

# **James Laidlaw Maxwell's Theology of Medical Mission**

**Maurie Sween**

## INTRODUCTION

James Laidlaw Maxwell, M.D., could not have expected an easy life when he arrived in Taiwan on May 29, 1865. An average of 21% of male missionaries to China (all of whom were in their prime and had been medically certified as healthy upon their departure) died on the field and a further 33% required evacuation for medical reasons. Moreover, anti-foreign sentiment due to trade disputes was strong and made life for all the westerners on the island especially dangerous. Nevertheless, Maxwell made for the capital city. Ten days later he was expelled, "chicken bones buried under his bed being disinterred as proof that he had been dealing in new born children for the sake of making medicine."

Thus began the ministry of the first Protestant missionary to Taiwan since Dutch ministers attached to trading posts were driven out in 1661. Maxwell's first years were indeed difficult. Yet each time his stations were burned he rebuilt. In time he was accepted as a skillful and compassionate practitioner of medicine. Three and a half years after his ignoble departure he reestablished medical work in the capital. That hospital remains a center for Christian ministry today. Unfortunately, a back injury during his first furlough limited his missionary career to only 6 years.

Maxwell's efforts on behalf of medicine in missions continued, however. In Britain he edited two mission journals, was active in founding and leading at least three mission agencies that survive to this day, and was known and respected at international mission conferences. Yet, his name cannot be found in the leading dictionaries of world missions and, though archives contain a wealth of information, surprisingly little has been written on the individual.

This paper, an examination of the thoughts of this spokesperson for medical missions, will be divided into two parts. The first will comprise an introduction of the subjects that were of primary importance to the individual. The second will place these issues in context, locating Maxwell's ideas on the map, so to speak, of topics important to missionaries of the period. Critical evaluations of Maxwell's ideas in light of the thought of his own generation will be presented throughout the second section. Because space constraints prohibit a thorough presentation of Maxwell's biography a brief outline of important events in his career will be appended to the paper.

The paper will argue that Maxwell considered medical missions to be ancillary to evangelism. Medicine in missions was primarily to enable effective Christian

witness. It will also be argued that Maxwell, while affirming the equality of all human beings, showed little understanding of the importance of culture in evaluating human society and capability. The paper will conclude that Maxwell held views that were normative in much of late 19<sup>th</sup> century missionary theology but were increasingly seen as dated in early 20<sup>th</sup> century discussions.