

SHELDON JACKSON

By

CHARLES COLSON

Text: I John 4:7-12	Date: 3/30/08	#0817
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The last time I was in your area I preached at the Moravian Church in Bethlehem. It was a cold February 10, 1884. The Moravians wanted me to tell them about the mission field in Alaska. I described the glories of this mission frontier. Then I challenged the Moravians to aid the cause of Christ as they had of old, but now in this northern land. Immediately eight young men from the seminary expressed interest to go to Alaska.

Ever since I was a child I wanted to be a missionary. In my last year at Princeton I applied to the Presbyterian Mission Board for a foreign mission appointment. They rejected my application on the grounds that I wasn't strong enough physically. Instead they appointed me to teach at their mission school for Choctaw Indians at Spencer, Oklahoma. I started in 1858, but I didn't care for having to whip the boys in order to maintain discipline.

So, the next year I was appointed a home missionary at La Crescent, Minnesota on the Mississippi River. I put up a sign at the ferry landing when I realized how many people were heading west. "Presbyterian immigrants moving west will please leave their names and destinations with the Rev. Sheldon Jackson so

that they may be looked after and church privileges supplied them as early as possible.”

My territory was about 13,000 square miles. The mission board couldn't support my endeavor. Thus, I started my own Raven Fund so named from the bible story of Elijah being fed in the wilderness by ravens. I appealed to churches and friends back east. Over ten years they contributed some \$20,000.00 half of which I used to build churches and half to support needy missionaries. I also asked churches to send boxes of clothes.

In April 1869 I attended the presbytery meeting in Sioux City, Iowa. Two clergy friends and I climbed a hill there overlooking the Missouri River; we visualized the plains and mountains to the west where streams of people were heading. The church needed to be where the people were. So we appealed to the presbytery to expand its missionary efforts. They responded by appointing me missionary superintendent for Nebraska, Dakota, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and Utah. Soon, they added Colorado and New Mexico. It was a parish of over 571,000 square miles.

I started in this new mission field in May, the same time that the transcontinental railroad was completed at Promontory Point, Utah. At every town in my travels I inquired if there were Presbyterians. If there were a dozen or so we organized a church. I found a firm in Chicago that would ship prefabricated church structures, although we often met for worship in warehouses and homes. In my first year of Rocky Mtn. work I traveled some 29,000 miles and organized 22 churches.

You know, I was criticized for poor judgment in forming many churches in out of the way places, because some were small and some didn't last. But the church needs to be where the people are. In 1875 I proposed to the mission board that we organize a mission to the new territory of Alaska. The director, Rev. Kendall, who was always annoyed that I didn't keep him informed of where I was going or what I was doing, responded by writing: "We think you have never done any thorough work in Montana. You have dashed in and out."

Well, the Indian uprisings prevented this so I went to Portland, Oregon. There I found Mrs. McFarland, my former associate from missionary work in Santa Fe. She was determined to work in Alaska. So the two of us set off for Wrangell in the Alaska panhandle. It was a village of mostly Indians. We started a mission school, and it was in Wrangell that I eventually founded the first Presbyterian Church in Alaska.

I would tell you more about my Alaska missionary travels as I did for the Moravians. But your good Mrs. Kreider has informed me that you are shortly to consider your own mission field over lunch in the fellowship hall. My hope, then, is that these brief remarks have encouraged you to think where the people are that need the church, that need Jesus Christ. It's not the far away territory that counts; it's the determination to speak about what the church, meaning us together, can do for Christ. I tell you from my own ministry that we cannot rely on the church's old structures, the way we've always done it; it demands a creative and dedicated spirit to do the true work of God's vision.

The first sermon I ever preached in 1856 was on the words from 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians: “the love of God urges us on.” I was reminded of them when Mrs. Kreider read your lesson from I John: “Beloved let us love one another, because love is from God.” These are radical and life-changing words and they have propelled me forward in all my ministry for Christ. I hope they do the same for you for the next fifty years of your ministry.