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

THE HISTORY AND RECORDS OF THE CONFERENCE

TOGETHER WITH
ADDRESSES DELIVERED AT THE
EVENING MEETINGS

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THE EXPANSION OF CHRISTIANITY IN THE EARLY CENTURIES

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR A. R. MACEWEN, D.D.,
NEW COLLEGE

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THE title given to the subject has been taken, it may be assumed, from Dr. Harnack's erudite and impressive treatise, and I shall follow Harnack so far as to confine myself to the first three centuries. When at the beginning of the fourth century Christianity became a State religion, and the Emperor resolved to convene an Œcumenical Council, the expansion of Christianity assumed a new character. Everything I shall say refers to the ages preceding that momentous change—to the ages when the Church had no "Home Base," when in every land she was a stranger, when the history of the Church was the history of a Foreign Mission.

The progress made by Christianity in this period was more important and determinative than any other change in the religious history of mankind. In the first three centuries Christianity was so planted and rooted in the centres of progressive civilisation that it inevitably became the most influential religion in the world, the most potent factor in the development of human life.

Further, this result had been achieved in face of strong, deadly opposition. Although a few of the emperors had wavered, not one of them had rendered any real service to the Christian cause. The wisest of them, the most

statesman-like and far-sighted, had been its keenest opponents—opponents far more skilful than any Chinese Empress or Turkish Sultan. As its rivals, it had religions of almost unlimited variety with attractions for men of every mood and grade—from the classical mythologies made glorious by Greece and imperial by Rome, to the soothing, dreamy theosophies nurtured in the Near East. Some of these religions had wise thinkers as their advocates, but neither philosophers nor moralists showed any fair appreciation of Christian teaching.

On the Christian side of the contest there were ranged few men of conspicuous ability. Between New Testament times and Constantine, not more than two Christians reached the front rank of genius, and of these two, the one (Origen) was deposed from office as a heretic, and the other (Tertullian) abandoned the Church, and denounced her for her worldliness. The closest survey of the personal, social, and intellectual forces by which the Christian mission was supported yields no explanation of its success.

Although the praise must be ascribed to the operation of the Holy Spirit, He worked, as always, through human agencies, and therefore the methods and the spirit of the men and women whom He employed call for our close attention. If it be said that the methods and the spirit of the early centuries cannot be reproduced or even imitated in our day, the answer is—(1) that many parts of the modern mission field closely resemble the Europe, Africa, and Asia Minor of those times; and (2) that we are called not to parrot-like reproduction or formal imitation, but to thoughtful consideration of their work. I shall indicate generally the lines in which guidance may be found.

Let us begin by setting aside a few mistaken notions which have, the Conference papers show, a place in some men's minds.

1. The progress of Christianity was not due to external unity nor to uniformity of method. There was no central authority or general organisation. The pioneering of St. Paul was splendidly devised, but after his death and the downfall of the Church in Palestine, no plan can be traced.

The first known Church councils were held a full century after the Council of Jerusalem, and they were strictly local, convened to deal with local heresies. Another century passed before councils became frequent, and then they accentuated instead of removing differences which had arisen. There was, indeed, a growing disposition to look to Rome as an example and a guide, but the disposition disappeared whenever Rome became unreasonable or imperious.

Accordingly, in the absence of central control, the methods of government and administration varied in different localities, and this was not found to be a hindrance or a drawback to effective work. On the contrary, the Church gained strength from elasticity and pliancy. The separate missions adapted themselves to the temper, culture, and political habits of the districts in which they were planted. They were held together to a very remarkable extent by deputations and correspondence, by the reading of the same sacred books, the use of the same sacraments, and the inworking of the same Spirit, but there was no fixed organism or visible authority, no machinery for issuing edicts or prescribing creeds, or even for adjusting discipline and dioceses. It was only after the battle with paganism had been won that external unity was secured.

2. Although there was adaptation to local conditions, there was not the slightest accommodation to paganism either local or imperial. The antagonism to idolatry in all its phases was unqualified and keen; sometimes it was almost proud. Take the martyr Polycarp as an example. His life would have been spared if he had consented to bow before the genius of the Emperor—a concession which an easy judgment might have tolerated. When the pro-consul in charge urged him to say, "Away with the atheists!" he looked severely upon the pagan crowd, praying, "Away with *these* atheists!" Then the pro-consul, who wished to save Polycarp's life, called him to present his case to the people. "To thee," he replied, "I would willingly speak . . . but those men are unworthy to hear my defence." These contemptuous words, which are quoted with admiration by the survivors of the saint, fairly represent the convictions of

most of the early Apologists, whose tractates addressed to the heathen were the only missionary literature. Some of them, indeed, recognised that there had been Christians before Christ, and that God had never left Himself without a witness, while a very few acknowledged that the old idolatries had been part of God's training of the Gentiles, and attempted to measure their religious worth. Yet even these last were unsparing in condemnation of the religions of their own times, and repudiated any proposals to blend pagan usages, or traditions, or ideals with Christian worship and beliefs.

3. The expansion of Christianity was not due to strong tides of the Spirit affecting crowds of men. As a rule conversion was a quiet process, reaching individuals through what we call "personal dealing." There was nothing like the collective impulse roused by the famous preachers of the Middle Ages, or the intense excitement which swayed crowds under the preaching of Francis Xavier or John Wesley. These mass movements have had their own place in the economy of grace: we can give thanks for them, as they have been reproduced recently in Korea and Manchuria; but, after New Testament times, they had no place in the foundation of the Church. We read, indeed, of rushes into Church communion, but these were made when persecution was abated, and the persons who joined in the rushes showed little stability, and usually lapsed into idolatry when persecution was renewed. Of revivalist preaching in the modern sense history has scarcely any record. The wandering evangelism of sub-apostolic times soon came to an ignoble end. The aim of the later evangelists was to convince in conversation and to win by friendliness rather than to excite or to impress. I say this, after reading regretful statements submitted to the Conference, that the conversion of multitudes has had no place in certain mission fields. Where it is so we have a reproduction of those early times. It was by the gradual persuasion and attraction of individuals that the Roman Empire was won for Christ.

So we pass from negations to things positive—to the beliefs and the life to which the world was converted.

The old world yielded to three spiritual influences—the doctrine of God, the doctrine of heaven, the community or brotherhood of the Cross.

I. First among the persuasive truths of early Christian teaching must undoubtedly be placed the unity of God, His sole authority and exclusive power over every department of man's life. The Reports presented to this Conference contain several impressive accounts of the essential misery of polytheism, the nervous anxiety and spiritual feebleness which it creates. In the Roman world, the ordinary mind was so perplexed, burdened, plagued by the multiplicity of deities which seemed to have some claim to be propitiated, that monotheism as presented by the Jews had won many proselytes. But Christian teachers set it forth with an entirely new attractiveness. They not only freed it from exclusive nationalism and broke down "the fence of the Law," but cleared it from austerity and gloom by teaching the incarnation of God and the mediation of the God-man. The identity of Jesus with God lay at the root of their message; it was, indeed, their message. He who from the beginning had been with the Father as His word, His reason, His counsellor in the plan of redemption, was born of a Virgin, clothed Himself in humanity, and bore the burden of sin in order that the very life of God might be imparted to man. The incarnation and atonement were variously defined. The most distinctive statements are those of Irenæus and Tertullian: "He became what we are, in order that He might make us what He is;" "He took our place, in order that we may have His place."¹ But all teachers agreed that after offering His sacrifice He returned to the place He held before incarnation, to share with the Father the functions of judge and saviour, so that when Christians praised Christ and prayed to Christ they were praising the one God and pleading with the one God. Neither incarnation nor atonement was so presented as to impinge upon the unity of God, or to suggest that there

¹ Harnack calls these "epoch-making" statements. "Epoch-marking" would be a more accurate epithet; so emphatically does Irenæus disclaim originality.

had been a redeeming plan distinct from the purpose of the Creator and Sustainer of mankind.

Now this truth, that the whole of life could be entrusted to one gracious personal Being, who could ward off every attack of evil, dawned upon the pagan hearer as a serene and welcome light, and drew him out of the distracting darkness in which he was the daily victim of many gods and many lords.

II. The second persuasive truth of the mission was the certainty of immortality and of unprecedented bliss in heaven after the day of judgment.

Here, again, reference may be made to the Conference Reports, for their account of the vagueness and coarseness of non-Christian beliefs in immortality gives a fair idea of the beliefs of pagans in the early centuries. The pale and shivering shades of Hades gained no colour and no warmth from the Greek and Roman classics. Marcus Aurelius surmised that at death the soul might be extinguished or absorbed. But in the Christian Church, to the lowliest and most backward disciple, all beyond the grave was bright and beautiful. His true place was in the coming world, not in this perishing and polluted fabric. It is a common habit even among Christians to depreciate "other-worldliness," and to say that you will win men for Christ by calling them to fix their eyes upon their daily interests and their present duties. The life of the early Christians, as Gibbon recognises in his analysis of the causes of the growth of the Church, was avowedly and steadfastly an other-worldly life. Their apologists argued that they fulfilled their civic and social obligations faithfully, but their explanation of this fidelity was that Christians expect a day of judgment, and look forward as strangers and pilgrims to unspeakable happiness in their true home. "Christians," says the Epistle to Diognetus, "are not of this world. . . . They are kept in the world as in a prison. . . . The soul holds the body together till it finds incorruption in heaven." So Aristides closes his Address to the heathen: "Let all those who do not know God approach the words of immortality; . . . our teaching is the gateway of life everlasting."

These ideas pervaded the daily living of ordinary believers. Their pagan neighbours saw that their character was changed and their course shaped by expectation of recompense and joy in heaven. After the martyrdoms of Lyons and Vienne, the savage persecutors, eager to stamp out the new religion, burned the bones of the martyrs and threw the ashes into the Rhone. "There," they said with a stupid sneer, "they are beyond the help of their God: they will now give up that hope of heaven which enables them to bear tortures." So plain was it that belief in resurrection was the source of Christian courage.

It is difficult for us at home to know what notes sound loudest in the teaching of modern missionaries; yet one can gather with deep thankfulness that the sure truths of immortality do not falter on their lips. Most friends of missions will remember the martyr scene in Canon Dawson's *Life of James Hannington*—how the martyrs faced death singing happily: "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain." It was through that very view of death and heaven that the Christians of the early centuries drew their wondering neighbours into the Kingdom of God's grace.¹

III. So we come to speak of the Christian community or brotherhood in its attractive power.

Although it was a separate community marked off from the world, new members were admitted readily. There was a period of probation and instruction, but less caution was shown than in modern missions, and unworthy men and women were often baptized—people who accepted the Gospel without counting the cost, and also people who were thorough hypocrites and "made a trade of Christ." In times of peace such persons stained the fair name of the brotherhood, and, if persecution arose, they went straight back to paganism. When the persecution ended, they usually applied for re-admission, involving the Church in the same perplexities as

¹ On 14th June it was reported to the Church Missionary Society that the daughter of Busoga, the chief who gave instructions for Hannington's murder, has been baptized. Of modern as of ancient missions, Tertullian's words, so often clumsily paraphrased, hold good—"sanguis Christianorum semen" . . . "seminavimus sanguinem."

faced Mission Councils in Manchuria after the Boxer riots. The leaders had to consider not only the claims of sinners to forgiveness, but the effect upon the community of drawing no distinction between those who had denied Christ before men, and the martyrs who had witnessed a good confession. In the main mercy triumphed over judgment, but sometimes they were exceedingly severe.

Further, the fact that when brethren fell into idolatry or lust, the mission came into contempt, made it imperative that all should avoid scenes of temptation, and led to regulations which may well be called "puritanic." There is, for example, a surviving series of canons drawn up at the very end of our period, in 305 or 306, by nineteen bishops in the town of Elvira, which prohibits dice-playing, excludes play-actors from communion, forbids the marriage of Christian girls to heretics or Jews, and declares that a magistrate who is a Christian must not enter church during his magistracy, since civil office involved some participation in idol-worship. In one canon, Christians who persistently absent themselves from church are sentenced to ten years suspension. Another canon declares that no pictures are to be admitted into churches, "lest the Object of adoration and worship should be painted upon walls." This last rule shows that we are speaking of a time when pagan ritual was not yet blended with the Christian simplicities; but it is still more important to note that local churches were occupied in defining both terms of communion and methods of worship, and that the success of each mission depended upon the wisdom that was shown. It was possible to make the brotherhood so hard and narrow that it repelled the heathen, or so lax and worldly that it lost moral and religious value. In the one case it shrivelled up into a useless and pretentious sect; in the other case it melted into the pagan world.

We speak of the "social mission" of the Church as if we had discovered a new kind of Christianity. In those times Christianity was specifically a social mission. Although there was no approach to communism, each congregation had its fund from which the pressing wants of church members were supplied. Widows, if widows indeed, orphans,

brethren in prison or in the mines, strangers on travel, tradesmen who had lost employment by professing Christianity—these were the reasonable burden of the brotherhood, and it was a burden that could be borne only by the self-denial of the brethren. Therefore preachers frequently urged their congregations to fast—not in the Roman but in the Salvation Army sense—to abstain from food and to bring the money thus saved to the place of worship in eucharist, as eucharist, proof or pledge of God's infinite grace. The neglect of a needy brother was indeed an offence of the same kind as the denial of Christ.

For this brotherhood, this visible, working unity, was not a secondary matter, a corollary, an added duty, but a primary obligation. To "communicate," to impart to one another endowments and possessions, to recognise in practice identity with Christ, with God, with man, was the bond of believers, the ideal of churchmanship. The best churchman was the man who gave up all he had received, nay, surrendered himself, his redeemed, consecrated, endowed self, upon the sacrifice and service of faith. He was the most honoured and successful missionary.

And yet, with all this intensity and realism, a remarkable sobriety prevailed, with a disposition to insist upon orderly and gracious conduct, which, as the centuries passed, commended the Christian cause to the ruling powers and to the pagan observer. The age of ascetic monasticism had not yet come: before the fourth century no monks were missionaries. Household life was ruled by new ideals and pervaded by a new tone, for husbands and wives, parents and children, masters and slaves, were united by Christ's laws of purity and peace. Let me concentrate the truth about this by quoting without comment three inscriptions from the catacombs:—

"These two lived together without complaint or quarrel, without giving or taking offence."

"Here Gordian, ambassador from Gaul, and his whole family, rest in peace: their maid-servant Theoptala erected this."

"To Felix, their well-deserving son, who lived 23 years and

10 days, and went out of the world a virgin and a neophyte in peace. Buried on the 2nd of August."

That was the life by which Christianity expanded.

One other feature of the mission must be named: its cheerfulness, its optimism, its happiness.

The cheerfulness which prevailed was largely due, as we have seen, to bright hopes of the future, but these had their forecast in the actual charm of the Christian course on earth. I speak not of the relief of burdened consciences—those were not introspective days—but of the deliverance from vice and greed and contention and spiritual darkness. It was an immediate blessing to be lifted out of cesspools of social filth, to be washed from all spots, and to be set in circles where men and women were wedded in Christ, where children were taught reverence, where maidens blushed and young men were unstained, and the very name of unnatural vices was suppressed. It was a blessing to the poor man and the slave to be treated as an equal by his neighbour, and it was a blessing to the rich to be guided in the use of their wealth. The deliverance from idolatry was a boon—escape from the hard, crushing claims of the gods of the Empire and from the sophisticated coils which the mystical religions of the East wound round spiritual aspiration. And it was more than a boon to be led out from pagan credulity and blind stoical submissiveness into the presence of the living and true God, and to listen as a free man to the words of His grace and peace.

It was the concentration, the inward identity of these attractive forces that gave the Cross of Jesus the same spiritual significance for ordinary men as it had for the Apostle of the Gentiles. The way of the redeemed, the way of light and purity, of brotherhood, order, and freedom, was marked by a cross from the beginning to the end—from the day when a man washed off the slough of sin in a fountain that seemed to flow from the wounds of the Nazarene, all through the times when he wrestled with the desires of the flesh, turned aside from the seductions of idolatry, stood forth in the eye of the public as a witness that God was one, or, if he had not that honour, carried the denarius he had

earned at his trade up to the Communion Table and placed it in the hands of the bishop or presiding elder, down to the day when he passed into the perfection of the heavenly life. The power of the mission lay in the fact that no distinction was drawn between faith and life, between the spiritual and the moral, between the cross which Jesus bore and the cross borne by His servants.

And the hopefulness, the promise, the strength of the mission that lies before us is that in the work of our missionaries, and in the hearts of those who support them, there is the same concentration, the same inward unity, the same deliberate purpose to make known a message for faith which is also a message for life.

If in any mind the thought arises that our faith is not the same as the faith of the early centuries, we have before us this week an answer which no man can gainsay. Out of the heart of those centuries there emerged one statement of beliefs. No one knows by whom it was drafted or where it first appeared. We find it in Africa, in Gaul, in Italy, on the Danube, and in Asia Minor, with slight variations, but identical in its essence and almost in its form—a statement so scriptural and evangelical that it was ascribed to the Apostles. Now in the Conference Reports you will discover an item, simple but grand, repeated by many missionaries—Episcopalian, Wesleyan, Baptist, Presbyterian—that the statement of faith which they find to have most value, and on which they lay most stress, is that same Apostles' Creed. In the seventeen centuries that have passed since it was shaped, the Holy Spirit has taught the Church much. He will teach us more if we listen to His voice, but the foundations of the Kingdom stand, although the things that were shaken have been removed. The central beliefs which our missionaries teach were the central beliefs of the men through whose mission Christianity first expanded, and if we set them forth it will continue to expand, for they will take the same blessings to the non-Christian world.