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The Missionary Gospel

The missionaries who first introduced Māori to the Christian Gospel were members of the Church Missionary Society (CMS). The mission was launched on Christmas Day 1814 by Samuel Marsden, the senior chaplain in New South Wales, at the invitation of Ruatara, a tribal chief from the Bay of Islands.

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As faithful members of the Church of England, the missionaries were both Anglican and evangelical in character. As Anglicans, their Christianity was shaped by the reformed, protestant tradition of the English Church. As evangelicals, they were part of a movement that had transformed Anglo-American Christianity during the 18th century. For the CMS missionaries, their protestant Anglican identity and their evangelical missionary fervor went hand in hand and shaped the character of the message they preached to Māori. This spiritual heritage resulted in a Missionary Gospel with four distinctive features:

1. The Missionary Gospel centered on the priority of the Bible in Christian mission.
2. The Missionary Gospel sought the conversion of the sinner's heart through prayer.
3. The Missionary Gospel brought a radical message of peace toward God and neighbour through the cross of Christ.
4. The Missionary Gospel empowered Māori in Christian mission, even at great personal cost.

THE MISSIONARY GOSPEL CENTERED ON THE PRIORITY OF THE BIBLE IN CHRISTIAN MISSION

It is sometimes said that the CMS mission to Māori

was a 'civilising' mission. This was not so, though it was a holistic mission. "Christianity and civilization are intimately connected," said the missionary, William Williams, "though not always united." From the beginning the focus had always been on making known the Word of God to Māori. This involved the missionaries in language learning, literacy programmes and Bible translation, with the aim of placing the Word of God, the Bible, into

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the hands of Māori to read for themselves.

As well as providing a source of authority for the missionaries, the Bible also shaped the content of their preaching: it was the "means of grace", as they termed the reading and preaching of Scripture. For the CMS, the Bible was the God-given means by which God himself would achieve his eternal purposes among Māori. In this regard, the missionaries did not see themselves as cultural innovators, but as faithful instruments: instruments of the "means of grace". They believed themselves called to be faithful to those "means", even when the missionary soil seemed utterly barren.

As an example of the way the Scriptures formed the basis of the missionary Gospel, listen to this conversation recorded by Henry Williams in 1823 at a village on the banks of the Waitangi River:

Mr Fairburn and myself having taken our station on the ground, the people formed a circle. We then addressed ourselves to one.

How do you do friend?

Very well I thank you.

This is the Sabbath: did you know it?

No, I knew nothing about it.

Do you know what is the cause of the Sabbath Day among the white people?

No I do not, I never heard the reason.

The great Atua who made all the world, the sea, the fish and birds and caused the vegetation to spring forth, who also made you and me and all mankind, finished the whole in six days. The seventh day he rested from all his work, and proclaimed it a day of sacred rest to be observed by all men.

Notice the way in which the missionary observance of the Sabbath allowed them to introduce the Genesis narratives and the idea of a universal Creator God. Not that Māori allowed such novel ideas to go uncontested, as was demonstrated by the reply given to Henry Williams:

No your Atua is a strange Atua to us, he is not the New Zealand Atua, neither did he make New Zealand, nor the New Zealand men.

THE MISSIONARY GOSPEL SOUGHT THE CONVERSION OF THE SINNER'S HEART THROUGH PRAYER

The missionaries were always much more interested in inner transformation than outward conformity. They were looking for the same “great change” to occur in Māori hearts that had occurred in their own. In their own testimonies, missionaries would describe themselves as “brands plucked from the burning” and so as the first Māori came to faith in Christ, as Christian Rangī did in 1825, it was natural to label their conversions in the same way.

Can the Māori heart ever give up its natural inclinations and embrace the Christian Gospel? It was an open question at the time, asked by Māori and European alike. Yes, said the missionary, but only by the power of God. For the missionary, conversion could only come through prayer to the Great Atua for a new heart within. The missionaries

were not interested in teaching Māori second-hand religion, they wanted Māori to experience the power of true religion for themselves. Of the many reasons why Māori converted to Christianity, their experience of Christian prayer was an important factor that is easily overlooked in a more secular age.

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The year before his conversion, Christian Rangī had planted kumara without the customary tapu. Marianne Williams, Henry's wife, heard him comment: “If they grow well, [I] will believe the white people have the truth.” By July 1825 he informed Henry Williams that, “I pray several times in the day. I ask God to give me his spirit in my heart to sit there.” In August of that year, although suffering from the last stages of tuberculosis, his prayers were answered and he made an open confession of his faith. He asked the missionary, Richard Davis, to visit: “He told me,” wrote Davis, “[that] his heart was very full of love to Jesus Christ, that he was very ill in his body but that he hoped to be soon in the good place.” Henry Williams baptised Christian Rangī on 24 September 1825, and, although he died the next day, the missionaries were jubilant, for they recognised that he had received the same conversion of heart that they themselves had experienced.

THE MISSIONARY GOSPEL BROUGHT A RADICAL MESSAGE OF PEACE TOWARD GOD AND NEIGHBOUR THROUGH THE CROSS OF CHRIST

Māori had well-established peacemaking traditions based on utu (satisfaction, reciprocity, balance). The missionaries worked hard to dissuade Māori from fighting, but the demands of utu were strongly felt, connected as they were to a sense of

justice and a desire to protect the community from harm. However, the Missionary Gospel spoke of a new way of gaining satisfaction (utu) through the cross of Christ and the prospect of a final judgment on the wicked. It freed Māori to forgive their enemies as they themselves had been forgiven, and to leave all acts of vengeance to God.

In 1836 a twelve-year old mission girl, Tārore, was killed when her travelling party was ambushed by tribal enemies at the foot of the Kaimai ranges in the Waikato. Ngākuku, her father and a leading convert of the Matamata mission, brought her body back for the missionary, Alfred Brown, to bury. Brown records in his journal:

After singing a hymn, and addressing the assembled party, Ngakuku asked me if he might also say a few words, and on my assenting, he said with deep solemnity of feeling, "There lies my child, she has been murdered as a payment for your bad conduct, but do not you rise to seek a payment for her, God will do that. Let this be the finishing of the war with Rotorua; now let peace be made. My heart is not dark for Tarore, but for you. You urged teachers to come to you; they came, and now you are driving them away. You are crying for my girl: I am crying for you, for myself, for all of us. Perhaps this murder is a sign of God's anger toward us for our sins. Turn to him: believe or you will all perish."

Alfred Brown concluded with this comment:

Let those who treat the operation of the Holy Spirit upon the heart as an idle fable, account on natural principles for the scene I have this day been privileged to witness.

How was it that Māori converts could take such radical steps, ignore the demands of utu, and forgive their enemies? What was it that enabled Ngākuku to later shake the hand of his daughter's killer? Only a radical conviction that a deeper form of utu and justice was at work in the world through the cross of Christ.

THE MISSIONARY GOSPEL EMPOWERED MĀORI IN CHRISTIAN MISSION, EVEN AT GREAT PERSONAL COST

The mystery of God's providence was not lost on the missionaries. Though they were hemmed in on every side by inter-tribal wars and unable to move beyond the confines of the far north, war captives from every quarter were brought to the Bay of Islands, many of them receiving a missionary education before being released and returning to their homes. The missionaries were well aware of the strategic value of their former students – Māori catechists, living beyond the reach of the mission station, leading daily worship, running local schools, and preaching in surrounding districts. It meant that for the majority of Māori, their experience of Christian faith took place within a thoroughly Māori context, some distance from European influence.

To the missionaries' delight, much of this work became the spontaneous initiative of Māori Christians themselves, a notable example being the ministry of Taumata-a-kura to the people of the East Cape. Another example was that of Tāmihana Te Rauparaha, who, with the blessing of Octavius Hadfield but against his father's wishes, embarked on a Gospel peace-making mission, along with his cousin Hēnare Mātene (Henry Martin) Te Whiwhi, to their tribal enemies in the South Island. But perhaps the costliest example of missionary work undertaken by early Māori converts was that of Te Mānihera and Kereopa, who, for the sake of the Gospel, lost their lives seeking to evangelise their tribal enemies in the Taupō area.

Te Mānihera Poutama was from the Taranaki region, but had been captured twice by Māori raiding parties. First, by Waikato Māori who took him to Tāmaki where he was captured again, this time by Ngā Puhi raiding from the Bay of Islands. He was released by the passing Wesleyan missionary, Walter Lawry, who took him to Tonga where he spent the next 18 months. Returning to Hawera and taking the baptismal name of Te Mānihera (Maunsell) he became a leading Christian

teacher under the CMS missionary Richard Taylor. Taylor observed that Te Mānihera, “was always conspicuous for piety and attention to his duties, and instead of his first love growing cold, his appeared to increase with time; indeed, his love of Christ was written upon his countenance.”

At a gathering of over 2000 Taranaki Māori held at the Pūtiki mission station, Christmas 1846, Te Mānihera spoke of the need for a Māori missionary movement and offered to go himself as a missionary to their traditional enemies in the Taupō area to bring them the Gospel of peace. Kereopa, his fellow catechist from Waokena, agreed to accompany him and the hui set them both apart as “tapu to the Lord”, gifting them each a set of missionary clothes. Despite repeated warnings that their lives were in danger, they completed their journey in death, offering their very lives to establish a lasting peace between the tribes.

CONCLUSION

The missionary gospel had its roots in the protestant and evangelical heritage of the English church and founded a Māori church that shared similar family traits. It was a gospel message that was shaped by the authority and narrative of the Bible. It was a gospel that looked for an inner

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transformation rather than an outward conformity. It brought a radical message of peace and reconciliation through the cross of Christ. And it empowered Māori to engage in Christian mission.

The CMS mission to New Zealand was among the first of many evangelical missions that make up what is now termed the Modern Missionary Movement. The influence of this missionary movement is still felt today with the rise of the so-called Global South. This is particularly true for the Anglican Communion, which has seen the rapid growth of its churches in Africa, Asia and South America. So, the Anglican Communion is itself a product of the same missionary movement that laid the foundations for our own church here in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. For this reason, we as Anglicans are rightly named in te reo Māori as Te Hāhi Mihināre: the Missionary Church.