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(To consider Missionary Problems in relation to the Non-Christian World)

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THE MISSIONS OF THE EARLY CHURCH IN THEIR BEARING ON MODERN MISSIONS

By the Rev. Professor H. A. A. KENNEDY, D.D., D.Sc.

Address delivered in the Assembly Hall on Thursday Evening, 16th June

1. *The Preparation for Christianity.*—In comparisons of the modern with the primitive situation on the mission field, it is common to find a sharp contrast drawn between the preparation of the Græco-Roman world for the Christian mission, and the attitude of mind which now confronts the missionary as he enters on a campaign among heathen peoples. There are elements in the contrast which may be frankly admitted. The Jewish Synagogues of the Dispersion, by their active propaganda of such doctrines as monotheism and retribution, had, unconsciously, been fertilising the soil of paganism. There was a wistful gaze turned towards the East, and men were ready to assimilate the mystic speculations and ritual presented to them by the travelling preachers of Oriental faiths. As the old naïve religions decayed, the needs of the moral consciousness asserted themselves. There was a widespread craving for victory over the material in all its aspects, and for communion with the Divine. External conditions also bore witness to the "fulness of the time." The common language, the affinity of sentiment, the generally attained order of civilisation, the unity of government—all these phenomena were influences of no ordinary value in "pre-

paring the way of the Lord." The very mention of those helps is likely to call up definite hindrances to the mind of the modern missionary. The necessity of shaping innumerable languages into suitable instruments for spiritual quickening and instruction, the extraordinary variety of levels in culture on the mission field, the complex array of social structures which confront him, the constant lack of civil or political organisation among heathen peoples—what perplexing problems do the existing facts of the situation suggest, as contrasted with those of the earlier times. And yet there are counterbalancing forces which must not be ignored. The evidence for these is amply available in the Reports presented to this Conference.

Of paramount importance is the remarkable accessibility of the non-Christian world. In close correlation with this accessibility is the diminishing hold of the non-Christian religions on the educated and influential classes. This general feature is not discounted by the fact that there are sporadic revivals of these ancient faiths, such as the renewed vigour of Buddhism in Burma and Ceylon, the recent deification of Confucius in China, the activity of neo-Hindu schools of thought in India, like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj, with their curious religious syncretism. Rather do such phenomena directly recall the environment of the earliest Christian missions. And when we view with thankful wonder the flowing tide of spiritual life in Korea, the moving towards Christianity of the "depressed" masses in India, the stirring of aspiration both in the educated classes and the illiterate population of China, we realise, without questioning, that the laborious preparation of years has at length opened a new era of spiritual possibilities.

2. *The Creative Personality in Mission Work.* — The prepared field of the Græco-Roman world was claimed and cultivated for Christ by the Apostle Paul and his fellow-workers. Here, at the very outset, we are confronted with the supreme value for the missionary enterprise of the inspiring, compelling personality. The first missionaries, men like Paul and Barnabas and other nameless labourers,

through their invincible faith in the living Lord, and their complete self-surrender to His service, were masters of extraordinary spiritual resources. They were unique religious forces. St. Paul's character was truly creative. The nature of his contact with those whom he brought under the sway of Christ is made plain by the Epistles. Take the earliest missionary document in Christian literature, the First Letter to the Thessalonians. Chapter II. contains a singularly attractive description of the relation between the missionary and his converts: "We were gentle in the midst of you, as when a nurse cherisheth her own children: even so, being affectionately desirous of you, we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls, because ye were become very dear to us" (vv. 7–8). There is the situation in a sentence. It sets forth a splendid missionary ideal, whose significance for the communities which St. Paul evangelised can scarcely be over-estimated. For it is a commonplace that "the best instrument in all mission work is the personality of the missionary himself" (Weinel). We have numerous examples of this throughout the early history of the Christian mission. I need only remind you of the extraordinary importance of Origen of Alexandria for the influence and diffusion of the Christian faith among the educated classes of his time.

Indeed, at this point, we seem to light upon one of the chief explanations of the spiritual solidity with which Christianity was established at so many centres in the first epoch of missionary enterprise. Apart from the workings of that Divine Spirit, whose energy is ever almighty, the earliest Christian communities were built up on the genuine devotion of individuals to the self-sacrificing men who had brought them the good news of Jesus Christ.

The earnestness with which St. Paul strives to maintain this affectionate personal relationship shows what it meant for him. And its effects on the mission field are no less noteworthy. On the ground of it, St. Paul could say to his converts, "Be ye imitators together of me" (Phil. iii. 17). The full significance of this bold language for the missionary enterprise of to-day is illumined by the following sentence

from Herr Inspektor Warneck's *Living Forces of the Gospel*: "Jesus as a pattern for heathen-Christians implies a higher stage of Christian life than many have reached. The majority of Christians in the Indian Archipelago look to the elders and teachers as examples, and they to the missionary" (p. 275, Eng. Tr.). But it would be a complete misconception of the circumstances to regard these inspiring Christian personalities of the early mission as isolated individuals, who laid all the emphasis on their personal presentation of the redeeming benefits of Christ. As a matter of fact, what differentiated the missionary activity of St. Paul and his fellow-workers from the travelling preachers of the second century, as described, for example, by Eusebius, was the invariably close connection of the former with the Church from which they had gone forth. So prominent was this feature that "the work of the individual was practically regarded as the operation of the Church through him" (Hauck). One has only to refer to such passages as Acts xiv. 26: "Thence they sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been committed to the grace of God for the work which they had fulfilled."

3. *The Nature of Missionary Preaching.*—"The ministry of the Word stands forth pre-eminently as a missionary instrument in the early Church" (Lindsay). We must attempt in the briefest fashion to estimate the main features of early missionary preaching. This is by no means easy. I am not sure that we can form a very definite picture even in the case of St. Paul himself. Nothing is more noteworthy in the Christian literature of the second and third centuries than the divergent descriptions of the presentation of Christianity, and of those elements in it which appealed to the hearts of men. Still, certain guiding principles of the primitive preaching may be ascertained. And for these we naturally turn to the Epistles and the Acts of the Apostles.

Various scholars have pointed out that the first three chapters of the Epistle to the Romans give a typical example of the lines on which St. Paul laid down his appeal to the heathen world. The facts are specially suggestive in two directions. On the one hand, the Apostle assumes a

natural or instinctive knowledge of God in Gentile as well as Jew. On the other, he starts with the presupposition that all have sinned, and stand in need of redemption. We are safe in believing that these two elements were always prominent in St. Paul's missionary preaching. Good evidence for the one fundamental position is to be found in such passages as 1 Cor. ii. 2 f.: "I determined not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." The other is powerfully attested by the reports of St. Paul's addresses at Lystra and Athens. Now these two main positions are extraordinarily illuminating for all missionary preaching. The one is immediately derived from St. Paul's own religious experience. He has proved for himself that Christ can redeem from sin and moral failure, and that as the Redeemer He has completely unveiled the fatherly heart of the all-holy God, who yearns to draw all men into living fellowship with Himself. This is a Gospel for all time and for all people. Whatever resources the missionary may possess, he must have a message which he can interpret in the light of his own spiritual experience. St. Paul's second basal standpoint is summarised in the famous passage of 1 Cor. ix., which concludes with these words: "I am become all things to all men, that I may by all means save some" (ix. 22). Here the Apostle reveals his marvellous insight into the essential principles of missionary effort. He knows how many of the religious and ethical conceptions of those to whom he preaches must ultimately be transformed, if they are to be worthy followers of Jesus Christ. But he will begin by constructive rather than destructive operations. And so he seeks a point of contact with his hearers in what he calls "the truth of God" (Rom. i. 25), a truth possessed by mankind, which many "hold down" or "hinder" "in unrighteousnes" (Rom. i. 18). Nay, more. His vista embraces the widest possible range. "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are reverend, whatsoever things are righteous, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be anything worthy of praise, take account of these things" (Phil. iv. 8).

It is difficult to estimate precisely the extent to which these mutually complementary methods were followed in the first three centuries. There could not be many missionary preachers who penetrated so profoundly into the depths of the Christian revelation as St. Paul did. But redemption from sin and moral helplessness was a fact, and the proclamation of Christ as the Saviour in the widest sense to a society which, whether half-consciously or earnestly, craved for moral and spiritual deliverance, remained in the forefront of early missionary preaching. Alongside of this, there were interesting developments of the other strain in St. Paul's appeal. This is especially evident in the work of the Christian apologists. These men emphasised the ideas common to Christianity and the highest pagan thought. But in seeking to demonstrate that the religion which they had embraced included within itself the worthiest ideals of Gentile aspiration, these converts from heathenism did not take up the position of cold observers, but, as Kähler aptly remarks, "gave expression," in their apologies, "to the inner movements of their own lives" (*Angewandte Dogmen*, p. 421).

The bearing of St. Paul's method, as illustrated by these two great principles, upon the modern missionary enterprise, is too obvious to require lengthened comment. It is superfluous here to lay stress on the unchanging need of genuine evangelism. This is strikingly emphasised in the Reports of the Commissions presented to the Conference. For example, "There is virtual agreement that the first need of India is for the preaching of the Gospel message" (Vol. I., p. 132). But what of St. Paul's normative principle of finding common ground with his audience? Here is one of the most urgent problems for the missionary enterprise. We know how manfully it is being grappled with. The Report of Commission IV. tells how, in China, Christian teaching and preachers have largely appropriated Buddhist terminology. From Japan we hear, for example, of Mr. Arthur Lloyd's remarkable attempt to interpret the faith of Christ to Japanese Buddhists through the medium of the Shinshu theology. In India, a deepening knowledge of the religious

thought of Hinduism is indicating avenues of approach to the religious consciousness of the people, which possess extraordinary possibilities. "If Christianity," says Canon Robinson, "can be defined as a personal surrender and devotion to Jesus Christ, the passionate devotion to Râma or Krishna, which is the essential characteristic of the *bhakti* worship of India, ought to prepare the minds of its worshippers to understand the meaning and basis of the Christian faith" (*The Interpretation of the Character of Christ to Non-Christian Races*, p. 44). The suggestion has been made in one of the Reports that "a few prominent missionaries should devote themselves entirely to the apologetic work of overcoming the pantheism of India from within." A splendid example of the lines on which such a suggestion might be carried out is found in Mr. A. G. Hogg's masterly study of *Karma and Redemption*, which is itself a proof of the gain that may come to Christian theology from the sympathetic study of Eastern religions.

4. *The Effects of Mission Work as Causes of the Expansion of Christianity.*—There is nothing more plain in the history of the first three centuries than that the effects of the mission work accomplished became, in turn, the causes of the propagation of the Christian faith. Christianity was seen to be an actual force, an actual fact, in the lives of men and women by their heathen neighbours. Certain evidences of this were peculiarly impressive. There was, *e.g.*, the banishing of the spirit of fear from an existence haunted by an environment of evil spirits. Its place was taken by the joy which sprang from the consciousness of salvation. "If God be for us, who can be against us?" This was newness of life, eternal life, a life hid with Christ in God. And the new spirit was far more than emotion. Its fruits were, in the highest sense, practical. It expressed itself pre-eminently in the attitude of love and brotherhood. Compassion extended far beyond its ordinary limits, as exemplified in the guilds and associations of contemporary society. "The power of this helpful love," as Prof. Warneck suggestively observes, "lay in the fact that it went forth from persons who had been heathens themselves, *i.e.* from native

Christians" (*Allgem. Missions-Zeitschr.*, xxx. p. 410). In such an atmosphere social distinctions were largely obliterated. It was possible for a slave to be Bishop of Rome about A.D. 200. And this same temper of brotherhood, linking one Christian community to another, speedily created a mighty society, whose very existence became a powerful instrument for winning adherents to its cause. Most of these phenomena have their parallels in modern missionary work. One in particular must be mentioned, which reminds us how vividly the conditions of the apostolic age are mirrored in our own. Already, from the Epistles, it is clear that there could exist side by side in the earliest Christian communities a very real faith and a very defective morality. Light is shed on the situation by the fact emphasised more than once in the Reports presented to the Conference that the sense of sin is a comparatively late growth in the consciousness of the convert from heathenism, and has really to be created by his new relation to Christ. But the phenomenon, as a whole, is, of course, intimately connected with the social organisation to which the individual belongs. Here the unit is, as a rule, I need scarcely remind you, the family, with all its traditions and heritage of customs.

5. *The Relation of Christian Missions to Heathen Social Life.*—Thus we are confronted with the problem which the early missionaries had to face, and which still perplexes the worker in the foreign field. What attitude ought the mission to take towards important elements belonging to the very texture of heathen thought and sentiment? Here some issues are perfectly clear. In writing to the Thessalonians, St. Paul selects as fundamental for their new outlook their "turning from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Thess. i. 9). At this point a complete break with their past is inevitable. "Ye cannot," he urges upon the Corinthians, "drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" (1 Cor. x. 21). This attitude was normative for early Christian missions. There could be no compromise with idolatry. The practical significance of the situation is interpreted by the remark of Herr Inspektor Warneck, that rarely does

an apostate seek Divine forgiveness, but apostasy implies a serious deadening of the conscience (*Living Forces of the Gospel*, p. 294). But many ethical situations on the mission field are far more complex. St. Paul's masterly handling of two prominent difficulties in the Corinthian Church, mixed marriages, and the partaking of food which had been used in pagan worship, is full of suggestion, because of its ripe moderation and spiritual tact. While he raises the discussion to a high religious level, the Apostle is careful not to lay down rigid rules. But that is a very different course from favouring laxity. In the early days of Christian missions there was not always available a balanced wisdom like that of St. Paul, and serious consequences followed. Asia Minor, where the faith had won its most rapid victories, was the region within which Paganism re-appeared in the Church. In that age it was the chosen home of religious syncretism. So that, inevitably, certain foreign elements became fused with Christianity, which detracted from its spirituality and tended to externalism. Even more. We find, for example, that the famous Church leader, Gregory Thaumaturgus, deliberately relaxed the earlier discipline, and "allowed the rude multitude to enjoy their festivals," but now "in Christian guise." "The cult of the martyrs" (I quote from Harnack), "took the place of the old local cults, and the old fetishes were succeeded by the relics of the saints" (*Expansion*, ii. p. 208). Christianity undoubtedly became popular, but at too great a cost. Everything points to a similar combination of circumstances as likely to confront the modern missionary enterprise. Already mass movements towards Christianity are taking shape. As in the third century, these are the channels through which alien ideas will flow into the Christian society. To realise the good in them, and to ward off the evil, will demand a high degree of spiritual insight and practical wisdom. For, unquestionably, all arbitrary action must be avoided. The missionary dare not shut his eyes against forces of religious value which may reveal themselves in heathen ideals. These may prove veritable stepping-stones towards a solid Christian position. In any case the

ideas and the customs which are the very substratum of heathen society must be studied without prejudice. "The religion of Christ," we read in the Report of Commission II., "interpreted in the light of the incarnation, finds everywhere traces of that Light which lighteneth every man, that seminal Word, giving fragments of Truth even to those not privileged to know God in Christ. The missionary so instructed asks of any custom, What is the *truth* in it, by which it has lived through these many centuries?" (Vol. II., p. 113).

This problem is exemplified in the supremacy of caste in India (see pp. 115, 116). A problem of a similar kind emerges with reference to ancestor-worship in China. In any case, we have to be reminded, as the Report just quoted aptly suggests, "of the deep reverence which our Lord and St. Paul paid to the personality of those with whom they had dealings, and that the one end of law, and of discipline as guarding law, is the development of the sense of sin; in other words, the training of a Christian conscience within the Church under our care" (p. 118).

Deep penetration and a far-reaching outlook are needful for determining the relation of the Christian mission to elements in heathen society which seem, for the present, at least, to form an integral part of racial thought and feeling, and differences of judgment are sure to reveal themselves as regards the application of apostolic principles to definite situations.

6. *The Nature and Organisation of the Church on the Mission Field.*—But there appears to be practical unanimity of conviction as to the *last* question which I wish to emphasise, the necessity of an indigenous Christian Church. Here, indeed, great divergence of view may prevail regarding ultimate forms of organisation and administration. But most, if not all, competent observers seem to believe that the non-Christian races must be evangelised by Churches composed of their own kith and kin. Perhaps this is the sphere in which most may be learned for the modern campaign from a careful survey of the earliest Christian missions. I must here remind you, that by the end of the second century there was no regular organised system of what is technically called "missionary" effort. There were, indeed, to be found

certain travelling preachers, but their work does not seem to have been of primary importance. And yet this was a period when Christianity extended its sway by leaps and bounds. The secret is to be discovered in the missionary enthusiasm of the organised Christian communities. St. Paul's plan of operation is familiar to us all. He chose strategic positions, planted strong congregations at these points, assured that Christian influence must inevitably radiate from them in all directions. It is needless for our purpose to dwell on the organisation of these communities. On the one hand, those founded by a prominent apostle like St. Paul, and acknowledging him as their spiritual father, were for that very reason linked to one another by powerful ties. On the other hand, it is evident from early Christian literature that, for the first two centuries at least, each of these communities was more or less an independent local unit, a representative in itself of the Church of God. To this condition of things there corresponded, in the earlier era, the existence of a prophetic and a local ministry; the one common to a wide range of communities, the other belonging to a definite congregation. Unquestionably these separate congregations came at a very early stage to have the consciousness that they were parts of one great Church. This was, as Tertullian says, "because they gave each other the salutation of peace, regarded each other as brethren, and practised the interchange of hospitality." The various Christian communities therefore, in each province of the Roman Empire, became the centres of missionary activity. Probably the first converts in each came to take a leading part in the teaching and administration of their congregations. In any case, those who primarily directed the work of the Churches were natives of the soil. Hence the Churches of Asia Minor, or of Africa, or of Italy developed in accordance with the genius of the country. There was nothing exotic about them. They were self-governing, self-supporting, and in the highest degree self-propagating. Their methods of organisation and evangelisation must have grown spontaneously out of their environment. This could be proved by examples. Now, their powerful impulse to expansion bears witness to the intensity of Christian inspiration

which they had received from their founders. St. Paul had trained his converts with immense pains in his own spirit. They felt that they were debtors to their neighbours. And they embraced all sorts of opportunities to win men for their Lord. In the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, *e.g.*, there is a charming story of three friends on a pleasure excursion, in which the two Christians of the group shaped the conversation so as to influence the heathen for Christ. This effort went on in all directions, in households, in the street, in places of business, among artisans, and in circles of the educated. Another feature of incalculable value for the success of the Christian movement lay in the common ground occupied by the members of the Church and those whom they sought to bring into its fellowship. A common heritage of customs and ideas, a common education, a common social life, that impalpable community of sentiment which no outsider can fully appreciate—these must always be factors of decisive moment even for the interpretation of a Gospel which transcends national limitations. And all this eager activity was buttressed by the splendid development of the Christian society, "from the local to the provincial Church, and from that to the larger league of Churches, in Synods." The direct bearing of these facts of primitive Christianity upon the modern situation requires little emphasis.

The history of the earliest Christian missions is an eloquent testimony to the assimilative power of indigenous Churches. Much energy has been concentrated, and wisely concentrated, on the establishing of healthy organisations. These organisations have, like those of the Early Church, been often modelled according to the framework of native institutions, a course which seems essential to their success. Perhaps more attention must be given "to the development of the native gifts of spiritual and mental energy (I quote from the Report of Commission II.), to secure for the Church in the mission field, in every case, room for its own characteristic development." The example of the Early Church suggests that the time has fully come to deepen, in the native Churches, the sense of responsibility to the non-Christians who are about them.

Missionary experience in Uganda, and more recently in Korea and Manchuria, most impressively attests the wisdom of the methods followed in the opening centuries of our era. And the recommendations of Commission I. on this subject (pp. 368, 369), embody a wise adaptation of the fundamental principles of the Early Church to the modern situation.

I have attempted to bring into prominence certain selected factors and methods in the missions of the Early Church which seemed to be of permanent value for the modern missionary enterprise. But the force of that splendid example will inevitably be lost, unless we share with Apostolic Christianity its profound impression of the unspeakable worth of Christ, unless we are possessed in heart and soul by the supreme conviction of the chief Apostle that the Gospel of Christ "is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth."