

Mission's Focus Shifts Over Eight Decades

The world mission conference held this year in Melbourne, Australia, was a result of an interesting development in ecumenism. The first one began in Edinburgh, 1910. World mission conferences have stimulated the study of missions and evangelism. They have brought together Christian leaders from all over the world. They were forums for debate, times of serious searching of Scripture, and questioning of attitudes towards receiving nations. But their usefulness is now challenged. The new theological trends within the ranks of the World Council of Churches (WCC) are a cause of deep concern for evangelicals who perform the lion's share of the mission work being done. They are ill at ease with the pronouncements made by ecumenical mission leaders. The history of the world mission conferences tells why evangelicals hesitate to get involved in WCC sponsored mission conferences.

Edinburgh, 1910

The 19th century witnessed the advance of Christian missions. By 1900, Protestant Christianity was worldwide. Many felt that the time had come to convene a world mission conference. The conference was called ecumenical. This description was not given because it pretended to represent every sector of the Christian church, but because it represented mission work in every sector of the inhabited world. So the Edinburgh conference became the first truly representative worldwide interdenominational and the largest mission conference the history of the church had ever witnessed.

The delegates faced the future full of confidence and optimism. Many Christians felt euphoric about world conditions. Only a few recognized that Edinburgh would be the end of the great era of world mission expansion. Political tensions were already leading towards the First World War.

The spirit of optimism was reflected by the first speaker at the conference, Lord Balfour of Burleigh. He described the opportunities of the churches in the West in these noble terms: "Nations in the East are awakening. They are looking for two things: they are looking for enlightenment and for liberty. Christianity alone of all religion meets these demands in the highest degree. There cannot be Christianity without liberty and liberty without at least the restraint of Christian ideals is full of danger. There is a power unique in Christianity of all religions to uplift and to ennoble, and for this reason, that it has its roots and its foundations in self-sacrifice and in love."

The slogan of the conference "The Evangelization of the Word in this Generation" had basic Biblical connotations. Most of those attending believed that all men were lost and that all men needed to hear the Gospel. Gerald Anderson comments: "Most participants seemed to take for granted that the Great Commission of Christ (Matthew 28:19) was the only basis needed for the missionary enterprise ... the missionary obligation was considered a self-evident axiom to be obeyed, not to be questioned."

The president of the conference was the Methodist lay-leader John R. Mott. He was an evangelical who was closely associated with the famous evangelist D.L. Moody. Just before he died in 1955, he wrote a letter to Toronto's well known Evangelical Baptist pastor, Dr. T.T. Shields, editor of *The Gospel Witness*. This letter revealed his deep concern about the developments within ecumenism.

"Dear Dr. Shields:

Your vitally important paper, *The Gospel Witness* and *Protestant Advocate*, reaches me regularly and commands my sympathetic attention. The last number, notably the one containing your sermon on The King of Glory Shall Come In, has moved me more profoundly than any of the many vital numbers. With all my heart I thank you and thank God for this highly important and deeply moving message. Never was your faithful witness more needed, near and far, than in the period through which we are now passing. With highest regard,"

More than thirteen hundred delegates were from the Western churches. There were only thirty from the "young" churches and not one had come as a representative of a church. Yet the delegates knew that the church in every part of the world had begun to stir. They talked about the future of the "native" churches. But the response of the members of the younger churches was a real surprise. V.S. Azariah, the first Indian Bishop of the Anglican Church in India, voiced the paternalistic attitude of missionaries towards nationals in his country and elsewhere. He said to a stunned audience: "You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. We also ask for love. Give us friends!"

The Edinburgh conference led to the formation of an ecumenical mission endeavour. As a result, the International Missionary Council was founded in 1921, at Lake Mohawk, New York.

Jerusalem, 1928

The second conference met at the height of the worldwide economic boom that burst a few months later, ushering in the "Great Depression." The theme was "Life and message of Christendom in relation to non-Christian religious systems and rising secularism."

At the gathering, most of the delegates had become aware that the familiar term "mission fields" was growing obsolete. It seems that at this time, the term "younger church" came into general use. Evangelical delegates discovered a growing desire on the part of the liberals to approach non-Christian religions with sympathy and an appreciation foreign to New Testament standards. There was a move towards universalism. Bishop Stephen Neill, a prominent WCC leader, observed: "Evangelism was no longer in the centre of the picture, and no more was heard of the evangelization of the world in this generation."

The bishop believed that the Jerusalem conference had crossed a dangerous theological threshold. He said: "This was the moment at which liberal theology exercised its most fatal influence on missionary thinking, the lowest valley out of which the missionary movement has ever since been trying to make its way."

Tambaran, Madras, 1938

This conference met under the threat of the approaching Second World War. Nearly half of the delegates were members of the younger churches. They had the right to speak. This was a great advantage. Yet they took little constructive part in the discussions of the conference.

The delegates recognized the obvious, that the church itself is the centre and focal point of the missionary enterprise. The chief objective of missions is to plant churches. Tambaran received its fame through Hendrik Kraemer's pre-conference book *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. The work is now a classic in mission literature. Kraemer confronted everyone with the problem of revelation, its nature and authority. He also emphasized the unique character of the biblical message. Evangelicals were encouraged by his opposition to universalism. Yet they were disturbed about the strong Barthian influence in his theology.

The conference didn't come to any theological conclusion. It remained deliberately vague.

Whitby, Canada

At Whitby, the distinction between older and younger churches was gone. Some of the leaders of the younger churches had had to learn to take over responsibility for every part of the church's work. Many missionaries had become either deported or interned during the Second World War.

The key concept of the conference was "Partnership in Responsibility." The conference declared that the younger churches had - "absolute spiritual equality, and of their right to manage their own affairs, to frame their own policies, and, under the guidance of God the Holy Spirit, to bear their own distinctive witness in the world, as the instrument by which God wills to bring to Christ, the whole population of the lands in which they dwell."

Willingen, W. Germany, 1952

This conference was overwhelmed by the formation of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948 in Amsterdam. It met under the shadow of global tension, and while the Chinese churches were forced to break relations with other churches. It was also the time of restoration of full fellowship with German missions. The main questions discussed were: "What is the place of missions in the life and witness of the Church?" "What is the actual nature of the Church's mission?" No longer did the delegates speak

of "our" mission and "our" missionaries. The emphasis fell on Missio Dei, God's mission, and on the sent one of the Father, Jesus Christ and His work in the world.

Accra, Ghana, Africa, 1957-58

This gathering ushered in a new era of relations between the churches in the East and the West. No longer did anyone want to talk about foreign and home missions. The home front of missions was everywhere. The delegates also wanted to go into a new direction. "Why should there not be a joint assembly of the International Missionary Council and World Council of Churches, convened with a view of seeking an organizational integration of these two bodies? Why not eliminate the difference between churches and missions? Why not a new concept: the Church is the Mission and the Mission is the Church? The day of missionary societies is over. Why not take aggressive steps toward the reunion of all the churches of Christendom, scattered throughout the earth?"

In November, 1961, at New Delhi, the dream of integration became a reality. The Missionary Council became the WCC's "commission for world mission and evangelism."

Mexico City, 1963

This was the first conference held in Latin America. Its theme was "Missions in six continents." The West had lost its dominant position. Asian and African churches had become proud of their own identity. The obsolete distinction between "Western mission" and "native churches" was abandoned. Mexico City kept alive the idea of seeing the home-front of evangelism as everywhere.

The conference ended with delegates issuing a message: "We affirm that all Christians are called to go forward in this task together. We believe that the time has now come when we must move onwards to common planning and joint action. The fact that Christ is not divided must be made unmistakably plain in the very structure of missionary work. Our present forms of missionary organization do not openly manifest that fact; they often conceal it. The far-reaching consequences for all churches must be faced... We do not yet see all the changes this demands; but we go forward in faith. God's promise still stands; to sum up all things in Christ. In this hope we dedicate ourselves anew to His mission in the spirit of unity and in humble dependence upon our living Lord.

Bangkok 1972-73

The Bangkok Conference with its slogan "Salvation Today" stood on the shoulders of Mexico city, 1963. It reaffirmed the reality of the relative presence of the church in six continents. For the first time there was equal representation between old and "mission" fields and the old "Christian" world. There were also representatives from large nonmissionary churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

The delegates sought to explain the meaning of salvation today, in the light of the concrete historical situation of contemporary mankind. Many veered away from the Biblical view of salvation by looking to Karl Marx and sometimes to secular technocrats. There was a sense of cautious optimism about the possibilities of changing and renewal of cultures. Salvation became for many social and economic liberation; a search for the quality of life in the here and now.

The conference called for a “moratorium on sending funds and personnel, while receiving churches sought their own identity and worked out their own understanding of mission.”

In general the reaction of evangelicals to the conference has been negative. C. Peter Wagner, in his *World Vision Magazine* report, said “delegates appeared more inclined to promote social justice than to avoid the final judgement.” According to Peter Beyerhaus, the fundamental problem was the fact that “Scripture ... was not allowed to play its majestic role in Bangkok. It was ... substituted by a situationalist approach ... called ‘contextuality’.”

What value do mission conferences have? The early gatherings were useful in generating new insights, stimulating missions and bringing together mission and church leaders for discussion. In our jet age, easy communication, and high inflation, the value seems to be mainly with the level of inspiration produced in the lives of the participants. The pronouncements and inspiration of the conferences in our time do not filter down to the places where the action is. We need absolute commitment of the whole church to the Gospel in her obedient response to the Lord’s Great Commission.

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