

World Missionary Conference, 1910

(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 DEMANDS MADE ON THE CHURCH BY THE PRESENT MISSIONARY OPPORTUNITY

II.

BY THE REV. PROFESSOR JAMES DENNEY, D.D.

*Address delivered in the Assembly Hall on Tuesday
Evening, 21st June*

MR. CHAIRMAN, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,—The subject that is occupying our attention to-night is one that in almost any aspect of it is intimidating. Whether we think about the dimensions of the missionary work that has to be done, or whether we turn our minds to the condition of the Church at home on which so great a work is to be laid, we may well feel afraid to think or to speak of it. It is not indeed that there is no interest in missions at home. Everything that has been happening here in these last days proves the contrary. The numbers that have attended these meetings, the messages that have been read at them from distinguished persons, the large space that has been given to reporting them in the newspapers,—all these things prove that there is interest. The work of missions has attained to such dimensions, and has entered so largely into the general movement of human things, that it is impossible for intelligent people not to have some kind of interest, but the closer you come to it in many cases the more you feel that the interest is not of a kind that is of any particular value to those who are engaged in the work of missions. It is a disinterested interest. It is the interest of curiosity, of the

intelligent bystander who cannot afford to be utterly ignorant of what is going on in his world, but very little of it is the conscientious and responsible interest of people who feel that the work of missions is their work, and still less is it the enthusiastic and devoted interest of those who feel the work laid upon their hearts through the consciousness of what they themselves owe to Christ.

One who lives at home cannot help thinking about the Home Church itself when he is asked to face these tremendous responsibilities that have been urged upon him at this Conference. I believe the most urgent duty of the Church at this moment is to recover the consciousness of itself, of its own nature and vocation, so as to be able to assert itself and maintain its existence and fulfil its calling and function in the world. I will mention one or two facts that I think go to show how necessary that is at this present hour. I speak only of the Church to which I myself belong, but something similar I believe is true of almost every Church in Christendom. The United Free Church has 1700 congregations or thereby, and during the last five years the average increase in its membership has been about 850; that is to say, every second congregation in the Church has added one and every other congregation has added none. The number of candidates for the ministry is much smaller at the present time than it was a good many years ago; it is hardly a sufficient number to keep up the staff at home, to say nothing of supplying men abroad. The truth is, that for large numbers of people at home the Church exists as an institution, but to a large extent it has ceased to exist as an attraction or as something that offers them a natural and effective career. Men are not coming forward as ministers, nor coming forward as missionaries, because they are not coming forward into the membership of the Christian Church at all. One is tempted to say that there is no use calling for reinforcements at the front while recruiting is stopped at home, and that is to a large extent the grave situation with which we are confronted. Something must happen to the Church at home if it is going even to look at the work that has been put upon it by this Conference.

First of all I would say that the Church must have a revived and deepened sense that God has given us something wonderful and incomparable in giving us His Son. A great part of the weakness of the Church consists in or arises out of the diffusion in it of a kind of Christian secularism. There are large numbers of people in the Church at home to whom the Church is something of—I was going to say exactly, but at all events of very much—the same kind as a great many other institutions that exist for the amelioration of society. They can belong to a Church as they belong to any other society that does the world good, but they do not feel under any obligation to belong to it. Very often the distinctive and specific things that ought to characterise the Church, that ought to be prominent in its testimony, that ought to be the testing things of its life—the forgiveness of sin and the presence of God in Christ and the indwelling of His Spirit and the reality of eternal life—these things are not the things that are prominent, but they are dulled and in the background somehow, and the souls of men do not live in these things, but in a kind of good works such as they might do anywhere else in the world as well as there. There is another thing that goes to weaken the Church—and sometimes, strange to say, it is supposed to be a reflex effect of the work of foreign missions themselves. There are other religions in the world besides our own, and you are familiar with the idea that those other religions have a place and function in the providential government of the world. The whole question of the existence of other religions and of their relations to the Christian religion and of their relative right to exist and to function in the life of the world, is so difficult a question intellectually that many people make it an excuse for refusing to interpose in such a complicated situation, and even begin to say to themselves something like what Ezekiel heard the Israelites say nearly six hundred years before Jesus came, “We will be like the heathen, like the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.” People say to themselves, “We are not going to interfere in this; we will leave this whole affair to

Providence to work it out in its own way; we will not assert anything intolerant or exclusive in our own faith; we will take our chance and sink or swim with mankind." That kind of feeling has tainted the mind of Christendom, and even the mind of the Christian Church. Now those two things have done a great deal to weaken the Church, and I believe we need in the Home Church preaching directed against them both; preaching that will bring out what is distinctive and peculiar in the revelation that God has given us in His Son, preaching that will make men feel that we cannot evade the responsibility of that incomparable gift that God has given, preaching that will make everybody feel that the difference between the Christian and the non-Christian attitude to Jesus is not the difference of more or less or the difference of better or worse, but the difference of life or death. And it is because that is not believed, it is because the distinctiveness and exclusiveness of the Christian religion has been allowed to fade to a certain extent out of men's minds, that the compulsive attraction of the Christian faith is less felt at home, and that the men are not coming into the Church by whom the work of missions ought to be done.

Then another thing. If the Church is to look at this work with success, it must not only cast itself on God for a new sense of what Christ is, but it must recognise that its duty is to unite. The work to be done is so great that it is impossible for the Churches even to contemplate it so long as they stand apart. Now, the unity of the Church is not an end to be attained by human effort; it is part of the being of the Church as the Church lives and moves and has its being in God. The Church is one, not as having the same legal constitution which we construct, or the same theological confession which we draw up; it is one, and it can only be one in this, that all its members represent the same attitude of the soul to Christ. Circumstances at home have tended to obscure that in the mind of the Home Church, but it is one of the happy results of foreign mission work that men of different theological and ecclesiastical traditions have found it quite possible and even quite easy to work together on the basis

of their common loyalty to Jesus Christ as the Lord and Saviour of sinners. But what people have not found out is the conclusion to which that experience leads. It leads to the conclusion that the only element in which the unity of the Church will ever be realised is that pure unmingled element of loyalty to the Lord Jesus. We are very anxious about unity in this country, and are pursuing it, I believe, with an earnest mind, and I believe many of us in quite false and hopeless roads. The basis of unity is not to be found in any number of carefully digested theological propositions, or in any ecclesiastical constitution, however carefully it be framed. I do not think it is to be found in the Westminster Confession or in the Thirty-nine Articles. I think these are vain attempts to look for unity where it is not to be found, and that it will not be found anywhere but in the common loyalty of all sinful men who call Jesus Saviour and Lord.

One of the advantages of seeing what true unity is, is that it delivers the Gospel once for all from all kinds of intellectual difficulties. It ought to be difficult to become a Christian—it is difficult to become a Christian, infinitely difficult—but it should not be *intellectually* difficult, and we do not find in the Gospel, in the dealings of Christ with men, a single example of Christ raising any intellectual perplexities or embarrassments with the Gospel. Hence, if we find in our presentation of the Gospel that intellectual difficulties are created, the one conclusion we ought to draw is, that we are presenting the Gospel in a wrong way. We are putting stumbling-blocks in somebody's path instead of making his path straight. We are making sad the heart of somebody whom the Lord has not made sad. The one fundamental and essential thing in which all Christian workers agree, the one thing therefore which is the only essential in the Christian religion, is something that has no theological, no intellectual embarrassments about it at all—the question whether or not a man will be loyal to the Lord Jesus Christ. The second advantage is this: we get rid of a great part of the temptation or tendency to professionalism in religious work. If our business is to teach Christianity

according to a creed, or to introduce it in the form of an ecclesiastical constitution, you can do that from the outside, and professionalism is as certain as mathematics; but loyalty to Christ is a thing that cannot be counterfeited so easily. That cannot be put on and worn as a cloak, and it would be an immense advantage if our minds were so clarified and our idea of what was the Gospel was so simplified, that we could see that loyalty to God is the one thing needful, and that no other fashion of union among Christians will ever come into the region of reality at all. If I thought that all the Christians in Scotland could ever by any kind of arranged basis, theological or ecclesiastical, be brought into one great legal corporation, I should think it an elementary Christian duty to do everything in my power to frustrate such a project.

Then the last thing on which I would say a word is this. I do not think the Church can contemplate the great missionary work, without recognising the indispensableness of sacrifice. We are called not only to pray for a new sense of what Christ is to man, and a new sense of the sufficiency of loyalty to Christ as the basis of unity, but we are called for Christ's sake to renounce. Now, I feel how difficult it is to speak about this, and how few there are who have any right to do it at all. What business have men like most of us at home, who have everything that heart could wish or that the world can give—what business have men with wives and children and houses and incomes and honour and leisure, to speak about sacrifice? Most men are ashamed to speak of it and do not speak of it at all, and I do believe that a great piece has been left out of the preaching of the Gospel in many Churches at home just because of the feeling in the preacher that there were things in the Gospel that he had forfeited his right to say, that he had been afraid to say to himself and did not dare to say to anybody else. We know, too, how unabashed selfishness is in the world and in the Church. We know how many people there are who are lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, people who resent it as a kind of insult that they should be asked to give up anything, people who will not part with money, who will

not give up their week-ends, who will not come under any kind of obligation that fetters their liberty so that they can do something regularly for the good of the Church, people who will not sacrifice an atom of their spare time or of their opportunities for mental culture or even for self-indulgence. They simply will not do it, and they refuse even to look at the idea that it should be done seriously. I say the world is full of people like that, and what is worse, whoever is to blame for it, the Church is full of them too. Now, what are we to do in a situation like that? Well, I do not think that the conscience of such people is to be reached by holding up in all its dimensions the magnitude of the task with which this Conference has confronted the Church. I do not think it really makes a strong impression on the minds of the people I am speaking of when you say that there are a thousand millions of the human race that have never yet heard the name of Christ. They just feel that a thousand millions are something that is not humanly imaginable. They do not take it seriously. Just as little does it impress people to talk about how many thousands of men and how many hundreds of thousands of pounds are required to evangelise the world in a generation. I believe we have to begin at the other end, and make men feel how much it cost Christ to bring into the world the knowledge of the Father and the forgiveness of sins and the hope of immortality, and to persuade them that love like that can only be answered by a love in kind, and that for a Saviour who came not only in water but in blood there can be no adequate faith, no adequate response, which is bloodless. There must be a passion in the answer of the soul to Christ that answers to the passion of His love to us, and there must be emphasis laid on Christ's demand for renunciation. Whoever would be Christ's disciple must not only cling to Christ's Cross but take up his own cross. And if there are people in the world who will not give up anything, if there are people who will not for Christ's sake give up the hope of being rich, or the hope of having a happy home, or the hope of a studious leisure, or the hope of social ambitions,—if there are people who have that for their last word, then as far as these people

are concerned the Christian religion is dead. We cannot hope for anything for the cause of missions or of the Church unless we can revive devotion to Jesus Christ. I believe that often we get little because we do not ask enough. I am quite sure the Church has erred in trying to make the Gospel too cheap, and in bringing it continually to lower and lower terms. There are no terms in the Gospel at all. Christ never offered less than Himself in all His grace and truth, and He never asks anything less than the surrender of the whole man to Himself; and it is when great things are asked that they are given. Christ asks for men to give themselves to Him, and not to an easy service, but to something the symbol of which is the Cross. When Garibaldi summoned young Italy in 1849 he said, "I do not offer pay, provisions or quarters; I offer hunger, thirst, forced marches, battles, and death." And it was to that cry that the deep heart of his people responded, and when a voice like that is uttered in the Church by men who have the right to utter it, then we can be sure that the thin ranks will fill up again and our King go forth conquering and to conquer.