

# **The Life and Ministry of Daniel McGilvary: Missionary Pioneer to Northern Thailand**

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To this day, Thailand remains a largely unreached country in terms of the Gospel and there is much evangelism and church work yet to be done. In this Buddhist land, numerous missionaries have labored over the years, many with little fruit to show for their work. Although mistakes have been made (as in every mission field) these missionaries on the whole have been faithful Christians laboring in a difficult field. It is significant therefore when we encounter a missionary whose work did bear much fruit and did much to establish the roots of the church in Thailand. Arriving in 1858, Daniel McGilvary labored for many decades and left a legacy that modern Christian ministers, both missionary and domestic, would be wise to study and learn from. In the following survey of the life and ministry of Daniel McGilvary, I have found two books to be of great value. Alex Smith, who spent twenty years as a missionary in Thailand, authored a concise analytical history of the church in Thailand entitled, “Siamese Gold, The History of Church Growth in Thailand: An Interpretive Analysis 1816-1982.” Smith’s research is broad and thoughtful, providing an insightful volume on how the church has and has not grown in Thailand, and the contributing factors to both. In addition to this excellent secondary source, Daniel McGilvary’s own autobiography, “A Half Century among the Siamese and the Lao”, has provided a wealth of first hand information that has filled out the superb outline provided in Smith’s book. Although the scope of this paper does not allow for a detailed study of the entirety of McGilvary’s life or of all the factors contributing to his ministry’s effectiveness, it is this author’s hope that the reader will find the following brief survey to be both insightful and inspiring. The saints of ages past have long encouraged and challenged the saints of today and it is with this expectation that we embark on our journey into the life and ministry of Daniel McGilvary.

## **Missions in Thailand before Daniel McGilvary**

Before beginning our study of McGilvary, some historical background information is necessary in order to understand the context into which he came. The first known missions effort in Thailand was on the part of Roman Catholics. Priests accompanied the Portuguese government's envoy to Thailand (then Siam)<sup>1</sup> and most Catholic missions in these early days were focused on expatriate Catholics residing in Thailand. In the 1680s a Greek Roman Catholic adventurer named Constantine Phaulkon came to prominence in the court of King Narai who reigned over most of what is now Thailand. However, fearing that the king was close to becoming a Catholic and fearing the power that Phaulkon was gaining in Narai's government, political adversaries arranged his arrest and execution.

The first Protestant efforts to reach the Thai were those of Ann Judson who reached out to Thai prisoners of war in Burma. The wife of famous missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson, Ann Judson never set foot in Thailand though she did see some Thai come to Christ in Burma. She translated into Thai a Burmese catechism, a tract, and the Gospel of Matthew. The first resident missionaries in Thailand were Carl Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin who arrived in Bangkok in 1828. Although Tomlin stayed only very briefly due to health and family considerations, Gutzlaff was there until 1831 ministering to the Thai, Chinese, and the many minority tribal groups whom he encountered. Many missionaries in Thailand during that time did not intend to be missionaries to the Thai but were using Thailand as a stepping stone to China. Following Gutzlaff's short ministry in Thailand, he proceeded on to China, where he spent twenty years itinerating up and down the Chinese coast. Although Thailand was long overlooked in favor of more popular fields such as China and India, a number of missions groups and denominations began to send workers to minister specifically among the Thai in Thailand. Notable among them were the American Baptists, the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), the London Missionary Society (LMS), and the American Presbyterians. The missionaries were small in number and were mostly restricted to Bangkok. They did much

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, the names "Thailand" and "Siam" will be used interchangeably to refer to what is now called the nation of Thailand. Siam is the former name of Thailand and is therefore used quite extensively in missionary and other literature of former times. In the same way, the adjectives "Thai" and "Siamese" will be used interchangeably to refer to the people, customs, language, etc. of Thailand.

translation work and literature distribution. Some missionaries used medicine as a form of outreach, notably Dr. Dan Bradley who introduced many modern medical techniques to the Thai. Much work was done to reach the Chinese, as they were perceived to be more receptive than the Thai. In historical retrospect however, this assumption has not shown itself to be true.<sup>2</sup> Pioneer missionary work was very difficult among the Thai since they were largely unreceptive. Unlike many animistic tribal groups, Buddhism provided the Thai with a cohesive philosophy and worldview that provided solidarity and unity to Thai society. Another factor to note is that until “1861 all missionary work was centered in Bangkok.”<sup>3</sup> As opposed to rural village areas, conversion to Christianity was more difficult for the Thai in Bangkok since they were in very close proximity to the political and social leaders of the country who were sometimes tolerant of the foreign religion and sometimes not. There were very few converts in these early days of Protestant missions in Thailand and it was not until the later part of the nineteenth century that numerical growth of any significance was seen. The first Thai converts were mostly those in the employ, or in close association with, the missionaries. Because of this association, they had less to lose socially and economically by converting to Christianity. Alex Smith rightly observes that although there are dangers associated with drawing converts almost solely from the missionaries’ own hired help, this kind of church growth may have been the only kind truly possible in those difficult early pioneering years.<sup>4</sup> This unnatural strained kind of church growth later gave way to more natural church growth, namely the conversion of Thai from the larger community who were not economically linked to the missionaries. Significant growth of this type occurred through the ministry of Daniel McGilvary and it is to him that we now turn.

## **McGilvary before Arrival in Thailand**

On May 16, 1828, little Daniel McGilvary was born in North Carolina to Scottish parents. This was the same year that Carl Gutzlaff and Jacob Tomlin arrived in Bangkok and

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<sup>2</sup> Alex Smith, *Siamese Gold, A History of Church Growth in Thailand: An Interpretive Analysis 1816-1982* (Kanok Bannasan (OMF Publishers): Bangkok, 1981), p.54.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, p.57.

<sup>4</sup> Smith, p.57.

began ministering among the Thai. For McGilvary however, the call of ministry in Thailand was still twenty years away. McGilvary's mother died early in his life and he was raised by his aunts and by his father, who gave him a disciplined Presbyterian upbringing. The Sabbath and family devotions were faithfully observed. When McGilvary went to live with his uncle Evander to learn a trade, he became involved in a Methodist church Sunday school class whose teachers held Bible memorization contests for the children. This class was a catalyst for the birth of McGilvary's "love for study and for the Scriptures"<sup>5</sup> A number of his friends confessed their faith in Christ at a Methodist revival meeting but McGilvary later understood the Gospel and accepted Christ privately at home. In 1845, he accepted a generous offer to attend school almost tuition free at Bingham Academy. Upon his graduation from that institution in 1849, he taught school for four years in Pittsboro, North Carolina. During his time as school teacher in Pittsboro, McGilvary became a ruling elder and Sunday school director at a newly organized Presbyterian church in that town. Despite the counsel of some who thought that he should make teaching his life's work, McGilvary left his teaching position and entered Princeton Seminary in 1853 to prepare for the ministry. McGilvary was greatly impressed by his professors at Princeton, especially Charles Hodge who later became famous for his systematic theology. Princeton's proximity to New York City brought many mission secretaries and returned missionaries to the seminary. McGilvary did not think that he was any good at language so for long time he seriously considered being a home missionary. McGilvary spent the summer vacation before his last year of seminary as an agent of the American Sunday School Union in Texas. McGilvary was struck by the multitude of churches there and came to believe that America could not provide "a field where Christ was not preached"<sup>6</sup> like he sought. Returning from Texas, McGilvary heard furloughing missionary Dr. Samuel Reynolds House speak at Princeton. Dr. House told the students of the kingdom of Siam, which was recently opened wide to missionaries by King Mongkut, the reigning monarch of that land. McGilvary was captivated by the idea of "a whole kingdom"<sup>7</sup> in which he could preach the Gospel. McGilvary and fellow classmate

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<sup>5</sup> Daniel McGilvary, *A Half Century Among the Siamese and the Lao: An Autobiography* (Revell: Chicago), p.27.

<sup>6</sup> McGilvary, p.37.

<sup>7</sup> McGilvary, p.37.

Jonathan Wilson talked with House and pledged to give serious consideration to serving as missionaries in Siam. Both men graduated Princeton in 1856 and went on to other endeavors but neither forgot Siam. McGilvary accepted a one-year call to be an interim pastor to the churches of Carthage and Union, North Carolina. Near the end of his year there, McGilvary was ready to accept a call to be their permanent pastor but the spiritual need of Siam still haunted him. He got news that the Siam mission was growing weaker and he devoted a day to fasting and prayer to know what the Lord would have him do. McGilvary decided that the Lord would have him go to Siam as a missionary. The churches of Carthage and Union found another pastor and soon after McGilvary was ordained in Orange County Presbytery of North Carolina as a foreign missionary, a type of ordination which the Presbytery had not done before. Traveling to New York City in preparation for his journey to Siam, McGilvary ran into his former classmate Jonathan Wilson at the Mission House in that city. He was pleasantly surprised to learn that Wilson too, was setting out as a missionary to Siam. On March 11, 1858, McGilvary, together with Jonathan Wilson and his wife, sailed for Singapore on clipper ship “David Brown”.

### **Early Ministry Years in Bangkok and Petchaburi**

From Singapore, McGilvary got passage up to Bangkok and arrived in the Thai capital in June 1858. He found the Thai language difficult and became frustrated at not being able to express himself. During this time of transition, McGilvary cared for the children living at the mission compound school and soon began to go on evangelistic tours as his language improved. During his first two years, he went on many tours with Dr. House, once with Jonathan Wilson, and sometimes alone. Over the course of his more than fifty years in Thailand, McGilvary toured incessantly, exploring new territories, preaching the Gospel and looking for receptive peoples among whom a church might be established. On an early tour to Petchaburi, southwest of Bangkok,<sup>8</sup> McGilvary met the lieutenant governor of the province who gave a reception for he and his missionary companions. He invited McGilvary to come live there and to preach Christianity if liked, on the condition that he teach his son English. If he wanted to open a school, the lieutenant governor would provide pupils. McGilvary was excited by the idea, as he

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<sup>8</sup> See Appendix A: Map of Modern Thailand

had long wanted to get out of commercial centers and into rural areas like his North Carolina home. He returned to Bangkok, thought over proposal and made preparations to go to Petchaburi. Unfortunately, McGilvary was detained because of a cholera outbreak in Bangkok. Jonathan Wilson's wife and daughter died in the epidemic and, at the request of the mission, McGilvary was to remain in Bangkok. After McGilvary married his wife, Sophia Royce Bradley, daughter of Dr. Dan Bradley, on December 6, 1860 and settled into a house provided for them by Dr. Bradley, Petchaburi seemed less of an option. Less than a year later however, the mission wanted to open a station in Petchaburi. McGilvary, S.G. McFarland, and their wives were sent to Petchaburi to establish a new work in that province.

McFarland preferred school work and taught the lieutenant governor's son while McGilvary focused on evangelistic work. The two couples met each night after their evening meal for half an hour of united prayer. They prayed especially for two servants of each family who eventually came to the Lord. McGilvary had many times thought that literature distribution was largely a waste of time, but it was a man in Petchaburi who changed his mind. Nai Kawn sought out the missionaries and begged them to teach his son the Gospel. Upon being questioned, he admitted that he had never met a missionary before but had obtained second-hand some tracts and other literature handed out by Dr. Dan Bradley years earlier. Nai Kawn displayed a very impressive understanding of the Gospel and had a mostly solid theology although he was a bit confused by such things as the Trinity. McGilvary and McFarland worked in Petchaburi for a number of years and witnessed significant church growth compared with past results.

### **McGilvary's Interest in the Lao and his Exploratory Trip to Chiang Mai**

McGilvary's interest in the Lao was prompted by a couple different factors. Shortly after his marriage in Bangkok, McGilvary met the prince of Chiangmai<sup>9</sup>, Chao Kawilorot, and was

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<sup>9</sup> The ruler of Chiangmai is alternatively called "Prince" or "King" and in this paper the two will be used interchangeably to refer to the same person. Chao Kawilorot and his successors were sovereign over their realm and in that sense were kings in the common understanding of the word. However, Chiang Mai and the other Lao states in the North were vassal states of the Siamese king to whom they were required to pay tribute. It is in consideration of this second role that the ruler of Chiang Mai may be called "Prince" since he is subject to the will of the Siamese king.

intrigued by this man and his culture. During his time in Petchaburi, McGilvary came into contact with a large colony of Lao in that area. The Lao near Petchaburi were war captives relocated from Korat in northeast Thailand<sup>10</sup> and were forced labor at government works projects in Petchaburi. McGilvary preached to them at night to avoid government interference, sharing the Gospel by the light of the full moon and campfires. Through his meeting with the prince of Chiangmai and his ministry among the Lao near Petchaburi, a desire was stirred in McGilvary's heart to visit their homeland. The Presbyterian mission was not yet ready to establish a station in Chiang Mai<sup>11</sup> but the newly organized Presbytery of Siam gave him permission to make an exploratory trip in the fall of 1863. Travelling up the Chao Phraya River out of Bangkok towards Chiang Mai, McGilvary and Jonathan Wilson missed meeting the prince of Chiangmai who was on way to Bangkok to bring tribute to the Siamese king. This turned out to be providential as the prince probably would have denied them right to go to Chiangmai. He later became suspicious of the missionaries and opposed their work in the North. The trip to Chiangmai took forty-nine days and they arrived on January 7, 1864. The nephew of the prince of Chiang Mai did not know whether to receive them or not because he did not have a letter from the prince, so he ignored them altogether. The daughter of the prince received them cordially since she remembered them from their brief visit in Bangkok right after McGilvary's wedding. Many people came to see the novelty of these white foreigners and to ask why they had come. In McGilvary's estimation, the people of the Lao States seemed outwardly rougher than the Siamese but more earnestly religious and Buddhism was apparently less a matter of formalism to them than to the Siamese. He thought that they would be more open to a better way if presented with it. After this initial ten-day visit in Chiangmai, the missionaries returned to Bangkok, arriving there on February 6, 1864. Even though it was but a brief visit, McGilvary's burden to do his life's work in that region was strong upon getting a first hand taste of it. Because of some missionary departures to the United States, McGilvary was not able to commence a northern station at that time. It would

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix A: Map of Modern Thailand

<sup>11</sup> To this day, there is no standardized system of transliteration of Thai words into Roman letters and everyone transliterates words as seems best to them. For that reason, names are often spelled differently although they refer to the same person or place. The reader should therefore not be confused by the appearance of the names "Chiang Mai", "Chieng Mai", "Chiangmai", and "Chiengmai", all of which refer to the same city. It may be noted that the majority of modern maps of Thailand prefer the spelling "Chiang Mai."

be three years until the way would be opened for the establishment of the Lao mission in the North.

## **The Beginnings of the Lao Mission in Northern Thailand**

On January 3, 1867 McGilvary moved to Chiangmai to open a new mission station there. He was accompanied by the George family who later returned to Bangkok to be replaced by Jonathan Wilson and family. When McGilvary went to open the Lao mission, the Lao states of the North were ruled by feudal princes. Five of these Lao states (Chiangmai, Lampun, Lakawn, Prae, Nan) were later incorporated into present day Thailand and the sixth (Luang Prabang) is part of modern Laos.<sup>12</sup> The Lao states were little known about in Bangkok and were almost another world. Before McGilvary only one other foreigner had ever made it there. The king of Chiangmai was friendly at first but he was soon soured against the missionaries by a Portuguese adventurer who wormed his way into the king's confidence. Eventually he was arrested and put out of office because of his misdeeds, and the missionaries were given a small plot of land in Chiangmai in 1868.

The first Lao converts were made in 1869 when McGilvary evangelized conscripted labors who came into Chiangmai to work at building projects for the king of the city. Nan Inta, a former Buddhist abbot, was the first man to be baptized. His faith in Buddhism was shaken when McGilvary accurately predicted an eclipse in contrast to the claims of his pseudo-scientific Buddhist books about cosmology and geography. McGilvary later recalled his conversion:

I well remember his tall figure and thoughtful face when he first appeared at our sala, shortly after our arrival in Chiangmai. He had a cough, and had come for medicine. He had heard, too, that we taught a new religion, and wished to enquire about that. Some soothing expectorant sufficiently relieved his cough to encourage him to make another call. On each visit religion was the all-absorbing topic. He had studied Buddhism, and he diligently practiced its precepts. As an abbot he had led others to make offerings for the monastery worship, and he had two sons of his own in the monastic order. But Buddhism had never satisfied his deep spiritual nature. What of the thousands of failures and transgressions from the results of which there was no escape? The doctrine of a free and full pardon through the merits of another, was both new and attractive to him, but it controverted the fundamental principle of his religion.

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<sup>12</sup> It should be noted that what McGilvary called Laoland was to become what is now northern Thailand. Most of the area covered by the Lao mission of McGilvary was eventually incorporated into modern Thailand. The descendants of the people with whom McGilvary worked have linguistically and in large part culturally assimilated into mainstream Thai culture. Modern Chiang Mai and environs are now Thailand proper and are politically and linguistically different from the country of Laos and its people. See Appendix A: Map of Modern Thailand.



We had some arguments, also, on the science of geography, on the shape of the earth, on the nature of eclipses, and the like... Just before the great eclipse was to occur I told him of it... I pointed out that the eclipse could not be caused by a monster which attacked the sun, as he had been taught. If that were the cause, no one could foretell the day when the monster would be moved to make the attack. He at once caught the idea... He waited with intense interest for the day to come... He followed the coming of the eclipse, its progress, and its passing off as anxiously as the wise men of old followed the star of Bethlehem – and like them, he, too, was led to the Savior... The eclipse had started an ever-widening rift. He began, as never before, to examine the credentials of Christianity. He soon learned to read Siamese in order to gain access to our Scriptures. We read the Gospel of John together. He studied the Shorter Catechism... When tempted to doubt, he fell back on the eclipse, saying, “I know my books were wrong there. If the Gospel seems too good to be true in that it offers to pardon and cleanse and adopt guilty sinners, and give them a title to a heavenly inheritance, it is simply because it is divine and not human.”...

The conversion of Nan Inta was an epoch in the history of the mission. The ordinary concourse of visitors might be for medicine, or it might be from mere curiosity. But when one of the most zealous Buddhists, well known by members of the royal family, openly embraced Christianity, the matter began to assume a different aspect... Nan Inta’s defection from Buddhism produced a profound impression among all classes. Emboldened by his example, secret believers became more open. Not the number alone, but the character of enquirers attracted attention.<sup>13</sup>

There continued to be some hostility to the Gospel but Nan Inta’s conversion opened the way for more professions of faith and gave greater respectability to the missionaries and their religion. Many of the converts were, like Nan Inta, mature men and men of influence in society. One of the key strategies of McGilvary was to specifically evangelize present leaders in society and heads of families, as they would make natural church leaders. In his study of the factors contributing to the effectiveness of McGilvary’s ministry, Alex Smith made the following observation, namely, “[h]is letters are full of evidence that he purposely sought the older men... [and that h]e saw local men as better evangelists and leaders than imported church workers.”<sup>14</sup> On McGilvary’s many evangelistic tours, he would often take mature male converts with him in order to disciple them and train them for church leadership. McGilvary’s apprenticing of national believers was largely done on-the-job although in later years some more formal educational training was established. It should also be noted that McGilvary also made a practice of taking new missionaries on these evangelistic tours orienting them to evangelistic work as he did the Lao converts.

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<sup>13</sup> McGilvary, p.96-99.

<sup>14</sup> Smith, p.87.

## **Opposition and Persecution Threaten the Young Church**

As more converts were made, the prince of Chiangmai felt threatened. He sent a letter of accusation to Bangkok and asked the U.S. Consul to remove the missionaries because they had caused a recent rice famine in the area. Reasoning that the poor rice harvest had begun before the missionaries arrived, the U.S. Consul told the prince of Chiangmai that they had not caused the famine and would therefore not be removed. However, he promised that he would order the missionaries not to cause any such famine. The prince was unhappy with that reply and ordered all Christians arrested. Most fled but two were captured and, refusing to recant their faith, were tortured and murdered. This was an extremely tense time and both the Lao Christians and the missionaries were in peril. For a long time, no one would tell the missionaries where the two men had disappeared to because they feared for their own lives. Eventually someone secretly told the missionaries about the martyrdoms and they sent word to Bangkok, not knowing whether this would be their last communication this side of heaven. The U.S. consul and a royal messenger from the Siamese king went to Chiangmai and told the prince of Chiangmai that he could do whatever he wants to his own servants (namely, the Lao Christians) but the missionaries must not be harmed. The prince was very upset at this and threatened to banish the missionaries. Once he calmed down however, he consented to allow the missionaries to stay as long as they only distributed medicine and did not preach Christianity. Although there were a few missionary doctors on the field, McGilvary himself was not a physician. He taught himself basic medical procedures like giving vaccinations for malaria and other common maladies as he believed that ministering to people's felt needs gained their confidence and opened the way for message of the Gospel.

It seemed at this point that the mission station in Chiang Mai would have to be closed but McGilvary was determined that God would prevent it. The prince of Chiangmai went to Bangkok to pay tribute not long after and while there he became sick and died on the return trip to Chiangmai. The new king was friendlier to the missionaries but it was about three years before the Christians became confident enough to openly follow Christ. Some new converts were made but these new believers were mostly older men who lived on the mission compound,

working there or coming for medical attention. Ideally, church growth would come from converts independent of the missionaries but this type of conversion may have been the only kind possible in the period immediately following the martyrdoms. Church growth was slow in this period and a number of converts returned to the spirit practices of Lao folk Buddhism. Still, people continued to come to Christ, increasingly those outside of the missionaries' employ. Some had been treated in the "hospital" of the missionary Dr. Cheek and some were relatives of one of the martyrs.

### **McGilvary's Evangelistic Touring**

On January 3, 1873, McGilvary's wife Sophia had come to the limit of her strength and the McGilvary family set out for their first furlough in the United States. On their way to Bangkok before setting sail for America, McGilvary split off from his family and, with Nan Inta, made a survey tour of Lamphoon, Lakorn<sup>15</sup>, Prae, and Nan. Commenting on this journey, McGilvary wrote,

I felt strong in having with me, in the person of Nan Inta, so wise a teacher and such a living witness of the power of the Gospel. On our first visits it has usually seemed wise to spend much of the time in visiting and making known the Gospel privately to those of reputation, as we know one wise missionary did in old times. It is necessary to give rulers a clear idea of the non-political nature of our work. In order to do this, we must show positively what our message is – not merely that we are religious teachers, but that, as such, we have a message different from all others, not antagonistic or hostile to them, but supplementing rather than which they offer."<sup>16</sup>

McGilvary made many tours during his decades of service in the North. McGilvary discovered "the value and the weakness of the strategy of itineration"<sup>17</sup> as he made many tours through the north preaching the Gospel and distributing literature. The major weakness that he found was that it was difficult to conserve interest in the Gospel from one preaching tour to another. Dr. S.R. House, who also made many evangelistic tours, observed that

In all our tours we find persons who seem to be interested in our religion, who take books with eagerness and read them with apparent avidity, and are interested for a time, but before another tour can be made to the same place, these impressions are effaced.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Modern day Lamphoon. The name "Lakorn" was a corruption of the full name of the city, "Nakorn Lamphoon".

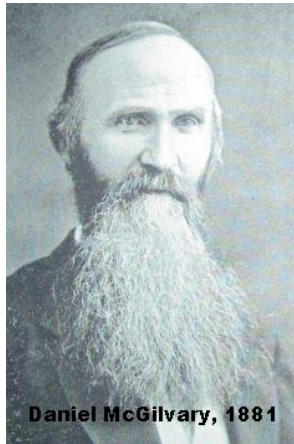
<sup>16</sup> McGilvary, p.161.

<sup>17</sup> Smith, p.80.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Samuel Reynolds House as found in Smith, p.80.

Because of this difficulty, McGilvary became convinced of the value of repeated contact and return trips to the same villages and areas. He spent many days in individual villages and did a lot of his ministry at night when people were home. He sat around the fire with the men of the village discussing the Gospel, answering questions, and teaching seekers. McGilvary practiced widespread evangelism of those who had no previous contact with the Gospel yet also made note of those who were interested and receptive to the Gospel so that he could visit them again on subsequent tours.

### **The Edict of Religious Toleration and Subsequent Church Growth**



Returning from furlough in 1874, McGilvary rejoined his missionary teammates in Chiang Mai and by 1877 the church in Chiangmai had 18 members. Although this was perhaps a modest start, “McGilvary saw this church as ‘an atom of life in the midst of the great ocean of depth.’”<sup>19</sup> In 1878, the king of Siam issued an edict of religious toleration at the urging of the missionaries. This was done to the displeasure of the Lao king and officials, but to the benefit of Lao Christians, some of who were forced to work on the Sabbath, been accused of witchcraft, or had been denied legal recognition of their marriages. Most importantly though, this edict meant that theoretically no person could be punished for becoming a Christian. The edict also opened the way for more people from the lower classes to publicly inquire about Christianity. In his autobiography, McGilvary relates that

Before the proclamation of toleration, while the common people were still afraid of making a public profession of Christianity, our most effective work was probably with that higher class of officials, who stood in somewhat less fear of the known antagonism of the Chao Uparat. They were, besides, a more interesting class than the common people, for they were better educated, were more accustomed in their daily duties to weigh arguments and decide on questions of evidence, and many of them had been trained in the religious order.<sup>20</sup>

Following the proclamation of this edict, the church in the North more than tripled in size and four congregations were formally organized in Chiang Mai and its environs. One of McGilvary’s key strategies was to start churches ahead of mission stations. Contrary to popular missionary

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<sup>19</sup> Smith, p.72.

<sup>20</sup> McGilvary, p.170-171.

practice of his day, and in many cases our own, McGilvary did not select a site for a station, set up a compound and buildings and then try to start a church in that area. McGilvary's emphasis was not on setting up stations but establishing churches. He made evangelistic tours to find receptive peoples and where there was substantial potential for growth, he would make repeated trips to that area, having made note of those who were interested in the Gospel on his previous visit. In some circumstances, McGilvary might suggest opening a station but his focus was on evangelization, not institutions, and thereby he did not burden missionaries and converts with structures to run that impeded evangelistic work. Initially, all converts were members of the Chiang Mai mother church until there was a substantial mass of believers in a given area. Then the Christians in that area were removed from the rolls of the Chiang Mai church and their own church was established. Until such a church was established, the scattered Christians were members of the nearest church geographically and were responsible to the elders of that church. McGilvary's strategy of founding churches ahead of mission stations was excellent overall although McGilvary himself admitted that the weakness of this approach was the difficulty of educating native workers. The lack of more centralized formal instruction left Lao Christians with a church that was not as well grounded biblically as it might have been.

### **Reaching Whole Families for Christ**

“Between October 1, 1877 and September 30, 1882, 119 adults and 59 infants or young children of Christian parents were baptized.”<sup>21</sup> Many of these new converts came from the same families. Recognizing this trend, McGilvary and his missionary companions made concerted efforts to reach entire family units, including extended family, with the Gospel. This is in stark contrast to modern evangelical, particularly American, emphasis on the conversion of the individual, independent from the family unit. Granted that Thai and Lao families of that time and of the present are more closely knit than most American families, McGilvary's example of focusing on families is still a relevant and practical strategy for evangelism in the modern world, both in America and abroad. The Gospel travels more easily along already formed social networks, the primary network being the family. Where one person or a couple of people in a

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<sup>21</sup> Smith, p. 74.

family become Christians, it is not uncommon for more relatives to follow. McGilvary tried to baptize the members of a family all at once, or within a short span of time of each other. When whole families turned to Christ, it was easier to defend against opposition from others in the village and from social rejection.

### **External Opposition and Internal Setbacks**

In late fall of 1882, the edict of toleration was repealed and the Lao authorities in the North “issued a proclamation forbidding intercourse with the missionaries.”<sup>22</sup> This prompted increased opposition to the Gospel but soon thereafter one of most ardent and powerful enemies of Christianity within the Lao administration died and the former atmosphere of toleration more or less returned. Of course, there continued to be opposition on the local level. It was not uncommon for Christians to be accused of witchcraft, threatened with family disinheritance, imprisonment, or other punishment. Some converts later turned from the faith and left the church or were disciplined and sometimes excommunicated for immoral behavior such as drinking, smoking opium, or performing spirit rites. Some of those disciplined however, were later restored to full church membership.

### **A Different Philosophy of Christian Schooling**

McGilvary and other missionaries were obviously disappointed when promising converts reverted to their old beliefs or fell into sin, and therefore did all they could to disciple and educate their converts and their children in the way of the truth. To this end, McGilvary encouraged the establishment of Christian schools to educate the children of converts and thereby conserve the gains won by biological growth within the church. It is extremely important to note that the purpose of these schools was to educate the children of Christians not to evangelize the children of Buddhists. In contrast to the school philosophy of McGilvary and the Lao mission, the Siam mission centered in Bangkok sought to convert Buddhist children to plant the church of tomorrow. In mission circles of that time, it was widely believed that the current generation was too difficult to reach with the Gospel but that there was still hope for their

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<sup>22</sup> Smith, p.73.

children if only they were reached in time. “Educate to evangelize” was the watchword of this philosophy that hoped to plant the church of tomorrow through the establishment of Christian schools. McGilvary however wanted to plant the church of today and his strategy of evangelizing older men and adults reflected this. Schools in the North were eventually established but they were not the main thrust of the mission. The few schools that were opened by the Lao mission were for the purpose of educating children of Christian families so that they would grow up in the truth. The only other option for education at the time was temple schools whose main curriculum was Buddhism. In historical retrospect, the “educate to evangelize” approach produced only a few converts as compared to McGilvary’s direct evangelistic strategy. By 1913, two years after McGilvary’s death, the church in Northern Thailand had over six thousand members compared to only six hundred in the Siam Mission.<sup>23</sup>

### **McGilvary’s Most Important Strategy**

Over Daniel McGilvary’s more than fifty years in Thailand, from his arrival in 1858 to his death in 1911, he employed many different strategic methods that contributed to the effectiveness of his ministry. His most important “strategy” however, was that he loved God and loved people. While it is important to study the methods and approaches that contribute to the growth of the church, the ministry of the Gospel is always primarily spiritual. McGilvary was a devoted man of prayer who from an early age had a “love for study and for the Scriptures.”<sup>24</sup> McGilvary was confident in God’s sovereignty in history and saw His hand in the advance of the church. McGilvary and Wilson just missed meeting the prince of Chiang Mai on their way north and in that McGilvary saw God’s guiding them past the man who would have prohibited their passage. Under persecution, McGilvary refused to abandon the infant Lao mission, being confident that the sovereign Lord would build his church, not allowing the gates of hell to prevail against it.

[Dr.] House wrote that McGilvary was a “thoroughly conscientious man, full of faith and trust... of more than average ability.” McGilvary’s wife was a woman of “rare good sense and prudence.” Both were admirably fitted for the work. They were “supremely happy and contented.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Smith, p.92.

<sup>24</sup> McGilvary, p.27.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, p.65.

McGilvary's love of God and contentedness in Him overflowed into a love for people. He took a genuine personal interest in people and preached Christ to all people, rich and poor, and listened to the concerns of all who came to him. The author of an 1896 article in the journal *Missionary Review of the World* made this observation about McGilvary's characteristic love for people.

He seems to be able to enter fully into the lives of the people, understanding their trials and rejoicing with them in their joys. This is one of the sources of his success as a missionary, and an essential characteristic of all who would be missionaries in the fullest sense.<sup>26</sup>

### **Father of the Church in Northern Thailand**

Over the course of his life and ministry, McGilvary was vastly influential in the establishment of the church in what is now Northern Thailand. Confident in the sovereignty of God, McGilvary set out to establish the church in the present, not believing in the pessimism that insisted that the current generation was too difficult to reach. In contrast to many churches of today that are made up primarily of women and young people (who are regarded as more receptive), McGilvary shared the Gospel with the mature men and with the leaders of society. He wisely saw how the Gospel could most effectively travel along social networks and within established cultural authority structures yet he also trusted in God who alone had the power to establish His church and to change lives. McGilvary was not unnecessarily tied down by institutions but tirelessly traveled from village to village, preaching the Gospel and making careful note of those whose hearts God seemed to be opening. In the tradition of William Carey, McGilvary expected great things from God, and attempted great things for God. Though not perfect, Daniel McGilvary was a Spirit-filled minister of the Gospel whose love for God and people are worthy of emulation by all who love the Lord Jesus Christ.

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<sup>26</sup> *Missionary Review of the World* 1896:370, as found in Smith, p.90.



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*Photo Credit:* Photo of Daniel McGilvary on page 12 of the current paper may be found in McGilvary's autobiography referenced above, p.238.

Appendix A: Map of Modern Thailand

