

HeRD #58 - Getting Married Properly

The Laos Mission faced numerous problems in establishing a viable Christian presence in northern Thailand. One problem had to do with marriage and marriage ceremonies. Northern Thai Christians were getting married "without benefit of clergy." Only ordained clergy could perform marriages, which until nearly 1890 meant only the missionaries. Couples were sometimes not willing to wait until a missionary could come around and do the wedding. Christians were also marrying "outside the faith" and occasionally resolved the ceremonial problem by not having a ceremony. The North Laos Presbytery appointed a committee to consider a resolution that Christians **MUST** be married in a proper Christian service if they were to remain church members. The 1887 minutes of presbytery contains the brief report of that committee:

"The Com. to whom was referred the resolution concerning the marriage of believers without Christian ceremony, reported as follows; which was adopted.

"Your Com. to whom was referred the follow motion, viz:- 'That Presbytery order that in all cases of marriage of a disciple without Christian ceremony, such ceremony be required as a condition of continuation to Church privileges', would recommend that it be expressed as the judgment of Presbytery that it is inexpedient to send down the proposed positive injunction to the Churches. We recommend, however, that Presbytery call the attention of the Elders of the various churches to the importance of the subject and urge them to instruct the people as to the necessity of having all marriages solemnized with the proper Christian ceremony."

In seeking to deal with the practical realities church members faced, the presbytery (dominated by the missionaries at this time) refused to take a hard stand. It refused to excommunicate those who failed to have a proper wedding ceremony. At the same time, in good American and Presbyterian fashion, it called for education of the members as the solution to the problem of wedding ceremonies.

HeRD #59 - Marriage Again

In HeRD #58 we discussed the problem of Christians who married without benefit of a Christian service. The North Laos Presbytery, we saw, in 1887 considered the possibility of disbaring from membership such individuals. In 1891 the presbytery returned to this problem and made the following decision: "Authority to solemnize marriages in remote congregations was given to Elders or those who are regarded as leaders where there are no Elders. Such leaders to be designated by the Stated Supply of the congregation and to report such marriages to him. Rev. W. C. Dodd was instructed to draw up a form of marriage to be used in such cases." This was a rather significant concession to the realities of church life in northern Thailand. The prerogatives of the clergy were sacrificed to the necessity of ministering to widely scattered, small Christian communities.

HeRD #60 - And Marriage One More Time

The issue of marriage kept reappearing in the discussions of the North Laos Presbytery. The minutes for 1908 contains the following: "Presbytery appoints the following committee to further consider the question of marriage and to confer with the civil authorities as to whether it may be practicable to obtain sanction to a special marriage law applying to Christians..." In 1910 the presbytery returned yet again to the issue and made the following decision: "A committee consisting of Kroo Punya and Elder See Mo was, on motion, appointed to prepare a letter of instruction and admonition for all Christians regarding marriage." These entries suggest that the northern Thai church had to wrestle with two issues. First, it attempted to establish the full legality of Christian marriage as distinct from Buddhist-based traditional and legal forms. Second, it sought to instruct northern Thai Christians in the "Christian" moral understanding of marriage. The mission, in sum, was trying to do nothing less than establish the legal, ritual, and moral "place" of Christian marriage in northern Thai society. We should note the strong emphasis on the **DISTINCTIVENESS** based on Christian exclusiveness in all of this. Where Christianity draws the boundaries between itself and the world has always been a central and frequently divisive issue for the faith.

