

Don McClure

Missionary Biographies

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We're looking at William Donald McClure Sr. who is a missionary in Africa and we have to make some tracks so, and some of it I have to read because I'll be reading some comments of his, but let's jump in.

I first heard of Don McClure when I was a kid of about maybe 8 or 10 years old. We had, I was raised in the United Presbyterian Church of North America which was a small denomination, evangelical, and Don McClure was one of our denomination's missionaries. We had a thing called the Junior Missionary Society for kids. Before the Sunday evening service, we went to Junior, and when I went to Junior, I heard stuff about Don McClure and so on, and so that's what I've chosen to deal with today.

Now sketch of his life. Can't do a whole lot. Born in 1906. He was educated at Westminster College in Western Pennsylvania. After that, he went to the Sudan for three years serving in Khartoum, I think, as a teacher and so on. Then he came back to the States. He went to Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Three years later then about 1934, he went to the Sudan to Doleb Hill and Akobo and Pokwo. He served in the Sudan a couple of stations and then in Western Ethiopia another station and so on. Then this was from about 1934-1960 in these three different places. Then he had oversight over the whole work in Ethiopia for a while. Then in 1970-77, he served in Gode in Eastern Ethiopia.

He was a pioneer missionary serving in Sudan and Ethiopia for over 45 years. If you know your geography of Africa, you can see the Med Sea up there, you can see Egypt, well, the Sudan is south of Egypt. That's where Don McClure was. Then after that, he was in Ethiopia east of Sudan. After that, he was in Eastern Ethiopia next to Somalia. So there you are. Now he was gunned down by Somali guerrillas in the 27th of March, 1977 and he was buried at Gode near the Ethiopian/Somali border, so he gave his life at that point.

Now it was not a picnic to go to the Sudan. There was a British official who has left his view of what the Sudan is like. I don't know when this was but sometime probably mid-1900s or something, but this British official said, "The poor Sudan. The wretched dry Sudan. It's not a country. It has neither nationality nor history nor arts nor even natural features, just the Nile, and for the rest there's absolutely nothing to look at in the Sudan.

For beasts it has tarantulas and scorpions and serpents devouring white ants and every kind of loathsome bug that flies or crawls. It's a quarter of a continent of sheer squalor. Overhead the pitiless furnace of the sun, under foot the never-ceasing treadmill of the sand. Dust in the throat. Tuneless singing in the ears. Searing flame in the eyes. The Sudan is a God-accursed wilderness, an empty limbo of torment forever and ever." You get the picture.

Don McClure's reaction, however, when he went to the Sudan after his college days for that three year stint, began like this when he wrote home. "I love the Sudan. Here life in each day demands everything you have. I was discouraged at first because the need is so great that meeting it seems hopeless. Missionaries here are not overworked by heavy duties but are overwhelmed by innumerable trifles. I'm usually disgusted with what I've been able to accomplish but it's a joy to give my all. Everything we do is really appreciated. My students have begun to comb their hair on the same side as I do and as much as they are able, to dress like me. One of them asked if it cost a lot to dye my hair red. I said it was very costly and rolling up my trousers I told him it was even more expensive to make the hair on my legs the right color." He loved the Sudan.

In 1932, he married Lyda Boyd, who was a helpmate, superb in every way for him. Can't go into that. Suffice it to say so close was their relationship that they later became famous in Africa as a couple who required only one regular-sized sleeping bag. I'll let you take it from there.

Now I can't go through it, if I go through in chronological order, it's going to be a massive detail. I'll lose you, etc. So I've broken it down into chunks of kind of themes, alright, to give you the illusion of organization, and I'll try to illustrate under that.

First point, first task, gathering people. First task, gathering Christ's people. Don McClure always looked upon himself in spite of all his other responsibilities, as a pioneer evangelist. For example, at Pokwo in Ethiopia about 1960, he summed up their progress and their work at that point. He said that the Gospel had been preached in every Anuak village. In some villages there are as many as 50 Christians holding regular services. In most villages there was at least one baptized Christian. Don estimated that 1/5 of the Anuak tribe had become Christian and another 1/5 were being prepared for baptism. Also, more than 10% of the Anuaks were now literate.

Well, that's sort of a statistic-like reflection and so on. It gives you some idea of where his heart is, but what does that look like in terms of a picture? What's that look like in flesh and blood? Well, it looks like this. I'll just give you a recap of a Sunday there at Pokwo. It was a baptism service and this is what he said. He said on Sunday we had a fine service. There were about 35, he had a communicant's class of about 50 and there were about 35 of them ready for baptism. The church was full that morning and he looked out over those who were to be baptized and here's some of whom he saw. Akello, a young girl, was standing with her blind father and sick mother. Akello came to the mission nearly a year ago with a left ankle that was shattered by a rifle bullet. She had been tending a fire in her village. Somebody came by and fired in there, hitting her ankle

and it shattered the bones. The doctor who happened to be there had to pick out bone fragments from the ankle. It fractured also part of the leg and so on. So she was there and she was tended at the mission station and she was just now at this point of this baptism service, being able to walk again, but had to have it dressed and so on.

So her mother came in with Akello when she came to the mission station to be cared for, and we discovered that the mother had an advanced case of tuberculosis, and a few weeks later her blind father came in, he said, "I had great difficulty convincing her father to come to the worship service," and so on. He said, "He can't see what's going on." He said all you have to have are ears to hear and a heart to believe what's being said.

So Akello first became a Christian. Then the old father, and finally a few months ago, he says, her mother. Here they were, a complete Christian family, but all three with terrible afflictions and with little hope for real health in the days to come. Today, he says, they were radiant.

Then there's a leper, had leprosy in both her hands and her feet, what remained of them. They were bandaged. Her face was badly affected. The leprosy so far advanced, that it was questionable whether we could arrest its progress, but she too has come to love the Lord.

And someone else, for instance, was there to be baptized, a man standing before me, he said, had been a drunkard and a beggar. He was thrown out of several villages because he wouldn't hoe enough ground to sustain himself and the villagers refused to feed him. He'd lost his wife because he couldn't keep up the bride price payment and he came in here, Don said, with tuberculosis, a forlorn creature with no one to love him and everyone happy to see him die. But the man became a Christian. He conquered his drinking problem and he was now hoeing one of the largest fields in the community. He's begun to take steps to get his wife and small son back.

Then let me completely quote what McClure says. "As the world counts power and prestige, we were a miserable, sick, dirt poor, ragged bunch of black Africans led by a crazy white missionary and the sober Anuak elders of the church of Jesus Christ at Pokwo as we walked in procession down to the river for the sacrament of Christian baptism." That's the first task, gathering Christ's people. That's where Don McClure's heart was.

He tells also the same sort of thing, you could multiply these, of Ojok who about 1960-62 was going to be baptized. He said Ojok looks 90 but he's not more than 45. He has an advanced stage of tuberculosis. There's nothing we can do for him and he had believed several years before when an itinerant Anuak evangelist had come through preaching the Gospel and now he wanted to be baptized but he couldn't even walk by this time. Don said he never saw a man so thin, nothing but skin and bones and unable to walk. Ojok had to crawl from the little hut where he's staying to the place where we held the service. When I called his name, he crawled forward and was baptized sitting on the ground. He said Ojok cannot stand up for Jesus but he gave a splendid testimony of how happy that

he was that he'd made his profession of faith before the people and he was now ready to die and go to be with his Lord.

That's the first task, gathering Christ's people. That was Don McClure's passion. Now, second division, the stretching of a missionary. The stretching of a missionary. You can understand someone in pioneer missions and so on, has any number of duties or responsibilities that are thrust upon him. He's an evangelist. He's a physician. Now Don McClure didn't have technical medical training but he had to deal with, he might go out the mission station in the morning, there might be 80 people there wanting to be treated and he could give shots, he could give medicine etc. So he was a physician in one sense. He was a farmer because he would help them, the tribal people, know how better to improve their crops and what to grow and so on. He was a builder. He would build these mission stations, the homes on them, the workshops, the schools and so on. And he was an educator because he would deal in literacy and so on. So you see the stretching of the missionary could make you go nuts if you liked to focus on one thing, but he couldn't.

So there's this stretch. I'll just give one example of this and that is the medical need and I'll give you a sample from that McClure passes on, and then a lament in the middle of this that he breaks into. He speaks of one day at Pokwo, he said, "Today I had to operate on what I think was cancer of the mouth. The woman had a huge growth in her mouth growing out from her upper jaw. A few weeks ago, some villager had attempted to cut it off with an old razor blade, but she became infected. The infection disappeared eventually but the growth became larger and larger and was hanging over her upper teeth in such a way that she could not chew. Against my better judgment, I cut it off this morning and found the roots going deep into her jaw and face. I then had to remove two teeth and drain her ear." They don't teach you this in seminary, "because the canal was still full of the former infection." Then he says this, "Who am I to attempt such things? And why does the Lord allow me to work alone out here. I'm the only medical officer for 25,000 Anuaks and together with a nurse at Akobo, we serve 40,000 people among the Anuaks alone." So you can see the frustration that comes with this stretching of the missionary.

Now he did have help for one year, a physician, Dr. Paul Bowman, came out from America to help and so he had a real doctor for one year, but he said, in a sense he was being facetious, "Paul took too much time." Let me explain. He said, "We now have a real physician with us for one year, Dr. Paul Bowman, and we are having unexpected trouble with the sick. Over the years the Anuaks have grown accustomed to the diagnostic speed of my medical ignorance. I'm able to treat 50 patients in a half hour, but Paul cannot work as fast as I do. A lot of knowledge is a dangerous thing. Paul finds a place where the patient can lie down and get a thorough examination, then he prescribes carefully, thus he can only treat 10 patients in an afternoon whereas I can treat 200. I suppose there's some benefit in medicine as science rather than medicine as faith but it slows things down a lot." And then he says this, "Dr. Paul has figured out that every patient averages 2 ½ treatments for each visit. No patient is just sick with one disease so Paul has been treating them for 2, 3, 4 and sometimes 5 different ailments." He describes one old woman who came in here a month ago. She was a leper with advanced

tuberculosis. She was running a fever from malaria, was anemic with chronic dysentery, possibly had syphilis and was covered from head to foot with scabies. She came in complaining of a toothache and a headache. Apparently the other minor afflictions did not trouble her but her teeth and head did. Paul said he gave her 12 different treatments that morning and would have to repeat those for months. That's the kind of thing they were facing and this is just one, one aspect of the demands upon Don McClure's time.

Okay, number three category: lessons in faith and service. Not just lessons for Don McClure but lessons, I think, that will come for us. Now so what are these? Well, one lesson, I think, is has to do with standing up to the dark powers. Standing up to the dark powers. Now he told of this was when he was serving the Shulas. This was probably in the late 1930s. He was serving the Shulas in the Sudan and there was a fellow who came by the mission workshop and claimed that he was...

Has this gone? It kind of fades. I'll try to blast it out if it does.

He talked about a fellow who was now claiming he was a witch-doctor named Bedang(ph) and that he could put a curse on spears, that is, you put a curse on a spear so that when it's thrown at something, it wouldn't hit it, okay? And so Don McClure hands him his .22 rifle and tells him to put a curse on it and see if he can't hit something, then. So he told him he couldn't mess with the sights on the gun but he gave him the rifle. Well, he said the gleam in Bedang's eye should have warned him that something was up. He did his hokey-pokey and then Don McClure asked him what he wanted him to hit with the rifle. Well, he pointed to a small dove sitting on the top branch of a tall eucalyptus tree that was slowly swaying in the wind. Now McClure said to Bedang, it would prove nothing if he missed that since no one could hit it with any rifle whether it was charmed or not. It was an impossible shot, but Bedang insisted that he had only charmed the rifle against that dove.

Well, McClure was beginning to lose face with the small boys there around the workshop in the mission and with the teacher, native teacher that was there. He said it was an impossible task beyond the skill of a superb marksman. Let me tell you, I'll read to you what he says here. He said: For years we missionaries have been afraid of witch-doctors, not personally afraid or afraid of any curse they could put upon us but we were afraid to stand up boldly and confidently in the power of the true God. We tried to placate these powerful men and attempted to win their friendship. We had given and accepted gifts from them and in every way made the native people believe that we were their friends but all this time the witch-doctors were working behind our backs, cutting the ground out from under us and so on, turning the people away from the Gospel and we were making no progress. We'd been trying to win them with affection, kidding ourselves that it was the Christian approach. Compromise is a dangerous game to play with the powers of darkness.

So he goes on: With those young black boys around me, these thoughts raced across my mind and there surged into my shamed heart an overwhelming conviction of God's power. Did I not stand in the strength of his might? My heart was gripped with the

confidence that I could do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthened me. For the first time in my life I believed those words with absolute conviction. I picked up the rifle, rested it against the side of the workshop, took aim at that swaying dove and pulled the trigger. God sped that bullet straight at that little bird which immediately fluttered to the ground. As the schoolboys looked in glee and ran triumphantly to pick it up, I realized what this meant to them, their bonds of fearful loyalty to witchcraft had been broken. That God-guided bullet had cut clear through the whole hellish system of Shula superstition. The boys didn't realize what it meant completely but they had an inkling and their little hearts rejoiced with them in the downfall of Bedang.

Without another word, I grabbed the tin shears that were on the workbench, reaching out I caught hold of a dozen or more leather thongs around Bedang's neck. He thought I was going to kill him. He cringed in terror and begged for mercy. I merely cut off the charms and bags of bones and threw them to the ground and I ordered him off the mission never to return again as a witch-doctor.

Facing the powers of darkness. Okay that's one lesson, now here's a second one. God doesn't need super-servants. The case of Orop. There was a school at the Doleib Hill mission, this was with the Shulas in the Sudan, and it had about 120 boys in it. One was Orop. Orop was an odd looking kid because his head was completely flat. He couldn't learn even though he loved school. They didn't have any chalkboards or anything but they would write their names etc. in the sand. Well, Orop couldn't get his letters or he'd get them all mixed up and so on, and so finally Don had to tell Orop that he couldn't be in the school anymore because he was taking the place of a boy or girl who could learn. So Orop sadly left the school but he would come back and stand outside the window of the building and listen to the Bible stories being told. Then he would go and gather a bunch of little boys around him and he'd retell the story, except he got them all mixed up so Don McClure had to go him and say, "Orop, you can't tell stories about Jesus because you get them all screwed up," and so on.

You can imagine how disheartening that must have been, but then he told Orop that he could carry his Bible for him when he went to village to preach, and so Orop would do that. He'd be waiting for McClure when the sun came up and he would take McClure's Bible and he would go ahead of him to a village and he'd gather the villagers there and then when Don arrived, he would preach to them and so on. That's the way Orop was serving the Lord in the only way he knew how.

Then an event occurred and McClure described it the day after. He said: Yesterday a group of small boys was playing in the river when a crocodile grabbed one of them. The boys ran away screaming all except Orop, he dived in and fought the crocodile. He succeeded in freeing the boy but the crocodile grabbed Orop. He came up but Don couldn't get a good shot at him and he followed him down the river and finally got the crocodile later, but Orop was gone. They only recovered one arm and one leg. As Don said, "Greater love has no boy than to lay down his life for a friend."

Well, he went to comfort Orop's mother and she said, "Orop told me," and he apparently got this right, "Orop told me he was not afraid to die because Jesus would come to take him by the hand and lead him home. Is this true?" When McClure assured her it was, she asked, "Will you teach me about Jesus? I want to be with Orop and Jesus." So there's Orop who never owned a pair of shoes, never learned to write his name, never finished first grade, couldn't tell Bible stories straight, but his mother was in the kingdom of God because of his witness. God doesn't need super-servants.

Now a third note. The difference the Gospel makes. There are any number of instances of this. This comes from the Anuaks in Pokwo, Ethiopia. Oftentimes an Anuak would call the witch-doctor, of course, if there was a medical problem and so on, but here was an Anuak Christian and his son was fishing and he got bit by a very poisonous puff adder. The father calmly brought his son to Don McClure to treat him and he said, "If the medicine will not help him, then our prayers will, and if he dies, our lives are in God's hands." Well, McClure said the boy is going to get well, but then he said, "I teased his father by saying, 'Why didn't you kill a sheep and pour the blood on your son as you would have done three years ago?'" He raised his hands above his head in horror and he said, "That was in other days. Now we only believe in the blood of Jesus." That's the difference the Gospel makes. Lessons in faith and service.

Now in the time remaining, let me highlight a fourth category: fighting the men in New York. Fighting the men in New York. What happened was that Don's denomination, the United Presbyterian Church of North America, this small evangelical denomination, was merged with a huge denomination of 2 to 3 million, sometimes called the Northern Presbyterian Church, today it would be the Presbyterian Church in the USA but at that time this new union became the United Presbyterian Church in the USA. But what happened when that big, that merger went through, was that the concern for Gospel missions began to evaporate and this caused Don a lot of frustration and so on, just candidly.

Now it's interesting, though, this is just by the way, this is free, the moderator of the new denomination came out to Ethiopia and he wanted Don to get them an audience with the patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and this is one time...a missionary sometimes just gets ticked off and this is what happened. They had a few greetings in this meeting and then the patriarch demanded to know why Americans who had been invited into Ethiopia to work among Muslims and pagans were taking Christians out of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and putting them in other churches. And the moderator kind of stumbled and hemmed and hawed trying to think of something to say, but it just, it just aggravated Don no end and he just burst out, he said: I told the patriarch that I was one of those missionaries which he had not known, and that I'd been working among pagan people for many years, not one of whom had been a Christian before we came to Ethiopia. Moreover, I asserted that because of our efforts, there were now many thousands of them in the church of Jesus Christ. I pointed out that in 15 centuries the Ethiopian Orthodox Church had made absolutely no effort to reach these people and was making none today! The moderator was aghast at my outburst but sometimes you just get ticked off, even if you're a missionary.

Well, that's some of the frustration but the frustration really was with the way the denomination at that time was beginning to change its approach to missions and this affected Don's work in Africa. For instance, the lingo. They didn't want to call their workers missionaries anymore, they were to be fraternal workers. Not like you take the Gospel to the pagans etc., that might be too Colonial, but rather fraternal workers. We come alongside the native church and we assist them in their mission.

So a little bit different language and a different conception, but Don had a continuing burden and frustration. His burden, though, was as he states it: I have a great burden on my heart for all the unreached people in Western Ethiopia. In the area for which our church is responsible, there are more than 30 different tribes who have never heard the name of Jesus spoken in their language. I think we should do something now and I propose to the headquarters that they allow me to raise money outside the budget to support 10 missionaries in a program that we call "The Forgotten Tribes Mission."

So this was Don's concern but the frustration continued because there was a level of bureaucracy, apparently, and this frustrated him. He just let go in one of his comments once. He says that they were spending too much money setting up new agencies and ministering them. He said bureaucrats are the same everywhere, already the forms and questionnaires have doubled and the ecclesiastical paper pushers are just getting warmed up. I'm too busy preaching the Gospel and teaching the Anuaks to read to fill out a questionnaire for some executive in New York City who wants to know what books we use in the schools and how many of our students come from broken homes. If they figure the kingdom of God will be advanced by this information on a sheet of paper in a file in New York, they can jolly well come out here and find out for themselves. It was just eating on him. Maybe he should have been more diplomatic, don't know, but this was a real frustration for him.

So fighting the men in New York, but it did get to a difficult level because they were bringing home career missionaries for lack of funds allegedly, but they would send out these short-termers, frontier interns they called them, and there was one, for instance, by the name of Dick Blank. Dick Blank was a seminary graduate. In the materials that came to Ethiopia ahead of Dick Blank it says that he did not wish to be classified as a professing Christian and they sent him out as a frontier intern, as though he had a contribution to make. Now this was the kind of frustration that Don McClure had in the latter part of his service time.

Now let me just sum up then in a concluding way. Don McClure tells of his desire, and I think part of it is on your little program. This was written, I think, to his family during that time after his college years when he just went out for three years to the Sudan, and this is what he said: I want to leave Africa dead-tired and worn-out. My college track coach always complained that I looked to fresh at the end of a long race. In the race of life, I want to go all out all the way until I'm completely exhausted in his service.

Then his son-in-law, a fellow by the name of Charles Partee, reflected on Don McClure's life and he said that he was happily far from faultless, he could see that in his father-in-law, but still, now let me quote Partee's point, "What remains my dominant impression of Don McClure is that his enthusiasm was boundless, his energy relentless, his cheerfulness unnerving, and primarily his dedication to his missionary tasks unlimited. He's the only man I've ever known whom I believe to be perfectly content in every situation in which he found himself whether dining with the filthy rich or eating with the filthy poor, whether preaching the Gospel to people covered with animal skins or to the entirely naked, whether flying across Europe or walking across Africa, whether conferring with an Emperor like Haile Selassie in Ethiopia, or bandaging a peasant. I think it was because wherever he found himself at work in a task large or small, he also found his God at work."

That is a sketch of the ministry of Don McClure in the Sudan and in Ethiopia.

Let's close with a word of prayer.

Our Father, we are all unprofitable servants but we do thank you for those of your servants who have shown what commitment to the Lord Jesus, what use you can put them to and how they can be shining lights for their Savior. Thank you for the ministry of Don McClure, raise up others, we pray, like him. We pray also that wherever you have called us to serve, however, that when you come, O Lord, we would be found doing what you have called us to do. In Jesus' name. Amen.