

**TOWARDS A CLEAN CHURCH**

**A Case Study in Nineteenth-Century  
Thai Church History**

**Herbert R. Swanson**

**Office of History  
Church of Christ in Thailand**

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TO THE CHURCH

The Church History

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PREFACE

This modest book grew out of an article I wrote for a collection of Thai-language articles recently published by the Office of History of the Church of Christ in Thailand.[1] After putting that article aside in its "completed" form, new thoughts and additional insights kept coming to mind, and I decided to rewrite the article in English in a slightly longer form. The process of further reflection and review has finally led to something larger than an article and smaller than a full-length book, which it seemed best to publish in a book format.

The story this case study analyzes is an important one for understanding the Protestant experience in Thailand. It sheds further light upon the great twin failures of nineteenth-century Protestant work in Thailand: the failure to win a large constituency; and the failure to establish strong local Christian communities. Analysis of events in the Phet Buri Station between 1880 and 1900 also brings to light the work of two highly influential missionaries in Phet Buri, neither of whom have received the attention they deserve, namely the Rev. E. P. Dunlap and the Rev. D. G. McClure. Dunlap's career, in particular, should be the subject of close scrutiny. He represents that most enlightening phenomenon of the creative maverick whose unique qualities highlight the more ordinary thoughts and actions of others.

Church history in Thailand is always an intellectual adventure because of the uniquely precarious position of the church historian. The church historian here studies the history of an institution widely regarded as alien to Thai society. The church historian quite naturally draws upon ideas and perspectives taken from the Christian tradition. Thus, a church history written within the context of and about the Thai church appears suspect to a large segment of its potential audience. It addresses subjects of interest to Thai religious history, but in an

unusual manner and from an unusual perspective. At the same time, Thai church history addresses matters of profound importance to Thai Christians, but ignores traditional theological explanations of events in its analysis.

Church historians, in short, appear too religious and parochially Christian for the tastes of a "secular" audience and not religious enough for a church audience. I have tried to keep both non-church and church audiences in mind as I have written this book. The Phet Buri story contains important material for both the history of religion in Thailand and for the self-understanding of the Christian church in Thailand. I trust that the non-church reader will be patient when my Christian agenda becomes too apparent and that those related to the church will be equally patient when the historian's scalpel seems to cut too deeply.

A number of individuals deserve particular thanks for their assistance in the research and writing of this book. Before all else, I would like to take this opportunity to thank the officers of the Church of Christ in Thailand for their continued support of the work of the Office of History. That support makes this book and all of our work possible. I want to thank the Rev. Don Persons, Mr. Bob McIlvride, and the Rev. John Butt for their constructive criticisms of earlier drafts of the book. Thanks go also to Ach. Prasit Pongudom of the Office of History who provided a number of helpful insights from his own research; and my special thanks to Ach. Prasit Saetung for assisting in the printing and publication of this book.

Particular thanks must be given to the staff of the Payap University Archives, the repository of a significant, ever-growing body of primary and secondary sources in Thai Protestant history; and to the fine people of First Presbyterian Church of Howard County, Columbia, Maryland, USA, who through their Mission Committee helped fund the printing of this book.

Herbert R. Swanson



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## INTRODUCTION

In the May 1917 issue of the Laos News, a publication of the Presbyterian Laos Mission in northern Thailand, the Rev. J. L. Hartzell described in some detail his work with the Lampang Church of that mission. Near the end of his remarks, Hartzell stated that Christian discipleship was so demanding of those who converted to Christianity that some converts eventually "fell away." He observed that most of those who left the church were "...people who were received too hurriedly or entered the Church with the hope of some material gain uppermost in their minds." Every person, he stated, had to make their own choice as to whether they would serve God or Baal, that is whether they would be faithful Christians or reject the Christian religion. He went on to state,

We want a large Church but first of all we want a church of which we are not ashamed and if this kind of a church must be a small one we prefer it to a large Church containing a large number of people who are a discredit and a hindrance to the faith they profess. We are making progress *toward a clean church* by raising some out of the bog of delinquency, and by disciplining or expelling those who refuse to be raised.[1]

Hartzell's statement deserves attention because it succinctly summarizes an idea widely held among nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Protestant missionaries in Thailand, the concept of a "clean church"

The idea of the clean church goes far back into the history of the Christian church. Second-century North African Christians, for example, heatedly disputed the relationship of the church to "the world" with one side demanding a pure church that accepted as members only those who displayed the highest ethical standards. This

pure church party rejected any applicants for church membership who could not live up to its rigid standards. The other side of the North African argument urged the church to accept all who came to it, train those who did not live up to its standards, and forgive rather than excommunicate those who fell short but repented sincerely.[2]

Over a millennium later, the Protestant Reformation took up the same issue of the purity of the church in its attempt to bring the church back into line with the standards of faith and practice the reformers found in the Bible. English Puritanism originated, subsequently, as a reform movement which sought to restore to the church its ancient purity and simplicity. The Puritans carried that drive for purity to North America where they hoped to establish in New England the model of the "true church." Their search for a purified, reformed church contributed to a wide-spread concern among American Protestants, particularly Congregationalists and Presbyterians, for the reform not only of the church but also all of American society.[3]

Hartzell's call for a clean church, thus, reflected a long-standing theme in Christian history, one clearly present in the American Presbyterian missionaries' own ecclesiastical heritage. That heritage provides the connecting link between the larger stream of church history and the history of a cluster of small Thai churches in late nineteenth-century Phet Buri. The missionaries brought with them a deep concern not only to plant Protestant Christianity in Thailand but also to establish and preserve a "clean church." The course of events in the Presbyterian mission station at Phet Buri in the years after 1889 particularly reveals the power of that concern.

The study of those events in Phet Buri sheds important light on how Protestant missionaries in Thailand gathered together Christian communities. That study also indicates the importance of the missionary image of the clean church for the history of the whole church in Thailand. For it remains true that Thai Protestant history must deal with the fact that Protestantism failed to convert significant numbers of people and failed to establish strong, well-led local churches. The "Phet Buri Case" suggests that the missionary desire to maintain a clean church contributed to these failures.

The events in Phet Buri have a further significance in and of themselves. Church historians and other researchers, including myself,

have examined the questions of why the Protestant missionaries failed to win a large following and failed to create strong local Christian communities from a number of perspectives;[4] and each of those perspectives has provided insights into the historical issues related to Protestant evangelism and church life. But to date we have lacked detailed case studies of particular events, studies which can shed greater light on the larger issues at stake by looking carefully at individual historical cases.

The events which took place in the Presbyterian mission station at Phet Buri in the last two decades of the nineteenth century provide particularly instructive and interesting insights into the history of Protestant evangelism and the history of Thai church life. Between 1880 and 1900 the Phet Buri Station witnessed both unique evangelistic successes and marked evangelistic failure. At times the Station promoted lively congregational life in the churches it established, while at other times it took actions that led to the virtual death of local church life. These spasms of success and failure, growth and decline offer a valuable opportunity to examine at close range key issues related to the question of why the Protestant church attracted so few adherents and failed to establish lively local congregations in central Thailand.

The following chapters, then, recount and analyze the story of the Phet Buri churches and the impact that the idea of the "clean church" had on them. Chapters One through Three focus largely upon events themselves while Chapters Four and Five dissect those events historically and theologically.



## CHAPTER ONE

Missionary interest in Phet Buri began with Dr. Dan Beach Bradley of the American Missionary Association (A.M.A.) mission in Bangkok. During the 1850s the "Laos" people living in the Phet Buri area attracted his attention as a potentially ripe evangelistic field. He visited Laos villages in the Phet Buri area in 1859 and then appealed to the A.M.A. for funds to open a station in Phet Buri. Although the home board rejected his plea for support, Bradley succeed in planting his enthusiasm for the Laos in Phet Buri in his daughter, Sophia, and his Presbyterian missionary son-in-law, the Rev. Daniel McGilvary. Within a relatively short time thereafter, the McGilvarys along with the Rev. Samuel G. and Jane McFarland, opened a mission station in Phet Buri in 1861 under the auspices of the Siam Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (P.C.U.S.A.).

The process of opening the new station initially consumed all of the time these two couples invested in their work. When they finally could begin active evangelism among the Laos, the McFarlands and McGilvarys met with an immediate, positive response. The responsiveness of the Laos in the Phet Buri area encouraged the McGilvarys to pursue their vision of a Laos Mission in the northern homeland of the Laos. In late 1866 they withdrew from Phet Buri to prepare for their journey to start a new station in distant Chiang Mai.

When the McGilvarys left Phet Buri, the Rev. S. G. McFarland assumed the role of de facto head of the station, a position he retained until 1878. During his tenure the Station established two churches: the Phet Buri Church in 1863, with three Thai members; and the small Bangkokun Church in 1878. McFarland resigned in that same year of 1878 to take up educational work with the Thai government. His departure set the stage for events in Phet Buri that culminated in the rapid rise and then the abrupt crash of the Phet Buri and Bangkokun churches in later years.

Prior to McFarland's leaving Phet Buri, the Siam Mission sent the Rev. Eugene P. Dunlap to take his place. Dunlap, a new missionary who first arrived in Bangkok in 1875, brought to his work an intense

enthusiasm and deep commitment, along with a winning personality that attracted people at every level of society to him. Dunlap habitually threw himself into his work with complete abandon, and he virtually burst upon the small Phet Buri Station in 1878 like a one-man storm. He arrived in Phet Buri at an auspicious time when the churches there and in other places, notably Bangkok and Chiang Mai, were growing more rapidly numerically. As a result of that growth coupled with Dunlap's enthusiastic leadership, the Phet Buri Church added some thirty-two members to its rolls in 1879, an impressive statistic given the very slow growth of the church since its founding.[1] Mary L. Cort, a missionary colleague in Phet Buri, enthusiastically affirmed that the growth of the work in Phet Buri under Dunlap's leadership resulted from the presence of the Holy Spirit.[2]

Just, however, as the congregation began to show marked growth and improvement, Dunlap's health gave way under the pressure of both the climate and his intense style. His failing health forced him to leave Thailand in October 1879. When members of the Phet Buri church heard that Dunlap was leaving, some of them openly displayed their grief and the congregation generally felt discouraged. It lost much of its enthusiasm.[3]

The Siam Mission faced a constant shortage of seasoned missionaries, and thus it had to appoint another new missionary, the Rev. James M. McCauley, to take over from Dunlap. When he arrived in Phet Buri, McCauley could not speak Thai, and he had little working knowledge of the people and culture. In spite of these obstacles, the church members liked his quiet, kind personality. He, therefore, managed to sustain some of the rate of growth in the church that marked the Dunlap period, and the members of the church continued to attend worship and other activities. But within ten months of his arrival in Phet Buri McCauley too experienced serious health problems and in May 1880 he left Phet Buri to return to the United States.[4]

With the departure of McCauley, the Phet Buri Station and its churches entered a difficult phase. The Siam Mission, again short of personnel, had no male missionaries that it could send to take over the work of the station; and, contrary to the conventions of the day, the mission had to ask the two young women missionaries at the station, Mary Cort and Sarah Coffman, to take over the administration of both

the station and the church. Cort and Coffman faced a number of problems, including the fact that a number of the male members of the church refused to accept women leaders in the church. Among these men was Nai Klai, the chief elder of the church and a man of considerable influence in the congregation. This male resistance caused a great deal of tension in the church as the women missionaries had to suffer through open displays of disrespect and hostility. Yet, even during these difficult times, the missionary leadership of the church sustained some numerical growth and the membership did not withdraw from the congregation.[5]

Although the records available provide relatively few details concerning the inner life of the Phet Buri Church, it seems that the congregation began to drift as soon as Dunlap left. It did not have a strong congregational life that could sustain it through difficult periods of any length. This condition left the congregation quite unprepared to deal with the Rev. C. S. McClelland, the next missionary sent down by the Siam Mission to take over at Phet Buri in 1881. Like McCauley, McClelland was a new missionary who did not yet speak Thai or have a working knowledge of the people he must lead. The similarities between the two men ended there. McClelland had a blunt, direct personality that came across to the people in Phet Buri as harsh. He emphasized, furthermore, church discipline, an emphasis that did not endear him to the members of the Phet Buri Church. In one notable instance he came upon the non-Christian wife of a member of the church, who lived in the mission compound, teaching a Christian woman how to gamble. McClelland insisted that the first woman must move off the compound, and he refused to listen to pleas that she had never violated mission discipline before and would not again. The session[6] also suspended the Christian involved for a period of time. McClelland justified his apparently harsh measures against the gamblers by insisting that he had to protect the purity of the congregation. He stated, "I feel that the church must be kept pure even at the expense of their numbers." He refused to forgive the misdeeds of the two gamblers because he feared that the members of the church would misunderstand any act of leniency.[7]

McClelland's stance on church discipline and his strong personality provoked an immediate response from the church's

membership. Attendance at worship dwindled, and Nai Klai, the leading elder, refused to cooperate with McClelland to the extent that he eventually withdrew from the church entirely—taking a significant number of members with him—and began to harass the missionaries. Mary Cort reported the missionaries felt distressed over the way their relations with the members had deteriorated.[8] By 1882, however, McClelland and his family also experienced serious health problems and, in their turn, left for the United States never to return to Thailand. McClelland left behind him a stagnant church comprised of indifferent church members and a situation in which the general populous in Phet Buri no longer showed any interest in Christianity. Only those directly in mission employ continued to attend worship and associate themselves with the church. At the Bangkabun Church no one attended worship at all, and the people there advised an elder sent out from Phet Buri to tear down the chapel in Bangkabun because no one wanted to associate themselves with the church under the "new regime" in charge of the Christian community. The people missed McFarland, Dunlap, and Nai Klai.[9]

Just at this time and after a long period of recuperation in the United States, E. P. Dunlap returned to Phet Buri in early 1883, and the Phet Buri Church revived immediately. Between February and May of 1883 the formerly moribund church baptized sixteen adults and six children, and at the August communion service it joyfully celebrated the reception of fifteen converts and the election of two new elders. The church building was so full that day that chairs and benches had to be brought in to accommodate the overflow crowd.[10] Dunlap's leadership also led to a revival of the Bangkabun Church to such an extent that he established an inquirer's class to accommodate potential converts. Dunlap also persuaded the congregation at Bangkabun to donate funds to help build a Christian chapel in another village. After its November 1884 communion service, the Bangkabun Church held an impromptu congregational meeting which also resolved to build a new chapel at Bangkabun because the old chapel could not hold all who attended worship.[11]

In both churches former members returned to the fold. And in addition to this general restoration of the work, Nai Klai, whose actions always drew the most missionary attention, also came to

Dunlap and confessed he had acted wrongly in resisting the other missionaries. At his request, the church accepted him back into its membership. Dunlap also revived the evangelistic efforts of the station and especially emphasized rural evangelism. His efforts in this direction led to the founding of two more churches, one at Pak Thale in January 1884, and the other at Tha Rua Banphai in July 1885.[12]

Dunlap's style of leadership contrasted sharply with McClelland's, particularly with regard to the use of church discipline. As soon as he arrived in Phet Buri in 1880, as we have seen, McClelland began to pay close attention to the behavior of the members of the Phet Buri Church, and when he discovered improprieties he reported them to the session for disciplinary action. Thus, in its meetings on the 25th and 26th of December 1880, the session excommunicated one member for entering the Buddhist monkhood and another both for long failing to attend worship and for publicly renouncing Christianity. The session excommunicated another two members for gambling. In the following year, the session disciplined other members for extramarital sexual relations, for gambling, for intoxication, for secretly attending temple festivities, and for disobeying the session itself.[13] McClelland's reliance on discipline to instruct and correct church members and his use of the Phet Buri Church Session to exercise that discipline reflected traditional Presbyterian polity concerning the role of the session. That polity regarded the session as a church court responsible for maintaining the theological and moral purity of the local congregation.

Dunlap exercised disciplinary oversight of the Phet Buri Church in a manner very different from McClelland. Dunlap tended to bring disciplinary questions to the session much less frequently than McClelland; and when the session did call offending members before it, Dunlap preferred to warn them, rather than excommunicate or suspend members whose behavior violated church standards. Thus, on March 26, 1884, the session investigated one member accused of drunkenness, another accused of gambling, and another accused of violating the Sabbath. The session, under Dunlap's leadership, warned and instructed each of these individuals separately without exacting any other punishment. At times, however, Dunlap's leadership of the

session did lead it to take more direct disciplinary measures. The session, for example, suspended two other members accused of extramarital affairs from taking the sacrament of communion, one for a single communion and the other for an indefinite period. Towards the end of Dunlap's second period in Phet Buri, in the years 1885 and 1886, the session examined almost no cases of church discipline at all.[14] Dunlap did not eschew church discipline per se, but he argued that the church should exercise discipline on the basis of its value to the person disciplined. He acknowledged that missionaries had a responsibility to discipline church members, but he felt that discipline must be mixed with love and grace.[15]

One might divide the decade of the 1880s into two general periods according to the type of missionary leadership the church experienced. During the years when "caring" missionaries led the Phet Buri Church the congregation grew in numbers and seems to have had a relatively active church life. During those years, on the other hand, when the members of the church felt that the missionary leadership was not generous or caring, the church immediately declined in numbers and in active participation by members.

In the period from 1883 to 1886, Dunlap gave particular attention to the problem of the congregations' dependency on foreign money for support by emphasizing stewardship and giving. He reported mild success in getting the church members to give more generously to the church.[16] He also instituted a stricter policy concerning the reception of converts into the church. In order to insure that converts joined the church from "proper" motives, Dunlap saw that each applicant for membership underwent a two-month waiting period after she or he requested membership, received basic Christian education instruction, and passed a strict examination prior to reception for membership.[17] In the light of later events, we must call particular attention to these policies. They indicate that Dunlap shared something of McClelland's concern for a pure, a "clean church." Dunlap himself acknowledged the need for careful church discipline, but he emphasized purposeful discipline that sought changes in behavior. He believed that gentler forms of discipline usually gained better results.[18]

Dunlap's pastoral attitudes opened many doors in terms of

personal relationships. Other missionaries reported that he had a steady stream of visitors, both Christian and non-Christian, who came to him seeking his help and his advice. Some came to ask about Christianity. Others asked him to mediate interpersonal problems. Those who called upon his assistance trusted him to the extent that they generally followed his advice.[19] The Phet Buri Church itself thrived in the pastoral environment created by Dunlap, and the years 1882 to 1886 marked a period of growth and harmony in the life of the congregation.

Dunlap led a relatively active church in Phet Buri. His station report for 1886 reports that in addition to the Sunday School (7 teachers and 130 students), the church had a Foreign Mission and Bible Society and a rapidly growing woman's missionary society of 38 members led by Mary Cort. Cort also superintended the work of three Bible women who visited both members and non-members.[20]

Problems existed, however, which threw shadows across this otherwise bright scene. Dunlap himself observed that giving pastoral care to a Christian church located in the midst of a non-Christian culture and society posed difficult problems. In the case of Phet Buri, the larger culture constantly sought to pull converts away from their new faith and back to traditional religion. Dunlap felt that he should visit the members of the church as frequently as possible and encourage them in prayer, the reading of the Bible, and involving themselves in Christian activities in order to counter-act the danger that they might fall back into the larger society "outside." But Dunlap simply did not have time to carry out the myriad duties of running a mission station, conducting an active evangelistic program, and pastoring a church filled with new converts. His own sense of evangelistic duty and calling did not allow him to cease active involvement in evangelism in order to pastor those already converted.[21] The Siam Mission did not have sufficient personnel to send him assistance. Difficult interpersonal relationships between missionaries also kept him from concentrating on his pastoral duties.[22] At the very time when the growing church at Phet Buri needed particular pastoral attention, circumstances prevented a man who had the skills to give that attention from doing so.

The Phet Buri Church stood upon the fragile base of Dunlap's personality. So powerful was his personal influence that everyone in

Phet Buri considered him the "head of the Christians." People at every level of local society felt comfortable with him and held him in esteem. When members of the royal family and other officials visited Phet Buri they often made it a point to call on Dunlap because they realized that the station's work was important to the community. They gave money to support the educational and medical work of the station, and Dunlap occasionally used his relationship with these members of the social elite to get funds for projects he wanted to carry out.[23]

Everything, then, depended on Dunlap. It should have come as no surprise that in this high-pressure situation Dunlap's health once again broke. He was a man in a great hurry to fulfill his Christian duty as a missionary, and he drove himself mercilessly. He refused to listen to doctor's orders and pleas to get rest and take care of himself. Dunlap himself reported that he nearly died twice during the early months of 1888. Finally, in June 1888 he had to give up all his work and take an extended leave to rest. He eventually left the station and returned once again to the United States for a health furlough.[24]

Dunlap's illness and his leaving created an unstable situation in the Phet Buri Station and its churches. The "native" workers had to pick up much of the slack, but they were unable to carry on with church work as vigorously as Dunlap. The life of the church began to decline.[25] In the 1928 centennial history of Protestant missions in Thailand, the Rev. John A. Eakin, who later worked in Phet Buri, wrote the chapter on the history of the Phet Buri station. In that chapter Eakin praised Dunlap as an earnest, spiritual, sympathetic, generous person and went on to state that when Dunlap left the bottom fell out of the work at Phet Buri.[26] Although not apparent at the time, Dunlap's leaving marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the Phet Buri station—particularly because those who followed him sought to make a definite break with the past he represented.



## CHAPTER TWO

The Phet Buri station's entry into a new era took place within a larger context of events in the Siam Mission, and subsequent events in Phet Buri make sense only within that context. In 1884 the Rev. Egon Wachter, a Protestant convert from Catholicism and a native of Germany, joined the Siam Mission and eventually took charge of the First Presbyterian Church of Bangkok, generally known as the Samray Church. By early 1888, Wachter began expressing serious discontent concerning the quality of members in the Samray Church. He complained that they cared only for personal gain. They had converted for purely "worldly" reasons that had nothing to do with true Christian faith, and they showed no interest in salvation, caring only about their own comfort and advantage. All the converts wanted of Christianity, he felt, was for the missionaries to be their patrons so that they had financial security and influential help when they needed it. The members of the Samray Church, he insisted, knew nothing about self-giving or self-sacrifice. Wachter claimed that part of the problem grew out of the fact that the converts had never known a "true religion" before and thus had no frame of reference for being true Christians.[1]

Wachter argued that church members such as these hindered the spread of Christianity in Thailand because they themselves did not live pure Christian lives nor give a pure Christian witness to others. He held that the success of missionary evangelism in Thailand depended upon the preaching of the "pure Gospel." Wachter believed that the Christian message could not be changed nor adapted in any manner, neither in terms of doctrines nor in terms of ethical norms. The pure Gospel came from God and the Siam Mission's evangelistic success depended entirely upon its ability to maintain the purity of the Gospel it preached. He wrote, "I firmly believe that the pure gospel without any additions and supplements will exercise a greater power than all the means which may be in use to make it acceptable." [2] Wachter emphasized the undesirability of trying to attract converts with any form of social or pecuniary benefits.

In January 1889 Wachter wrote a letter to the Presbyterian