

Protestant Missionary Biography as Written Icon

By Gerald L. Sittser

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Ask people for examples of “hagiography,” if they know what the word means, and they will mention the stories of saints who lived during the Middle Ages. The Medieval period did in fact produce hundreds of hagiographies, so the inclination to ransack the Middle Ages for examples is understandable. But Protestants have their own version of the same genre—the modern missionary biography.

I will argue in this article that Protestant missionary biographies should be read in a way that is similar to how we view Eastern Orthodox icons, with one important exception. Icons serve as a medium that transports the onlooker to another world, a world where matter is transformed by spirit, where the human is infused with the divine. This is especially true of the icon of Christ, which depicts the Incarnation of the Son of God, the sublime and ultimate expression of the divine and human in one person.¹ This is also true of the icons of the saints, for they reflect some aspect of the person of Christ and thus draw attention to the perfection of the prototype. But whereas Orthodox icons portray the results of that transfiguration, missionary biographies reveal the process by which that transfiguration takes place in space and time, how sanctity is achieved, or better, infused by the work of the Holy Spirit in a life that is yielded to God. The intent is thus not to “tell the facts” of the saint’s life in a straightforward way but to trace the spiritual transformation of the saint over time. Icons fulfill their purpose if they draw onlookers into a world where transfiguration has achieved its intended result, engendering in onlookers a longing to enter into that transfigured state.² Missionary biographies fulfill their purpose if they enable readers to understand something of

Gerald L. Sittser argues that Protestant missionary biographies should be read as if they were written icons, with the one exception that, while icons show the results of the saints’ transformation, biographies tell the story of the process of transformation. The essay first explores iconography and then uses the stories of two Protestant pioneer missionaries, C. T. Studd and Mary Slessor, as case studies to demonstrate how these saints became living icons. The purpose of these biographies is not simply to “tell the facts,” however accurate they might be, but “to awaken, illumine, inspire, and challenge believers to follow God with the same passion, especially in obeying the Great Commission.” Mr. Sittser is Professor of Theology and Philosophy at Whitworth College.

the process of this transfiguration and are moved, as a result, to surrender their lives to God, to imitate Christ, and to fulfill the divine will, especially by obeying the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20). In the pens of their biographers, therefore, Protestant missionaries become written icons of faith. They point beyond themselves to the Incarnation and show readers what it means to reflect the divine glory and how one can actually progress toward the divine glory.³

Iconography

Icons have always been revered in Eastern Orthodoxy. They are as important to their worship and liturgy as the mass is in Roman Catholicism, preaching is in mainline Protestantism, and contemporary music is in popular evangelicalism.⁴ The central icon, of course, is Christ, whose depiction in the form of a painted image was made possible, permissible, even necessary in the Incarnation.⁵ As any

¹Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 239. "Because of the Incarnation Christianity posits an intimate relation between the material things and the living God." Later in the same chapter Wilken quotes John of Damascus (675-749): "Look how matter is honored" (245). Wilken says of John of Damascus' argument: "His point is that matter has within itself the capacity to become a resting place for God, to become something other while remaining what it is" (248).

²The definition of the Second Nicene Council reads: "For the more these are kept in view through their iconographic representation, the more those who look at them are lifted up to remember and have an earnest desire for the prototypes." See Daniel J. Saha, *Icon and Logos: Sources in Eighth-Century Iconoclasm* (Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1986), 179.

³John of Damascus, the great apologist for icons, makes a distinction between the results (iconic image) and the process (story behind the image). "I venerate the image of Christ, as God incarnate; of the mistress of all, the Mother of God, as the mother of the Son of God; of the saints, of the friends of God, who, struggling against sin to the point of blood, have both imitated Christ by shedding their blood for him, who shed his own blood for them, and lived a life following his footsteps. I set down in a record their brave feats and their sufferings, as ones who have been sanctified through them and as a stimulus to zealous imitation." See John of Damascus, *Three Treatises on the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003), 34-35.

⁴For short and useful introductions to icons as they developed in Eastern Orthodoxy, see Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine: The Spirit of Eastern Orthodoxy (600-1700)* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 91-133; and Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought*, 237-261. For sympathetic treatments of icons, see Egon Sendler, S. J., *The Icon: Image of the Invisible: Elements of Theology, Aesthetic and Technique* (Los Angeles, CA: Oakwood Publications, 1988); Henry Maguire, *The Icons of Their Bodies: Saints and Their Images in Byzantium* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996); John Baggeley, *Doors of Perception—icons and their spiritual significance* (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988); Michel Quenot, *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom* (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002); Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons* (Crestwood, NJ: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1982).

⁵*Ibid.*, 257. Wilken quotes Theodore the Studite (759-826), an iconodule who lived a century after John of Damascus. "There would not be a prototype [that is, no Christ] if there were no image. . . . If Christ cannot exist unless his image exists in potentiality, and if the image subsists in the prototype before it is produced artistically, then anyone who does not acknowledge that His image is also venerated in Him destroys the veneration of Christ."

iconographer will say, all icons of Christ depict a person, Jesus of Nazareth, who has two distinct but related natures, one divine and the other human. Icons of Christ are paintings that become something other than what they are; they become images of Jesus, the perfect God-man. They show that Jesus was not simply a god, not a mere abstraction, nor a phantom, but a real person. The homage is paid to that person, not to the image. The image is meaningful because the person is real.

The image points beyond itself to the reality of the person, the Incarnate Son of God, who transformed matter into something other than what it naturally is. Icons depict the results of this transformation of matter. John of Damascus states:

Of old, God the incorporeal and formless was never depicted, but now that God has been seen in the flesh and has associated with human kind, I depict what I have seen of God. I do not venerate matter, I venerate the fashioner of matter, who became matter for my sake and accepted to dwell in matter and through matter worked my salvation, and I will not cease from reverencing matter, through which my salvation was worked.⁶

We see the maker through the matter, the creator through the creation. Ultimately, we see God's very nature through a human being, Jesus Christ. The Incarnation fuses these two worlds together in one person.

The icons of the saints serve a slightly different purpose. They demonstrate that, as God became truly human for the sake of humanity's salvation, human beings can likewise share in the divine nature and reflect the divine glory. Leonid Ouspensky and Vladimir Lossky, two contemporary interpreters of icons, write, "If the Divine Hypostasis of the Son of God became man, our case is the reverse: man can become god, not by nature, but by grace."⁷ The icon of Christ depicts the divine descent, God becoming human; icons of saints depict the human ascent, humans reflecting the very nature of God, which is made possible through the Incarnation. But human nature is not lost in the process of deification any more than the divine nature is lost in the Incarnation. The saints have glorified bodies, infused with light, a revelation of things hidden. They show what the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ was intended to accomplish through the work of the Holy Spirit in fallen humanity.

The process of sanctification begins in the saint's earthly life. The Holy Spirit fills and illumines and transforms a person, conforming him or her to the image of Christ.

The grace of the Holy Spirit penetrates into his nature, combines with it, and fills and transfigures it. Man grows, as it were, into the eternal life, already here on earth acquiring the beginning of this life, the beginning of deification, which will be made fully manifest in the life to come.⁸

The saints are not suddenly changed, as if by magic. They grow into sainthood. It

⁶Damascus, *Three Treatises*, 29.

⁷Ouspensky and Lossky, *The Meaning of Icons*, 34.

⁸*Ibid.*, 35.

is through the events of ordinary life and through their obedience to God in this world that the saints are gradually transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit into something other than what they normally are or could be.

But the depiction of the spiritual nature of the saints cannot be done directly, for how can one communicate the spiritual nature of a person in a painting? It is for this reason that icons should not be viewed in the same way one would view, say, a renaissance painting, for icons do not portray people as we normally see them from an earthly point of view. They are not so much works of art as works of devotion. They do not portray their subjects in a representative manner, as mere material creatures. Icons strive to communicate more; they function as a window that allows onlookers to see spiritual qualities rather than mere earthly beings. "The second reality, the presence of the all-sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit, holiness, cannot be depicted by any human means, since it is invisible to external physical sight."⁹ Icons must therefore use symbols to communicate the sanctity, luminosity, and inner beauty of a saint, one whose human nature has not been diminished but transfigured by the work of the Holy Spirit.

Icons are therefore not supposed to look "real" in an earthly sense because they do not intend to depict earthly realities alone. Their purpose is to depict spiritual realities. The distortions are not meant to deceive but to enlarge the onlookers' perspective, to expose them to these spiritual realities, and to illumine onlookers so that they see the reality of God's existence in and through the icon. "Both in icons and in the lives of saints, the first thing that emerges is not the individuality but its subordination to that of which it is the bearer."¹⁰ Icons must therefore depict more about the person than what the eye can naturally see. The earthly person is still there: the saint has a name, an identity, a story, a role in the history of the church.¹¹ Yet these individual traits are subordinate to the divine source of sanctity.

The spiritual nature of the person is primary, and thus receives special artistic attention, which makes the image appear odd, strange, even bizarre. Certain physical features of the person—for example, a high forehead (symbolizing wisdom), large eyes (luminosity), gaunt face (ascetic discipline), an intense stillness (perfect equilibrium)—are obviously exaggerated or distorted to demonstrate the results of sanctity. Certain artistic elements—halo (sanctity), gold background (timelessness), inner light (the divine radiance)—are added to communicate the source of sanctity, thus creating an overall quality that seems haunting and other-worldly. Further, the point of convergence lies in front of the saint, not behind the saint, as if the saint was looking into the world of onlookers, beckoning them to enter into a greater reality than the one in which they live so comfortably. The strange, luminous quality emphasizes the "spiritualizing of tangible reality." Thus: "A man

⁹Ibid., 38.

¹⁰Ibid., 37.

¹¹Ibid., 37. "Therefore, the icon perforce shows the nature of the service of a saint, whether he be an Apostle, a bishop, a martyr . . . and reproduces with particular care his characteristic, distinctive traits."

stands, as it were, at the start of a pathway which is not concentrated on some point in depth, but which unfolds itself before him in all its immensity."¹² The icon symbolizes the reality of the kingdom of God which reaches out to onlookers, inviting them to enter it.

How icons should be viewed provides a hermeneutical framework for the way missionary biographies should be read, though with one notable qualification. While icons manifest the *results* of sanctity, depicting the saint as already having been transformed by the spirit of God, missionary biographies show the *process*. In either case, it is impossible to understand them unless onlookers or readers keep in mind that something other than the saints' earthly life is being depicted.

Medieval Hagiography

The study of spiritual biographies written in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages has enjoyed something of a renaissance in the past forty years.¹³ These "Lives" were recorded to inspire the faithful to pursue a life of holiness and virtue, to renounce the world, the flesh, and the devil, and to follow Christ. The stories of martyrs like Perpetua and Polycarp contributed to this purpose, as did the stories

¹²*Ibid.*, 41.

¹³The scholarly literature on hagiography is massive, and growing. The general tendency of these scholarly works is to argue that hagiographies tell us more about the authors (or compilers) and the community to which they were writing than about the saints themselves. For example, Thomas Head writes: "Works of hagiography can thus tell us at least as much about the authors and about those who used the text—their ideals and practices, their concerns and aspirations—as it does about the saints who are their subjects." See Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2001), xiii. For examples of recent books on hagiography, see Thomas Head, *Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints: The Diocese of Orleans, 800-1200* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Patricia Cox, *Biography in Late Antiquity: A Quest for the Holy Man* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1983); Cynthia Hahn, *Portrayed on the Heart: Narrative Effect in Pictorial Lives of Saints from the Tenth through the Thirteenth Century* (Berkeley: The University of California Press, 2001); *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe*, eds. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Lynda L. Coon, *Sacred Fictions: Holy Women and Hagiography in Late Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997); Sandro Sticco, ed., *Saints: Studies in Hagiography* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval & Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1996); Gail Ashton, *The Generation of Identity in Late Medieval Hagiography: Speaking the Saint* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Stephen Wilson, ed., *Saints and Their Cults: Studies in Religious Sociology, Folklore, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Catherine M. Mooney, ed., *Gendered Voices: Medieval Saints and Their Interpreters* (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999); Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and Their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988). For collections of "Lives of the Saints," with excellent introductions, see Thomas Head, ed., *Medieval Hagiography: An Anthology* (New York: Routledge, 2001), and *Soldiers of Christ: Saints and Saints' Lives from Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, eds. Thomas F. X. Noble and Thomas Head (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

of the desert saints.¹⁴ The noble accomplishments of great bishops, like Cyprian, Ambrose, John Chrysostom, and Augustine, served similar purposes.¹⁵ The saints were lifted up as examples to follow. Their courage in the face of martyrdom, ascetic exploits, ecclesiastical accomplishments, and monastic practices spelled out the requirements of genuine discipleship. These early hagiographies set a standard for the flood of hagiographies that followed.

Perhaps they set a standard that was too high, discouraging the faithful from trying to imitate their lofty example, for later hagiographies added another purpose to the genre. The saints became more than examples to follow; they functioned as mediators of grace. If anything, this intercessory power almost eclipsed their exemplary role. Sulpicius Severus's *Life of Martin of Tours* symbolizes this shift, as do the hagiographical works of Gregory of Tours. The miracles of St. Martin, performed not only before but especially *after* his death, underscored the power and authority that Martin's sanctity had achieved.¹⁶ Lawrence Cunningham examines this shift of emphasis. He notes that early on spiritual biographies highlighted the way saints imitated Christ, especially his death, which was held up as the pinnacle of sacrificial obedience. "Christianity had a powerful model for voluntary death in the person of its founder; every subsequent act of martyrdom was seen as an act in imitation of the death of Christ."¹⁷ But later on hagiographical texts emphasized the intercessory power of the saints after they had died. "The intercession of the martyrs or the application of the martyr's relics could cure illness, forestall disaster, shield from antipathetic forces, cause conversion, forgive sins, or avert calamity."¹⁸ Renate Blemenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell argue similarly.

Yet since ordinary Christians turn to saints precisely because of an acknowledged lack of mental and religious competence, commemorating these holy heroes entails above all invoking their names in time of distress, rather than imitating, or meditating on, their virtues.¹⁹

¹⁴For an excellent source for stories of early martyrdoms, see Herbert Musurillo, editor and translator, *The Acts of the Christian Martyrs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972). For the stories of the early desert saints, see Robert T. Meyer, editor and translator, *Palladius: The Lausiac History* (Westminster, Maryland: The Newman Press, 1965). See also Norman Russell, editor and translator, *The Lives of the Desert Fathers* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980).

¹⁵Robert T. Meyers, editor and translator, *Palladius: Dialogue on the Life of St. John Chrysostom* (New York: Newman Press, 1985). See also Roy J. Deferrari, ed., *Early Christian Biographies in the Fathers of the Church* (New York: Fathers of the Church, Inc., 1952) and Carolinne White, editor and translator, *Early Christian Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1998).

¹⁶Carolinne White, translator and editor, *Early Christian Lives* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 129-160.

¹⁷Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 9.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁹Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski and Timea Szell, *Images of Sainthood in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 16. Not that all later hagiographies take on this character. The early biographies of St. Francis, for example, present him as a model for imitation; later biographies emphasize his miraculous powers, though they do not neglect his exem-

That the genre expanded to include other kinds of hagiographical literature supports the point. The stories of translations of saints' bodies to shrines, accounts of miracles associated with relics and elevations, and canonization documents used to prove a saint's holiness put even greater emphasis on the intercessory power of the saints after their death. The saints became patrons for the faithful, representing their interests before God, notes Peter Brown.²⁰

The two functions, however, are not mutually exclusive. The exemplary stories of the saints helped to establish them as powerful intercessors who could assist the faithful in their need. Inspiration and intercession were two parts of a larger whole. The former required examples that would challenge the believing community to imitate the lives of the saints; the latter called for manifestations of miraculous power that would prove the saints had the authority to intercede for the believing community before the throne of heaven. In either case, hagiographical texts functioned as icons, either showing the process by which saints achieved their sanctity or demonstrating the results of that sanctity, as manifested through their role as intercessors.

Protestant missionary biographies emphasize the former purpose. They narrate the life story of these modern-day saints—their background, their difficult decisions, their courageous sacrifices, their influence on the larger church, and the legacy they left after their death. They provide evidence for why pioneer missionaries should be regarded as examples worthy of imitation. These biographies are admittedly romanticized. Even obvious faults and failures—neglect of family, mistreatment of colleagues, addiction to medication, serious pathologies, monumental mistakes—are used to illustrate the sacrifice, courage, and tenacity of the missionaries. The accounts do not lie, but neither do they tell the unvarnished truth as we would expect of modern critical biographies. They function rhetorically to convict, inspire, and recruit readers to a life of discipleship and obedience to the Great Commission. They fulfill an obviously rhetorical and, as the authors themselves would argue, biblical purpose.²¹

I shall use two stories as case studies. These stories are typical Protestant missionary biographies, and they function much like their medieval hagiographical counterparts. The first is the biography of C. T. Studd, a pioneer missionary who, after laboring in China and India, traveled into the interior of Africa and started

plary life.

²⁰Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

²¹See Jonathan Bonk, "Biographies of Missionaries," *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 133. Bonk argues that the genre of missionary biographies is a largely neglected scholarly subject, unlike medieval hagiography, which is a virtual scholarly industry. Some modern scholars of missions, such as Andrew Walls and Lamin Sanneh, mention missionary biographies, but almost in passing. Ruth Tucker has contributed to the field by providing more realistic accounts of missionaries, often exploring the impact of their missionary callings on their families.

the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade. The second is the biography of Mary Slessor, who spent her career in the Calabar region of Africa where she started mission stations, intervened in tribal disputes, and planted churches. Both biographies highlight how these ambitious, unusual, and flawed people became living examples of faith.²² They describe what the Protestant version of sanctity is and how sanctity develops over time.

The Stories of C. T. Studd and Mary Slessor

Charles Thomas Studd (1862-1931)—always known as C. T. Studd—grew up with two older brothers in English privilege.²³ His father, Edward Studd, had made a fortune as a planter in India before moving back to England. Converted under the ministry of Dwight L. Moody, he soon evangelized his three sons, too, all on the same day. But C. T. had other interests, and these dominated his life at Cambridge. He was considered the best English athlete of his day, and he traveled throughout the British Empire to play cricket. In 1882 he reached the pinnacle of his success, rising to “the very top of the cricket world, amateur and professional alike. It is doubtful whether any other undergraduate in the history of cricket has done such a thing.”²⁴ Cricket was his life. It also became his idol, undermining his spiritual commitment. “Instead of telling others about the love of Christ,” Studd wrote, “I was selfish and kept the knowledge to myself. The result was that gradually my love began to grow cold, and the love of the world began to come in. I spent six years in that unhappy backslidden state.”²⁵

Studd was jarred out of his complacency by the spiritual zeal of his two brothers, one of whom became deathly ill, though later recovering. Soon after he attended a Moody crusade and experienced a renewal of faith. “There the Lord met

²²There is much that could be said about Studd and Slessor that will be overlooked in this article. They are complex figures whose lives could be interpreted from a variety of perspectives—feminist, Marxist, and the like. Studd and Slessor traveled to Africa in the wake of a huge missionary thrust that occurred in the middle of the 19th century, inspired by the likes of Dwight L. Moody and John R. Mott. It is clear that their attitudes reflected, at least to some degree, the colonial ambitions of Europe. We can see evidence of this attitude in Studd’s irritation over the natives’ “laziness” and in Slessor’s work as a judge for the British and her efforts to introduce trades that would allow tribes to benefit from and contribute to England’s economic interests in Africa. The reality of the “white man’s burden” is easy to identify in these accounts, too. Further, it is clear that Studd was both product and perpetrator of the “muscular Christianity” then popular in England and America. His “manly” Christianity may have made him successful as a missionary, and it surely made him tenacious. But it also made him brash and egotistical, to say nothing about his performance as a father and husband. In short, these stories are highly complex and could be read from a variety of perspectives. My argument is that one way to read them is through the interpretive framework of icons. The authors themselves intended to portray Studd and Slessor in just that way.

²³Norman P. Grubb, *C. T. Studd: Athlete and Pioneer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1933).

²⁴*Ibid.*, 21-22.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 29-30.

me again and restored to me the joy of His salvation."²⁶ He returned for another season of cricket, but he discovered that his priorities had changed. Once having almost inextinguishable love for the sport, he found something far better. "My heart was no longer in the game; I wanted to win souls for the Lord. I knew that cricket would not last, and honour would not last, and nothing in this world would last, but it was worthwhile living for the world to come."²⁷

Studd soon sensed he was called to serve as a missionary to China. His family opposed him, an experience that he likened to Moses' exile in the wilderness. But Studd forged ahead, committing himself, with six other high-profile students, to become "Chinamen" for Christ. Known as "the Cambridge Seven," they became examples to thousands of students of choosing purpose over privilege. Studd journeyed into the interior of China, where he was forced into "walking with God alone" and using "native things only."²⁸ While in China he also inherited a small fortune, which his father's will had bequeathed to him when he reached the age of 25. Following the example of his hero, Hudson Taylor, he gave away every shilling to various mission and relief organizations (such as the Salvation Army), so that he would be forced to trust in God alone for the money he would need as a missionary. While serving in China Studd also met his future wife, Priscilla Livingston Stewart, who was as devoted to missions as he was. They were married a short time later. They eventually had five daughters, one of whom died in infancy.

In 1900 the family moved to India, where C. T. served as pastor of the Union Church of Ootacamund. They returned to England in 1908. Over the next year Studd became interested in what he called "the heart of Africa." Awakened by a clever and provocative advertisement in a newspaper—"Cannibals Want Missionaries!"—he sensed that God was summoning him to be a missionary there. He had no organization, no money, and no support, not even from his wife. Yet he sailed for Africa alone in 1910, leaving his wife and daughters behind. He began a new work and launched his organization, Heart of Africa (later renamed Worldwide Evangelization Crusade), in southern Sudan. It was grueling work, but it seemed to suit Studd perfectly. He ventured ever deeper into the interior of Africa, eventually eyeing the Belgian Congo as territory for his pioneering work. As if hearing God speak, Studd asked himself, "Dare you go back to spend the remainder of your days in England, knowing of these masses who have never heard of Jesus Christ? If you do, how will you meet Me henceforth before My Throne?" A trip back to England only filled him with greater resolve, even though his wife was bedridden with a serious heart ailment. "That settled the matter . . . it was impossible to have the pluck to stay in England."²⁹

Studd seemed well suited for the work. He mastered languages, translated the Bible, planted a series of mission stations, and adjusted quite easily to the harsh

²⁶Ibid., 30.

²⁷Ibid., 30-31.

²⁸Ibid., 49.

²⁹Ibid., 123.

conditions of the jungle. He trekked thousands of miles, carried on a voluminous correspondence, and preached several times a week, some sermons going two hours. He lived as much like the native population as he could. Toward the end of his life he hardly slept. It was not unusual for him to work 18 hour days, yet he refused to slow down.

But troubles followed him, all the same. Laziness, conflict, and worldliness among the natives vexed him, as did their lack of love and holiness. His own co-workers opposed him, too, largely because he demanded such huge sacrifices. His relationships with the home office fared little better. The morale of the mission reached its nadir when Studd dismissed his own daughter and son-in-law, Edith and Alfred Buxton, from the mission because they did not appear to be committed. Studd himself referred to those years as his Gethsemane. His cross became "heavy beyond endurance. He was "fainting under it." "My heart seems worn out and bruised beyond repair, and in my deep loneliness I often wish to be gone."³⁰ But Studd would not yield or quit.

His persistence eventually paid off. In 1925 the original vision was "reborn" at a prayer meeting. Studd recognized the need for an "explosion of spiritual dynamite, which would clean out the hindrances and leave room for the Spirit to work again."³¹ That prayer meeting became an important milestone in the history of the mission. "From that time to this there has been no check on the field to the unity, love, joy in sacrifice, zeal for the souls of the people, which has laid hold of the Crusades in the Heart of Africa."³² The change was noticeable. The missionaries who still remained in the organization became as unflagging as Studd himself. "Not a murmur is heard," he reported, "however short the funds may be, but only expressions of praise and trust in God. It is hard to get anyone to go on furlough unless health really demands it."³³ The blessing appeared to spread to the native church, too. There was an "obvious awakening to the cost of following Christ," Studd observed. The church grew, in both numbers and depth of faith—" . . . a brightness in their faces, new life in the praying, a hatred of sin." "The work is reaching a sure foundation at last, and now we will go bounding forward. Oh, it is good to be in a stiff fight for Jesus."³⁴

His success seems unfathomable. He and his co-workers built churches that seated up to 1000, and saw them filled. Upwards of 2000 people would gather to hear "Bwana" preach when he was visiting a village. The organization expanded its operation into other countries, yet it never paid anyone a salary, which could only be received by faith. Some forty missionaries joined the Crusade, including native missionaries. Meanwhile, Studd became increasingly radical, even fanatical. His unrelenting pace, addiction to morphine, and intolerance alienated him

³⁰Ibid., 196.

³¹Ibid., 197.

³²Ibid., 199.

³³Ibid., 199.

³⁴Ibid., 200-201.

from supporters in England. After Priscilla's death in 1929 the home mission committee took control of the organization, removed Studd from leadership, with two of his sons-in-law, David Munro and Grubb, and prepared to launch a new organization. Desperate, Studd broke into the mission headquarters, taking records to keep them in his possession.³⁵

The strain was too much for Studd. His health continued to decline, though he worked to the very end. He died in 1931. His last word was "Hallelujah!" Some 2000 natives attended his funeral. Many of his admirers and supporters paid him tribute. They also pledged that they would not slacken the pace or compromise the vision. The mission was not Studd's but God's. One staff member announced at the funeral, "Never would we lower the standard shown in the Word! Never would we break the fellowship in the Gospel! Never would we cease our labours for the furtherance of the Gospel!"³⁶

Mary Slessor's story reads much like Studd's, though she came from a very different background. Slessor (1848-1915) grew up in a working class home in Dundee, Scotland. Her father, an alcoholic, died when she was young. She was forced to quit school and to work in a textile factory. Though a "wild lassie" during her childhood, as she described herself, she came to faith through the witness of a family friend who warned her of eternal judgment. The misery of her childhood, however, appeared to have had a felicitous affect on her.

Slessor volunteered in a street ministry during her teen years. When "roughs" challenged her, she did not flinch or cower or quit. Some of them were eventually converted. She visited homes, roused children to attend Sunday services, and witnessed in the factory where she worked. People warmed to her almost immediately and came under the spell of her quiet charisma, though she was "only a working-girl, plain in appearance and in dress, diffident and self-effacing."³⁷

During the fourteen years she worked in the factory, she became increasingly fascinated by a region in Africa known as Calabar, her eyes "fixed on the great struggle going on between the forces of light and darkness in the sphere of hea-

³⁵After Studd's death, Norman Grubb was later reinstated and helped the mission return to its original glory. He took over leadership of an organization that was in shambles, placed it on firmer ground, and helped to expand its operation to reach around the world. By 1970 it supported over 500 missionaries. It is amazing, considering how virtually abusive Studd was to his own family members, that his daughters and sons-in-law remained so loyal to him and carried on the work after he died. See Ruth A. Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 266-267. Tucker provides many colorful sketches of pioneer missionaries, and she offers a perspective often ignored or dismissed by biographies. She suggests that what led to Studd's "downfall," if it is even appropriate to speak of it in those terms, was his extremism and fanaticism, which resulted from his single-minded devotion to the mission. Norman Grubb's biography does not ignore this darker side to Studd, but it does tend to mitigate the severity of it, or to use it to demonstrate the depth of Studd's commitment to the work.

³⁶Op. Cite., 238.

³⁷W. P. Livingston, *Mary Slessor of Calabar: Pioneer Missionary* (New York: George H. Doran Company, n.d.), 10. There are several other accounts of her life, all along the same lines.

thenism."³⁸ She attended church meetings whenever missionaries working in the Calabar region visited her church, and she read as much as she could about it. The original mission was planted there in 1846. Missionaries described the natives as bloody, savage, cruel, sensuous, devilish, and cannibalistic. The need and danger awakened in Slessor a deep desire to serve in that region as a pioneer missionary. When her brother John, who was planning to serve there himself, backed out due to fragile health (he died a few months later), Slessor volunteered and received approval from the mission board. She sailed in 1876.

She spent her first tenure of service on the coast, teaching in a school and traveling to villages, where she taught Bible classes and provided some medical care. She was horrified by the brutality of their social customs—the virtual enslavement of women, twin murder, polygamy, justice by ordeal. Early on Slessor came to see that “it was the duty of the missionary to bring about a new set of conditions in which it would be possible for the converts to live, and the thought influenced her whole after-career.”³⁹ She was equally concerned about, if not bitter toward, “the civilized countries that seek profit from the moral devastation of humanity.”⁴⁰ Eventually she moved into the interior and lived among the natives as the only white person. She ate the local food, slept in huts, and practiced many of their customs. She became increasingly involved in combating what she considered outrageous social injustices, and she rescued dozens of abandoned, orphaned, or endangered children, some of whom she adopted as her own.

Still, she would not be satisfied until she could reach the people of the Okoyong, a people from whom other missionaries had recoiled. “There was not a phase of African devilry in which they did not indulge.”⁴¹ Not surprisingly, Slessor set her sights on those people. She spent a year surveying the Okoyong region, and then moved there herself, accompanied by her five adopted children. Thus began the most important phase of her missionary work. For all practical purposes she became a virtual ruler among the various tribes of the Okoyong. She intervened on behalf of people falsely accused, cared for wives who were abused or neglected in the harem, exposed superstition and sorcery, opposed the use of alcohol, and combated tribal warfare. She also built a mission house, a school, and a church.

Meanwhile, her work continued to expand. So adept was she at intervening in tribal affairs that the British government actually appointed her to supervise the tribal court. Her unconventional methods, which departed so sharply from British protocol, made her trustworthy and effective among the tribes. She introduced certain trades among the Okoyong, too, which helped them establish a more economically lucrative relationship with the British. Still, Slessor’s primary interest was to evangelize the Okoyong people. The results at first seemed meager. She labored for nearly a decade before the first native, Akom, became a Christian, and

³⁸Ibid., 13.

³⁹Ibid., 27.

⁴⁰Ibid., 31.

⁴¹Ibid., 58.

fifteen years before the first communion service was held; only seven natives were received into the membership of the church. Over time, however, her school began to produce young Christian leaders for the various tribes, who eventually fanned out and taught in other mission schools. She attracted new missionaries, predominantly women, who assumed leadership in mission stations that Slessor had started before moving deeper into the interior. If Slessor faced a frustration, it was not native resistance but the indifference of people back home. She wondered about the lack of interest, especially among clergy, whom she found unwilling even to consider the mission field. She was vexed by Britain's complacency. "Oh Britain, surfeited with privilege! Tired of Sabbath and Church, would that you could send over to us what you are throwing away!"⁴²

In the last decade of her life she continued on the same course. But her health began to deteriorate, from both exhaustion and disease. She died on the mission field at the age of 66, surrounded by her "bairns," the African children she had adopted. She left behind a church of 10,000 souls, with a communion roll of 3,400, to say nothing of a more prosperous economy, significant advances in the judicial system, peace among many of the tribes, and new social customs that protected the lives of the innocent, such as twins and slaves.

Written Icons of Faith

These missionary biographies do not follow the canons of critical scholarship any more than icons resemble renaissance paintings. They sketch spiritual portraits of two people who sacrificed everything to follow Christ and to do his will. Therefore we should read these accounts in a way that is similar to how we view icons. The purpose is not merely to tell the facts and thus preserve the memory of these missionaries but to awaken, illumine, inspire, and challenge readers to perceive and embrace the same spiritual vision and calling.

How then should we read these accounts, considering their similarity to icons? First, we should recognize the evangelical purpose of the authors, which they share in common with iconographers. The goals of both writers and painters are entirely spiritual in nature. They are no more interested in communicating mere historical information about their subjects than the gospel writers were about the life of Jesus. Iconographers actually view their art as a spiritual discipline. They subordinate themselves to the God they know through Christ. They participate in the sacramental life of the church and meditate on the spiritual nature of the subject before they paint. Thus, according to Ouspensky and Lossky,

Only those who know from personal experience the state it [the icon] portrays can create images corresponding to it which are truly "a revelation and evidence of things hidden," in other words, evidence of a man's participation in the life of the transfigured world he contemplates...⁴³

⁴²Ibid., 216.

⁴³Ouspensky and Lossky, *Meaning*, 42.

It is this participation in the life of the church, belief in the Incarnation, and "subjugation" of the artist's will to the divine will that "frees" the artist to paint a true spiritual portrait of a saint.

Grubb and Livingston had an evangelical purpose in mind when they wrote their biographies. Grubb stated at the very beginning of his biography that he intended to achieve a spiritual goal, for "the convictions which dominated C. T.'s life are also my convictions" and thus "this book has been written with my heart as well as with my head." Studd "lived to glorify his Saviour. The object of this book is likewise to glorify Him as He is seen at work in and through this utterly surrendered life."⁴⁴ Throughout the biography he consistently portrayed Studd as "reckless" in his faith, which was, in Grubb's mind, a positive attribution.⁴⁵ Just before leaving for Africa, Studd coined the phrase that would become the mission statement of his organization. "If Jesus Christ be God and died for me, then no sacrifice can be too great for me to make for Him."

Livingston, too, cited Slessor's commitment to Christ as the primary reason why she sacrificed and accomplished so much. It is what engendered love for people and passion for missions.

But it was His love, so strong, so tender, so pitiful, that won her heart and devotion and filled her with a happiness and peace that suffused her inner life like sunshine. . . . In return she loved Him with a love so intense that it was a pain. She felt that she could not do enough for one who had done so much for her.⁴⁶

It is also what moved Livingston himself to exhort his readers to take up the same cause. What is needed, he concluded, was "a renewal of love for Christ in the hearts of the people," for it was "love for Christ that made her a missionary."⁴⁷ Like their iconographic counterparts, Grubb and Livingston believed that Christ was God incarnate, the savior of all who believe. They believed that Studd and Slessor had become saints, made perfect through Christ. They wanted to announce this good news to the world. Grubb and Livingston were as zealous for faith as their saintly subjects. They wrote as evangelists, using the biographies as a means to an end.

Second, we should understand that, as icons show the *results* of spiritual transformation, these biographies describe the *process* of such transformation. According to Grubb and Livingston, this process was the natural consequence of Studd's and Slessor's devotion to Christ and Christ's devotion to them. They took seriously Jesus' stern warnings and lavish promises, and they surrendered themselves to a life of service. They gave up comfort and security to follow Christ, believing that they would receive hundred-fold in return, if not in this life then certainly in the next.

⁴⁴Grubb, *C. T. Studd*, 7.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, 149.

⁴⁶Livingston, *Slessor*, 8.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 352-353.

Grubb traced Studd's life as one long process of commitment and sacrifice, all for Christ. The story is not for the faint of heart. As Studd once asked a group of students just before he left for China, had the world ever seen such men

standing side by side renouncing the careers in which they had already gained no small distinction, putting aside the splendid prizes of earthly ambition, taking leave of the social circles in which they shone with no mean brilliance, and plunging into that warfare whose splendours are seen only by faith, and whose rewards seem so shadowy to the unopened vision of ordinary men?⁴⁸

In Studd's mind, the Cambridge Seven were exemplars of a "manly" kind of Christianity which was worthy of the best and the brightest. "It was a sight to stir the blood and a striking testimony to the power of the uplifted Christ to draw to Himself not the weak, the emotional, and the illiterate only, but all that is noblest in strength and finest in culture."⁴⁹

Studd subordinated everything to his missionary calling, even his own marriage. Though admitting that they were passionately in love, C. T. and Priscilla put their marriage second because "there is no abiding city." They described the ceremony as "a pilgrim's wedding," and the marriage itself took on a similar character.⁵⁰ Priscilla refused to use a physician during the births of her daughters because she did not want to interrupt the mission work. When one daughter died, she would not let the loss undermine the mission, however "broken-hearted" she was.

I made a covenant with my God that I was not going to let sorrow of any kind come into my life and ruin my life as a missionary. I was not going to let my husband see sorrow that would unhinge him. He never saw a tear when he came back.⁵¹

No sacrifice, it seemed, was too great, for either of them. Over the last thirteen years of his life, Studd saw his wife for only two weeks (three of his daughters joined him in Africa after they were married). Priscilla battled serious health problems for years, and she was confined to bed rest for months at a time. But her husband showed little sympathy. After visiting England for a few months on furlough, he returned to Africa alone, leaving Priscilla at home, still bedridden. She experienced a deep renewal of faith the very next day, climbed out of bed, and resolved to carry on the work of the mission at home.⁵² She chose to sacrifice her life rather than claim the right to a normal marriage. Such courage and conviction contributed to the prosperity of the mission.⁵³

⁴⁸Grubb, *C. T. Studd*, 46.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 79, 81.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 88.

⁵²*Ibid.*, 179.

⁵³I have read several unpublished autobiographical accounts of mission work, too, written by missionaries upon their retirement. These accounts are often harrowing. In one case, the family lost two children, moved multiple times, saved no money for retirement, and suffered severe health problems. Yet they wrote of these sacrifices as if it was the least they could do.

Slessor's story follows the same pattern. Livingston shows how Slessor progressed toward sanctity and missionary success. She followed a pathway that set her apart, even when she was still living in Scotland. "Even then," her biographer notes, "she was unconventional in her methods and was criticized for it."⁵⁴ She began to care for the people who were hardest to reach and most easily overlooked. What was her secret? It was the vitality of her Christian faith that made her different. "It was the glow of the spirit of Christ which lit up her inner life and shone in her face, and which, unknown even to herself, was then and afterwards the source of her distinction and power."⁵⁵

Her Christian commitment also drove her to Africa to reach people who had never heard about Christianity. As Livingston noted, these people were crude and dangerous and virtually unreachable. It was the perfect place for the fiery Slessor. "Not an attractive people to work amongst," comments Livingston. But then he adds, "Neither must the dwellers of earth have appeared to Christ who He looked down from heaven ere He took his place in their midst. And Mary Slessor shrank from nothing which she thought her Master would have done . . ." She knew that her family and church needed her in Scotland, but she realized that "down in the slums of Africa there were millions who knew no more of the redemptive power of Christ than did the beasts of the field."⁵⁶ Her friends warned her that it was "the white man's grave," which was all the more reason, in Slessor's mind, for investing her life there. "Her reply to questioners was that Calabar was the post of danger, and was therefore the post of honour. Few would volunteer for service there, hence she wished to go, for it was there the Master needed her."⁵⁷ That same passion to reach the lost pushed her ever deeper into the interior. She was absolutely determined to penetrate a world that no one else bothered to or dared to enter. "She was essentially a pioneer. Her thoughts were for ever going forward, looking past the limitations and the hopes of others, into the fields beyond teeming with populations as yet unreached."⁵⁸

Like Grubb and Priscilla, Slessor was even willing to surrender her very human—and natural—desires to God, including her longing for marriage. It was very clear that she did have such desires. She actually became engaged to a fellow missionary, Charles W. Morrison, a teacher on the mission staff who lived nearer to the coast and who was fifteen years her junior. But the mission refused to transfer him, and she refused to be transferred because she considered her work more important than marriage. So she broke off the engagement. As she wrote to a friend, she realized that a successful missionary required a willingness to sacrifice everything for the work, even her own personal happiness.

The biographers used the stories to illustrate how spiritual transformation

⁵⁴Livingston, *Slessor*, 10.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 11.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 16.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 56.

occurs. It is a gradual process, requiring a willingness to sacrifice, surrender, and suffer, all for the sake of Christ. Though opposed by his family, Studd abandoned British privilege, athletic fame and fortune, and his inheritance to serve Christ in foreign lands. Slessor left her homeland and remained single her whole life for the sake of her work. She spent nearly her entire adult life living in a culture very different from the one in which she grew up. Still, it is clear, at least from the perspective of the biographers, that what mattered to these missionaries was not the cost of their sacrifices but the one who was worthy of the sacrifices, not the greatness of their deeds but the one who commanded them to follow him. In the end, the biographies shed light on what it means to know and follow Christ. They are variations on the same theme. As written icons of faith, they point to *the* icon.

Third, we should recognize—it is hard not to—that C. T. Studd and Mary Slessor were not typical believers. They were different, unusual, even odd, just as the saints portrayed in icons appear peculiar and odd. Studd was given to exaggeration. He often described his circumstances as dire, his sacrifices heroic, his commitment extraordinary. “Oh, the agony of it!” Studd wrote to his wife.

The asthma, what has not that meant, a daily and nightly dying? The bodily weakness? The being looked down upon by the world folk! The poverty! And have I not been tempted? Tempted to stop working for Christ! Doctors! Relatives! Family! Christians!⁵⁹

Studd was an extremist who often offended his closest supporters. He wrote a booklet on missions, “D.C.D.,” which read in part, “I want to be one of those who *doesn’t care a damn* except to give my life for Jesus and souls.” One phrase, “Doesn’t Care a Damn,” stirred quite a controversy at home, as did rumors of his addiction to morphine, his wild appearance, and his intolerance and criticism of other missionaries.⁶⁰ In the end, Grubb’s portrait of his father-in-law appears almost as a caricature.

Likewise, Slessor became so peculiar that she found it almost impossible to live among Europeans. She preferred to follow the customs of the Okoyong people. She rarely wore hat and shoes, and she never boiled the water or used mosquito netting. She adjusted to the constant infestation of rats and ants, the presence of throngs of people, including her adopted children, and the threat of deadly disease. “These habits,” explained Livingston,

so seemingly eccentric to people lapped in the civilized order of things, had grown naturally out of the circumstances into which she had been forced in pursuit of the task she had set herself. She had deliberately given up everything for her Master, and she accepted all the consequences that the renunciation involved. . . . The one thing essential to her was her work, and anything that hampered her freedom of action was dropped.⁶¹

Slessor did not realize how far and fast she had advanced, forcing the church back

⁵⁹Grubb, *C. T. Studd*, 119.

⁶⁰Tucker, *From Jerusalem*, 266-67.

⁶¹Livingston, *Slessor*, 134.

home to catch up. "It is a striking picture this, of the restless little woman ever forging her way into the wilderness and dragging a great Church behind her."⁶² She had become a model of a new kind of Christian, novel and peculiar, to be sure, but also attractive and influential. Wrote one observer who visited her on the field,

I can still hear her, still listen with the old fascination, still enjoy her wild indignations, still marvel at her amazing personality, her extraordinary vitality and energy, still feel as I have ever felt her God-given power to draw one nearer to the Lord she loves so well.⁶³

But the exaggerations are part of the portrait, as necessary to the writing of their stories as exaggerations are to the painting of icons. The earthly must yield to the heavenly, the real must give way to reality. The strangeness is not supposed to be taken at face value. It serves a more important function. It draws attention to the mysterious process that leads to sanctification, which transforms a person into something other than what he or she could become otherwise. The exaggerations are not fabrications. The persons we come to know in the biographies of Studd and Slessor really existed. We have enough historical sources to be certain of the general reliability of the accounts, though it would be possible, even appropriate, to portray these figures in a very different light (Freudian, Marxist, Post-Colonial, Feminist, and the like). But neither are the exaggerations the ideal, as if they were meant to serve as perfect templates. Not everyone can live just like these two missionaries. Not everyone should. But these biographies argue that everyone should take the Christian faith as seriously as they did, even if the results are decidedly different. In some cases, we hope that the results would be different.

Their idiosyncrasies, their strangeness, even their fanaticism are supposed to point to the prototype and ultimate icon, Jesus Christ, the one who inspired them to pursue such an unconventional life. Thus the biographies of these saints should be read—as Michael Quenot says icons should be viewed—with the values of the Kingdom of God in mind, values that invert and subvert the normal order of things. "Iconography has embraced the entire concept of those Gospel teachings like the Sermon the Mount, which completely reverse our secular, earthly values."⁶⁴ Icons depict the reality of the kingdom of God, where martyrs are glorified and ascetics honored. The least becomes the greatest, the servant becomes the master, the lowliest becomes exalted.

The stories of C. T. Studd and Mary Slessor were written to inspire people to imitate Christ. If they appear subversive, it is only because the gospel itself is subversive, at least as Grubb and Livingston understood it. What we as readers are inclined to dismiss as fanciful or distorted or ridiculous is, at least in the minds of these biographers, nothing less than what is true and right from a Christian perspective. Spiritual biographies, as we see in these two accounts, call readers to

⁶²Ibid., 224.

⁶³Ibid., 186.

⁶⁴Michael Quenot, *The Icon*, 106.

abandon their worldliness, to forsake their cynicism and doubt, and to live a gospel life. In this case, true comprehension requires the eyes of faith, for only faith can see what lies behind these stories. Michael Quenot warns, "The symbolic language of iconography totally escapes the sensual person whose heart is completely oriented to personal comfort and the egotistical satisfaction gained from material things."⁶⁵ Spiritual biographies of this kind invite readers, as icons do beholders, to ask a question—"What kind of life do I want to lead?"⁶⁶ They beckon readers to consider entering a world that is infused with the light of the incarnate Son of God, founded upon the principles of the kingdom of God, and animated by a call to radical service, and they provide examples—as strange and even offensive as they might be—of how one can begin the journey.

⁶⁵Ibid., 66.

⁶⁶Ibid., 147. Again, Quenot states, "The entire spiritual life postulates a choice between these two centers: either the 'corporealization of the soul' or the 'spiritualization of the body' in the way shown to us by the icon."

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