II

THE NORTH AMERICAN MISSIONARIES

For more than half a century, Protestant churches in Mexico were dependent on the efforts of North American missionaries. This was true despite the fact that these churches grew out of the desire of the Mexican Methodists to discover forms of preaching and worship, ecclesiastical organization, and social action that met their own needs. Nevertheless, from 1873 to 1930, North Americans controlled all the elements of church organization and administration along with the theological education of the Mexican clergy through their Board of Missions in New York City.

A. Origins and Motivations OF the Mexican Mission:

North American Methodists first demonstrated an interest in our country in 1836 when they prepared a study of the feasibility of opening mission fields in Mexico and South America.\(^1\) The result of this study was the opening of missions in Uruguay and Argentina. However, political instability in Mexico, which at that time was turning toward conservatism, economic difficulties in the United States, and divisions within the Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC) over the issue of slavery, impeded the realization of their plans for our country.

By the beginning of the 1870s, all of these circumstances had changed. In particular, the internal problems of the North American church had been resolved by the division of 1844.\(^2\) The


\(^{2}\) In 1845, disagreements over the issue of slavery precipitated a split in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the United States leading to the formation of separate Northern and Southern Methodist denominations.—Trans.
result of this schism was the continuation of the denomination’s work by two separate entities: the (Northern) Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. At the same time, the economy of the United States appeared to be expanding—although in fact it was on the eve of a severe crisis—which made it feasible to finance the work. Meanwhile Mexico had enjoyed several years of relative peace thanks to the decisive victory of the liberals in 1867. The liberal government was growing stronger and as it did, personal security was becoming assured throughout the country. Moreover, the anti-Yankee sentiment that had pervaded Mexico since the United States invasion of 1846-48 was beginning to dissipate. This was due in the first place to United States Secretary of State William H. Seward’s offer of aid to Mexico during its resistance to the French Intervention and in the second place to the rapid expansion of the United States economy—especially northern industry which had been stimulated by the Civil War—which awakened the admiration of Mexicans.

For all of these reasons, the leaders of the Methodist Episcopal Church decided that the doors of Mexico were wide open for the inauguration of mission work. And so, despite the recent failure of a non-denominational undertaking by the American and Foreign Christian Union, Northern Methodists (MEC) appropriated the sum of ten thousand dollars to begin mission work in Mexico, their “next-door neighbor.” This decision was taken in 1872, a time when the attention of North Americans, especially those from the northern states, was being drawn more and more to the opportunities our country offered as a place for investment and commerce. However, their interest extended beyond profits to a spiritual concern for those millions of

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3 The American and Foreign Christian Union was an organization that did not belong to any particular church. For that reason, its activities did not possess any denominational character doctrinally or in ecclesiastical organization. In reality, its primary role was to distribute Bibles in non-Catholic countries.

4 Gilbert Haven, the first person sent to Mexico by the Missionary Board of the MEC, wrote a memoir of his travels under the title: Mexico, our next door neighbor (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1875).
individuals who might be open to other benefits which the North Americans had to offer such as the Protestant Gospel.

A good example of this combination of motives can be seen in a passage that William Butler, founder of the Mexican Mission of the MEC, wrote in 1889. He began with the material attractions of Mexico: “All of those who have studied its singular and magnificent resources are convinced that Mexico deserves the progress for which it yearns.” He continued his remarks by appealing to the writings of Baron Alexander von Humboldt. “This country, if well administered, could produce all of the goods that world commerce obtains in other parts of the terrestrial globe.” The point of Butler’s reflections was simple: after reviewing a long list of products exported from Mexico—all of them raw materials—he called upon North Americans to take an interest in Mexico, a country that—said Butler—“desires our petroleum, watches,…and hundreds of other articles that they do not produce themselves and for which Mexicans currently pay high prices to English and German merchants, not counting the transportation costs of a four thousand mile voyage from Europe.”

Thanks to geography, the United States seemed destined to play an important role in the life of Mexico. More than once, Methodist missionaries claimed that their obligation to do mission work in Mexico was justified by that country’s proximity.

Butler continued his promotion of Mexican missions by pointing out the duty owed by North Americans to their southern neighbors: “we should take some pride in their independence, while lending our assistance by every means possible to assure to the Mexican people all of the


6 In 1872 the Methodist Board of Missions asserted that North Americans needed to evangelize Mexico because Mexicans “were at our doorstep…” 54th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1873, p. 135. As late as 1923 this idea was still being expressed as when it was asserted that “proximity has been recognized as a source of international responsibilities.” The World Service of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 4a. imp., (October 1923), p. 135.
blessings of that Christian enlightenment which we ourselves enjoy.” Butler asserted that they should help Mexicans to obtain all the elements of progress: civilization, culture, enlightenment, but above all, the Gospel, the only foundation upon which a “decent” world could be constructed.

To Butler and other missionaries, Mexico represented a field ripe for evangelization. It was a country, they believed, in which millions of individuals desired to hear the Word of God and would respond to its teachings. But the possibility of preaching to new and receptive audiences was not the only attraction that drew the missionaries toward our country. Mexico was also thought of as the key and gateway to Central and South America. This idea was expressed again and again by those in charge of determining the policy of the Mission Board, and the influence of that idea can be seen in the actual direction of the mission. Two examples will suffice to illustrate the importance of Mexico to the larger field of Latin American missions. First, in 1885 the South American mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church included six Presbyterian District Presidents (supervisors of pastoral work in specific areas), three of whom had begun their work in the Mexican field. Second, in 1917 mission work began in Costa Rica under the leadership of Eduardo Zapata, a Mexican preacher.

B. Cultural Baggage: Millenarianism and Manifest Destiny

In 1840, Henry Dana Ward outlined a vision of the future that would produce a new attitude in Christian thought. It was a combination of very ancient millennial ideas with roots in the book of Revelations and a very modern faith in human progress that surfaced during the

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7 “Message from Dr. Ellingwood to the General Assembly of Evangelical Workers of Mexico,” cited in Butler, Mexico in Transition, p. 282. This speech attempted to analyze the mission work in Mexico and assumed a position of respect toward our independence at a time when there was talk of annexation in the United States.
Enlightenment. The version of Biblical eschatology that Ward espoused held that as the end of time approached, humanity would enjoy a thousand years of peace and prosperity. The optimistic ideas of the Enlightenment coupled with the evidence of material progress that the Industrial Revolution was producing allowed Ward to conclude that the promised millennium was about to be realized. According to Ward, the Protestant Christianity of his day offered a complete program for reaching that earthly consummation. It consisted of “rapid progress in virtue, knowledge, holiness, and the arts.” The means for achieving these advances would combine spiritual resources with political ones. Ward believed that the final battle between good and evil had already begun in the political realm where “the powers that for so long have perverted the true Gospel” were rapidly being destroyed. Their removal would permit the universal spread of the gospel. 

Ward’s vision was picked up by Joseph Bellamy who gave it some new twists. Bellamy identified the Babylon of the Old Testament with the medieval Catholic Church. He argued that “the experiences of the Israelites in captivity were recapitulated in a literal way by the righteous remnant under the domination of Rome.” The redemption of this remnant would come about by way of a military crusade in which the righteous would triumph, thus implying that true believers were “Christian soldiers.” Having identified the Roman Catholic Church as the enemy, Bellamy argued that it was necessary to resist it in every way. In the political realm, the struggle would lead to a confrontation between the Anglo-Saxon and Hispanic worlds, however the principal

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weapon in the struggle must be education. The real source of evil in human nature, he asserted, was not innate human sinfulness but ignorance.  

There is no way to know whether the missionaries who came to Mexico had read the books of Ward and Bellamy, but it is clear that the ideas of these two writers permeated their thinking and informed their actions. A marked anti-Catholicism along with a strong emphasis on education was evident in everything they did in our country. Nor is it inconsequential that right up to the present day their most popular hymn speaks of Christian soldiers fighting for the faith. It does not seem far-fetched to see in this an echo of the millennial ideas of Ward and Bellamy.

This same millennialism gave to the missionaries another important characteristic: a confidence that the nation from which they came had been commissioned to redeem the world. These North Americans clearly viewed the United States as the political instrument that would enable Christians to fight and win the final battle between good and evil. This idea fit perfectly with the role which the United States had arrogated to itself as the guardian of the Latin American nations. The “Monroe Doctrine” and President Ulysses S. Grant’s “No Transfer” principle were understood by the missionaries as providential instruments for bringing about the millennium.

10 Ibid., p. 59.

11 “Onward Christian Soldiers.”

12 The Monroe Doctrine, announced by the United States government in 1823, asserted that the Western Hemisphere should no longer be considered open to European colonization. The implication was that it had become a region of permanently independent states with the United States serving as their diplomatic and perhaps military defender. In his first State of the Union address on December 6, 1869, President U. S. Grant urged Spain to grant independence to Cuba and declared that the United States opposed transfer of control over the island to any other European power. Both the Monroe Doctrine and Grant’s statement reflect the longstanding presumption of the United States that it bears a special responsibility to direct the course of events in the hemisphere. Other nations in the region tend to view this idea suspiciously because on a number of occasions it has been used to justify United States interference in their internal affairs.—Trans.
C. Mexico through North American Eyes

The majority of Protestants who came to work as missionaries in our country between 1870 and 1913 had never left the United States prior to receiving their appointments. This was owing to the recruitment policy adopted by the Mission Board which was to send young people, preferably recent college graduates, to take charge of the newly formed congregations. The first three Methodist missionaries in Mexico had been older individuals who were not inclined to defer to the Board on questions of missionary policy. William Butler, who had founded the Methodist mission in India at midcentury and who did a magnificent job of planning and organizing the new mission in Mexico, struggle perpetually with the Executive Secretary of the Mission Board, principally over the subject of finances. William Cooper, a preacher previously affiliated with the Episcopal Church who was recruited by the Mission Board to work in Mexico owing to his familiarity with the Spanish language, came into conflict with Butler because, when it came to evangelistic work, his ideas were more Episcopal than Methodist. Moreover his hot temper and poor health limited the value of his efforts. Thomas D. Carter, who had worked with the Spanish-speaking communities in New York and also understood the language very well, resigned his new charge because he was unwilling to accept a post outside the environs of Mexico City. To avoid such problems in the future, the Mission Board sought to recruit healthier and more malleable young people, as Butler himself repeatedly urged them to do in his reports to them.

13 The problem erupted when Cooper was commissioned to translate the Discipline and Rites of the MEC into Spanish. He appeared to change the sense of the words pronounced by the minister in the communion service, making the sacrament more than a purely symbolic act as it is in Methodism which does not accept the doctrine of transubstantiation.
However this new policy created another set of difficulties: the young missionaries were totally unfamiliar with anything that was foreign to their own country and this applied especially to Mexico. They lacked knowledge of the Spanish language and their bookish university training gave them no idea of the circumstances that they would encounter here. Literature provided by the mission’s founders were the closest contact that these young people had prior to their arrival with the country in which they were to spend their lives. Moreover the ideas they formed in the decade of the 1870s remained largely unaltered through the whole of their missionary experience, forty-four years in the case of John Wesley Butler, son of the mission’s founder. Perhaps it was a case of their ideology making them rigid in their thinking.

Moreover all of the missionaries were “convinced anti-Romanists” which led to serious difficulties when it came to understanding the local culture of such a quintessentially Catholic nation as Mexico. Everywhere they looked the missionaries saw behavior that appeared ignorant or immoral to their Protestant sensibilities. They blamed these perceived failings on the Catholic Church. To the missionaries, Mexico’s Hispanic and Roman Catholic culture was backward and steeped in superstition. They judged the nation’s Catholic traditions to be little better than a false religion which subjugated rather than liberated the individual. They viewed the Catholic Church as an institution that preserved its dominance by keeping the people in ignorance rather than providing the light of the Gospel and of the Enlightenment. And they regarded the Catholic clergy as a self-interested clique that sought wealth and worldly comforts instead of loving God and serving the people. On top of all other evils, they believed that the influence of the Catholic Church over the nation’s political life had led to instability and impeded much needed political, social, and economic reforms.14

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14 56th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1874, p. 147.
Of course, this was nothing other than an Anglo-Saxon version of the Mexican liberals’ view of the Catholic Church. For example, in 1834, a one-page flyer attributed to José Eleno Galván circulated throughout Mexico City with the following message: “Riches, honor, distinction, privileges, despotism, luxury, pride, and egotism—this is the sublime religion that is so tenaciously defended by the dissolute clergy; the example they set for us is very different from the religion of the crucified one who preached humility, poverty, and charity, and offered himself as our example.”  

The missionaries thought that at the root of this unhappy situation were fanaticism and ignorance. In their opinion, what little progress and happiness there was to be found in Mexico was due to the efforts of the anti-clerical liberals. In 1889, William Butler asserted that, thanks to the reforms of the liberal party under Benito Juárez, Mexico “had established a constitution that included all of the guarantees of liberty that we Anglo-Saxons regard as fundamental, including the complete separation of church and state...” The liberals had also confiscated “the vast and poorly managed church properties, which had only served to bankroll an unruly and mercenary army that fought to defend despotism and by which the Catholic Church practically controlled the country and kept it bathed in blood.”

The 1885 Annual Report of the Board of Missions declared that the workers sent to Mexico had come “face to face with great forms of superstition, error, and sin...” Hence, the first task of the missionary must be to destroy the cause of this situation: the power of the “Roman Church.” Sometime later, John Wesley Butler explained, in a passage directed toward

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15 “In the end, the clergy and Santa Anna call to Nana,” cited in Ma. Del Carmen Reyna, La Prensa censurada durante el siglo XIX (Mexico, D.F.: Sep Setentas, 1976), p. 93 (Sep Setentas, 255).

16 Butler, Mexico in transition, p. 282.

North American readers, the reasons for the Methodists’ efforts in our country: the Catholic Church had proven incapable of fulfilling its obligation to preach the message of salvation. This failure manifested itself in various ways: prohibitions against reading the Bible; the presence of a “dead Christ” in Mexican churches—“when, in order to be saved, one needs more than a dead Christ or a historical one”; the existence of syncretism that worshipped the pre-Hispanic gods under the guise of the saints; the belief that good works and penance were superior to the merits of the Savior; the sale of indulgences; the celebration of pagan festivals. All of these were thought to be problems so serious that, as Butler asserted, even the Catholic Church itself was developing an awareness of the need for renewal, a work in which they would have the unquestionable help of Protestantism, although he did not explain how such help would be provided.

None of these charges was new. William Butler had already expressed them years earlier in his book *Mexico in Transition*. They were considered to be evidence of Catholic “fanaticism” which manifested itself in religious, political, and moral intolerance. The missionaries believed that the essential first step was to establish acceptance of the idea of freedom of conscience in religious matters. They proposed two ways of changing the situation: by preaching the gospel of personal transformation and by spreading enlightened ideas through every available means including the pulpit, the press, and, most especially, the primary school.

Another matter that worried the mission’s directors was whether they could count on the political stability they needed for the development of the work. For how long would Mexico remain peaceful, they asked themselves? Could Mexicans establish and carry out a coherent

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18 John Wesley Butler, “Why we are in Mexico,” *Mexico*, No. 1 (Jan.-Mar., 1907), p. 3. This was the official organ of the missionaries in Mexico and served to disseminate the awareness of the mission in the United States.
policy of long-term development? In 1876, barely three years after the establishment of the mission and only nine since the victory of the liberals over the conservatives, Butler was complaining that Mexicans had forgotten the democratic ideals for which they had fought so hard and were returning “once more to the old national custom for settling political differences”: the military uprising, in this case, the Tuxtepec revolt. At least this time the struggle was between two factions of the liberal group so although the methods used were reprehensible, the result would likely bring a growing acceptance of the liberal Constitution as the governing instrument in the political life of the nation. Nevertheless there was still the possibility that a resurgence of the conservative party—the Methodists called it the “clerical party”—would reduce the gains of the last few years to nothing. This possibility pointed to the need for mutual assistance between the liberal administrations and the Protestant churches.

Indeed, the missionaries considered the presence of a strong liberal government to be indispensable for the progress of the nation as well as for their own efforts. Experience confirmed this assessment. With the support of President Sebastian Lerdo de Tejada, the Methodists were able to establish centers of mission work in highly Catholic areas such as Querétaro and Guanajuato. They believed that only with the support of the federal government would they be able to maintain the territory they had occupied against the constant aggressions to which Protestants were subjected. The protection they received explains the great admiration

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19 The Tuxtepec revolt was launched by liberal general Porfirio Díaz against President Sebastián Lerdo de Tejada. Lerdo had succeeded Juárez in 1872 but when he sought reelection in 1876, Díaz rebelled, claiming that Lerdo had violated the liberal principles of “an honest vote and no re-election for incumbents.” Díaz forced Lerdo into exile and claimed the presidency for himself. He retired from office in 1880 but returned to the presidency in 1884 and held the office, in violation of the liberal electoral principles that he himself had championed, until he was forced power by the 1910 Revolution.—Trans.

20 William Butler to R. Dashiell, March 10, 1876 and March 31, 1876, Methodist Episcopal Church Archive, Correspondence of William Butler, 1874-1876.

21 This was concern was expressed constantly in the pages of El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado, especially after 1888.
Methodists felt for liberal heroes such as Benito Juárez, Melchor Ocampo, and Miguel Lerdo de Tejada. It also explains the gratitude and veneration with which missionaries referred to Porfirio Díaz under whose protection they labored. The first three leaders laid the foundation for the progress of Protestantism in Mexico. The last one took liberal ideals out of the realm of possibility and put them into effect. The precariousness of their situation is illustrated by the fact that violent acts against Protestants multiplied during the administration of Manuel González (1880-1884), a circumstance that changed for the better with the return of Díaz to power.

Of course, as a practical matter, the missionaries felt obliged to support whatever individual or group was in power against all challengers. For example, although William Butler believed in the legitimacy of Lerdo de Tejada’s government, after the 1876 revolt he transformed himself into the greatest apologist for Porfirio Díaz among the Protestant missionaries who wrote about Mexico. Something similar occurred after the fall of the old dictator. John Wesley Butler, who had lived in Mexico throughout the Porfirian period and had offered eulogies to the “Hero of Peace,” acknowledged in 1913 that the regime of Díaz had failed to “elevate” the people and that Madero had awakened hopes for social improvement for

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22 Karl Schmitt has written a good article on “American Protestant Missionaries and the Díaz Regime, Journal of Church and State, 25/2 (1983), pp. 235-277. Based on the Protestant books published during and after the Porfiriato, Schmitt arrives at the conclusion that in spite of the problems that were caused by the fall of the regime, the missionaries who remained in Mexico longer, “never lost respect and admiration for Díaz…”

23 All of the individuals named in the paragraph were prominent liberals in 19th century Mexico. President Juárez drastically reduced the political influence of the Catholic hierarchy. Melchor Ocampo wrote scathingly of corruption in the Catholic clergy. Miguel Lerdo de Tejada authored a law which led to the confiscation and sale of most of the Catholic Church’s real estate. President Díaz made the protection of foreigners in Mexico, including North American missionaries, a high priority of his administration which lasted, with one interruption during the one-term González administration, from 1876 to 1911.—Trans.

24 Butler hinted at his position in a letter of March 10, 1876: “The liberal party is divided into two parts, one of which wants to abandon the government of Lerdo and bring Porfirio Díaz to the Presidency. This, instead of waiting till June when they could vote peacefully for the change they desire…” Methodist Episcopal Church Archive, Correspondence of William Butler, 1874-1876.
all Mexicans. Nevertheless, this opinion was not strong enough to prevent him from publishing an article in the *New York Times* in which he asserted that “[i]t has been an error on the part of the United States government not to recognize in some manner the administration of General Victoriano Huerta…” despite the fact that Huerta had overthrown and then murdered Madero.

This pragmatic attitude was characteristic of missionary policy. In statements to the North American public, missionaries expressed unrestricted support for the government, even when they were not in personal agreement with it. Meanwhile within Mexico, they sought to have as little to do with politics as possible. Two considerations prompted their approach. First, the missionaries were looking to the liberal government for protection from Catholic aggression by which they were—or felt they were—threatened. Second, the directors of the Missions Board, following a line of policy that had been established in the *Church Discipline*, sought to avoid conflicts with governments, so they recommended that those who were sent out not involve themselves in political matters. Perhaps this explains the missionaries’ complete silence on the socio-political situation when they wrote about Mexico. As Karl Schmitt said: “it was as if Mexican history had stopped in 1867.”

The liberals—Juárez, Lerdo, and Díaz—had rescued “poor Mexico” from the paralysis of continual revolution and were now leading it along the path

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25 The most interesting thing of all is that Butler wrote these words at the time when Madero had been sacrificed by Huerta. Cf. 95th *Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1913*, p. 255.

26 Quoted in Deborah Jo Baldwin, “Variation within the Vanguard: Protestants and the Mexican Revolution” (Ph.D. diss., University of Chicago, 1979), p. 269. Baldwin also mentions a letter sent by Butler and several other missionaries “whose ties to the missions/Protestants/ are not clear,” in which they express their surprise to Henry Lane Wilson at the “unjustified attacks” against him because of his participation in Huerta’s coup d’etat. A copy of this letter has not been found in the Methodist Episcopal Church Archive.

27 An example of this is the letter that the Secretary of the Mission Board sent to Samuel P. Craver along with his appointment: “during your residence in a foreign country, it is your duty to support, as far as possible, the government under whose protection you are living...” Bishop Simpson to Samuel P. Craver, Dec. 20, 1875, in *El Abogado Cristiano Ilustrado*, 11/79 (Oct. 15, 1887), p. 157.

of order and progress. Hence there was no reason, according to the missionaries, to criticize them.

According to the missionaries, Mexico was on the verge of developing into a modern country, all it lacked was a desire for progress, for work, for education, and above all, for a closer walk with God that would assure the success of the endeavor. And the missionaries thought that they had the capability, as well as the obligation, to provide the necessary means to inculcate these desirable qualities. Even more importantly, they felt themselves to be the possessors of the only foundation upon which it was possible to build a modern and progressive society: the Word of God. The ideas of the secular liberals were good they agreed, but they would not be able to reach their goals if they were not sustained by the moral and spiritual support of the Christian religion. Precisely for that reason, the missionaries insisted that the liberals would advance their cause further by cooperating openly and actively with the Protestants, but only after having accepted the truth that the new preaching revealed.

D. Of Progress, Civilization, and Other Matters

Two things immediately caught the attention of the new arrivals: Mexico’s racial diversity and the marked social inequality that they encountered on all sides. It is notable that they spoke constantly of “Indians” and “members of the better class of society,” emphasizing these two categories of individuals at every opportunity. Methodists regarded it as a great achievement whenever Native Americans or rich and powerful people accepted their teachings.30

30 John Wesley Butler, History of the Methodist Episcopal Church in Mexico (New York: Abingdon, 1918). See the entire chapter that refers to Oaxaca. Also 94th Annual Report of the Board of Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1912, p. 254.
The vast mixed race population did not particularly attract their attention; evidently they were just part of the great undifferentiated mass of Mexicans who served as a backdrop to these other two groups.

Native Americans were regarded by the missionaries as totally different from white people. Missionaries admired their “profound native sensitivity” as well as their willingness to accept anything that would benefit them, such as the Gospel or literacy. Of course, the missionaries never failed to add the comment, “in spite of being a pure blooded Indian,” as if that were a handicap. It appears that the image of the “noble savage” formed in British North America during the 18th century had remained intact, despite their subsequent experience, and it had been transplanted unchanged to the soil of Mexico. This applied especially to those Native Americans who accepted the new teaching. But some Native Americans offered resistance to the bearers of the new creed. In such cases the missionaries described them as ignorant beings who were inclined to follow their basest impulses and who generally acted under the influence of alcohol. However none of this was attributed to inherent wickedness, rather it was the pernicious influence of Hispanic culture and especially, this seemed obvious to the missionaries, to the Catholic Church. The political use that the Spaniards had made of religion was considered responsible for the “savages’” loss of innocence.

For the Methodists, there was a strong contrast between Roman Catholic authoritarianism and the struggle for freedom of thought and conscience that they associated with Protestantism. As Methodists described it, the Protestant convert, an individual believer with obligations to God and society as taught in the Protestant churches, represented a total contrast to lay Catholics with their ritualism and attachment to forms. As long as the latter lacked responsibility and freedom, how would they be able to make progress? This is what had happened to the native people of
Mexico in the opinion of the missionaries. Mexicans had been subjects of the Spanish crown and the Catholic Church for more than three centuries. But the time had finally arrived for them to liberate themselves by means of a new religion that promoted education and a whole new way of life. In announcing their triumphs in largely indigenous regions, the spokespeople of the mission often explained that the Native Americans were coming to the missionaries to ask for churches and schools. With the help of the Gospel, these people would become acquainted with progress and civilization. As a result of this transformation, claimed the missionaries, the natives would trade in their sandals and ponchos for Mexican-made three piece suits.

Even the economic inequality of Mexico was understood as a consequence of “Romanist” influence. Once again, the political influence of the church was said to be at fault. Anti-Catholic writings such as *Catholicism and Protestantism in the development of the nations*, by Belgian author Emilio Laveleye, which were published by the mission, did little to improve this negative perception.\(^{31}\) Perhaps the best example of this line of thinking was expressed by William Butler in his remarks about the Spanish Inquisition. Butler characterized this institution as “diabolical,” and accused it of being the instrument that enabled “priests to control with an iron fist anyone who dared to rise up in defense of civil and religious liberty.”\(^{32}\) Yet the missionaries did not question the structure of the economy or the mal-distribution of property in Mexico. For them, the problem lay elsewhere. Those who benefited from the current economic system hid behind the power of religion or used religion outright as a means to acquire wealth. Hence the best way to combat inequality was to attack this false religion. The means proposed for doing this, it needs

\(^{31}\) Emilio Laveleye, *El Catolicismo y el protestantismo en su relación con el desarrollo de las naciones* (México, D.F.: Imprenta de la Iglesia Metodista Episcopal, 1877).

\(^{32}\) Butler, *Mexico in transition*, p. 293.
to be emphasized, was acceptance of a new religion—and its associated morality—along with education.

None of this is intended to say that the missionaries expressed attitudes of contempt for wealth or that they opposed the rich. On the contrary, one of the most fervent desires of the missionaries was to bring into their church “people of the better class.” There were two reasons for this. With such people, the mission would acquire greater strength because it would be able to count on the support of influential people in the community. Moreover it would be taking great strides toward making the churches financially self-sufficient.

While racial diversity and economic inequality certainly caught the attention of the missionaries, there were other features of Mexican society that interested them as well. They thought that Mexicans were more attached to the forms of religion than to its substance. The obvious remedy was to preach about the personal experience of salvation, a theme they emphasized time and time again. Mexicans needed to draw closer to God. Personal contact with the Creator was the only way by which the “new humanity” could be born. Vices, intemperance, sloth, in sum, all of the evils of humanity would vanish just as soon as the whole of society came to know the message of salvation. This was what Mexicans needed, said the missionaries. The first Protestant ministers in Mexico were deeply shocked by the activities they saw going on all around them: lottery ticket sales—someone claimed that one in four Mexicans were sellers of lottery tickets—drunkenness, dishonesty, financial scams, frivolous entertainments, lack of reverence for the Sabbath; these were the overwhelming impressions of life in Mexico conveyed by the reports that the missionaries sent back to their superiors in the United States.33

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33 Haven, *Mexico, our next door neighbor*, p. 91.
As can be seen, the North American missionaries generally viewed Mexicans with an air of paternal superiority. The missionaries were quintessential representatives of the North American social ideal and they arrived in our country with the conviction that the United States was the model to follow in order to construct a modern society. We have already seen their profound admiration for liberal ideas, which they regarded as the ideological and cultural engine of social progress. What the missionaries saw when they looked at Mexican society was nothing less than a struggle between civilization and barbarism. Of course, they defined civilization in terms of the capitalist world in which they had lived their entire lives. For them, civilization consisted of “all the blessings of Christian enlightenment that we ourselves enjoy,” as stated in 1888 by Dr. Joseph Ellingwood, Director of the Presbyterian Mission in Mexico.

What were these blessings? More than anything else it was—and still is for Methodists—a matter of religious people seeking a “direct connection” to God through the reading of the Bible and acceptance of the Gospel. According to Methodist sermons, this acceptance brought many benefits, most of all peace and joy from knowing oneself to be satisfied spiritually. But there were other, more practical consequences that were of considerable worth in their own right. At conversion, a person took on some commitments that contributed to the betterment of their life here on earth. Because all the goods that a person enjoyed were no longer their own but gifts from God, the convert had an obligation to administer them properly. Health, money, and talents became valuable assets. From that it followed that the “new people” must avoid injuring themselves with vices, they must handle their money properly, saving it and making it productive, they must strive to do their work as well as possible. That was how one should respond to their obligations to society and to God.
Methodists felt that the ideal person was someone who, through earnest effort and persistence, had conquered their vices and was leading a life of sobriety and industry. That, in turn, would result in better relationships in the family and in society as a whole. Education was a crucial part of this. Enlightenment was to be sought, not in order to change one’s place in society, but rather to transform oneself into a person who was capable of carrying out their daily tasks in the very best way. Over time, such behavior would permit substantial monetary savings that could, for example, enable the believer “to acquire a small shop” and a “decent” cottage in which to rest from the fatigues of daily life. This same line of argument served as a rationale for the necessity of saving in general, which in turn depended on an increase in productivity—although they didn’t use those exact words—resulting from the abandonment of vices and sloth as much as from the desire and ability to do better. The North American missionaries brought with them an idealized vision of a community of small proprietors, aware of the place they occupied and prepared to do their part for the proper functioning of the whole society. This was their ideal for individuals and society.

But what about the great estates and the grand fortunes? From what we find in their writings, the missionaries never asked themselves about such things. It’s as if they never expected their converts to occupy any other place in society than that of small proprietors—owners of a shop, a farm, or a modest house. While the existence of great fortunes was not unknown to them, great wealth was neither condemned nor was it explicitly endorsed. The missionaries could speak with admiration of millionaires—the Vanderbilts for example—who made “good use” of the money they had acquired in the short space of a generation. But this image was never presented as the ideal. And they could also acknowledge questionable cases
such as vast New York fortunes in excess of one hundred million dollars—at a time when “many are unable to eat meat even once a year.”

With this we come to the most interesting thing of all. They never asked themselves about the origins of these fortunes but they did ask themselves how such wealth could be utilized for the common good. They concluded that it should be invested where there was the greatest need—in Mexico, for example. In that way, progress would reach more people. Greater economic activity, growing commercial relations, more wealth that could be distributed among more people by means of responsible work; this seems to have been the kind of progress desired by the Methodist missionaries. In order to attain it, what was needed, in their view, was the true liberating Gospel of Christ and its natural consequences, work and, above all else, education.

E. Who were these Missionaries?

Our image of these bearers of the new gospel would remain incomplete if we forgot to say something about the motives that brought them to Mexico. Most of the missionaries were college graduates who could have lived without worries and in relative comfort in the country of their birth. What motivated them to leave their homeland for unfamiliar places and climates, to learn a language that was unknown to them and meet a nation of strangers, some of whom would prove hostile? The Butler family, for example, experienced more earthly sufferings than satisfactions during its first years. We have spoken of the difficult relations that existed between William and the Board; we could also cite the problems that arose between John Wesley Butler and his missionary companions.34 And we could mention the persecutions that they suffered for

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34 Problems that he would complain about to his father about the difficulty of being a Butler in the Mexican mission. John Wesley Butler to William Butler, June 23, 1879, Methodist Episcopal Church Archive, Correspondence of William Butler, 1874-1876.
being “heretics” in their adoptive country. And as if this were not enough, they found themselves in a world where the lack of hygiene was a serious problem. In a period of three months, one of William Butler’s sons died and two others came close to death owing to stomach illnesses. There were more reasons to abandon the enterprise than to keep going, but most did not quit.

Perhaps the only thing that can explain such persistence is the nature of the commitment that the missionaries felt for their assignment. Whether or not we share their convictions, we must admit that they were motivated by a force superior to their difficulties and their material privations. That force was their religious experience. When it was no longer strong enough to keep missionaries at their post, they abandoned the field. William Cooper and Thomas Carter can serve as examples of such individuals. However most missionaries only abandoned their posts during the 1910 Revolution and even then they did so owing mostly to the difficulty of carrying on the work, not out of a mere desire to protect themselves.

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35 William Butler to Bishop Simpson, Aug. 25, 1874, Methodist Episcopal Church Archive, Correspondence of William Butler, 1874-1876.
Every four years representatives from all affiliated Methodist churches met at American Methodism’s General Conference. At the conference, current church work was evaluated and general objects planned out for future work. The Mexican mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church sent representatives to this body and several times reported on its work. In 1908, Bishop David H. Moore, bishop in charge of the Mexican mission, gave the report on the area. These fragments come from this report.

Mexico is the only foreign mission field that is in North America; so close to us that we only have to cross an imaginary line to get there – so close that the beating of its heart beats against ours, in our literature, science, politics, and commerce; so close that it cannot be separated from us. All of its interests are our interests and all of our interests are the same as Mexico’s.

Now friends, in conclusion, I would like to remind you to be fair to Mexico; that all obligations of the religion of the LORD Jesus Christ that devolve upon you will be effective for Mexico. Look at their geographical position. Statistics show that Mexico is spread out like a horn of plenty, open in the highest degree to the United States. For the love of God, let us be filled with all the honesty and goodness we can.

We ought to remember that we have great political obligations to Mexico… Mexico once had large territories. Where did they go? We have robbed them; and the sin can only be assuaged by repentance, shown through Christian piety and Christian achievement, that will never justify us before God, since we have taken more from the territory than we now possess.
We have had large currents of American capital flowing towards that great country. Commercial relations are always important, and its only by means of the Christianization of the Mexican people and ourselves that they have gone to Mexico and that we will obtain the conditions of stability between these two Republics, and we ought to remember that this great Republic is contiguous with ours and is a sister republic… This is a territory that should be reclaimed for the LORD Jesus Christ. The “Fair-Haired God” that Lew Wallace has announced is supposedly one of the New Testament Saints, and there was a “Fair-Haired God” that brought the Mexicans great prosperity and promised to return…The “Fair-Haired God” ought to come from the United States.


2) “PEACEFUL CONQUEST”

“The Antipatriotic Labors of the Romanists in Imminent Danger”

There are almost no articles, written by whatever Catholic fanatic, that do not focus attention on the “peaceful conquest” of Mexico by the United States. This little catchphrase is so worn-out by the reactionaries and enemies of progress that it scarcely produces an effect even among the most ignorant townspeople.

The enlightened people of the country never fear, because they know that in the struggle of civilization, intelligent and hardworking men have nothing to lose. We can see why. The United States is flooding our markets with their appliances, almost of them of good quality. Each day the importation develops in an amazing way, mostly due to the proximity of the American union. There are no, nor can there surely be any European nation that competes with the US.
Americans are the owners of the majority of the railroads, make up the strongest companies of electric light, possess good mines, and other branches of public wealth that would be tedious to list.

However, what does the clerical press do to prepare Catholics for this inevitable struggle? Speak badly about the United States and Protestants. And this is correct way to combat the danger? Surely not.

The normal thing to do would be to instruct the people, create habits for work, combat the traditional San Lunes, preach on the importance of savings, make them moderate and temperate, open academies that teach English and bookkeeping, teach them stenography and how to type, and finally, make them a useful and intelligent people for the business of life, instead of instilling into them hate for their supposed enemies.

Protestants, contrary to the Romanists, are preparing in ways they should, and when the current of foreign capital takes better proportions, they will be able to compete in the noble struggle of work and intelligence. …

The sectarians of Romanism, instead of thinking in the way of priests, ought to open their eyes to see the danger that they run. Instead of entertaining themselves by begging the celestial court to exterminate the heretics, they ought to learn that modern struggles are not fought with litanies and holy water, but with science, hard work, activity, and capital. …

A good example of this is the recent war between the United States and Spain. While the Spanish were asking for the blessing of the Pope and the peninsular friars, Americans were feverishly recruiting their navy and landing troops in Santiago, Cuba. …

What was the result of this struggle? There is no reason to hide it: the Americans with their riches, science, strategy, practical spirit, and unlimited confidence in the God of victories,
succeeded in everything they did, as will surely triumph all other peoples that have equal or similar virtues.

Nevertheless, the outlandish tactics that the clergy employ when speaking of the peaceful conquest not do not stop being funny. They roar, shout, kick out against Americans, but do not raise the corporate spirit to the end that Mexican capital –the majority of it in Catholic hands– is invested in large industrial and productive companies that could offset many of the advances make by foreign businesses. In the end, their ostentatious and ridiculous struggle, which best yields to their slogan, is reduced to pure “warbling mystics,” and they are the first to bring rollover lines and linotype from the United States, and to deposit their savings in American banks.