

Edinburgh 1910 – Its Place in History

Edinburgh 1910: One of Many?

It is not uncommon to hear reference being made to “Edinburgh 1910” as a defining moment for the modern Western missionary movement. Yet was it really such a unique event? The idea of a great international conference to discern the next steps for worldwide Christian mission is by no means the sole prerogative of the Edinburgh 1910 World Missionary Conference. More than a century earlier William Carey, the pioneer Baptist missionary in India, had proposed a decennial interdenominational world missionary conference and had suggested that the first should be held in Cape Town in 1810.¹ Since the mid-19th century Carey’s idea had found expression, not in centres close to the “mission fields” of the southern hemisphere but in the great cities of the Western world: New York and London in 1854, Liverpool in 1860, London in 1878 and 1888, and New York in 1900. Edinburgh 1910 stood in this line of succession.

Through the work of its Continuation Committee which became the International Missionary Council, its inspiration was taken forward in the 20th century with conferences being held in Jerusalem in 1928, Tambaram in 1938, Whitby in 1947, Willingen in 1952, and Accra in 1958. In 1961 the IMC integrated into the World Council of Churches, itself often regarded as a product of Edinburgh 1910, which had been formed in 1948.² Under WCC auspices further great international mission conferences were held at Mexico City in 1963, Bangkok in 1973, Melbourne in 1980, San Antonio in 1989, Salvador de Bahia in 1996 and Athens in 2005. Meanwhile a stream of Evangelical mission engagement flowing from Edinburgh 1910 organised globally as the Lausanne movement from 1974 and held conferences at Lausanne in 1974, Pattaya in 1980, Manila in 1989 and Chiang Mai in 2004. Edinburgh 1910, it seems, is one of many.

Yet none of the others in the noble succession carry such epoch-making significance as Edinburgh 1910, either in the assessment of the participants or in that of subsequent generations. John R. Mott the Conference chairman called it: “the most notable gathering in the interest of the worldwide expansion of Christianity ever held, not only in missionary annals, but in all Christian annals.”³ Temple Gairdner’s account of the conference, written from the point of view of a participant, gives a vivid sense of the breathless excitement which characterised the event for those who were present as they took part in an event quite different from any other they had known.⁴ This sense of a unique and decisive event echoed down the years and became a definitive point of reference for those concerned with the evangelization of the world. Moreover, few

¹ See Ruth Rouse, “William Carey’s ‘Pleasing Dream’”, *International Review of Mission*, Vol. XXXVIII (April 1949), pp. 181-92.

² See Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, Vol. I, London: SPCK, 1967; Ans J. van der Bent, “Ecumenical Conferences”, in Nicholas Lossky et al ed., *Dictionary of the Ecumenical Movement*, Geneva and Grand Rapids: WCC and Eerdmans, 1991, pp. 325-336.

³ Cit. C. Howard Hopkins, *John R. Mott 1865-1955: A Biography*, Geneva and Grand Rapids: WCC and Eerdmans, 1979, p. 342.

⁴ W.H.T. Gairdner, “*Edinburgh 1910: An Account and Interpretation of the World Missionary Conference*”, Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910.

would question Kenneth Scott Latourette's judgement that "The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, was the birthplace of the modern ecumenical movement."⁵ It is worth looking in more detail both at the perspectives of participants and at the subsequent judgement of history.

Participants' Perspectives

A distinctive feature of Edinburgh was that it was not a rallying of the faithful. It did not make inspirational impact its primary objective. Rather, it was designed to be a working conference, reflecting and planning. It was distinguished from earlier great missionary conferences by its attempt to achieve a more unified strategy and greater coordination within the worldwide engagement of Christian mission. The participants were delegates of the missionary agencies which were assigned a quota of places in proportion to the amount of income which they spend on overseas mission. The aim of the organising committee was that it should be "a united effort to subject the plans and methods of the whole missionary enterprise to searching investigation and to coordinate missionary experience from all parts of the world."⁶

Very substantial content was fed into the meeting by 8 Commissions which had worked over the preceding two years to produce reports on the following topics:

1. Carrying the Gospel to all the non-Christian World.
2. The Church in the Mission Field.
3. Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life.
4. The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions.
5. The Preparation of Missionaries.
6. The Home Base of Missions.
7. Missions and Governments.
8. Cooperation and the Promotion of Unity.

The research and reports of the 8 Commissions brought real substance to the Conference. Its enduring value is due in no small measure to the preliminary work done by the Commissions which generated a wealth of original and innovative material. To have the Reports completed and distributed to all the delegates ahead of the conference was a formidable logistical task but the organizational genius of Conference secretary Joe Oldham was equal to it.

Additionally, the "Statistical Atlas of Christian Missions" offered a more comprehensive empirical analysis of the Christian missionary endeavour than had ever been attempted before. Mott described the Conference as "the first attempt at a systematic and careful study of the missionary problems of the world".⁷ As Andrew Walls explains: "Edinburgh sought to survey and assimilate the accumulated experience of the interaction of Christian and non-Christian worlds with a view to

⁵ Kenneth Scott Latourette, "Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council", chapter 8 in Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, eds., *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948, Vol. I*, 4th ed., Geneva: WCC, 1993 [1954], p. 362.

⁶ Cit. Keith Clements, *Faith on the Frontiers: A Life of J.H. Oldham*, Edinburgh and Geneva: T. & T. Clark and WCC, 1999, p. 77.

⁷ Cit. Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission and Appropriation of Faith*, New York and Edinburgh: Orbis and T. & T. Clark, 2002, p. 59.

bringing the encounter to a new stage.”⁸ The methodology of the Conference furthered this sense of purpose. The substantial reports prepared in advance, the issue of daily papers, the venue being a hall designed for discussion and debate, the seven-minute time limit on speeches from the floor – all this was geared to the generation of clear and action-oriented thinking.

Edinburgh 1910 drew part of its power from the fact that it capitalized on new possibilities for travel and communication. The steamship had revolutionised international travel so that it became possible to contemplate bringing together hundreds of people from different parts of the world for purposes of conference. Mott himself was at one time calculated to be the most widely travelled person in all of history.⁹ No one was more alert to the new possibilities. Technological advance was hailed as the handmaid to the spread of the gospel worldwide. The vast correspondence which gathered information from hundreds of missionaries spread across the globe would not have been possible on anything approaching its scale at any earlier time.

The Conference was also a moment of recognition for the missionary movement. Even within the church, it had often been regarded as peripheral and eccentric. Now its assembled delegates heard no less an ecclesiastical leader than the Archbishop of Canterbury, Randall Davidson, stating that “the place of missions in the life of the Church must be the central place, and none other: that is what matters”. Davidson went on to conclude: “Secure for that thought its true place in our plans, our policy, our prayers; and then – why then, the issue is His, not ours. But it may well be that, if that come true, there be some standing here tonight who shall not taste of death till they see the Kingdom of God come with power.”¹⁰ Thus placing the missionary movement at the heart of the faith and action of the church gave a great sense of the momentousness of the event taking place. It also introduced the thought that “mission” is the mission of the church – something which would be a major theme in 20th century developments. There was recognition also from civil authorities with George V of Britain, the German colonial office and Theodore Roosevelt, former President of the USA, sending greetings.

The presence of Randall Davidson signalled also another feature of the Conference which made a deep impression on the participants. It brought together people from a wide range of theological and ecclesiological persuasion, united in a commitment that the missionary cause was so important that they could set aside their doctrinal differences in order to focus on the challenges presented by worldwide mission. Arising out of the great revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries, the missionary movement was marked by a shared spirituality which crossed denominational boundaries. As Latourette noted: “In countless missionary and other organizations Christians of more than one denomination, bound together by the faith which characterised the revivals, worked hand in hand for the spread of the Gospel.”¹¹ The event of the Conference prompted the question of how far this might be taken in the relations of the churches. Keith Clements observes that: “while the conference’s

⁸ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, p. 59

⁹ Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 17.

¹⁰ Gairdner, *Edinburgh 1910*, p. 43.

¹¹ Latourette, “Ecumenical Bearings”, p. 353.

precise aims were carefully defined in terms of cooperation, and rightly so, scarcely imaginable possibilities might be burgeoning in the direction of more structured unity.”¹² The value of and need for unity among different Christian churches and agencies was evident on the mission fields and Edinburgh 1910 suggested that moves for greater unity among the “younger churches” would challenge the “older churches” in the West. Again, this is a theme which would feature prominently in the coming century.

No assessment of the impression made by the Conference would be complete without a mention of its leading figures. The Conference chairman, the American John R. Mott, in Latourette’s words: “combined a dignified, commanding presence, deep religious faith, evangelistic zeal, the capacity to discern ability and promise in youth and to inspire it, wide-ranging vision, courage, tact, administrative ability, power over public assemblies as a presiding officer, and compelling, convincing speech.... He dreamed and acted in terms both of individuals and of movements which would influence nations and mankind as a whole.”¹³ His skills were complemented by those of the Scot Joe Oldham who worked behind the scenes, sensitive to theological nuances and a masterful diplomat, to ensure all the mechanics were in place. As W.R Hogg put it: “If Mott masterminded Edinburgh 1910 ... Oldham was its chief engineer.”¹⁴ Kathleen Bliss recalls that: “At the end of the conference, when [Oldham] rose to give out a few notices (he played no part in the debate), the whole company gave him a standing ovation. This was a tribute to the immense thoroughness that he had put into the preparation of the conference... He thought of himself as an enabler.”¹⁵ The personal chemistry between Mott and Oldham in the human fabric of the Conference was, by all accounts, unusually effective.

Finally, the geographical location of the Conference carried a certain significance. Edinburgh was something of a backwater compared with the great cities of London and New York where earlier missionary conferences had been held. Yet, as Timothy Yates points out: “Scotland had certain attributes and characteristics which made it peculiarly fitting for an epoch-making missionary conference to be held in its capital city.”¹⁶ Yates mentions that it was the Scot David Livingstone who, above all others, had represented missionary heroism to the wider world in the 19th century; that in Alexander Duff Scotland had produced the first professor of missions; that Scotland had a vigorous theological tradition; and that Joe Oldham as the conference secretary brought a characteristically Scottish combination of thoroughness, scholarship and Christian devotion which was critical to the success of the event.¹⁷

The Perspective of History

It is striking how often Edinburgh 1910 is used as a point of reference by those concerned with world Christianity. To take but one mid-century example, the Report

¹² Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*, p. 91.

¹³ Latourette, “Ecumenical Bearings”, p. 356.

¹⁴ W.R. Hogg, *Ecumenical Foundations: A History of the International Missionary Council*, New York: Harper, 1952, p. 109.

¹⁵ Kathleen Bliss, “J.H. Oldham 1874-1969”, in Gerald H. Anderson et al. ed., *Mission Legacies: Biographical Studies of Leaders of the Modern Missionary Movement*, New York: Orbis, 1994, pp. 572, 570.

¹⁶ Yates, *Christian Mission*, p. 21.

¹⁷ Yates, *Christian Mission*, pp. 21-24. See further Clements, *Faith on the Frontier*.

of the Foreign Mission Committee to the 1951 Church of Scotland General Assembly began with these words: “‘Edinburgh 1910’ has not yet ceased to produce fruit, and some of its fruit appeared in 1950.”¹⁸ It was a very different world from the one which had excited the missionary imagination in 1910. Two world wars had occurred. Communist revolution had brought Western missionary work in China to an end. India was independent making the future of missionary work very uncertain. In Africa the stirrings of nationalism suggested that the missionary enterprise there might be in jeopardy before long. The extent of the change in the prospects for the missionary movement had been recognised in the opening of the Foreign Mission Committee’s Report the previous year: “God has given the missionary movement both encouragement and discouragement since the days of ‘Edinburgh 1910’. Must we not confess that we needed this lesson on the paradoxical relation between Christian Faith and History?”¹⁹ Edinburgh 1910 is the reference point from which missionary strategy attempts to make sense of unfolding events. Such references could be replicated from many different churches and countries. Perhaps inevitably, however, the recognition of the significance of the event is tempered by the fact that its limitations and weaknesses have become ever more apparent with the passing of the years.

The delegates were, overwhelmingly, British (500) and American (500). Representatives from continental Europe were a small minority (170). Even fewer were the delegates from the “younger churches” of India, China and Japan. There were no African participants nor were there any from Latin America. No one was invited from the Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox Churches. While the participants were struck by the diversity of participants, from a longer historical perspective it is striking how limited was their range. Of course, the participants were also overwhelmingly male despite the fact that women were already making a massive contribution to the missionary movement.

Few though they were in number, the Asian delegates – from Burma, Ceylon, China, India, Japan and Korea – clearly exhibited the changing composition of the Christian church and demonstrated where its future might lie. Their presence was celebrated as a sign of the success of the Western missionary movement but, as Andrew Walls points out, “there is no sign that these delegates were expected to have a *distinctive* or original contribution to the conference.”²⁰ In fact, the most oft-quoted and perhaps the most influential speech was made by the South Indian priest V.S. Azariah who concluded: “Through all the ages to come the Indian church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labours of the missionary body. 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!”²¹

Another point at which the historical limitations of the Conference are apparent is in the fact that it was premised upon a territorial idea of Christian mission. A key distinction was that drawn between “fully missionised lands” and “not yet fully

¹⁸ Report of the Foreign Mission Committee for 1950, *Reports to the General Assembly 1951*, Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1951, p. 369.

¹⁹ Report of the Foreign Mission Committee for 1949, *Reports to the General Assembly 1950*, Edinburgh: Church of Scotland, 1950, p. 369.

²⁰ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, p. 58.

²¹ *World Missionary Conference 1910: The History and Records of the Conference*, Edinburgh and London: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier; New York, Chicago and Toronto: Fleming H. Revell, p. 315.

missionised lands”. The task of mission was to “carry” the gospel from the one to the other. This Christendom model of Christian expansion would be obsolete within half a century. As Andrew Walls points out: “Today some of what in 1910 appeared to be ‘fully missionized lands’ are most obviously the prime mission fields of the world.”²² The use of the territorial principle also meant that Latin America was excluded from the consideration of the conference on the grounds that it was a “missionised land” – a recognition of the integrity of the Roman Catholic Christianity of the continent on which Anglo-Catholics insisted as a condition of their participation.

The territorial understanding of Christian expansion was allied with an activist mentality and a military metaphor. The Conference was marked by the mood of the Protestant missionary movement described by David Bosch as “pragmatic, purposeful, activist, impatient, self-confident, single-minded, triumphant”.²³ This mood unfortunately was often expressed in the vocabulary of aggression, attack, conquest and crusade. Participants saw nothing incongruous in using the language of violent military campaigns to describe their missionary engagement and aspirations. The enthusiasm and drive which marked the Conference drew much more than it realised on the optimistic self-confidence of imperial expansion and technological advance. The searchlight of history exposes these weaknesses. Yet it also points up the significance of Edinburgh 1910 in ways which were not possible at the time.

It is difficult to dispute the claim that the Western missionary movement did more to change the demographic profile of the Christian faith than anything else which occurred during the last two centuries. It has become a commonplace in any introduction to Christianity to point out how its “centre of gravity” has shifted from Europe and North America to the great southern continents of Asia, Africa and Latin America in the course of the 20th century.²⁴ While we are ever more aware of how much of this movement of Christian expansion is attributable to the initiatives of indigenous people, there can be no denying the seminal role of the Western missionaries. They were at the height of their influence in the period from 1850 to 1950 and one of the reasons that Edinburgh 1910 became emblematic of the movement is that it occurred at the high point of the movement, when it already had a wealth of missionary experience but when it was still bursting with energy and ambition.

Another reason for its unique significance is that the Western missionary movement was extraordinarily diverse and varied. There were a host of sending agencies in the West, often jealously aware of their own distinctive characteristics. Equally, they were working in a dazzling variety of “mission fields” around the world. It was nearly impossible to pull all the threads together so as to give a coherent account of the movement. Edinburgh 1910 achieved this to a greater extent than anything else. The conference organisers set out to assemble a body of delegates who would be representative of the entire Protestant missionary movement. Thanks to intensive diplomacy in the run-up to the conference they were even able to secure the

²² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith*, New York and Edinburgh: Orbis and T. & T. Clark, 1996, p. 237.

²³ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, New York: Orbis, 1991, p. 336.

²⁴ See e.g. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.

participation of Anglo-Catholic Anglican agencies who had kept their distance from earlier Protestant conferences.

It is the spring from which influential currents flowed into the coming century. Its guiding conviction was that the evangelisation of the whole world was within reach if Christians would apply themselves with faith and obedience. This has continued to be energising for generations who have taken that rallying call to heart. Equally, its achievement in bringing together a wider range of Protestant traditions than had ever previously been achieved was ground-breaking. The frequently expressed conviction that effectiveness in mission calls for unity marked the inception of the modern ecumenical movement. Hence a great many Christian leaders, when they have looked for the source of their inspiration, have traced important spiritual roots to the meeting on the Mound in Edinburgh in 1910. Not only was it the occasion when Mott and Oldham emerged as world leaders of the missionary movement but it proved to be a nursery from which some of the young men in attendance would emerge to make their mark on the coming century: William Temple, John Baillie and V.S. Azariah to name but three.

Conclusion: The Great New Fact

With the possible exception of Vatican II, no event was more definitive for the emerging shape of Christianity in the 20th century than Edinburgh 1910. It was the first clear glimpse of what William Temple would describe as “the great new fact of our time” – a truly worldwide Christian church.²⁵ This epoch-making vision of the church as a truly global missionary community has continued to inspire subsequent generations, making it an enduring point of reference for those who hear Christ’s call to a mission which extends to the ends of the earth. As Andrew Walls summarises: “The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910, has passed into Christian legend. It was a landmark in the history of mission; the starting point of the modern theology of mission; the high point of the modern Western missionary movement and the point from which it declined; the launch-pad of the modern ecumenical movement; the point at which Christians first began to glimpse something of what a world church would be like.”²⁶

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²⁵ William Temple, *The Church Looks Forward*, London: MacMillan & Co., 1944, pp. 2-3; cit Yates, *Christian Mission*, p. 33.

²⁶ Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process*, p. 53.