

George Leslie Mackay's Mission to Formosa: An Examination in the Areas of Biblical Mandate,
Culture, and Church History

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Despite Canada's relatively young age of just over 150 years as a Dominion it has a strong history of Presbyterian foreign mission works. From John Geddie and the Gordon brothers in the South Pacific Islands to Jonathan Goforth's labours in China there is much to reflect on, learn from, and be encouraged by. Among this group of mighty labourers in Christ's kingdom must also be placed the indefatigable son of Oxford County, Ontario, George Leslie Mackay. In this paper Mackay's labours among the people of North Formosa, present day Taiwan, will be briefly examined. This examination will take place under three headings including how Mackay's labours fit within the biblical mandate for world evangelization, how cultural issues effected the mission to Formosa, and how Mackay's work parallels other successful mission works from history.

Before these areas will be examined a very brief overview of George Leslie Mackay's labours and work will be set forth. Mackay was born in Oxford County, Ontario, to Scottish immigrants on March 21, 1844. By all accounts his parents were faithful Presbyterian Christians in the Presbyterian tradition. He felt a call to the ministry and obtained degrees in Toronto and Princeton Seminary. He also studied in Scotland for a time where he was particularly encouraged to go to the foreign mission field. He was ordained and sent to China as a missionary in 1871. After arriving in the orient with the leading of the Holy Spirit he chose North Formosa as his field of labour. The Lord mightily blessed his labours, despite extraordinary challenges, and after thirty years of work a Christian church was established in North Formosa having four organized congregations and over fifty mission stations. In addition, during his years there a college, school for girls, and hospital were also constructed. He died, after an illness, in June 1901.

George Leslie Mackay's labours were greatly blessed by the Lord and in part, this is due to the biblical foundation that his mission work rested on. The nature of this biblical foundation

will be shown by examining how Mackay's labours fit within the biblical mandate for world evangelization. Three of the primary mandates that Scripture puts forward with respect to mission work are the command to go forth, the application of the Covenant of Grace, and to promote the glory of God through Jesus Christ. In examining Mackay's mission endeavours, it will be clear that all three of these bases are present in his work and life.

One of most clear motives which Scripture puts forward for world missions is the command of Jesus Christ. This is most clearly seen in Matthew 28:18-20, "And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.'"¹ This verse was referred to in the dedication of Mackay's Bible which was given to him by the Canadian Presbyterian Church upon his departure for Formosa. In fact, his biographer, Marian Keith, writes that since he was a little boy Mackay had a sense of this call. She writes, "For had not One said to him, long long ago when he was but a little boy, 'Come follow me, and I will make you to become a fisher of men'? and he had obeyed."² Mackay also obeyed through example. As a result of hard work, he learned the Chinese language and Keith writes, "The missionary was soon able to speak so fluently that he preached almost every day, either in the little house by the river, or on the street in some open square."³ Mackay obeyed the great commission.

¹ *Scripture Quotations Are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), Copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a Publishing Ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by Permission. All Rights Reserved.*

² Marian Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa* (Bolton, ON: Leopold Classic Library, 2017), 37.

³ *Ibid*, 86.

Along with Christ's command to go and make disciples, the Covenant of Grace also provides a mandate for world evangelization. Peter A. Lillback summarizes the Covenant's relation to mission work in saying, "God's intention in reaching out to the whole world is seen in his gracious covenant call in the gospel."⁴ This Covenant message refers to the gracious work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Jesus himself speaks of his fulfilling this Covenant in John 17:1b-3, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Jesus' message was Mackay's message. This is seen in the substance of his proclamation to a man named A Hoa, who would become his first convert, "And Mackay told his guest why he had come to Formosa, and of Jesus Christ who was both God and man and who had come to the earth to save mankind."⁵ In time, it was clear that Mackay's work was God working through him. God was putting his Covenant with mankind to action and calling the lost into the light of the truth. R. P. Mackay says of this work, "Thus the work developed and grew, not according to any preconceived or detailed plan, but under the leading of the Holy Spirit."⁶ In George Leslie Mackay God was implementing the Covenant of Grace in history, calling his people out of the world.

The final motive for world evangelization which Mackay displayed in his labours was the goal of giving glory to God in Jesus Christ. The glory of God was paramount to Mackay and his first journal entry after arriving in the town of Tamsui in North Formosa reveals this, "Here I am

⁴ Peter A. Lillback, "The Covenant of Grace as the Paradigm for Mission," in *A Covenantal Vision for Global Mission*, ed. Paul Wells, Henk Stoker, and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2020), 57.

⁵ Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa*, 75.

⁶ R. P. Mackay, *Life of George Leslie Mackay, D.D. 1844-1901* (Charleston, SC: BiblioBazaar, 2010), 24.

in this house, having been led all the way from the old homestead in Zorra by Jesus, as direct as though my boxes were labeled, ‘Tamsui, Formosa, China.’ Oh, the glorious privilege to lay the foundation of Christ’s Church in unbroken heathenism! God help me to do this with the open Bible! Again I swear allegiance to thee, O King Jesus, my Captain. So help me God!”⁷ This desire to see the glory of Jesus Christ was seen in those converted by his ministry. A Hoa, who became a close associate and friend, said to a group of people who were ridiculing him, “I am a Christian! ...I worship the true God. I cannot worship idols...I am not afraid. I love Jesus. He is my Savior and Friend.”⁸ Mackay’s ministry was marked by a desire to see the kingdom of Christ grow and his glory to go forth and this motive was also taken up by those converted by his preaching and teaching. The biblical mandates of Christ’s command to go forth, the application of the Covenant of Grace, and the desire to see God’s glory were key and clear motives for George Leslie Mackay in his labours.

The next area of examination with respect to Mackay’s mission to North Formosa is to examine how cultural issues effected the mission work. The topic of culture is a complex one but can be broken down into two categories, areas of culture which needs changing due to inherent sinfulness and areas of culture which can be embraced, worked with, and even enjoyed as they are not contrary to God’s word. In examining Mackay’s interaction with Formosan culture both areas are evident.

Aspects of culture in North Formosa were inherently sinful and needed correction in order that God would be glorified, and the people freed from the bondage of sin in those areas. The following quote about the justice system that existed when Mackay arrived gives a window

⁷ Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa*, 62.

⁸ Ibid, 98.

into the sins of the society, “He visited a yamen, or court-house, and saw the mandarin dispense “justice,” but his judgment was said to be always given in favor of the one who paid him the highest bribe. He saw the widow robbed, and the innocent suffering frightful tortures, and sometimes he strode home to his little hut by the river, his blood tingling with righteous indignation.”⁹ Mackay’s solution to these problems is then put forward in his own words, “O God, give me power to teach these people of thy love through Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ Mackay was faced with sins in Formosan society and his proposed solution was the gospel of Jesus Christ which he knew would result in positive change.

Along with sinful culture which Mackay rejected other aspects of culture could be embraced and even used to promote the gospel and he did this very well. For example, Mackay worked exceedingly hard at learning the Chinese language believing that “any missionary unwilling to undergo the labor of acquiring the language is a doubtful appointment.”¹¹ As a result of learning the language Mackay found that he had opened a door to the people of North Formosa. For example, he had surprised a group of local boys in being able to greet them in their own language. Keith writes, “From that day the young missionary and the herd-boys were great friends...And as they were very willing to talk, he not only learned their language rapidly, but also learned much about their homes, their schools, their customs, and their religion.”¹²

Mackay used his growing language skills to learn much about the religions of the local people. His knowledge grew to such an extent that he was able to dispute with the most learned scholars and often used the tenets of the Chinese religions to refute their own practices and

⁹ Ibid, 70.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Mackay, *Life of George Leslie Mackay, D.D. 1844-1901*, 19.

¹² Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa*, 67.

promote Christianity. Mackay believed that there were things that he could grab hold of to promote the gospel saying, “There are scattered rays of light in every land, and many beautiful gems of thought.”¹³ R.P. Mackay summarizes George Leslie Mackay’s position stating, “It is the wisdom of the Christian missionary to recognize truth wherever it is found and to show that these fragments of truth are united and perfected and personified in Him who is the Truth and the Life.”¹⁴ He learned the language and became an expert in the local religions in order to use this cultural knowledge to effectively bring the gospel.

There were other aspects of North Formosan culture which Mackay embraced. Over time Mackay dressed like the local population, his beard was a mark of respect, he enjoyed their food, and even set up a museum to display the beauty of the flora and fauna of the island which he enjoyed very much. He lived with the people in rented houses and lived among them as they lived. He also married a woman from among the Christian population who he loved very much and who was able to aid in bringing the gospel to women and children who rarely attended church due to local customs.¹⁵ In this way the gospel went forth to many Formosan women despite cultural barriers. Mackay did not embrace the sinful aspects of the local culture, did enjoy and embrace the local customs and culture where he could, but most importantly he used the culture as an entrance for the gospel. At one point Mackay wrote in 1883, “Upward of 2,000 have thrown away their idols and wish to follow the Lord of Hosts.”¹⁶ The Lord blessed his labours.

¹³ Mackay, *Life of George Leslie Mackay, D.D. 1844-1901*, 20-21.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 21.

¹⁵ Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa*, 216-217.

¹⁶ Mackay, *Life of George Leslie Mackay, D.D. 1844-1901*, 43.

The final area of analysis to be taken up with be to examine how Mackay's work parallels other successful mission works from history. Here four areas will be briefly examined including his reliance on the Lord, hard work, his respect for the local population, and God's providential care. Every missionary has the need to rely on the Lord and Mackay displayed this in great measure. After thinking about Psalm 121:5 which was referenced in the inscription in his Bible, "The LORD is your keeper; the LORD is your shade on your right hand," he was encouraged. "He was going out to an unknown land where dangers and perhaps death awaited him, but the Lord would be his keeper and nothing could harm him."¹⁷ Mackay's work was always bathed in prayer which is further evidence of his reliance on the Lord. Concerning the desire to have a helper in the work we read, "With all his might and main, day and night, he was praying – praying for one special object. He had been praying for this long before he saw Formosa. He was pleading with God to give him, as his first convert, a young man of education. And so he was always on the lookout for such, as he preached and taught, and never once did he cease praying that he might find him."¹⁸ He knew that the Lord needed to bless his labours and prayed earnestly for this blessing.

Along with hard work in prayer Mackay displayed extremely hard work in general. His students were amazed at his dedication. "He surely worked as never man worked before. Late at night, long after every one else was in bed, he would be bending over his Bible, beside his peanut oil lamp, and early in the morning before the stars had disappeared he was up and at work again."¹⁹ His work ethic did not develop after arriving on Formosa but was a trait which he had developed in his youth. Keith remarks with respect to Mackay's trip to the East, "He was the

¹⁷ Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa*, 19.

¹⁸ Ibid, 73.

¹⁹ Ibid, 192.

same busy G.L. he had been when a boy; always working, working, and he did not waste a moment on the voyage. There was a fine library on the ship and he studied the books on China until he knew more about the religion of that country than did many of the Chinese themselves.”²⁰ The Lord blessed his work ethic. For example, he learned the Chinese language being able to preach in Chinese only five months after being introduced to it²¹ and he became so knowledgeable in Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism that “the literati found it convenient to avoid debate.”²²

An area of importance on the mission field is how the local population is perceived by the missionary. Benyamin F. Intan, in an article entitled “The Witness of Reformed Christianity in Indonesia” writes how the Dutch missionaries did not have respect for the local population, believing them to be inferior, and therefore “conducted mission work in one direction only and refused to learn from the religion and culture of those receiving the gospel.”²³ This ultimately hindered the mission work in Indonesia. George Leslie Mackay did not share such views with respect to the population of North Formosa. In December 1877 he wrote to the missions committee about his work and desire for the salvation of the lost and his recent marriage to a Chinese lady. In the letter he remarks speaking of woman on North Formosa, “I cannot reach that class myself, and as I believe that Chinese and Canadians are alike in the presence of our Lord, I act accordingly.”²⁴ This respectful view of the population to whom he ministered is seen in how he interacts with them and teaches them. Under his leadership students, who were men, or

²⁰ Ibid, 19-20.

²¹ Mackay, *Life of George Leslie Mackay, D.D. 1844-1901*, 20.

²² Ibid, 21.

²³ Benyamin F. Intan, “The Witness of Reformed Christianity in a Minority Situation: Indonesia,” in *A Covenantal Vision for Global Mission*, ed. Paul Wells, Henk Stoker, and Peter A. Lillback (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: P & R Publishing, 2020), 244.

²⁴ Mackay, *Life of George Leslie Mackay, D.D. 1844-1901*, 34.

women who he taught and who were called “Bible-women” could recite the entire Shorter Catechism or collections of Psalms and hymns.²⁵ He had a great deal of love and respect for A Hoa and he would remark of him, “rarely had he heard Canadian preachers who could influence a Canadian audience as A Hoa could move a congregation of his own countrymen.”²⁶ He also involved Formosans in the church settings up gifted and faithful men as pastors and others as elders and deacons.²⁷ Involving the local population in the work made the growing church in North Formosa their church which the Lord blessed with growth. Along with a reliance on the Lord coupled with his own hard work, Mackay’s love and respect for the people was a significant factor in the success of the work.

The final area of examination in the history of missions is to look at how God’s providentially used various factors to impact the mission field. The church of Jesus Christ has many enemies, and this was displayed very clearly in North Formosa on many occasions. For example, in the City of Bang-Kah the people were filled with hatred for all foreigners and for the gospel in particular and they had driven Mackay out with rocks and insults the first time he entered the city. The next time Mackay entered he and his companions were nearly killed in a mob which tore apart the house they had rented. Despite near-death experiences and with persistence the church was eventually built.²⁸ One of the areas of providence which aided in such success was the medical knowledge that Mackay had acquired in school in Canada as well as his knowledge of dentistry. He became adept at pulling painful teeth out of people’s mouths and helping them overcome malaria which opened great doors for the gospel. “So with forceps in one hand and the Bible in the other, Mackay found himself doubly equipped. Every second person

²⁵ Ibid, 30.

²⁶ Ibid, 22.

²⁷ Ibid, 44.

²⁸ Keith, *The Black Bearded Barbarian; The Life of George Leslie Mackay of Formosa*, 174.

seemed to be suffering from toothache, and when the pain was relieved by the missionary, the patient was in a state of mind to receive his teaching kindly.”²⁹ The Lord blessed his knowledge of medicine for the building of the church.

During his ministry in North Formosa two wars occurred. The first was an invasion by the French in 1885 which turned many of the population to rise up against any foreigner and any who supported them. This meant that many Christians were murdered by mobs and many chapel buildings were destroyed. The enemies of the church were gleeful thinking that the church had been destroyed. Instead, the church grew in faith and praised the Lord to the shock and surprise of those who hated the gospel.³⁰ “And their amazement grew as the chapels, the lovely new chapels, of stone or brick, began to rise from the ruins of the old ones...until there were not only the forty original chapels, but in a few years the number had increased to sixty.”³¹ The result of the war with the French, and the subsequent persecution at the hands of her enemies, was that the church grew rather than diminished. The war against the Japanese was also used for good, despite the terrible suffering it initially brought with it, as the Japanese were more capable political leaders and they paid for all of the damage done by their soldiers, “and on the whole the trial proved a blessing.”³² Many more stories and evidence could be put forward to display God’s wonderful hand of providence even using suffering as a tool by which his glory went forth.

The life and work of George Leslie Mackay adds greatly to the history of missions. He was a man who had as his foundation for mission work the mandates for evangelism laid out in Scripture. He also embraced the aspects of culture that he could and conquered the bad with the

²⁹ Ibid, 112-113.

³⁰ Ibid, 251.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid, 292.

application of the gospel. Finally, the story of the work on North Formosa mirrors so many other mission fields with respect to the need for hard work, reliance on the Lord, respect and love for those to whom the gospel went forth, and God's mighty hand of providence. God's work in the life of George Leslie Mackay is a source of great encouragement for the Christian church today as it is a reminder of God's Covenant love for his people and the unstoppable application of the saving work of Christ on the cross by the Holy Spirit.

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