

# John Geddie

1815-1872

Messenger of the Love of Christ in Eastern Melanesia

Hideous shrieks and unearthly wails shattered the stillness of the night.

"Do you hear those horrible cries?" asked the missionary's wife.

"Yes," her husband replied. "Someone has died and, after the custom of this dark island, a relative is being strangled."

Shortly after dawn, on a beach nearby, they saw a group of natives casting into the sea the body of the man who had died a few hours earlier and also the body of his wife who had been strangled. Hastening to the shore, the missionary spoke pointedly to the natives about the wickedness of their conduct. Some of them, having for sometime been under Christian instruction, joined in the condemnation, and then set about to locate the actual murderer. In a few minutes the party returned, dragging the culprit. Seeing the white man he cried out: "Have mercy! Let me go and I will never again strangle a woman."

After an earnest talk with the guilty man, the missionary told the natives to release him. This they were at first unwilling to do, saying that he should be tied to a post for several days while he was flogged and lectured.

"No," said the white man. "Force will not do. Only the compulsion of love will avail. Was it not *the love of Christ* that softened your hard hearts? Use no weapon but that which our Redeemer uses, the weapons of love. Let us constantly keep our hearts open 'unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins.'"

There we have *the man* and *the text*. The man was John Geddie, the year 1851, the place the New Hebrides [Vanuatu] and the text which wrote such a magnificent history, Revelation 1:5: "*Unto Him that loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood.*" Like the Apostle John's his all-absorbing theme was *the love of Christ*. The stirring annals of John Geddie's life may be summed up in three episodes: the love of Christ *captivated his young heart*; the love of Christ *animated his missionary labors*; the love of Christ *irradiated all his day*.

## I. The Love of Christ Captivated His Young Heart



John Geddie was born in Banff, Scotland, April 10, 1815. His father, a watch and clock maker, was a devout member of the Presbyterian Church. During the great revival under the Haldanes, an Independent Church was formed in Banff. Mr. Geddie attached himself to this church and served as a deacon. His wife, Mary Menzies, the mother of the future missionary, was of a pious Secession family. To this worthy couple four children were born -- three daughters and a son.

In 1816 Mr. Geddie emigrated with his family and settled in Pictou, Nova Scotia. Young John and his sisters got their early education in "Hogg's School," so named after the Scotchman who was the teacher. John was an active boy and an eager student. The details of his conversion are not on record. Like John Bunyan, he was powerfully convicted of sin and for some time considered himself beyond the possibility of salvation. Eventually, *the love of Christ* banished the terrors of the law and on June 22, 1834, at the age of 19, he united with the Presbyterian Church.

Even prior to this, his favorite pastime was the reading of books and articles telling of the triumphs of the gospel in certain far-away places and of the desperate need of the gospel in other vast areas. After completing grammar school and later the Pictou Academy, he entered upon the study of theology. Geddie was small of stature and was often referred to, both at this period and later, as "little Johnnie." His health having seriously declined, he faced the prospect of being compelled to give up the ministry. At this time he solemnly dedicated himself to the Lord, vowing that if his health were restored and the way opened, he would go with the message of salvation to some heathen land. March 13, 1838, he was ordained as pastor of a congregation on Prince Edward Island. The following year he was married to Charlotte McDonald.

While assiduously devoting himself to his pastoral duties, Geddie sought to promote the idea that a Colonial Church might and should engage aggressively in foreign mission work. This was a new idea, for up to this time churches in the British Colonies, instead of sending missionaries abroad, were seeking financial aid for their own work from their brethren in other lands. The Baptists of the Maritime Provinces were then agitating the idea of undertaking foreign mission work and were the first actually to send forth a missionary. Their emissary was Rev. Mr. Burpe, who was sent to labor in connection with the American Baptist Mission in Burma. But to John Geddie belongs the credit of first stirring up a Colonial Church to undertake a mission of its own among the heathen.

This he accomplished in the face of much opposition and only after years of effort. Thousands of hearts were stirred to action by his impassioned plea: "To undertake a mission to the heathen is our solemn duty and our high privilege. The glory of God, the command of Christ and the reproaches of those who have gone to perdition unwarned, call us to it. With 600,000,000 of immortal souls as my clients, I beg you to arouse yourselves and to take a worthy part in this noble enterprise which seems destined, in the arrangement of God, to be instrumental in achieving the redemption of the world."

The church at length committed itself to the establishment of a mission in the South Seas and accepted Mr. and Mrs. Geddie as their first missionaries. Mr. Geddie's mechanical abilities and his knowledge of medicine peculiarly fitted him for work on a pioneer field among Melanesian and Polynesian savages. The two missionaries and their children sailed from Halifax on the 30th of November, 1846. In his parting message Geddie declared: "**In accord with the Redeemer's command and assured of His presence, we are going forth to those lands where Satan has established his dark domain. I know that suffering awaits me. But to bear the Redeemer's yoke is an honor to one who has felt the Redeemer's love.**"

## II. The Love of Christ Animated His Missionary Labors

During the course of the long sea voyage, he was much impressed by the appearance of the heavens in the southern latitudes. When he gazed for the first time upon the Southern Cross in its mystic beauty, he wrote in his Journal: "My best enjoyments in time, and my prospects beyond the grave, center in the cross, which is the emblem of redeeming love."

He was thinking of *the love of Christ* and of the text: "**Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood.**"

On October 17, 1847, after a journey of more than 20,000 miles, the vessel sailed into the harbor of Pango-pango [Pago Pago] Samoa. While awaiting transportation to Eastern Melanesia, Geddie devoted six months to the study of the Samoan language. This knowledge would be of great value to him in communicating with the Samoan teachers who had already been settled on several of the Melanesian islands.

The following May he and his family embarked on the *John Williams* on a tour through the islands to the West to determine where they would settle. In some areas the Austral Negro race predominated, in others the Malay race was more in evidence, but for the most part the people were a mixture of the two, with Negroid features prominent. This explains why they have been usually classified as Melanesians.

At Tanna the natives were shy and sullen. Inquiry revealed that an Erromangan, who had come to Port Resolution with a sandal wood trader, had landed the previous day and was promptly killed, roasted and eaten by the Tannese. Many Tannese had fallen into the hands of the Erromangans and been eaten, and many Erromangans had suffered a similar fate on Tanna.

At the island of Efate they approached the place where, a few months earlier, the ship *British Sovereign* had been wrecked and the crew of not less than twenty-two persons had been killed and eaten. Deeds of brutality were not restricted to black men alone. Geddie saw the place where three white men, engaged in the sandal wood trade, had on slight provocation shot about one hundred natives. He also saw the cave into which about one hundred other natives retreated for shelter and where they were smothered by the fire which the white traders built at its entrance. Similar wanton deeds perpetrated throughout the Pacific created much hostility toward all white men, interfered seriously with missionary operations and engendered a passion for revenge which often led to attacks on innocent missionaries and, in numerous instances, to their martyrdom, as in the case of John Williams, Bishop Patteson and others.

Geddie, "the father of Presbyterian missions in the South Seas," landed on the island of Aneiteum [Aneityum], of the New Hebrides group, in 1848. When the *John Williams* sailed away, **the missionaries felt for the first time the stern reality of being abandoned on an island surrounded by a barbarous people from whom they had much to fear and with whom they had little, if anything, in common. But were they despondent?** "Though severed now from those with whom we could take sweet counsel," wrote Geddie, "**we are not alone. We have His promise, at whose**

**command we have come hither, 'Lo, I am with you alway.'"**

Mr. and Mrs. Geddie were soon engrossed in learning the Aneiteumese tongue. The difficulty of the task was increased by the fact that the language had not been reduced to writing and no dictionaries or books of any kind were available. After mastering Aneiteumese, the first assignment was to reduce it to writing and then to print some materials to help enlighten the people.

The revolting practice of cannibalism was prevalent on all the islands. The natives confessed that they considered human flesh the most savory of foods. It was considered proper to eat all enemies killed or taken in war. It was a common occurrence for chiefs to kill some of their own subjects to provide a cannibal feast, if the bodies of enemies were not readily obtainable. The missionary knew a man who killed and ate his own child!

The people were steeped in moral degradation. Licentiousness was rife, revenge was considered a sacred duty, forgiveness was a word not to be found in the language and the spectacle of a happy heathen family, bound together by ties of love, was unknown. And their religious beliefs were not calculated to elevate them. Their deities included idols and spirits called Natmasses. Their sacred men were invested with remarkable powers, such as producing thunder and lightning, causing hurricanes and inducing disease. **"Can we indeed expect anything good from the poor heathen,"** wrote the missionary, "when their deities are supposed to be such as themselves, or, rather, are conceived as having attained to a more gigantic stature in every form of vice than man can possibly reach?"

*What was the force that impelled John Geddie to live in circumstances so desolating and that sustained him amid scenes so harrowing? And what was the message with which he expected to touch and transform a people so debased? In one of his home letters he wrote: "The love of Christ sustains us and constrains us. My heart pants to tell this miserable people the wonders of redeeming love." And when the epochal day arrived on which he was able to preach to the natives for the first time, what was the momentous theme of his discourse? "I thank God," he wrote in his Journal, "that I have been spared to see this day when, for the first time, I can tell perishing sinners of the Saviour's love." Again he said: "If ever we win these benighted islanders, we must draw them with cords of love. I know of no power that is adequate to transform their lives except that which transformed my own life, namely, the power of the living Christ who 'loved us and washed us from our sins in his own blood.'"*

Revelation 1:5 is the text and the love of Christ the theme that animated his fervent labors amid the desolation and abominations of barbarism.

### **III. The Love of Christ Irradiated All His Days**

Geddie conceived of himself as being on a campaign of conquest for his Lord. Aneiteum was his base of operations, while his parish extended across the vast reaches of Eastern Melanesia with its multitudinous isles. He evolved a five-fold strategy of

conquest commensurate with his objective.

Prominent in his thinking was the recruitment of new missionaries. He sent fervent pleas for missionary reinforcements to the Presbyterians of Canada and Scotland and to the London Missionary Society. For years he labored on alone, but eventually other missionaries came to help possess the land. The most eminent of these was John G. Paton.

Geddie worked diligently for the evangelization of the home base. By means of schools, personal conversations and itinerating tours through the island, he was unremitting in his endeavors to win the Aneiteumese. There were many obstacles, many trials, many perils.

Very few attended school at first and these irregularly. Having no comprehension of the value of learning to read and write, many said to him, "How much will you pay me to come and study?" The severest heartaches came when his children, one after another, had to be sent to the homeland for their education and when little Alexander, three years old, sickened and died. As Geddie went through the forests and over the mountains on his evangelistic tours, numerous attempts were made to kill him. Stones, clubs and spears were hurled at him, and several times he was injured. But he kept on telling of *the Redeemer's love* and exemplifying it in his actions.

One day Geddie came upon a group of women wailing piteously and rubbing a man's corpse with broken leaves. Some were pulling their hair and shrieking violently. The man's widow, an attractive young girl, sat near by expecting to be strangled. Geddie said, "This woman must not be killed," and started leading her from the scene. Immediately some men assaulted him, knocked him to the ground and seized the young widow. While some of the women held down the girl's arms and legs the men proceeded to strangle her. When Geddie again tried to intervene, men with clubs drove him away. The murderous deed was by this time completed. Knowing that the savages were infuriated and that he was further risking his life, he warmly told the people of the foul darkness of their deed. "According to our custom and belief, this is right. Be gone before we kill you!" they shouted. Then he began to tell them of that wondrous love which led the Son of God to give up the praise of the angels for the mockery of men, to exchange the diadem of the ages for a crown of thorns, and to die on the cross that the dark-hearted sinners of earth might be changed and received at last into the heavenly home. As he spoke, **clubs were lowered and the people became wistfully attentive, for there is something even in a savage breast that responds to the story of *the Saviour's suffering love*.**

Geddie sought, too, to train converts to go forth as Christian teachers and evangelists. After years of patient seed-sowing and cultivation, the missionary began to reap some precious sheaves. From the first he taught the converts that they were saved to win others. Reinforcing his teaching with action, he took them with him on his weekly tours through the island and encouraged them to witness for their Lord to their countrymen.

He taught all his converts to read and love the Word of God. As they developed in the

Christian life, he imparted to them his vision of evangelizing the teeming populations of other islands. Scores of them volunteered in the spirit of Isaiah, "Here am I, send me!" and went forth to hazard their lives for Christ on other dark islands. Many of them "loved not their lives even unto death" and perished as martyrs on a foreign shore. **Only eternity will reveal the full story of the magnificent heroism of these humble men and women who, like their beloved missionary, impelled by the love of Christ, went forth to labor, suffer and die, sustained by the presence of their Lord and soothed by the assurance that some day the seeds they had sown would be blessed of God to produce a harvest of precious souls.**

He journeyed often to other islands. In response to Geddie's ardent plea, friends in Canada and Scotland raised a large sum of money and provided him with a vessel. In this, and sometimes in other vessels, he made extensive journeys through the New Hebrides, New Caledonia and the Loyalty Islands. He settled new workers on various islands and encouraged those already settled. His view of the importance of native workers is thus indicated: *"Native agents, under the judicious direction of right-hearted missionaries, will yet accomplish a great work on this and neighboring isles of the sea."* He never landed any teachers unless the chiefs solemnly promised to protect them and assist them. Despite these precautions, many of the workers suffered severe privations and died violent deaths. Many others were victims of the ravages of disease. As some fell, others were always ready to take their places and, after years of toil in the night, the dawn began to break on some dark islands.

Natives from other islands were encouraged to visit Aneiteum. Years of labor and prayer brought an amazing transformation on the island. Let Geddie's Journal speak: "For many months after our arrival almost every day brought some new act of theft to light, and altogether we lost property to a considerable amount; but now locks and keys are entirely useless. The natives who attended our Sabbath meetings used to come with their clubs and spears and painted visages; but now we seldom see a weapon on the Sabbath day, and the habit of painting is falling into disuse. I have seen the day when a man who wore a garment was the sport of others, but now every rag in the community is in requisition on the Sabbath day. All this were nothing, however, except as evidence of a change of heart wrought by the Spirit of God." It was a day of rejoicing and thanksgiving when the ordinance of the Lord's Supper was first observed. "This is the first time," says Geddie in a letter, **"that the Redeemer's love has been celebrated in this dark land. Oh! that the time may soon arrive when many more of its dark and degraded inhabitants shall join us in this ordinance of love."**

His prayer was at length answered. One day Yakanui, a chief and sacred man, came to the missionary. Yakanui was a human monster, the greatest cannibal on the island. There were very few children left in his district, because he had killed and eaten so many of them. Many grown persons had also fallen under the impact of his murderous club. He was hated by the people, yet feared because of his ferocity and because they believed he possessed mysterious powers by which to bring ruin upon them. Attracted by the gospel of forgiving love, he came to the missionary, who tenderly pointed him to the Redeemer who is **"able to save unto the uttermost."** Schools were established in all parts of the island. The New Testament, then the whole Bible, was translated and put into the hands of the people. Hundreds, then thousands, broke with heathenism and

turned to Christ, and twenty-five churches were crowded with eager worshippers each Lord's Day.

As Geddie toured among the islands settling native teachers, he told of the wondrous changes wrought by the gospel on Aneiteum and persuaded many to go to see these wonders at first hand. Some delegations went on the mission vessel, others traveled in their own boats, but all returned to their respective islands to tell abroad the astounding news of the miraculous changes they had witnessed and thus to prepare the way on their own islands for the reception of the Word of Life. One of the most singular delegations came from the dark island of Tanna. They came in their own boats and brought with them a pig, with which to buy a Christian teacher to take back with them!

Not long after he settled on Aneiteum, Geddie wrote in his Journal, February 9, 1849: **"In the darkness, degradation, pollution and misery that surrounds me, I will look forward in the vision of faith to the time when some of these poor islanders will unite in the triumphant song of ransomed souls, 'Unto Him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in His own blood.'"**

*This was the text that captivated his heart.*

*This was the text that animated his labors.*

*This was the text that irradiated all his days.*

When, after twenty-four years of toil, he answered his Lord's final summons and left the earthly scene, December 14, 1872, a tablet, prepared in Sydney, was placed behind the pulpit of the church in Anelcauhat where the beloved missionary so long had preached. On it was the following inscription:

"In memory of John Geddie, D.D., born in Scotland, 1815, minister in Prince Edward Island seven years, Missionary sent from Nova Scotia to Aneiteum for twenty-four years. **"When he landed in 1848, there were no Christians here, and when he left in 1872 there were no heathen."**

The life of John Geddie and his monumental accomplishments in Eastern Melanesia, especially on Aneiteum, constitute an everlasting memorial to the power of the love of Christ to transform savages into saints and the abodes of barbarism into a possession of the Lord.