

Early Presbyterianism in the Philippines Part 2

After the American forces defeated the Spanish colonialists in the Philippines in 1898, Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist leaders met in New York to discuss how to evangelize the new colony. The leaders signed a comity agreement “to unite all the evangelical forces in the Philippine Islands for the purpose of securing comity and effectiveness in their missionary operations” in order to avoid “unnecessary duplication of work and rivalry which have been costly and counter-productive to Christian solidarity.” The denominations agreed that “the most effective and equitable distribution of the territory and work” was to divide the country into territories for church planting, for example, Methodists in Luzon and Manila, Presbyterians in Southern Luzon and Western Visayas, Baptists in other parts of the Visayas, Congregationalists in Mindanao, etc.¹

In 1901, the early missionaries in Manila gathered to further discuss the comity agreement with three main goals: (1) to organize the Evangelical Union; (2) to choose a common name for Protestant churches; and (3) to delineate the geographical work allotments for each church.²

James B. Rodgers, First Presbyterian Missionary

In 1899, Rev. Dr. James B. Rodgers (1865-1944), the first American Presbyterian missionary, arrived in the Philippines after his missionary service in Brazil. Dr. Rodgers was born and raised in New York, and graduated from Auburn Theological Seminary. For 36 years in the Philippines, he pioneered in evangelistic, educational, and ecumenical work, being instrumental in the founding of the Philippine Evangelical Union in 1901.³ Anne C. Kwantes wrote that Rodgers “was well-known for his enthusiastic support of interdenominational cooperation and church union.”⁴ As well, accounts of his untiring zeal for mission work are well-documented.⁵

¹ Arthur Judson Brown, *The New Era in The Philippines* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1903), 176-7, 190-2.

² Brown, 188-9. The Evangelical Union, was generally successful during the early years of the comity agreement, as can be seen in countrywide evangelization; mergers of churches; cooperation in establishing hospitals, schools, cooperatives and credit unions; and unity on social issues. However, the Evangelical Union also had problems which led to schisms, the most prominent of which is the formation of the *Iglesia Evangelica Metodista en Las Islas Filipinas* (IEMELIF) when Nicolas Zamora seceded from the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1909. The Disciples of Christ were the most divisive group, while the Methodists refused to join the 1929 merger of the United Evangelical Church. Frequent friction and jealousy also occurred between the Presbyterians and Baptists. For a fuller account of disunity among Protestant missions in the Philippines, see Floyd T. Cunningham, “Diversities Within Post-War Philippine Protestantism,” *Mediator* 5/1 (October 2003), 54-67.

³ Anne C. Kwantes, *Presbyterian Missionaries in the Philippines: Conduits of Social Change, 1899-1910* (Quezon City: New Day, 1989), 21.

⁴ D. G. Hart and Mark A. Noll, *Dictionary of the Presbyterian and Reformed Tradition in America* (Downers Grove, IL: P&R Publishing, 1999), 222.

⁵ All of the references cited in this article attest extensively to Rodgers’ zeal and passion for the missionary work in the Philippines, and the high regard for him by Americans and Filipinos alike. One missionary wrote about Rodgers, “The Government of the United States has no stronger ally in its pacification of the islands than the Protestant Church of America with its faithful, self-sacrificing missionaries; and of these, none deserves greater praise than Mr. Rodgers, one of the veterans, though still a young man” (Brown, 287).

However, other sources also noted the racist attitudes of the missionaries in the Philippines at the time, Dr. Rodgers included. Arthur Leonard Tuggy, in *Iglesia ni Cristo: A Study in Independent Church Dynamics* (Quezon City: Conservative Baptist Publishers, 1976), documents this low opinion of Filipinos by the missionaries. Rodgers thought Filipinos were lazy (page 79). Another Presbyterian missionary Stealy B. Rossiter believed the island contained a “great bunch of semicivilized human material” (page

To get a better idea of Dr. Rodgers' background, it is useful to look at Auburn Theological Seminary. Auburn prides itself in being "an open and progressive institution, slightly eccentric, with an unusual ability to respond to change.... Throughout its history, Auburn has reached out in an inviting and tolerant spirit." In 1825, John Williamson Nevin, then a student at Princeton Seminary (later becoming a leading theologian), observed that Auburn's theology was "a little swerved" from the straight line of Reformed theology. Auburn Seminary describes its "freedom" struggle against Machen, "In the battles over the authority of the Bible, Auburn's name became attached to a famous defense of freedom. The Auburn Affirmation opposed efforts of fundamentalists to impose a single interpretation of scripture on others." Eight PCUSA foreign missionaries were signatories to the Auburn Affirmation, including Rev. Dr. Roy H. Brown, a missionary to the Philippines who served as President of Silliman University from 1932-36.⁶

A couple of examples from Rodgers' memoirs could shed light on his views. In his discussion of what must be preached to the people in the mission field, he says that the purpose of preaching is "to help them to have a faith that is in accord with both human and divine wisdom. Our message is positive, not negative. It is to help Christians of all classes to become better Christians."⁷

What he meant by "a faith that is in accord with both human and divine wisdom" is ambiguous (is this the Arminian freewillism?), but in saying that his message is "to help Christians of all classes to become better Christians," one is reminded of Mother Teresa's famous universalist remark: "I've always said we should help a Hindu become a better Hindu, a Muslim become a better Muslim, a Catholic become a better Catholic."⁸ As well, a "positive" gospel is echoed today by many prosperity gospel preachers such as Joel Osteen.

73). Methodist Homer Stuntz regarded the Tagalogs as "the most enterprising, the most quarrelsome, the most restless race in the country," and that "as a rule all Filipinos drink" (pages 67, 77).

As well, many of these missionaries had a mixed attitude towards the Filipinos. The *New York Times'* review of Stuntz's book, for instance, summarizes Stuntz's feelings, "The Filipino, averse to work and not without any serious faults, is polite, hospitable, loyal, adaptable to cultivation, with a decided aptness for medicine and a great fondness and skill for music" (*New York Times*, "A Cheerful View: The Philippines and the Far East," May 21, 1904). But some missionaries were amazed at the spiritual maturity shown by Filipino Protestants within a very short time:

These people are by nature very eloquent. As the truths of God's word sink deeper and deeper into them, and as the Spirit of God in answer to earnest prayer reveals His wonderful love and salvation to them, they forget themselves, and speak with a power, that not only astonishes their countrymen, but even us at times.... These simple people take God at His word, and He honors their faith. It is not sentimentality but faith born of a knowledge of God's word, which they are studying earnestly. (Brown, 225-6)

In addition, Ann C. Harper, in "Iglesia ni Cristo and Evangelical Christianity," *Journal of Asian Missions* 3/1 (2001), page 108, writes about the paternalistic "white man's burden" attitude of these American missionaries:

U.S. nationalism was a component of their endeavors: they were serving not only God, but their homeland. For them American culture was inextricably linked to the Christian message.... Most missionaries supported the army during the Philippine-American War and never condemned its atrocities against Filipino civilians.

Both Tuggy and Harper cited the work of Kenton J. Clymer, *Protestant Missionaries in the Philippines, 1898-1916* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

⁶ Carl McIntire, *Dr. Robert E. Speer, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and Modernism*, 1935. See also Silliman University, "Presidents."

⁷ James B. Rodgers, *Forty Years in the Philippines: A History of the Philippine Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America 1899-1939* (New York: Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the USA, 1940), 30.

⁸ Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), "Quotes of Mother Teresa."

In another place, Rodgers says,

The conflict is between the teaching that holds to the scientific definitions of three centuries ago in regard to the physical and mental laws and that which adopts, with reservations of course, many of the philosophical and material discoveries of the last half century. The law of evolution does not threaten religion any more than the law of heredity or gravitation.⁹

Here, Rodgers seems to be diminishing the teachings of the 16th century Protestant Reformation and putting more trust in modernism's "philosophical and material discoveries." This is evident when he places evolution in the same category - *law* - as heredity and gravitation, and not just a theory. Like his contemporary Presbyterian minister Charles Briggs, his interest was on religious progress.¹⁰

In his book, Rodgers does not once even mention the Westminster Standards (Confession of Faith, Larger Catechism, and Shorter Catechism), which indicates that he was a product of the anti-confessional and anti-Reformed atmosphere in the PCUSA at the turn of the 20th century. The reason why the PCUSA modernists started making major revisions to the Confession of Faith is not only because of anti-scripturalism and anti-Calvinism, but also to diminish the role of creeds and confessions in the church.¹¹ And this is the state of the PCUSA today, whose version of the WCF is unrecognizable, and whose members are clueless as to what the Westminster Standards are.

This disregard for the Westminster Standards and the teachings of the Reformation is also seen in one of the anecdotal stories in his memoirs. Among the Presbyterian missionaries in those early days in the Philippines, re-baptism of former Roman Catholic members was common practice. In one of the adult baptism services, one of the Filipino converts refused to be baptized, and after Rodgers explained to him that it was not because of superstition but a sign of the forgiveness of sins, the man countered that it was not what John Calvin taught! Rodgers did not know that Calvin accepted his baptism as an infant in the medieval Roman Catholic Church until he read what Calvin actually wrote.¹²

⁹ Rodgers, 31.

¹⁰ D. G. Hart and John Muether, "Turning Points in American Presbyterian History Part 8: Confessional Revision in 1903," *New Horizons*, Aug/Sept 2005.

¹¹ Hart and Muether, "Turning Points Part 8."

¹² Rodgers, 36. Calvin defended his own infant baptism in the Roman church against anabaptists and catabaptists in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.15.16, saying that the validity of one's baptism is not a work of priests, but of God:

This confutes the error of the Donatists, who measured the efficacy and worth of the sacrament by the dignity of the minister. Such in the present day are our Catabaptists, who deny that we are duly baptised, because we were baptised in the Papacy by wicked men and idolaters; hence they furiously insist on anabaptism. Against these absurdities we shall be sufficiently fortified if we reflect that by baptism we were initiated not into the name of any man, but into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and, therefore, that baptism is not of man, but of God, by whomsoever it may have been administered. Be it that those who baptised us were most ignorant of God and all piety, or were despisers, still they did not baptise us into a fellowship with their ignorance or sacrilege, but into the faith of Jesus Christ, because the name which they invoked was not their own but God's, nor did they baptise into any other name.

It is remarkable that the Protestant Reformers would defend their baptism in the Roman church when many of them were being persecuted and martyred by this same church. Re-baptism of new members who converted from the Roman church was apparently a common practice in the early Presbyterian churches in the Philippines, as witnessed by John Bancroft Devins in *An Observer in the Philippines, Or Life in Our New Possessions* (Boston: American Tract Society, 1905), page 286.

Perhaps, then, Dr. Rodgers had at least an inclination towards liberalism, anti-confessionalism, anti-Calvinism and ecumenism that Auburn Seminary and many Presbyterian ministers promoted. In fact, based on the fruits of his labors in the Philippines, it would not be far-fetched to say that his was more than just an inclination.

Presbyterians Lead Ecumenism

It is obvious that from its founding days, the spirit of ecumenism was instilled by American Protestant missionaries in the Philippines led by the Presbyterian missionary James Rodgers. In December 1900, the Presbyterian mission wrote a proposal of cooperation to all other mission boards present in the Philippine, which led to the signing of the Evangelical Union in April 1901. It is notable that one of the Presbyterian resolutions was “that all Protestant Filipino churches be designated ‘*Iglesias Evangelicas*’ [Evangelical Churches] without further distinction that marks their location.”¹³

Ecumenism was also evident in the early formation of ecumenical councils. The Evangelical Union in 1901 was succeeded by the National Christian Council in 1929, Philippine Federation of Evangelical Churches in 1939, Philippine Federation of Christian Churches in 1949, and finally by the now-liberal National Council of Churches in the Philippines in 1963.¹⁴

Presbyterians, led by Rodgers, spearheaded the founding of denominations and churches formed by the merger of churches from different denominational backgrounds. In 1914, the American congregations of Methodists and Presbyterians in Manila united to form the Union Church of Manila. In its founding document, the church stated that its purpose is “to unite Christians in worship and in every effort to spread the gospel, and to give adherents to any denomination, while sojourning in Manila, a church in which they may worship God and labor in unity for the upbuilding of the Kingdom.” Members of Union Church represented 22 denominations, including *Latter Day Saints, Greek Orthodox, Hebrew, and some Roman Catholics!*¹⁵

In 1929, Presbyterian, United Brethren and Congregational Churches formed the United Evangelical Church in the Philippines. This was the forerunner of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP) formed by the merger of Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical United Brethren, Philippine Methodists, and the Congregational Church in 1948. The UCCP today traces its lineage from the PCUSA, and still has fraternal relations with its mother church.¹⁶

In 1932, six smaller indigenous Presbyterian, Methodist, United Brethren and Reformed churches formed the *La Iglesia Evangelical Unida de Cristo*, or, simply, the Unida Evangelical Church.¹⁷ These small denominations were for the most part schisms from the larger American-dominated churches. For instance, *Iglesia Evangelica de Los Cristianos Filipinos* (Evangelical Church of Filipino Christians), established by Rodgers in Bacoor, Cavite in 1902, had split from the Presbyterians in 1913, in order to form an indigenous church.¹⁸ The other churches which formed the Unida Evangelical Church were *Iglesia Cristiana Trinitaria* (Trinity Christian Church), *Iglesia Evangelica Reformada* (Reformed Evangelical Church), and *Iglesia Evangelica*

¹³ Brown, 188-9.

¹⁴ Cunningham, 50-53.

¹⁵ Union Church of Manila, “The History of the Union Church of Manila.”

¹⁶ Ellinwood Malate Church, “History Nook.”

¹⁷ *Iglesia Evangelica Unida de Cristo, Manwal ng Manggagawang Unida* (Unida Worker’s Manual) (Manila: IEUDC, 1995), 1-8.

¹⁸ Cunningham, 53. Rodgers himself attended Unida’s inauguration in 1932. See also Devins, 282-7, which has a running account of Rodgers’ pioneering work in Cavite province.

Metodista (Reformed Methodist Church).¹⁹ Part 3 of this paper will be a more detailed analysis of the Unida denomination.

Ecumenism was also manifested in the field of theological education. In 1907, Methodists and Presbyterians founded Union Theological Seminary.²⁰ Later, it also became the seminary for the United Brethren, Disciples of Christ, and Congregationalists. Similarly, Silliman University in Dumaguete City in the central Philippines began as a school established by Presbyterians and Congregationalists.²¹

Moralistic Preaching

During those early years, American missionaries were zealous not only in evangelism and education, but also in social transformation, speaking often on a variety of moral and social issues. Protestants objected to the legalized importation of opium into the Philippines, and proposed to eliminate prostitution, dance halls, intemperance, work and recreation on Sunday, usury, obscene postcards and gambling. Many Protestants put pressure on the government on these and other moral issues.²² Kwantes calls the American missionaries “conduits of social change” in the title of her book, while Clymer concludes that many missionaries emphasized the transformation of society, the “Social Gospel,” as much as the work of the evangelization of the islands.²³

The emphasis on social transformation carried over into the preaching and teaching in the churches. As previously noted, Rodgers wanted the Filipinos to “have a faith that is in accord with both human and divine wisdom” and to help them “become better Christians.” This is in line with the social thrust and ecumenical emphasis of the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA, led by its ecumenist and liberal General Secretary from 1891-1937, Rev. Robert Speer.²⁴

¹⁹ IEUDC, *Manual*, 1-8.

²⁰ Kathy L. Gilbert, “Philippine United Methodist institutes change lives,” United Methodist Church Featured News and Stories, November 16, 2007.

²¹ Cunningham, 50-51.

²² Cunningham, 46.

²³ Clymer, 19-21.

²⁴ Bradley J. Longfield, *The Presbyterian Controversy: Fundamentalists, Modernists, and Moderates* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). In one of his speeches, Speer exhorted students, “Don’t preach a system of truth.... Don’t preach salvation; don’t preach redemption. Preach the Savior. Preach the Redeemer.” The present evangelical anti-intellectualism, “My only creed is Christ,” is an echo of Speer’s theological ambiguity. As an ecumenist, he chastised his audience, “We Presbyterians and Methodists have no business being apart on questions of doctrine and polity. These things on which we differ are not things connected with the great vital purpose of the Church of God in the world....” (187)

Presbyterians were not the only ones, of course, affected by the modernist influence. Rev. Elmer K. Higdon, a Disciples missionary who was then President of the National Christian Council in the Philippines and pastor of the United Evangelical Churches, advocated the “social gospel,” saying, “Evangelicals, therefore, are now in the good position to help solve the problems that have arisen.... out of the economic inequalities.... (T. Valentino Sito, *Comity and unity: Ardent aspirations of six decades of Protestantism in the Philippines, 1901-1961*, Quezon City: NCCP, 1989, 47) In a 1937 speech, Higdon spiritualized Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, saying, “As the blood courses through the human body, so the power of God courses through human society correcting social evils.” (Elaine J. Kennedy, *Baptist Centennial History of the Philippines, 1900-1999*, Manila: Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, 71, citing *The Message*, January 1937). The Baptist mission also suffered from a schism as a result of modernist influence among some of their missionaries (Cunningham, 58).

As a result, moralizing and spiritualizing sermons were commonplace.²⁵ A few examples may be cited. In August 1898, a few months after the American troops occupied Manila, the first Protestant service in the Philippines was conducted by Chaplain George Stull, a member of The Methodist Episcopal Church, who came with the occupying forces. It was held in an old Spanish dungeon facing the bay, and was attended not only by American soldiers, but by Filipinos as well. He said in his sermon, "That the power of God will use this day to make a good Catholic better, any weak American stronger, any backslider ashamed, and the gloomy old dungeon the beginning of wonderful things in these Islands, is my prayer."²⁶ This again brings to mind Mother Teresa's words.

In the early days of February 1899, hostilities already started between the occupying American forces and the Filipino revolutionaries.²⁷ In the midst of this ominous atmosphere, the first American missionaries held worship services. Bishop James M. Thoburn of the Methodist Episcopal Church introduced his preaching series with the text from Isaiah 42:4, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged till he has set judgment in the earth; and the isles shall wait for his law."²⁸

And in a sermon delivered on the inauguration of the Union Church of Manila, Bishop Charles Brent of the American Episcopal Cathedral exhorted the congregation using Ephesians 6:13, "Today, in your triumph of unity and peace I sound the trumpet calling you to war. Men are made for tasks and in them they find their satisfaction. Manhood unfazed by problems falls into decay. Haste, then, to the war. Take up the whole armor of God, that ye may be able to withstand in the evil day and having done all, to stand." Even when the Americans were on the brink of involvement in World War I, Paul's "armor of God" is not a call to join the war of nations!²⁹

Thus, in this environment of strong ecumenical impulse and raging fundamentalist/modernist controversy, it was that Rodgers and other American missionaries established Protestantism in the early years of American occupation of the Philippines.

We now turn to a case study of a specific denomination, Unida Evangelical Church, which had roots in those early years, and what Reformed Presbyterians can learn from those early years of missions in the Philippines.

²⁵ Michael S. Horton, in "What are We Looking for in the Bible?" *Modern Reformation* 5/3 (May/June 1996), pages 4-8, defines a moralistic sermon as a legalistic issuing of "imperatives without the divine indicative" making the gospel a moral law. It is not unbiblical teaching, but in the desire to be relevant and practical, the preacher forces the text to say something other than what it really says.

²⁶ Richard L. Deats, *The Story of Methodism in the Philippines* (Manila: National Council of Churches in the Philippines, 1964), 91, citing Homer Stuntz, *The Philippines and the Far East* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye, 1904), 415-6.

²⁷ Benjamin Pimentel, "White Man's Forgotten War," *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 31, 1999, SC-1.

²⁸ Deats, citing Stuntz, 421. Matthew T. Herbst, in "Methodism and Aggressive Christianity," *Journal of Religion and Society* 7(2005), page 6 (citing the *Michigan Christian Advocate* April 29 and May 29, 1899) says that Thoburn believed that the American victory over the Spanish in Manila was "a miracle on par with Joshua's triumph at Jericho."

²⁹ Union Church of Manila, "The History of the Union Church of Manila."