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THE MISSIONARY TASK OF THE FRENCH PROTESTANT CHURCH

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*Address delivered in the Assembly Hall on Friday Evening,
17th June*

“I AM he that came out of the army”: this is the motto, dear brethren, that I am anxious to put at the beginning of my message. A message, and not a lecture: because to speak, as I am called to do, of the missionary task of French Protestantism is to speak of a battle of which it is difficult to say which is the more striking and awful, the greatness and importance of the fight, or the weakness and the insufficiency of the army. Consider both, and draw the conclusion yourselves.

I

Consider first, the battle.

There was a time, not very long ago, when it would have been rather difficult to speak freely, before an assembly like this, of the task of the French Protestants. The European nations were in a state of diffidence and of latent struggle, and even between Christians of different nationalities the sympathetic understanding of each other was not always easy. Now we see and enjoy better things, and although clouds may remain on the sky, still mutual confidence and earnest desire for peace have made progress. This is a time of splendid opportunity for unity and for co-operation, both in prayer and in effort; a time—to come back to my message—when it is with a feeling of perfect freedom that I undertake to explain, before the representatives of the

whole evangelical world, the work entrusted by God's providence to the sons of the Huguenot and other French Protestant Churches.

The present vocation of these Churches, brethren, is different, but not inferior to their vocation in the past. Their first vocation was suffering for Christ. Three centuries of persecution have put them in the first rank of martyrdom: But now their calling is work. Circumstances have put before them, both in France and in the world, a task the exceptional magnitude of which I am anxious to explain to you.

First of all, in France itself. I say it without hesitation: to win France for Christ would be a conquest of first missionary importance. In order to understand it, consider, please, the position occupied by the French-speaking Protestants as the chief representatives of the pure Gospel in France, in the Latin world, and in that still larger world which is reached, penetrated, influenced by the French spirit. This influence cannot be denied, I am sure. It derives from the special gifts and especially from the clearness and simplicity of thought, and from the classical beauty and strength of expression, which God has bestowed on that nation. Every nationality has its advantages and mental powers; the gift of the French genius is to find out that form of the truth which renders it fit for transmission and diffusion, which transforms it into a currency easy to circulate from hand to hand, from mind to mind, up to the extremities of the thinking world.

Now measure the importance, for good or for evil, connected with that circulating power of French expression of thought. Consider the tremendous influence, through the whole world, of works like those of Voltaire, of Rousseau, of Renan. Consider the present, continued influence of political and social formulas stamped by the French Revolution! Of course we all, in France as well as anywhere else, admire the English liberalism, and that beautiful combination of conservatism and progress which characterises both the British constitution and the British method. Still, is it not a fact that, on every point of the world where the sap of

liberty and of progress is fermenting in the minds, they instinctively have recourse to the French mottoes and emblems? We may regret it, or criticise it, but it is a fact: look at the revolution in Turkey, in China, sometimes even in other parts of Europe, and in the heathen world itself! Is it not, therefore, a question of capital, of world-wide importance, to know whether this power of clear expression may be lost for the service of the Gospel, or put in the service of it, as it has been in the last century by a Vinet or an Adolphe Monod; in the seventeenth century by a Pascal; and, first of all, in the sixteenth century by a Calvin?

This is the reason, brethren, that makes the future of French Protestantism a question of œcumenical importance. Of course, each soul is of infinite value; as Christians you are interested in the smallest progress of evangelistic work in France. In the human family, the Latin nations, and France amongst them, are important and beautiful branches; and as members of that family, as men, you are interested in the spiritual welfare of those nations. But what I mean is still more central: the tie between them and you is deeper. You not only owe them your sympathy: *you need them*; you need their special gifts; God needs them for His work, as in the past He has needed the Greek and the Latin genius, the Greek and the Latin languages, for the diffusion of the Gospel and the progress of His Kingdom. Is it not, then, for the evangelical and missionary Church of the world, a vital duty to love, to encourage, to strengthen the French Protestants?

I do not forget the still vivid and sound elements in the Roman Catholic Church of France, but how hindered, how imprisoned, how powerless they are! Therefore I say: French Protestantism is perhaps not the only, but certainly it is the best and the most available means of influencing the French genius in the direction of pure and evangelical Christianity; of "bringing"—even in France—"into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ"; of putting, in a word, the French spirit and language into the service of the Gospel.

Therefore, brethren, come over and help us! I say "come," because there is no sufficient help where there is no personal interest and presence. Without General Beckwith (a Scotsman!) settling in the Waldensian Valleys, the Waldensian Church would not have become the instrument it is now for the Gospel in Italy. Without a MacAll settling in Paris, the Mission Populaire would not have been started. Yes, come and help! Help our Churches! Help our works of evangelisation! Help us to be in France not a dying remainder of a beautiful past, but a powerful leaven which must penetrate the meal, until the whole shall be leavened.

II

Am I wrong, brethren? But I cannot help fearing lest some of you will consider my statement exaggerated. You think we are too ambitious; you think it is not possible that so tremendous work and responsibilities should have been entrusted to so small a body as is our Protestantism. Let us confess it, brethren; your doubts do not surprise us, because they are our doubts. We, too, can hardly believe that God may have such high intentions concerning us. Willingly enough we would say, like Moses: "O my Lord! send, I pray thee, whom thou wilt send!" But the Lord Himself forbids us to turn aside from the work He has put before us. As He did with Moses, He forces us, by decisive signs of His power acting through our weakness, to trust Him and to obey His orders. And these signs are: *our Missions*.

The chief temptation of old nations is to rest on their glorious past, and to accept silently decay in the present. And the chief temptation of long persecuted Churches, having scarcely escaped from destruction, and left as a trifling minority in the country, is to accept defeat and sterility. Such temptation we, French Protestants, know only too well. But God has counteracted it in giving us the direct proof of our still existing fecundity. He has given us our Missions as a demonstration of our capacity of bringing forth children for Him. Once more the old

apostolic word has proved to be true: the Church, the Protestant Church of France, as the woman, has been saved in child-bearing.

Two years ago the delegates of France, of French Switzerland, of the Waldensian Valleys of Italy, of all the Churches and Missions working in South Africa, were attending the Jubilee of our Mission of Basutoland. Seventy-five years earlier the first missionaries, three young Frenchmen, Casalis, Arbousset, Gosselin, had made their first appearance in the country. It was desolated by war; the population reduced to a small number; cannibalism born out of famine and misery; a dying nation under a wise chief.—Now the tribe numbers 450,000 souls; it still occupies, under the British protectorate, its own country as a native reserve; a Church of Christ has been established numbering now 17,500 communicants and 7000 catechumens. A native pastorate; a native work of evangelization of the country; a native share in our Upper Zambesi Mission; a splendid and complete system of schools: these were the facts which it was given to our delegates to witness and to report to us. What a joy, what an awful surprise for the old Huguenot Church! It seemed to me, when they came back and brought to us their testimony, as if this *mater dolorosa* of the Reformation, as it has been called, was extending her arms, like Jacob, saying: "Who are these?"—and as if the angel of God was answering: "They are the children which God has given to thee: two children, a Church and a nation." Yes, a Church, strong by God's grace, growing up to self-support and self-government; and a nation, kept alive and sound by the Gospel. Such are the proofs God has given to the Church of France of its capacity to bring forth for Christ!

But Basutoland is only the first of a series. Twenty-five years ago F. Coillard, one of our Basutoland missionaries, started for the interior, and out of his labours a new Mission is born: the well-known Barotsi or Upper-Zambesi Mission, of which we hope, although it is still hindered by many difficulties, that it will become, by and by, a second Basutoland!

Moreover, the Zambesi Mission is not the only offspring of Basutoland. Some years ago, before Coillard went out, two young missionaries, belonging to French Switzerland, after some years of apprenticeship in Basutoland, went out under the leading of Mabile, and established a Mission of their own, quite distinct from ours, amongst the Gwamba of the Northern Transvaal. The work grew and extended itself up to a second field, the Portuguese east coast of Lourenço Marquez, and still is making great progress. We cannot speak too highly of this work of the French-speaking Protestants of Switzerland, known under the name of *Mission Romande*. Its chief supporters, the members of the Free Churches of French Switzerland, have not ceased to be the warm friends of the Paris Missionary Society. The two works are entirely independent of each other, but they can also be considered, from a higher point of view, as two branches of the one missionary enterprise of French-speaking Protestantism.

Are not these three Missions—the Basutoland Mission, the Transvaal and Lourenço Marquez Mission, the Zambesi Mission—strong proofs of the apostolic calling of our Churches? And do they not justify the kind help already extended by some of our British friends and give us a strong claim on still larger assistance, so much the more that they are carried on in the sphere of British dominion, and are quite free from any national connection with France itself?

But I hasten to add this: if our Mission in South and Central Africa appear to us to have strong claims on your sympathies, we dare to claim these sympathies with the same energy, and, perhaps, with more emotion, for those other Missions which the Providence of God, by means of historical events, has committed to our care in the vast area of the French colonial empire.

Of course that empire cannot be compared with the British dominion. But still it is second only to it. It extends over nearly a quarter of Africa, over Madagascar, the half of Indo-China, and important groups of Islands in the South Seas. Now for this large empire we, French Protestants, are made by circumstances directly responsible.

God be thanked, there are still English and Norwegian missionaries in Madagascar and in the Loyalty Islands; there is still an American Mission in the Gaboon; there are English missionaries in French North Africa, and to maintain, as much as possible, this policy of the open door for the Gospel has been the effort and the glory of the Paris Missionary Society. But every one who is acquainted with the facts knows that, notwithstanding our good will, the chief responsibility for the heathen and Mohammedans in the French Colonies rests on the French Protestants.

Now, what have we done in order to fulfil this responsibility? The foundation of the Senegal Mission, fifty years ago; the taking over, at the same time, of Tahiti and of the Society Islands; more recently, the taking over, from the London Missionary Society, of one of the Loyalty Islands, and the starting of a Mission in New Caledonia; the taking over, from the American Presbyterians, of their stations on the Ogowe River, in the French Congo, and the creation of new stations there; and, last but not least, the entering into the field of Madagascar, not to weaken or to drive out, but to help and to supplement the English and Norwegian Missions,—at what a cost of labour, of suffering, of money and of life, many of you know—this is the work we have done and for which we have trebled in ten years our expense and our staff. Does it not show how and to what extent we have accepted the task which God has entrusted to us in the Colonial Empire of France?

But now I ask you, brethren, this work, done in the French Colonies and by Frenchmen, is it a purely French work? Is it not, as well as our South and Central African work, a work of deep interest for the whole of Evangelical Christendom? Yes, it is. Evangelical Christendom, which you represent, cannot turn aside from a work which concerns such a tremendous portion of the field — perhaps fifty millions of heathen or Mohammedans—it cannot turn aside from it and say coldly: It is a French work! I tell you, you cannot abstain from that work, because, if you do so, the work itself will be partially left undone, as it is already

now! Look at the Report of Commission I.; meditate the chapter on Unoccupied Fields; look at the Atlas you have received the day before yesterday, and consider the portions of the French Colonial Empire where nothing is done. Not one evangelical missionary in the interior of Senegal and in the French Sudan! Not one evangelical missionary in the interior of the French Congo State, from the upper Ogowe up to Lake Chad! Portions of Madagascar left without the light of the Gospel! The whole of French Indo-China without one single Protestant missionary! And even in the Missions already in progress, what weakness, what insufficiency of men and means!

III

Now, who is responsible for this state of things?—Is the work not entrusted to the care of us, French Protestants?

Of course it is, and the question arises: Have we done what we could?—Ah! French Protestants! well may the question re-echo in the depths of our conscience, while we seek before God the reply which truth obliges us to give!

But while dealing honestly with ourselves, we may justly turn to our friends, and ask them in turn: Do you know what French Protestantism is, upon which circumstances have imposed such a crushing charge? Compare us, I will not say with Churches of England and America, but only with the Churches of the Continent. The Scandinavian nations are Protestant; Holland is Protestant; Germany, in its largest and strongest portion, is a Protestant nation. The task resting upon it, at least in its colonies, is in proportion to its power. But for us, brethren, this proportion does not exist. We are utterly insufficient for our work. God knows it, but you must know it also. We are in France a small minority, scarcely one to sixty; not more than six hundred thousand souls; not quite one million, if we include the French-speaking Protestants of Alsace, of Switzerland, of Italy, of the Netherlands.

Now, do you know what it means for one-sixtieth of the whole French population to counteract the effort of the

other fifty-nine sixtieths? And of these 600,000 Protestants, do you know that only a small proportion bears its part in the burden of our work? And this minority in a minority, do you know how it works and lives? Do you realise what it is to struggle in isolation with scattered forces, against the pressure of surroundings which are either Roman Catholic or indifferent, if not free-thinking and atheistical, in many cases hostile? More than that, do you know what it is to find these same hostile forces in the mission field, and after having heard, in former times, a French Minister of State saying, "France abroad means Catholicism," to hear now a French Colonial Governor saying, "France abroad means atheism"? And finally, do you know what it feels like for a Church, itself often half-frozen, to consume its own heat in keeping itself alive, and nevertheless to go out to fight and to conquer? If you realise all this, you will be astonished that enough warmth remains to sustain, not only its own life, but also its various home evangelisation and its far-off Missions, and you certainly will admit that a large portion of this work exceeds its strength and means.

But it is time to conclude. You will not be surprised if this conclusion is a very earnest and solemn request for help. In the presence of God, I call upon you to consider our work as being not only *our* work. I take this work and I throw it on the heart and on the conscience of every Christian man or Church able to take a share in it; I throw it on the heart and on the conscience of the whole of evangelical Christendom. I commend it to the affection, to the prayers and to the help of all true friends of the Kingdom. It has been done for Christ: for Christ only. For Him we have held the fort until now. I trust this Conference will not pass away without having let us see the helping troops appearing on the hills.