The Legacy of John Ritchie

G. Stewart McIntosh

Oh, little did my mither ken,
The day she cradled me,
The lands I was tae travel in
And the death I was tae dee.

(Scot’s ballad)

John Ritchie, like so many other Scots, was to spend the greater part of his life far away from his homeland. It was part of the bitter harvest of the nineteenth-century industrial revolution and the “clearances” of the Highlands of Scotland; it was also part of Scotland’s extraordinary contribution to the mission of God.

Ritchie was born in Kilmarnock, Scotland, on November 11, 1878, the son of a cabinetmaker. He had to leave school at the age of eleven and worked in a large Glasgow printers. One cold winter’s night in 1893, returning from the tavern, he was invited to attend a temperance meeting by a young friend. The question asked of all at the meeting, “What doth it profit a man that he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” stuck in his mind. Later the answer and the commitment to the Lord came through his hearing of the Gospel and the shaping of his missionary career by self-taught pastor and convert of Moody’s Glasgow campaigns, D. J. Findlay, founder of Glasgow’s St. George’s Cross Tabernacle.

The influence of Findlay on this young convert was such that it would also shape the nature of the nascent Protestant Church in Peru for decades to come—Christian Endeavour movement, consistory above the pastor, women’s league, temperance, and the second coming were all part of Ritchie’s transplantation of Findlay’s teaching to Peru.

By 1901 Ritchie was organizing and conducting gospel meetings in the printing works where he was employed and had begun, like Livingstone and Mary Slessor before him, to educate himself. The following year he was accepted into the Harley House Bible Institute in the notorious slums of the East End of London, under the auspices of H. Grattan Guinness. The program there was basically Bible study in the morning and preaching and ministering to the poor and sick in the afternoons. It was there that he read in the Chamber’s Journal an article about Bolivia, which confirmed his call to serve his Master in South America.

On May 24, 1905, Ritchie had his interview with the South American and Indian Council of the Regions Beyond Missionary Union, which “unanimously accepted Mr. Ritchie for service in Peru…. Who will send this brother as the representative to dark Peru?” Part of the answer to that lugubrious question was taken up by the Bridge of Weir Orphan Homes in Scotland and the orphans, who had some of their scant pocket money deducted to help Ritchie on his way! They were to be one of his sources of income from his arrival in Peru in August 1906 until 1929, when he was to resign from the Evangelical Union of South America (EUSA). He married a daughter of a wealthy Peruvian merchant, a Methodist herself, and had four children. However he was to have only one true love—the church that he brought to birth with others. One of his daughters sadly commented, “My father had only one daughter—The Peruvian Evangelical Church”.

Ritchie’s legacy and contribution to the Protestant church in Peru was formidable. In an era when fundamentalism and premillennial hopes began to set at naught a message of nonconformist radicalism, Ritchie was a man out of season. Indeed on reading and studying him now, one gains the impression that he would have been very much at home with the holistic mission of today.

Ritchie and Politics

Soon after his arrival in Peru in 1906, Ritchie became immersed in politics and the struggle for religious liberty and constitutional changes in Peru. Ritchie’s political influence centered on the use of the media. With his own printing press, from 1911 onward he was able to bombard sections of the community with his thoughts about religious liberty, nor was he slow in writing in the national press.

One observes in Ritchie the difference in the contribution to the understanding of the Latin American scene and Latin American missiology from his perspective of praxis, compared with that of his friend John A. Mackay. The American Bible Society (ABS), which employed Ritchie from 1932, noted that “Mr. Ritchie feels that it is dangerous for [John A.] Mackay’s writing to connect Haya de la Torre with the evangelical meetings to project Haya’s ideas.”

Ritchie, like Mackay, was a prolific writer and spokesman for much of the material before, during, and after the Panama Mission Conference of 1916. He wrote the “Report on Survey and Occupation,” in which he foresaw the evangelization of Peru accomplished by only forty to fifty male missionaries. He expressed the thought that if the right type of men were forthcoming and a satisfactory cooperation of all the missionary societies obtained, coupled with a capable native ministry, soon even this number of foreign missionaries might diminish. This was not to come to fruition, but his thought that foreign missionaries should devote themselves to discipling rather than mere soul-winning resulted in the formation of the Lima Bible Institute in 1935, where Ritchie was administrator and teacher.

Ritchie and the Amerindian World

In the Andean Republics of Peru, Bolivia, and Ecuador there are over 10 million Quechua speakers, descendants of tribal groups united by the Inca Empire. In his geographic introduction to the conference in 1916, Ritchie mentioned that about 50 percent of the population was Indian, only 15 percent whites, and the remainder mestizo of several degrees, Negroes, and Chinese. Not unsurprisingly there was a general feeling at that time that translation work was useless, even inadvisable, for Quechua speakers. A missionary leader wrote, “There is a feeling among...

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Ritchie favored the use of the Quechua language in teaching as a means to preserve the traditions of their race.

Quechua. “The government of Peru fears that the Indian, educated as an Indian, would take control of the government, which his numerical strength would enable him to do, hence the government wishes to have the Indian assimilated into the Spanish-speaking mass.” Ritchie always sided with the rural, Quechua-speaking church.

National Evangelical Council of Churches

As early as 1916 Ritchie advocated formation of a national Protestant church council. A provisional constitution had been drafted in 1932 by the Alliance of Christian Missions in Peru, an alliance that Ritchie had been instrumental in founding some eighteen years previously. But it was not until 1940 that the National Evangelical Council of Churches, the first in Latin America, became a reality.

In 1934 Ritchie had written to the ABS:

The steady growth and expansion of the evangelical movement, with the increase in number of different missions and missionar­ies, as well as the rise of national and independent Christian movements, several of which have no official representation in the Capital [Lima], indicate the possibility of organizing such a body not only for the representation suggested above, but also as a medium of mutual understanding, a clearing house of common interests, a means to facilitate cooperation between those bodies, which though sometimes widely separated in their origins are similar in their aim and spirit and find themselves in proximity in this country.

As, however, we look forward to the time when the Christian movement of Peru will be self-governing, and when the foreign missionary effort will have largely passed away, it has seemed wiser, instead of reorganizing the Committee of Mission Coopera­tion, to lay the foundation of a National Christian Council which should be the vehicle of a catholic spirit in the Protestant Churches of Peru.18

Six years later, after a week of meetings, a constitution was hammered out and finally approved. However, the delegates “were so exhausted by the effort that they declared the conference closed and hurried off to their respective homes without formulating a plan of action or leaving any instructions for the newly elected executive. . . . When Ritchie was informed, he threw up his hands in despair and exclaimed: ‘The mountain was in travail and lo, it brought forth a mouse!’” (p. 63). Ritchie perhaps had the right to be exasperated; he had only, after all, been waiting since 1916, a mere twenty-four years! He had to learn yet again the need for patience in Latin America.

Ritchie and Social Concern

Ritchie was “forty years ahead of his time” in the field of family planning and social concern. As far back as 1912 he had been involved in the formation of libraries, recreational centers, temperance leagues, schools, and reform legislation for the working week and prisons in Peru. “Two classes of abuse might demand our intervention . . . those directed against the evangelical movement and any occurrence of national crimes that destroy the liberty of defenseless tribes or races” (pp. 65, 66).

From his own working-class background, he could not fail to sympathize with the lot of the typical working-class mother. Most wives in Latin America were obliged to bear children at the rate of one every year as long as they were physically able to do so. He had translated and published a book on birth control, which offered a modicum of protection for those overburdened mothers. In 1924, however, Ritchie, was denounced by single lady missionaries to the London board of the mission for including “immoral” literature on his evangelical bookstore shelves. By 1928, the mission board had redefined the basic aim of the mission in a way that Ritchie, with his holistic vision, could not accept. The minute read: “Our sole objective as a society is that of winning men and women to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord and gathering of these into Christian Churches on a New Testament basis with no qualification of denominational character” (p. 64).

In April 1929 the Committee on Cooperation in Latin America offered Ritchie a post in its New York office, which he accepted. Ritchie had resigned from EUSA the previous year, due to the narrowing of the mission’s purpose. From New York he returned to Peru in 1931, with appointment by the American Bible Society as the society’s secretary for the Upper Andes. He settled into his new post in Lima on January 1, 1932, and remained there for the rest of his life.

Ritchie and National Training

Ritchie had always worked on the principle that it was the national who would be on the ground when the foreign missionary had gone. Although he had his share of concern for buildings and in trying to cope with new, untried missionaries, especially women, it was resistance from the home churches, missions, and others throughout the years toward investment in men from Peru that irked Ritchie. “As the missionary himself will never have time for pastoral duties . . . he will give his time to educating these national leaders in the affairs and ministry of the Church rather than attend to these himself. It will be more important to him that the national brethren learn to conduct the affairs of the Church rather than these be conducted perfectly” (p. 67).

Indigenous Church Principles

Although more prolific in writing articles and editorials in Spanish through his magazines, Ritchie also left a substantial written legacy in English, the largest part of which deals with indigenous church principles. The core of the indigenous church movement’s thinking was stated in the cliché of forming “self-supporting,
self-governing, and self-propagating churches.” Ritchie commented acidly: “Had he been an experienced missionary, Mr. Sidney Clark [one of the movement’s advocates] would have recognised that this plan, so neat and adequate on paper, could be carried out only in very favoured circumstances, if ever. . . . Moreover such continuous visits by a foreign-led group would be calculated to arouse hostility and beget organized opposition” (p. 68).

Ritchie felt it to be more important for nationals to learn to conduct the affairs of the church than for these to be conducted perfectly.

Ritchie, however, at least agreed with the goal of indigenous leadership: “So long as missionaries think of themselves as successors to be succeeded by other missionaries, they fail to prepare the Church for a self-sufficient life. The successful missionary needs no successor” (p. 67).

Although writing some fifty years ago, Ritchie put his finger on the main reason of tension in church/mission and ecclesiastical relationships in the world today:

One of the curious phenomena of missionary work is the extent to which missionaries are often dominated by their fears. Their procedures are largely determined by these fears. They fear lest their native converts read something of which they disapprove, including publications of other Christian bodies. They fear the influence of organization, even though they work in disinterested cooperation. They fear the initiative of every national which they did not prompt or cannot control. They fear the word that is in disfavour back at home, or which is not their favourite “Shibboleth.” They fear communism or Modernism, real or imagined, sometimes with a fear that robs them of the capacity for discernment and deliberate judgment. They speak and act as if every enemy had a better message than theirs. . . . Such fear is paralyzing. . . . He should have a genuine and intelligent faith which will not fear. . . . a faith that will enable him to go straight on doing the will of God without being distracted at the windmills or chasing ghosts to the alarm of the Christian Church. (P. 67).

Ritchie reacted strongly against unstructured Christianity. The view expressed by Clark that “we have too much machinery” is held tenaciously by some missionaries, especially by zealous evangelists that go out under what are called “faith missions.”. . . they feel that the ecclesiastical machine strangles the spirit of Life in them. They attribute this condition to organization. . . . The abuse of any good thing does not warrant its rejection. The permanence of the work of John Wesley as compared to that of George Whitefield is that the former organised everything and the latter nothing! . . . Founding churches where there are none is, therefore, the only permanent way to extend the Gospel over the whole earth. (P. 69)
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To the theorists who insisted that when a church was “self-supporting” it was “indigenous,” Ritchie warned: “‘Indigenous’ should express the conception of a Christian Church which sustains its own life, rather than pays its own expenses or exists without any external aid, and whose mode and being of expression arises from its own nature and environment rather than arising out of ecclesiastical, theological and political conflicts of the Church in some other land” (p. 70). How pertinent are these words for mission in Latin America today!

**Ritchie at the End**

When Ritchie was nearing the end of his life, he remarked wryly:

> It is usually the younger missionary who knows it all! He has yet to learn his own limitations and the value of the insights which come with experience. . . . The missionary who goes forth to win souls requires a knowledge of many more things than his Bible. . . . When our Lord came to this sin-cursed world of ignorant and perverse mankind, He laid aside his glory, emptied Himself of all that marked Him as belonging to another world, divested Himself of whatever might have given Him superiority in the eyes of men. . . . The foreign missionary above all Christians requires to have this mind. . . . He should seek to know, understand, or at least sympathize with the view of the national, for as long as he thinks as he did “back-home” there will be a chasm between him and the people, and he is liable to give unnecessary offence to those he went to win.

> If men are to work together building an indigenous church it is important that they cultivate a spirit of cooperation and mutual respect, lest they sow in it seeds of distrust, suspicion and division, and fail to set an example of loyalty. (P. 73)

Despite a long and painful illness, Ritchie worked, thought, and prayed on to the end. He died at 9:30 p.m. on April 2, 1952, in Lima. Perhaps the greatest legacy of John Ritchie is to be found, not now in his writing, but in the 1,600 congregations of the Iglesia Evangélica Peruana that have come to birth through him and his disciples.20

**Notes**

7. The EUSA was formed in 1911 from various small missions, including the RBMU.
9. The main area of struggle from 1911 to 1913 was to change article 4 of the Peruvian Constitution, which prohibited the exercise of any religion in Peru other than that of Roman Catholicism.
10. Ritchie was editor and publisher in Peru of the Christian magazines *El Cristiano* (1911–15), *El Heraldo* (1916–21), and then *Renacimiento* (1921–52). He put to good use the provision in the Peruvian postal system for free distribution of magazines.
11. John A. Mackay, missionary to Peru for the Free Church of Scotland, 1916–1924, later went to Princeton Theological Seminary.
12. Victor Raúl Haya de la Torre was the founder and political leader of Peru’s APRA party and a close friend of Mackay. Though Haya de la Torre was not a confessed Protestant himself, many of the early evangelicals sided with him.
13. It is worth noting that there were more nationals working as full-time missionary colporteurs than there were expatriates in 1916, which belies the notion that foreign missionaries were the primary source of church planting in Peru.
15. The Lima Bible Institute became the Lima Evangelical Seminary in 1960. In 1990 its postgraduate department of missiology, the first in Latin America, became the Evangelical Faculty “Orlando E. Costas.”
17. Ibid.
18. American Bible Society Files, New York City, February 23, 1934. His vision was far ahead of other mission leaders in Latin America. For instance, it was not till 1970 that Bolivia had its own Association of Evangelical Churches.
20. The Iglesia Evangélica Peruana was formed by Ritchie and others with twenty-two congregations in 1922. He had hoped that it would be a single united church of Peru. That was not to be, although it has the largest number of Protestant congregations, and 250,000 members.

**Selected Bibliography**

**Material Written in English by Ritchie**


**Material Written About Ritchie**

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