Proving God

By The Rev. A. T. Houghton, M.A.

THE revolutionary situation in which we find ourselves in the period of the mid-twentieth century has brought about a complete revision of thought concerning the methods of approach and of working in the presentation of the Gospel in lands still predominantly non-Christian. Methods which seemed to be effective a hundred years ago are now seen to be out of date in the face of strong nationalistic forces and the resurgence of great world religions. In the midst of hammer blows dealt to the peaceful progress of Christian missions from overseas by these anti-western and, therefore, anti-Christian forces, a silent revolution is going on in the minds of many concerning the bewildering financial situation, due to the fact that Christian giving is not keeping pace with the fantastic rise in the cost of maintaining western missionaries in eastern lands. Ought a missionary society to accept recruits except in so far as there is a guaranteed income to maintain them adequately? Or, on the other hand, is it lack of faith in God to want to be assured about full financial provision before action is taken? If one hears of missionaries in the field suffering silently for months on end because the remittances from home are utterly inadequate to meet their needs, are they to blame for lack of faith in God, or is their mission at home to blame for sending them without sufficient resources to meet the cost? These are not purely academic questions which can be discussed in an arm-chair with an open Bible, but terribly practical questions which concern a considerable number of the smaller missionary organizations.

A worthy contribution to this debate comes from the pen of Phyllis Thompson in her latest book, *Proving God*[1], which records, as the subtitle states, some financial experiences of the China Inland Mission, and especially during the last twenty-five years, which has seen the momentous reorganization and redeployment of its missionary personnel outside of China. The Foreword is written by Mr. J. Oswald Sanders, the present General Director of the newly constituted C.I.M. Overseas Missionary Fellowship. He takes the opportunity of enunciating afresh the principles on which the Mission continues to operate, as laid down by its founder, Hudson Taylor, over ninety years ago. A quotation from Mr. Sanders's Foreword briefly sums up these principles:

> "Implicit in its constitution is the conviction that we are dealing not with a God Who is remote or disinterested, but Who always responds to faith, and will, without fail and in good time, meet every need of the worker whom He has called into His harvest-field. Going into debt either as a Mission or as individuals is regarded as being inconsistent with the principle of entire dependence on God. If this is indeed God's work, He is

[1] *Proving God*, by Phyllis Thompson. China Inland Mission, 7/6.

bound to support it. The Mission does not function on the budget system ; expenditures are determined by funds received. As to the method of support, 'the needs of the work are laid before God in prayer, no person being authorised to solicit funds or take collections on behalf of the Mission'. . . . 'He abideth faithful,' wrote the founder of the Mission. 'If we are really trusting *in Him*, and seeking *from Him* we cannot be put to shame.' "

The author then proceeds to tell the thrilling story of some of God's provision : the plot of land and the buildings which became the headquarters of the Mission at Shanghai, and which when realized in a miraculous way, provided the wherewithal to evacuate almost the entire Mission to Hong Kong in 1951. The story goes on to describe God's individual provision for His children in time of great need, leading up to the amazing way in which currency was provided during the war years when much of China was in Japanese occupation. "Jehovah Jireh" ("The Lord will provide") and "Ebenezer" ("Hitherto hath the Lord helped us") have always been the twin promises on which Hudson Taylor relied, and the author's next illustration of God's care for the children of the Mission, through the schools at Chefoo and Kuling, and later in other places, takes us right back to the origin of "Jehovah Jireh" when the Lord mysteriously called on Abraham to sacrifice his son, and in that very incident put forth His protecting hand over Isaac. From the children of the Mission we are taken to God's care of the aged, and His provision for retired workers after many years of unremitting service in the field.

The book abounds in stories of God's multiplying of the loaves and fishes to meet the needs of thousands, and shows how God has guided in the present redeployment of missionary resources as the Mission has remained true to the principles on which it was founded. As in the case of the first recruits who set out with Hudson Taylor, "they believed that if they did God's work in God's way, God would supply them with what they needed". "God's work in God's way" : it is here that we need to be very careful of the meaning of our premise before jumping to what may seem to be the logical conclusion ! For Hudson Taylor the whole of the paragraph quoted from the present General Director's Foreword was true, but he was careful to make clear that what he deduced from the premise, of the need for complete dependence on God, that the method of support should be to lay the financial need before God alone, was the particular and peculiar line on which he felt God had led him to work, but not necessarily that which should be followed by others. In other words, that whereas God's *commands* concerning the proclamation of the Gospel, and the complete dependence of God's people upon Himself, are of universal application, His particular will for individuals or organizations which He calls into being will be indicated by His guidance through circumstances and in other ways. Hudson Taylor was careful, therefore, to make clear that he did not regard this method as the only scriptural way of raising funds, but the way in which God had led him and the Mission which he had founded, to prove God's faithfulness. As Hudson Taylor honoured God in this way, and as the Mission has lived

up to the same principle, God has manifestly honoured their faith and fulfilled His promises.

But it is conceivable that God *might* have led His servant to prove His faithfulness not by never soliciting funds from others, but by depending on God alone to provide the needed missionary agents, whereas in actual fact Hudson Taylor, and those who have followed Him, have always felt quite free to appeal to the Christian public for the needed workers, and from time to time have called for a specific number in a particular period of time. And God has equally honoured their faith in this more public method of appeal.

We may well ask whether the financial difficulties in which some organizations have found themselves may be due to the fact that they have modelled themselves on Hudson Taylor's methods without being equally led by God to prove His faithfulness along those lines. It is possible too easily to recruit and send out new workers without relating the number to the financial provision God has made in previous years, regarding maintenance as the responsibility of God alone. It is possible for a Mission to be in debt to its missionaries, even while refusing to incur debt in other ways. Hudson Taylor, on the other hand, was meticulously careful not to go ahead of God's manifest provision of financial need, whether in sending out new workers or embarking on new work.

Those societies which send out agents whose maintenance they guarantee as a first charge on their funds, may be equally dependent on God alone, and while refusing to go into debt, they will be called upon to exercise constant faith in the God Who has promised to supply all the needs of His children, for no society is in a position to send out its missionaries and to maintain them from interest on capital reserves, but is dependent on the systematic and sacrificial giving of the Lord's people. To enlist the financial support of those interested in the work is clearly a scriptural principle which St. Paul followed in calling upon the Churches for the support of the poor saints at Jerusalem.

Whatever the method of supply, therefore, if we would prove God's faithfulness, we must ensure that we are doing God's work in God's way, and in utter dependence upon Him, and such a book as *Proving God* should be a great encouragement to faith in this materially-minded age.