



Maxwell Lathrop

In Memoriam

March 1, 2004

"...how have the mighty fallen."

by Dr. John P. Roberts

Dr. Maxwell Lathrop - "Max" to all his friends--, pioneer missionary to the indigenous mission field in Mexico, original incorporating member, in 1936, together with storied missionary luminaries Drs. Kenneth Pike, Brainerd Legters, Richmond McKinney and Cameron Townsend, of the now world-wide Wycliffe Bible Translators / Summer Institute of Linguistics organizations, translator of Holy Scripture into the difficult Purepeche language of the Tarascans (no known affinity to any other language of the world), friend of Mexico's beloved President Carranza, was called home by his Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ, Monday, the first day of March, Year of our Lord 2004.

"This event," Dr. Keneth Pike has written of the WBT/SIL's 1936 incorporation (with Lathrop and the other men as the first Exectuve Committee), "was one of the most momentous decisions of modern missions." Together with Pike, Townsend, and the other first translators who soon grew into an advancing and unstoppable spiritual army, the entire world would come to be encompassed and transformed by the impact of the Word of God being spoken, for the first time, in the native tongues of most of the known languages of the earth.

While still a student at Westminster Theological Seminary, where he sat at the feet of theological giants-- Professors Oswald T. Allis, J. Gresham Machen, Ned Stonehouse, Cornelius Van Til and Paul Wooley--, during one auspicious summer break Max attended the second "Camp Wycliffe" set up by "Uncle Cam" Townsend, in Sulpher Springs, Arkansas (June 8, 1935), where he studied phonetics with Dr. McCreery. It was a short preparation which, together with his college (Lafayette College, Eaton, PA) and seminary training would last a life-time of adventure, danger and amazing work in the mountains of Michoacan, Mexico.

Nearly 7,000 feet above sea-level, the ethereal Lake Patzcuaro is the home of the Purepeche-speaking native marsh dwellers. Here, among the once feared warriors who almost alone among all the tribes of Mexico were able to defeat the dreaded Aztecs, Max first dedicated himself to the writing of an alphabet that would introduce them to the Prince of Peace. This inaugural work was soon followed by a Tarascan language primer and then, over the course of years, successive books of the New Testament, Hymns and Biblical studies. A major enterprise, as it involved running a printing press, along with his many efforts to introduce new manual industries to the

impoverished peoples of the region, his cottage by the lake became a beacon of hope much visited by missionaries, government dignitaries, tourists and of course, the always present native friends and spiritual brethren.

There too, among the laughter and joy of Christian service, came the sorrow that invariably accompanies those who give themselves to a greater cause: his young son slipped unnoticed one day under the chilly waters of Lake Patzcuaro -- a lake bright with the famous "butterfly fishing nets" pictured in geographic magazines around the world, and silvery highway which brought the Tarascan families on reed boats to the Lathrop's doorstep to hear of Him who is Victor over the human sadness, impoverishment and death with which they, and now brother Max, were all-too acquainted.

As his pastor for several years, Max seldom spoke to me of this great tragedy; but no conversation ever ended without his having asked the all-important question driving his life and ministry: "What have you done, today, to show forth God's glory?" A self-identified "Doxist," Max had little time for denominations and their squabbles; but he did help me and Dr. P.Y. DeJong establish, in the mid 80's, the Reformed Church of the Valley, of which he was a proud member. A fixture at the Wycliffe banquets in South Texas, most people looked upon Max as a "walking history," as one young person told me. And while the churches in North America which he so diligently represented seemed content to let this living "history" slip by during this period of his life, in God's providence the important work in Mexico begun among the Purepeche was encouraged and supported by the visionary endeavors of the Westminster Biblical Missions (WBM - PA), which continues to seek for a person who will follow in the footsteps of Dr. Lathrop's Tarascan ministry.

Max cannot be replaced -- but his work *can* be continued, and it was his last prayers and wishes in this life that some young man studying for ministry would some day contact WBM for service there along the banks of the Patzcuaro. Although I was pleased to nominate him to Juan Calvino Theological Seminary's annual recognition of those who have provided the greatest service and ministry to the Churches in Mexico, I can think of no more fitting praise than the continuation of his mission. Awarded the Seminary's Doctor of Theology degree, *Honoris Causa*, for his contribution to the growth of the Church in Mexico, cited by the Mexican government for his exemplary promotion of the educational, medical, economic and social needs of the native Tarascans, and known by me and many others as one of the great advancers of the Kingdom of God, Max, nevertheless, must best be remembered, I believe, in his own words. Asked once at a banquet to identify himself, Dr. Lathrop's answer captured my heart: "I am a simple man, praising God in simple ways."

"I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all thy works." -- Psalm 73:28

A Memorial Service was held at the Reformed Church of the Valley, Sunday, March 7, 2004 at 3 p.m.