

HeRD #377 - Sheep Stealing I

On the face of it, "sheep-stealing" is an apparently simple phenomena. One church or mission sets out to steal the members of another church of mission. The following set of HeRDs, based on Ruohomäki's thesis "The Finnish Free Foreign Mission in Thailand in 1946-1985: A Descriptive History," argues that sheep-stealing is more complex than that. The FFFM felt itself victimized by the depredations of other missions. CCT leaders have accused the FFFM itself of stealing CCT members, notably in Chiang Rai Province. Ruohomäki seeks to demonstrate that the FFFM was only a victim and never a victimizer. In the process he develops a clear, narrow definition of sheep-stealing. It's too narrow, or so I'll argue.

The whole subject of sheep-stealing deserves considerable attention. It has powerfully influenced Protestant church and missionary relations, esp. since the 1950s. I was quite taken aback recently to hear a church leader argue that the church splits that take place from sheep-stealing are good. They show that the Holy Spirit is at work. Research we've done in the Office of History in Chiang Mai, Nan, and Uttaradit Provinces demonstrates that the opposite is true. Sheep-stealing not only poisons ecclesiastical relations, but it also kills or cripples local churches. It splits families as well as churches. It frequently results in two (or more) smaller churches, neither of which cans sustain a strong congregational life. It throws the whole idea of Christian love into disrepute with others. It introduces ugly notes of judgment self-aggrandizement, and self-justification into the church. It's very difficult to believe that the Holy Spirit has anything to do with it.

HeRD #378 - Sheep-Stealing II

Ruohomäki, as we noted in HeRD #377, devotes attention to the issue of "sheep-stealing" in his thesis on the history of the Finnish Free Foreign Mission. The FFFM accused other missions of sheep-stealing. It was accused by others, notably the CCT, of the same behavior. Ruohomäki sets about to prove two things. First, he seeks to show that the FFFM was a victim of sheep-stealing. Second, he wants to demonstrate that the FFFM itself never engaged in stealing other churches' members.

Ruohomäki makes a good case for being victimized. In the 1960s, he writes, "The FFFM met a lot of problems from a new American mission called Church of Christ (non-instrumental). Some missionaries of this mission came to Petchaboon and tried to persuade the workers to leave the FFFM. The Church of Christ missionaries promised better support and even motorbikes to the evangelists if they were willing to abandon their mission. They tried to convince [them] that the FFFM missionaries were heretics. According to them, teaching concerning the Baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues and healings of the FFFM were heretical doctrines. Even the playing [of] musical instruments in church meetings was against Biblical principles according to them." (p. 53) Ruohomäki reports that the depredations of the Churches of Christ mission were successful and all but one of the FFFM's Thai workers quit to join the new mission. They were re-baptized in the process.

There is no question but what the Churches of Christ (Non-instrumental) did engage in overt and aggressive sheep-stealing, esp. in the 1960s. Its missionaries believed that the members of other churches weren't saved. They were the modern equivalent of the Jewish synagogues of New Testament times. These missionaries, apparently, reasoned, then, that by divesting other churches of their members they were following Paul's model and methods. Ruohomäki sees sheep-stealing as being this type of overt, intentional, and aggressive deconstruction of other churches. I want to suggest that there's more to it than that.

HeRD #379 - Sheep-Stealing III

As we saw in HeRD #377, Ruohomäki in his thesis on the Finnish Free Foreign Mission defines sheep-stealing as the over, intentional, and aggressive raiding of members from other churches and/or disrupting the work of another mission. His "model" for sheep stealing is the actions and attitudes of Churches of Christ (Non-instrumental) missionaries. The question of sheep-stealing doesn't end there, however. The FFFM itself has been accused of sheep-stealing as well, particularly among the churches of the CCT's Second District (Chiang Rai Province) in the 1950s and 1960s. As we would expect, Ruohomäki denies that such was the case. In doing so, he relies on the concept of overt and aggressive intentionality

with which he judged the Churches of Christ.

In making his case for innocence, Ruohomäki makes three important points. First, he argues that the CCT members who joined FFFM churches were mostly nominal Christians without experiences in personal regeneration. The CCT churches themselves, furthermore, were responsible (by implication) for the condition of their members because they were spiritually lifeless. They provided no experiences in revival and no study of the Bible. Their members acted no differently from society generally. The churches had very few activities. Second, the Pentecostal Movement in Chiang Rai was started by enthusiastic young Thai Christians. The FFFM arrived only after Pentecostal groups had already been formed. Third, the FFFM never engaged in intrusive behavior. It specifically never tried to buy away CCT leaders or members. Ruohomäki does acknowledge, however, that the FFFM left the door open for "unconverted" Christians to join its churches. He argues that no mission can claim exclusive right to a particular area or field. Nor can it try to force its members to stay in its own fold if they become convinced that another mission or church is more biblical. He argues that this is a matter of religious freedom. He quotes another FFFM missionary to make the point that, "We have not seduced anyone out of from one's church. Instead Presbyterians [the CCT] in the beginning excommunicated those, who took Biblical water baptism." (Ruohomäki, 81)

The conclusion is inevitable, then, that by its own lights the FFFM didn't indulge in aggressive, intentional, and overt sheep stealing. It didn't intentionally raid or disrupt the work of the CCT and its churches in Chiang Rai Province. We'll look at this defense again in HeRD #380.

HeRD #380 - Sheep-Stealing IV

Jouko Ruohomäki's thesis on the history of the Finnish Free Foreign Mission understands sheep-stealing as being the overt, intentional, and aggressive appropriation of the members of another church or mission. On these terms, he argues that the FFFM didn't steal CCT members in Chiang Rai in the 1950s and 1960s [see HeRD #379]. It seems to me, however, the FFFM did just that. **FIRST**, the FFFM's had a hostile attitude towards CCT churches. They were supposedly weak, irresponsible, and didn't teach the truth about the Holy Spirit. Ruohomäki portrays them as being beyond hope of renewal. **SECOND**, the FFFM ignored the situation facing the Chiang Rai churches. They had been hit by depression in the 1930s and then by war, persecution, and social isolation in the 1940s. Those churches, meanwhile, had a history of revivalism going back to the 1920s, which is why the FFFM found many of their members responsive to Pentecostal revivalism. It's true that these churches also resisted Pentecostal "inroads," and I don't know the details of that resistance. In other similar situations both sides were guilty of stubborn spiritual arrogance [see HeRDs #339-342]. We can assume that something like that was going on here as well. **THIRD**, while Ruohomäki brands the CCT's members as "unconverted," he is also highly complimentary of the quality of the leadership former CCT members gave the FFFM's Chiang Rai churches. He openly attributes those qualities to their previous Christian experience. He favorably contrasts the FFFM Chiang Rai churches to those in Petchabun Province where there was no core of former CCT members around which to shape their congregations.

The Chiang Rai churches, in sum, weren't so entirely worthless as Ruohomäki claims, even by his own standards. They had provided their members with a Christian background. They had their own revivalistic traditions. It is true that they weren't living up to their potential and had many weaknesses. One has to ask if that, however, justified the aggressively negative attitudes the FFFM took towards them? Ruohomäki himself points out that eventually a more friendly relationship developed between Chiang Rai's CCT and FFFM churches. By his own statements and the historical situation of the Chiang Rai churches, then, it appears that a more kindly, friendly, and patient FFFM attitude was possible and even warranted. It's true that FFFM missionaries didn't engage in overt sheep-stealing. Pentecostal "nationals" with informal ties to the FFFM appear to have initially performed that task in their stead. The FFFM does appear to have encouraged aggressive, negative attitudes that provided it with the opportunity to form FFFM churches around cores of former CCT church members. That's sheep-stealing. The FFFM was covertly rather than overtly aggressive, but still aggressive. The definition of sheep-stealing, then, needs to include the fostering of negative, rebellious attitudes in the members of other churches. Where the consequence of the presence

of one sect or denomination is the significant loss of members from other churches to it, sheep-stealing is probably on.