvert Schools system, used widely by the families of American businessmen, government employees and missionaries all over the world. The program is well developed and provides supplies and teaching guides for each day. Disadvantages to be noted are the lack of social contact with other children, the lack of incentive found in group study, and the time required of a missionary parent to teach several children in the family, each in a different grade.

However, the matter of grade school training is handled, it is usually done on the field and in a way that is generally satisfactory. It is when high school age is reached that the real problems develop. A rather extensive quotation from a report on this subject will place the matter before us.

Most missions do not seem to have a firm policy requiring parents to send their children home to the States for all or part of their high school education. The matter is left up to the discretions of the parents in most cases. A number of executives expressed the opinion that children should take the last two years of their high school in the States in order to get better college entrance preparation and also in order to become oriented to life in America before plunging into college work. On the other hand, a number of executives declared that it is best to make this "break" between high school and college, rather than uproot a child, both socially and academically, in the middle of his high school career.

The size of the high school being attended on the mission field would probably have some bearing on this matter. If it were a small school, with limited social and educational opportunity a student might tend to have an

inferiority complex or sense of insecurity when he returned to the States and went immediately into college life.

Some missions which have had a policy of sending their children home for the entire high school education have been faced with the parents contemplating withdrawal from missionary service in order to stay in the homeland for the duration of their children's high school education. Occasionally parents have had to come home prematurely because of problems arising with their children attending high school in the homeland.⁴

Some missions make provision for high school training on the field, and even where this is not done, individual families have kept their children with them, using correspondence courses offered under certain University extension services. Whether the high school age child should be kept on the field or sent home will have to be decided by each family in the light of conditions on the field and in the light of the particular needs of each child.

Sooner or later the missionary family will find itself in the States for a time of furlough. The normal one-year period slips by and a new aspect of the over-all problem must be faced. Should the children of high school age be left in the States. If so, where will they find a home? Should the whole family remain in the States, giving up missionary service on the field? While there has been much misunderstanding of this problem and criticism of the way it has been settled by different families, it is encouraging to know that there has been some serious and prayerful thinking and acting on the part of pastors and church members and mission boards. The missionary should not feel that he is facing this alone.

If the parents feel that they should return to the field there are several possible solutions for the children who are to be left. One that has worked out well in some cases is for the child to be taken into a Christian home and made one of the family circle. Sometimes this will be a relative and sometimes not. In any case the whole arrangement should be carefully talked over. It may be wise in some cases to let the child express his own opinions and be involved in the choice of a home.

Another way to meet this need is through a missionary children's home or a boarding school. These may be mission operated, or private institutions. The advantages are that they are designed for the express purpose of providing a home for the children and the personnel considers this their ministry. However, it is difficult to avoid the institutional atmosphere in such homes, and a child can well suffer psychological effects that would be unwholesome. The homes of this type that succeed best are probably the ones that are kept small with a definite emphasis on family living, and where the children are allowed to attend a near-by public or private school.

A decision that some missionary families have taken is to remain in the States rather than allow the family to break up during the critical years of adolescence. This is a difficult step to take. It involves an interruption in the service on the field where experienced personnel is usually desperately needed. For the missionary it means a more permanent adjustment to life

in the States and a search for employment at an age in life when it may not be too easy to find. The longer the absence from the field the more difficult it will be to return. If a missionary takes such a step without consultation with the staff on the field and the home board, he can disrupt the mission program to a very great extent. Certainly any solution should be sought by all involved and carried out in common agreement.

As mentioned earlier, this complex problem has received some careful consideration. Mission executives, while not anxious to disrupt the smooth flow of any program, are generally very sympathetic. The Foreign Missionary Society of the Brethren Church offers to divide the term of service on the field so that the missionary parents and adolescent children may get together more frequently either on the field or in the homeland. Not all families may feel that this is a solution; yet it has been done with apparent satisfaction in some cases, and the door is open for those who wish to try it.

Another practical suggestion has been spelled out by a missions-minded pastor who has had close hand experience with this problem through having taken missionary children into his home. He and his wife know the situation from the viewpoint of the missionary parent, of the missionary child, and of the home that takes the missionary child in. He believes that the missionary family should look ahead and decide, in consultation with the fellow missionaries and the board, to dedicate one term of their service to remaining in the States. This period would be selected to coincide as nearly as possible with the "crisis years" of adolescence when there is special need of close family ties. Where several children are in the family, one might have to be sent home a year or two ahead of the family. And after this period a younger one who could not be left would go back to the field and return for high school a year or two later.

Several practical advantages lie in this plan. First, the family is kept together, a fact that in the midst of all the discussion has been emphasized as of great importance. The parents can consider that the evangelization and spiritual nurture of their own children is being taken care of by those whom God intended that it should be--the parents. If the missionary takes a pastorate during these five or six years, he will gain some valuable experience for himself and should be able to impart more of a missionary spirit to the church. If it is true that future missionaries come largely from missionary homes, it could well be that the decisive years would be these that are spent together, even though not on the mission field. Problems on the field due to this break in service could be overcome partially by planning ahead, and also by appealing to home churches to supply more candidates for this very need. Many details would have to be worked out, but this plan deserves some careful consideration.

Before closing, the author would like to present another idea. It may create more problems than it seeks to solve. It certainly would not be applicable to all situations and should not be taken as a solution except where there is definite leading from the Lord. This plan has been practiced in some fields, yet the reaction of most would be to reject it.

A family goes to a foreign country with the idea of establishing itself there permanently. The purpose would be distinctly missionary, but the "foreign" aspect would gradually disappear because there would not be the periodic furloughs nor the close tie to the home country. This

would not mean that there might never be a visit to the States, but it would not be the practice. Such a family would have to face the fact that their children would be educated in the country, would be citizens of it, and would quite possibly marry there and rear their families there. If such a suggestion seems unthinkable, consider what changes our Lord involved Himself in when He came to earth. And remember, also, where our citizenship is as Christians.

As stated above, this is a radical suggestion. Perhaps it could not be carried out within the framework of existing foreign mission policy. It would not be possible in every foreign country. Perhaps one of the strongest reasons for presenting this idea lies in the question asked by an Argentine Christian of a missionary parent shortly before the missionary family left for furlough, taking with them an 18 year old son who had grown up in Argentina. "Why do all the missionaries rear their children here in our country where they learn our language and our ways better than their parents do, and then just when they could be of real help in the cause of the Gospel they take them away to the States?" One way to answer such a question would be to encourage the missionary child to keep before him a vision for service in the land he was reared in. Another would be to follow the suggestion given above and never take the child away.

Not all the problems have been touched in this paper. It is hoped that enough has been said to cause many to think more constructively about them. The task of preaching the Gospel to the world belongs to all of us. We should share the problems and seek the answers together. Perhaps as we do, there will be less occasion for anyone to ask why missionaries' children are such "brats."

The preparing of the children of our missionaries so that they can find their proper place in life, and in many cases, in active Christian service is of such vital concern to all that we shall be remiss if we give this problem anything less than our prayerful interests and financial support.⁵

DOCUMENTATION

1. Harold Cook, Missionary Life and Work (Moody Press), p. 94.
2. Joyce Brown, "Dear Mom" Letters From a Missionary Daughter (Moody Press, 1960), p. 43.
3. A Missionary Parent, "Do You Pray for M.K.'s?" article in Brethren Missionary Herald (June 3, 1961).
4. Norman L. Cummings, Missionary Children's Schooling Overseas (report), p. 13.
5. Ibid., p. 14.