

## **Will We Correct the "Edinburgh Error"?— Future Mission in Historical Perspective (Revised)**

by

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No missionary gathering impacted 20<sup>th</sup> century missions as did the World Missionary Conference held in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1910. No single error was as significant as the "Edinburgh error." Currently, missionary conferences of various kinds and with a variety of agendas are routine and Edinburgh centennials are slated for Edinburgh (again), Tokyo, Cape Town and elsewhere in 2010. Will organizers of these and numerous other missionary conferences on the drawing boards correct the "error of Edinburgh"? How important is it that they do?

### **The "Edinburgh Error" and its Reflections in the Ecumenical Movement of the Twentieth Century**

It was a momentous occasion. Kenneth Scott Latourette's "Great Century of Missions" had given way to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The missionary baton was passing from British to American hands. Edinburgh attracted 1200 delegates representing the missionary arms of most of the great denominations. For the first time non-Western churches were represented by a contingent of outstanding leaders. Darwinism, Higher Criticism, the Social Gospel and much else constituted very real problems. Nevertheless, possibilities for churches and missions seemed endless, *if only . . .*

**The fateful decision of 1910.** Chairman John R. Mott, Secretary J. H. Oldham and other Edinburgh organizers decided to confine the Edinburgh agenda to strategy and policy issues—missionary training, missions and governments, the message in mission contexts, the church on the mission field, and so on. Most, if not all, of the mission agencies invited to send delegates were thought to be evangelical so "No signing of any theological agreement was required at Edinburgh" says Lutheran missiologist, James Scherer.<sup>1</sup> As a procedural matter, leaders ". . . insisted that the divisive issue of doctrine not intrude into the proceedings" writes Stanford's Robert McAfee Brown, a specialist on Catholic-Protestant dialogue.<sup>2</sup> As for the nature of Christian mission itself, participating churches and missions were free to define mission within their separate communions and without reference to any external standard including the Great Commission itself.

Unknowingly Edinburgh organizers had set a pattern for the ecumenical movement of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bishop Stephen Neill rightly says that Edinburgh 1910 was ". . . the starting-point of the modern ecumenical movement *in all its forms*" (italics mine)<sup>3</sup> Justice Anderson indicates that Edinburgh was ". . . the training ground for many of the future leaders of the missionary-ecumenical movement."<sup>4</sup> James Scherer observes that Edinburgh

. . . launched a movement for missionary cooperation and consultation *without prior doctrinal consensus*. . . Corporate prayers revealed that this consensus had behind it a genuine spiritual substance. It did not need to be put to the test of doctrinal definition. Delegates were ready to accept one another in good faith.

. . . There was no precedent for it in the annals of Christian assembly. From the time of Edinburgh, *it became an accepted*

<sup>1</sup> James A. Scherer. *Gospel, Church and Kingdom: Comparative Studies in World Mission Theology*. Augsburg 1987:15.

<sup>2</sup> Robert McAfee Brown, *The Ecumenical Revolution: An Interpretation of the Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*. Doubleday 1967:32.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Neill. *A History of Christian Missions*. Eerdmans, 1964:554.

<sup>4</sup> Justice Anderson. "The World Missionary Conference: Edinburgh 1910" in A. Scott Moreau, gen. ed. *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Baker, 2000:1029.

*method of doing together the business of the kingdom. (italics mine).*<sup>5</sup>



Headed by Mott, a Continuation Committee resulted in the formation of the International Missionary Council (IMC) at Lake Mohonk, New York, in 1921. Charles Brent, a missionary bishop in the Philippines and one of the planners of Edinburgh, realized that ecclesiastical and theological issues could not be postponed forever and therefore took a leading role in organizing the Committee on Faith and Order. Edinburgh gave rise to the Committee on Life and Work as well. Ultimately these two streams united to form the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 1948. But it was not until 1961 that the IMC joined together with the WCC by becoming its Division of World Mission and Evangelism.

It is very doubtful that Mott, Oldham and their 1910 collaborators would have been happy to see mission agencies surrender their independence to the WCC. However, at the time of the formation of the IMC in 1921 they themselves had allowed for the involvement of some churches as is apparent in an official IMC document that states, “. . . the only bodies entitled to determine missionary policy are the missionary societies and boards, *or the churches which they represent, and the churches in the mission field*” (italics mine).<sup>6</sup> Aside from this, the IMC basically followed the precedent set at Edinburgh: namely, instead of thinking in terms of doctrine or a statement of faith, they thought in terms of “functions” or purposes. They established eight specific “functions” for the organization and proceeded to lay them out in what today might be called a “purpose statement.”<sup>7</sup> It was with these functions in mind that plans were laid for a meeting of the IMC in Jerusalem in 1928—plans that not only made provision for more church representatives but also for a larger agenda including such topics as religious education, secularism, industrialization, racism, and rural problems. Though estranged earlier as a result of the War, **German leaders** had been reassured at Lake Mohonk and looked forward to the projected conference in Jerusalem. Nevertheless they soon took exception to the emphasis being given to social redemption as over against individual conversion in the preparation stage. Finally, they boycotted the conference altogether.<sup>8</sup>



From the time of Edinburgh the modern ecumenical movement has been characterized more by organizational togetherness than by theological consensus. Despite a rather significant conservative presence and some laudatory accomplishments, this was true, not only of the World Council of Churches itself, but also of the International Missionary Council right up to the time of its incorporation into the WCC in 1961. As for the World Council, at its inauguration in 1948 it described itself as “. . . a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.” That statement was good as far as it went, of course, but it proved to be notoriously deficient when it came to defining Christian beliefs and even more deficient when it came to dispelling unchristian heresies. In response to the insistence of Eastern Orthodox leaders and as the price of their participation in the WCC, the vague phrase “according to the Scriptures” was added to the confessional statement in 1961. However, the change had little, if any, practical significance.

**Distinctly missionary outcomes of Edinburgh.** Good men, even great men like John R. Mott, J. H. Oldham and their colleagues make mistakes. When they do the consequences are great as well. But did these illustrious planners of Edinburgh actually make a mistake? As we would expect, not all will agree that they did. After all, participation was confined to delegates of mission agencies that were basically evangelical. Organizers probably thought that made further credentialing unnecessary in addition to enabling conferees to concentrate on mission-related strategies and endeavors to the exclusion of extraneous concerns. In the end, the conference produced practical helps to missions that

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<sup>5</sup> James A. Scherer, “Ecumenical Mandates for Mission” in Norman A. Horner, ed. *Protestant Crosscurrents in Mission: The Ecumenical Conservative Encounter*. Abingdon, 1968:22-23.

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, “Ecumenical Bearings of the Missionary Movement and the International Missionary Council” in Ruth Rouse and Stephen Charles Neill, eds. *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517- 1948*. Westminster 1968: 367.

<sup>7</sup> Latourette. 1968:367.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Latourette. 1968:368-69.

demonstrated the value of mutual consultation and cooperative endeavors. In any event, some would say, Edinburgh and its leaders cannot be faulted for whatever might have happened subsequently.

It is easy to understand why, at certain times and under certain circumstances, missions people might find it expedient and even necessary to meet together among themselves in order to take up a very limited agenda. Certainly, it is not my intention to impugn the motives of Edinburgh's illustrious planners. Nor is it my intention to blame Edinburgh for subsequent failings of the ecumenical movement that emerged from its deliberations and actions. Nevertheless, speaking generally, I believe that only on very rare occasions and with more precautions than were evident in 1910 do representatives of mission agencies have the prerogative of ruling divine revelation out of order in order to pursue their own objectives, however noble. And in my estimation Edinburgh 1910 was not one of those occasions. If anything, given the circumstances of that time both within and without the church, planners should not only have refused to rule out doctrinal discussion, they should have *insisted* on including doctrinal discussion both when planning and when guiding conference proceedings.

As we have seen, Latourette, Neill, Anderson and Scherer along with other historians maintain that Edinburgh 1910 was not only the starting-point of the modern ecumenical movement but that it also established those precedents that were to characterize that movement for years to come. That's one reason why this particular mistake was so momentous. Among its deleterious outcomes I will mention four that have been of special consequence to Christian missions.

1) When coupled with a narrow focus on the *nonchristian* world, the decision to rule out doctrinal matters was deleterious in two ways. First, it bypassed serious issues faced by Protestant missions in Latin America. The subsequent record of severe persecution of Protestant believers and pastors—and missionaries as well—at the hands of Catholic authorities shows that omission to have been unwarranted and unwise. Second, in spite of the focus on what we would call unreached peoples, the plight of vast numbers of aboriginals in Latin American who lived outside the sphere of any kind of Christian influence was overlooked. Through succeeding years the ecumenical record in its dealings with the Catholic Church on the one hand, and in its outreach among the unevangelized on the other, has not been exemplary to say the least.

 2) **Indecisiveness** as to the nature and meaning of the Christian mission was to be reflected later in continuing vacillation and confusion in the IMC and WCC as to what the church's mission really is as well as to the **precise relationship between church and mission.** At one point it was proposed that "*mission is church;*" at another point that "*church is mission.*" In 1968, delegates at Uppsala proposed to "let the world establish the agenda" while at the same time turning a deaf ear to the question "What about the two billion (who, it was reckoned, had not yet heard the gospel)?" Themes of still other conferences often had a hopeful ring but attendant discussions and understandings were much less hopeful. The theme at Bangkok in 1973 was "Salvation Today" but in the end "salvation" turned out to be "humanization." Ten years later the theme at Vancouver was "Jesus Christ—the Life of the World," but not one major speaker even made reference to it. Speakers focused, rather, on "world affairs in ecumenical perspective."<sup>9</sup> If the "ecumenical perspective" on mission were to be boiled down to a single sentence it might well be, "Mission is everything the church does in the world," or the more nuanced, "Mission is everything the church *is sent to do* in the world." But both definitions run afoul of Stephen Neill's oft-quoted dictum, "*When mission is everything, mission is nothing.*"

3) When it comes to the matter of training future leaders, the theological precedents set by Edinburgh proved to be anything but helpful. In the late 1950s, for example, the International Missionary Council established the Theological Education Fund (TEF) with a view to raising the level of theological education in the Third World. Among other endeavors, the TEF brought some of the younger churches' brightest scholars to Western institutions of higher learning so they could pursue graduate studies. In the 1970s especially those scholars were encouraged to evolve theologies and

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Arthur F. Glasser, "World Council of Churches Assemblies" in A. Scott Moreau, gen. ed, *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*. Baker 2000:1026.

programs designed specifically for their respective constituencies and cultures. As a result, a number of “contextualized theologies” were either added to the list of existing sub-orthodox theologies or somehow combined with them: Liberation Theology (in various forms such as Minjung Theology in Korea), Black Theology, Theology of Ontology and Time, Third Eye Theology, Theology of the Pain of God, Waterbuffalo Theology, and Yin-Yang Theology to name a few. Careful analysis of these theologies in the light of Scripture will show that any gains in cultural sensitivity were overshadowed by a loss of biblical authenticity.

4) Often repeated in 20<sup>th</sup> century mission enclaves, the Edinburgh error was ultimately reflected in the virtual abandonment of missions on the part of mainline Protestant denominations. At the beginning of the century mainline denominations supplied 80 percent of the North American missionary force. At its end, they supplied no more than 6 percent of it!<sup>10</sup> If good news was to be found, it was in the fact that the more conservative leaders of younger churches on former mission fields often resisted the defections of their clerical counterparts in Europe and America when it came to such matters as consecrating gay marriage and ordaining gays to Christian ministry.

### Corrective Attempts by Theological Conservatives in the Twentieth Century

Hopefully the author will be forgiven for **omitting** the Pentecostal movement from consideration at this point even though it emerged at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (1901) and has had an incalculable impact on world missions. However, that movement began as a restorationist and millenarian movement, not as a missionary movement. In addition, it has so many branches and expressions throughout Protestantism and even within Catholicism that it requires separate treatment. The two 20<sup>th</sup> century conservative Protestant movements that responded most directly to the error of Edinburgh were, first, the fundamentalists and, later, the evangelicals. It is with them that we will be concerned here.

***The reactions of fundamentalists and independents to Edinburgh precedents and the inroads of theological liberalism.*** A number of factors inside and outside the church and its missions combined in the early 1900s to elicit a fundamentalist response that was at once theological, missiological and organizational.

1) It would be a stretch to say that early 20<sup>th</sup> century fundamentalists were responding to Edinburgh alone or even primarily when, between 1910 and 1915, scholars from both Europe and America produced the well known 12-volume work, *The Fundamentals*. It would probably be more correct to say that those scholars were reacting to the larger incursion of a theological liberalism and modernism that denied the authenticity and complete authority of the Bible as well as various historic doctrines of the Christian faith—*doctrines that give substance to the Christian gospel and direction to the Christian mission*. *The Fundamentals* provided grist for the mills of those Bible schools and seminaries that produced the bulk missionaries throughout the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In retrospect, therefore, it seems most unfortunate that organizers of the most representative missionary conference of all of history up to its time—Edinburgh 1910—had avoided an opportunity to reinforce the authority of the Scriptures and reinvigorate the doctrinal verities that comprise the true gospel, confute its rivals and motivate its dissemination.

2) A fundamentalist reaction that was distinctly missionary took organized form in 1917 when a considerable number of independent “faith mission” leaders including Henry W. Frost (China Inland Mission), Orson R. Palmer (African Inland Mission), and Frank W. Lange (Central America Mission) formed the Interdenominational Foreign Mission Association of North America (IFMA, now CrossGlobal Link). At least two aspects of that event are of major importance here. First, this was the very first association of such missions to be formed in North America and the prominence accorded mainline denominational mission agencies at Edinburgh was a factor in precipitating it. Second, in the

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<sup>10</sup> A. Scott Moreau, “Putting the Survey in Perspective” in *Mission Handbook: U.S. and Canadian Christian Ministries Overseas*, 18<sup>th</sup> ed., in Moreau, gen. ed. EMIS 2000: 4, 34; Cf. also David J. Hesselgrave, *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*. Kregel 2005:317-26.

view of its organizers, they were defending the Christian faith in the face of defections from it. In one preparatory meeting, for example, it was noted the mission boards represented *differed from other agencies*

. . . particularly in the uncompromising adherence of those present to five specific beliefs: the deity of Christ, the vicarious atonement of Christ, man's fallen condition, the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures, and the **premillennial return** of Christ.<sup>11</sup>

Accordingly, when it came time to organize they affirmed the historic Christian faith by formulating a nine-article Confession of Faith, the first article of which had to do with the verbal inspiration, inerrancy and complete authority of the Bible (autographs).

3) A very similar but much later and more iconoclastic and separatistic fundamentalist reaction to Edinburgh and the ecumenical movement to which it gave rise was given expression in the formation of The Associated Missions of the International Council of Christian Churches (TAM-ICCC) by Carl R. McIntire and others in 1948. It is instructive in this regard that a year or so after the inauguration of the Evangelical Foreign Mission Association (EFMA, now The Mission Exchange) in 1945 (see below), its leaders proposed that a close relationship be established between their organization and the IFMA. The response of the IFMA in its annual meeting in 1946 gives quite clear indication of the posture of the IFMA in its earlier days. Members voted decisively to maintain independence of any denominationally-related organization. The record makes it clear that they “. . . did not want to enter into a relationship which might hinder fellowship with the other fundamental missions, such as members of The Associated Missions of the International Council of Christian Churches (ICCC).”<sup>12</sup>

4) Still in the forefront of missionary as well as church affairs in the 1950-60s, the fortunes of fundamentalism outside the IFMA, and within TAM especially, gradually receded. The *Mission Handbook 2004-2006: U. S. and Canadian Protestant Ministries Overseas*<sup>13</sup> does not even include TAM in its listings. As for the IFMA, it ultimately formed an alliance with the EFMA that, while allowing for independent action and assembly, tended to promote commonality in agendas, publications, programs and posture. Apart from its presence in the IFMA and fundamentalist Pentecostal groupings, by the turn of the century the voice of fundamentalism tended to be muted owing to a variety of factors, but especially its dividedness. It is ironic that while the term “fundamentalist” is often used pejoratively, Scripture makes it abundantly clear that the future of church and mission belongs to those who hold to the “fundamentals of the faith” whatever their organizational and ecclesiastical ties might be!

***Evangelical responses to ecumenism and fundamentalism.*** In the 1940's a group of conservative leaders headed by Harold John Ockenga carved out a niche in church and mission for “evangelicals” (he coined the term “new evangelicals”) who encouraged theological reform, social responsibility and ecclesiastical openness while eschewing the defensive posture of fundamentalism. In 1942 these leaders formed the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) with a seven-point Statement of Faith very similar to that of the IFMA in its affirmation of the authority of Scripture and orthodox doctrines. Three years later in 1945 the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (EFMA) was formed under the aegis of the NAE in order to facilitate missionary concerns. Though these two associations were, and are, open to organizations and/or individuals on the basis of a faith commitment, both tend to appeal primarily to evangelical denominations and their missionary agencies.

As evangelicals moved into the 1950s and beyond, tensions developed in three areas not only between evangelicals and ecumenists on the left and evangelicals and fundamentalists on the right, but also between evangelicals themselves. All three have had serious implications for Christian missions.

<sup>11</sup> Edwin L. Frizen, Jr. *75 Years of IFMA 1917-1992: the Nondenominational Missions Movement*. William Carey, 1992:108.

<sup>12</sup> Frizen. 1992:250.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. Scott Moreau, gen ed. EMIS 2004.

1) For long years cooperative evangelism was a most decisive issue at home and overseas. The question was a simple one: Does the preaching of a biblical gospel justify cooperation with liberal clerics who do not subscribe to the historic creeds of the church? Some said “yes.” Some said “no.” Due largely to the popularity and reputation of Billy Graham and with the passage of time the controversy gradually receded into the background and the inclusive position came to prevail. However, it cannot be said that the controversy has been resolved to the satisfaction of either all evangelicals or of most fundamentalists.

2) Other questions that divided evangelicals early on had to do with the nature of biblical authority and the importance of “evangelical theology.” Some conservatives held to the inerrancy of the autographs of Scripture; others to infallibility and the idea that the Bible is inerrant, not necessarily in its full extent, but only in that which it affirms. In line with the former view, The Evangelical Theological Society (ETS) subscribed to a single, simple statement on biblical inerrancy that, in effect, placed all agendas and deliberations under the authority of the written Word of God and resulted in a body of literature of incalculable benefit both to church and mission. Later on, however, the ETS found it necessary to add a Trinitarian plank to its faith statement in order to differentiate its position from that of certain cults. More recently, ETS leaders have found that enlarged statement to be inadequate when dealing with the challenge of open theism.

As for evangelical missions themselves, writing concerning a Congress on the Church’s Worldwide Mission which convened in Wheaton in April, 1966, Norman Horner writes,

The appearance of false doctrines has again ‘evoked a confessional act from the Christian community in witness to the true faith’ (Hughes). Something had to be done to affirm what evangelicals truly believe the Bible teaches, providing an antidote to ‘ecumenical theology’ and creating a true focus for missionary service.<sup>14</sup>

The Wheaton enclave was followed by a much larger and more internationally representative World Congress on Evangelism held in Berlin in October of the same year. Its theme, “One Race, One Gospel, One Task,” gave indication of a conservative understanding of both the Christian mission and the Christian message, but its importance is better measured in terms of the Lausanne Movement to which it gave rise.

3) Berlin 1966 was followed almost a decade later by a watershed event that brought into clear focus a third area of significant division among evangelicals: namely, that of social (or socio-political) concern as it relates to the mission of the church. I make reference here to the First International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne I) held in Lausanne, Switzerland in 1974. That Congress was attended by 2,430 invited participants (not delegates) and 570 observers including some Roman Catholic and WCC representatives. The plenary program featured seven papers on “biblical foundations” and five on “strategy issues.” But of special importance to our present discussion were challenges by Ralph A. Winter and John R. W. Stott. The former presaged “The Gospel for Every Person and a Church for Every People by A.D. 2000 and Beyond” movement for world evangelization. The latter presaged a pronounced shift in the direction of increased socio-political concern on the part of a sizeable segment of evangelicals. Before the Congress ended some 2,200 participants had signed “The Lausanne Covenant”—a 3,000-word declaration that affirmed the infallibility (not the inerrancy) of Scripture and the primacy of evangelism but left the precise relationship between evangelism/mission and social action as an issue to be resolved later. Subsequently the Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization (LCWE) which grew out of Lausanne I has sponsored a variety of conferences and meetings. Some of them have considered this issue but none has brought closure to it.

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<sup>14</sup> Norman A. Horner, “Introduction” in Horner, ed. *Protestant Crosscurrents in Mission: the Ecumenical-Conservative Encounter*. Abingdon 1968:12-13.

### The Point to Which Conservative Mission Forces Have Now Arrived

At present the status of the overall conservative response to the Edinburgh error is not at all clear. The fundamentalist movement is very much alive but at times seems to be altogether too divided, isolated and insulated to play a major role. The evangelical movement is very much alive and, in some ways even robust, but displays weaknesses in four areas that Edinburgh 1910 failed to address.

**Concerning Roman Catholicism.** Over recent decades, relationships between Evangelicals and Catholics have first ameliorated and more recently soured. Evangelicals and Catholics Together, among other groupings, has been pursuing the initiatives of Vatican II and seeking rapprochement on the conversion issue and other matters. Some evangelicals have been re-thinking the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith and even questioning the need for the Reformation. Not long ago the evangelical world was stunned when the president of the ETS, Francis Beckwith, resigned from that position and joined the Catholic Church. Meanwhile, on the Catholic side, **Pope Benedict has taken a hardened stance toward Protestants** by declaring that Vatican II has been widely misinterpreted when it comes to the matter of unity. He has also re-affirmed the traditional Roman position maintaining that the Church of Rome is the only true church.

**Concerning the authority of Scripture and Christian doctrine.** Recent history makes it apparent that evangelicals are now divided, not so much on the authority of the Scripture per se, but on the nature of that authority. There has been a decided shift among scholars away from inerrancy and in the direction of infallibility with attendant changes in the way the Bible is translated, interpreted and communicated. We have already noted the direction taken by the LCWE back in 1974. Much later, certain evangelical scholars focused on the inspiration and authority of Scripture and relevant issues in a meeting held at Wheaton College in 2001. Some papers reflected a shift in the direction of liberal scholarship significant enough to cause one scholar to urge his fellows not to forfeit their soul to academic respectability.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately for missions, the ETS now strikes an uncertain note on the question.

After reviewing relevant statements of faith articulated between 1950 and 2000, Thomas C. Oden and J. I. Packer found consensus on what they term a “Biblio-Christo-centric” definition of evangelicalism.<sup>16</sup> A more somber assessment of a larger range of evangelical productions and activities, however, has led one British commentator to point to a “battle” in the United Kingdom over “what an evangelical is”<sup>17</sup> and has also led an American scholar to write that by the end of the century it had become

. . . increasingly clear that the term [evangelical--ed.] now encompassed so complex a sociological reality that it was **losing its descriptive power**. . . *They [evangelicals] could no longer be distinguished from people in the “mainline,” “liberal” or ‘ecumenical’ churches.* (italics mine)<sup>18</sup>

**Concerning the meaning of mission and the fulfillment of the Great Commission.** Any fair evaluation of theologically conservative missions overall must take into account the fact that, since the rise of the evangelical movement in the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conservative missions in general have come into their own as far as number of volunteers, expenditure of money, breadth of undertakings, depth of research and wealth of missiological proposals are concerned. At the same time there is an underside to the story not sufficiently noted or discussed. Generally speaking, the agendas

<sup>15</sup> Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguez and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *Evangelicals and Scripture: Tradition, Authority and Hermeneutics*. InterVarsity 2004:170.

<sup>16</sup> Thomas C. Oden and J. I. Packer. *One Faith: The Evangelical Consensus*. InterVarsity 2004.

<sup>17</sup> *Christianity Today*, July 2007:16.

<sup>18</sup> Richard V. Pierard. “Evangelicalism” in J. D. Douglas, gen ed. *The New 20<sup>th</sup> Century Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Baker 1991:313.

of conservative missionary conferences at every level tend to be crammed with issues and programs having to do with leadership, education, strategy, justice, poverty, environment and the like to the diminution of theology and doctrine. If Bishop Neill's words, "When mission is everything, mission is nothing" applied to ecumenical missions of a somewhat more distant past, they certainly apply to conservative missions—especially the evangelical missions—of the recent past. As we approached the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the astute missions historian, **Ralph Winter**, wrote a piece entitled "The Meaning of 'Mission': Understanding this Term is Crucial to Completion of the Missionary Task" in which he said,

About the only people who still think of mission as having to do with preaching the gospel where Christ is not named, with being a testimony to the very last tribe and nation and tongue on this earth, are the often confused people in the pew.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, there are obvious parallels between ecumenism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and evangelicalism at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup>. A century ago the curtain had fallen on the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Latourette's "Great Century of Missions," a British century. Now the curtain has been drawn on the 20<sup>th</sup> century, an American century that included Winter's "Unbelievable Years" of Christian expansion.<sup>20</sup> Though very different in form, both the opportunities and challenges faced today are similar to those faced by Mott and his colleagues a century ago. Like them, today's leaders stand at a fork in the road. They cannot go back. They must go on. But, which way?

### Urgent Appeals from Two of the Twentieth Century's Leading Conservative Scholars

Which way? In order to answer that question it is entirely appropriate that we ponder the proposals of two of the twentieth century's most eminent conservative scholars—two men who lived the history we have reviewed and pointed churches and missions in the right way. I refer to Donald A. McGavran and Carl F. H. Henry, two Christian scholars whom I, along with many others, regard as being among the twentieth century's very best in their respective fields of missiology and theology. The fact that they traveled very different ecclesiastical routes only to arrive at basically the same conclusion serves to underscore the critical importance of their appeals. (I request that readers kindly overlook the necessarily personal nature of much of what follows.) In any case, it is well that we devote a comparatively large space to them because they speak with a degree of acumen and wisdom that this author could never command.

**The appeal of an eminent missiologist--Donald A. McGavran.** McGavran was born in India of missionary parentage. He served in India as a Disciples of Christ missionary from 1924 to 1957 when he returned home to establish the Institute of Church Growth; found the School of World Mission at Fuller Theological Seminary; and inaugurate the Church Growth Movement. It was McGavran who made the much-heralded appeal to WCC conferees at Uppsala in 1968 to return to Great Commission mission and strategy by attempting to reach "the two billion" without the gospel. The disheartening response at Uppsala was a major factor—though certainly not the only factor—leading to the unabashed and uncompromising position of his sunset years.

From the time of my tenure at Trinity in 1965 until his homegoing and my retirement in 1991, Dr. **McGavran was an esteemed mentor and friend.** From 1988 to 1990, however, his letters (including some unpublished manuscripts) increased in number, length and urgency because, as he once said to me, though we "speak in somewhat different terms we share the same fundamental concern for the future of missions." This must account for the increased frequency of his sendings despite the fact that, at an earlier period, I had expressed concern that his philosophy of church growth was derived too much from the social sciences, too little from biblical theology.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph D. Winter. "The Meaning of 'Mission': Understanding this Term is Crucial to Completion of the Missionary Task" in *Missions Frontiers Bulletin*, March-April 1998:15.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Winter, *The Unbelievable Years 1945-1969*. William Carey, 1970.

Late in life McGavran had several inter-related burdens. The burden of one of his letters and its accompanying essay was that churches and missions devote entirely too much effort to achieve structural unity at the expense of biblical mission. The burden of another letter and essay had to do with the “lion” that threatens the future of mission. The “lion” is the “conviction that mission is primarily helpful activities to brother men [sic.] irrespective of what they believe.” Put another way, the “lion” is the idea that “. . . mission is primarily helping those great groupings of mankind who are less fortunate than we are.”

A third burden was that, in academic settings, the determination of mission agendas are overly dependent upon the presence of missiologists who do not hold to beliefs that are absolutely foundational to Christian mission—beliefs such as the lostness of humankind, the uniqueness of Christ and the gospel, the necessity of conversion to Christ, and so on. It was in hope of rectifying this state of affairs that McGavran wrote,

I want to lay before you, David, a very important item. . . . I think that the evangelical professors of missions need to establish a nationwide organization called openly and courageously “The American Society of Christian Missiology.” . . . What is needed in America and indeed around the world is a society of missiology that says quite frankly that the purpose of missiology is to carry out the Great Commission. Anything other than that may be a good thing to do, but it is not missiology.<sup>21</sup>

It was this appeal that eventuated in the formation of the Evangelical Missiological Society (EMS) with its stand on historic Christian doctrine and its related agendas and productions.

McGavran should not be misunderstood. It is my best understanding that he did not oppose educational, medical and ameliorative ministries. Rather, he supported them. He himself was an educational missionary. In fact, he once told me that he had been in India for years before he realized that there was a door open to the salvation of Indians other than the door of education. But he believed that, like all good Christians everywhere, missionaries should carry on these ministries because they are *Christians* not because they are *missionaries* as such.

Likewise, McGavran was not opposed to academic associations of mission professors and professionals that include those of diverse theological positions and that welcome any discussion relevant to their discipline. He himself was a member of several such associations. What he advocated was the formation of one missiological society whose members agreed that “. . . the heart of missiology is preaching the gospel with the intent to win people away from the worship of stones, idols, ideas, power, sex, money and success to the worship of the true and living God as portrayed in the gospel.”<sup>22</sup>

In short, and in McGavran’s own terms, he believed that *Christian* mission is “Great Commission mission;” it is “reaching the ‘two billion’ who have not yet heard the gospel;” it is “discipling the *ethne*.”



***The appeal of an eminent theologian—Carl F. H. Henry.*** Henry was the founding editor of *Christianity Today*, chairman of the 1966 World Congress of Evangelism in Berlin; and author of over 35 books including a monumental six-volume work on divine revelation. One of his fellow theologians, Timothy George, hailed him as the leading evangelical theologian of the twentieth century. Another, Kenneth Kantzer, said that he was the ablest defender of evangelical doctrine of his time. Not widely known but of special importance in this context is the fact that his widow, Helga Bender Henry, is the daughter of a pioneer missionary to the Cameroons.

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<sup>21</sup> Personal letter, April 7, 1988.

<sup>22</sup> Personal letter, April 7, 1988.



who have mounted the most significant protest to the lapses of faith and order in the Protestant Episcopal Church in the USA, for example. So, if they can avoid falling prey to the Edinburgh error, the churches and missions of the global South and East may well constitute our brightest hope for the future of Christian missions.

So, how do they, and how do we, correct the Edinburgh error? I would suggest two primary ways of doing it—one is in part negative; the other is wholly positive. One has to do with the way we think about the Christian mission—with our frame of mind or mindset. The other that has to do with the way we go about doing the business of Christian missions—with our *modus operandi*. All that follows is, of course, necessarily sketchy and only suggestive.

**Correct the Edinburgh error by changing the prevailing missionary mindset.** Edinburgh leaders entertained no antipathy towards theology and doctrine. They simply assumed that, since those mission agencies invited to send delegates were basically evangelical, doctrinal concerns could be cared for at that point and had no need of inclusion in conference proceedings. They also assumed that, since participation would be limited to missionary personnel, ecclesiastical concerns could be avoided as well. In effect, theological, ecclesiastical and doctrinal questions could be ruled out in order to get on with the “business of missions.”

Long experience leads me to believe that, while the avoidance of doctrinal issues at Edinburgh was altogether intentional, the **comparative absence of serious doctrinal discussion in missionary conferences of more recent times has been largely unintentional.** Quite literally, the relative absence of doctrinal discussions is the product of a certain “mindset” that has several components.

1) Many missionary leaders seem to feel that, once they have subscribed to an orthodox statement of faith, they can “bank it”, “bank on it” and get on with pressing practical issues. **This assumption is not usually thought through, however.** For example, leaders who think this way would often be the first to inquire as to how many people who hold to the creeds of the church actually have a “personal and practical” relationship with Christ. Yet they seem to believe that their own status as “true believers” somehow confers legitimacy on their particular ways and means of doing Christian mission. Given that mindset, “their vision” is all too readily transmuted into a “divine vision” quite apart from a thoroughgoing examination of that vision in the light of divine revelation.

2) Also pervasive and persuasive among missions people generally is the repeated assertion, “Missions must change if they are to have a future.” Guru status is automatically conferred on any leader or teacher who repeats that particular missionary mantra frequently and fervently. Very recently, a faithful missionary friend quipped, “It has almost come to the point where we must contact headquarters every morning to enquire as to who we are and what we are to do today.” Of course, cultures *do* change. That is not only true, it is a fundamental characteristic of culture. And, as cultures change, missions must likewise change. True again. But though change is necessary to carry out Christian mission, change is not the essence of Christian mission. The essence is to be found in the nature and attributes of the Triune God and in the Word that he has revealed to us. The essence of Christian mission is not to be found in change, it is rather to be found in that which is both *unchanging* and *unchangeable!*

3) Of similar but not equal potency in mission circles is the notion that this is a “time for risking.” That is true also. But the kind of “risk” that is ordinarily in view is not the kind of risk undertaken by the likes of William Carey, David Brainerd, Adoniram Judson, John Patteson and the Auca martyrs. It is more the kind of risk undertaken when one employs this or that innovative approach or monetary investment or missionary method or gospel contextualization with the understanding that there is a good chance that it may not work out, that it may fail. Sometime ago I wrote an article showing how one contemporary approach to the contextualization of the gospel actually involves the **denial of certain cardinal teachings intrinsic to the gospel** including teachings such as the blood atonement of Christ. Imagine my surprise when one evangelical critic replied to the effect that that is exactly the kind of risk that must be taken if we hope to communicate the gospel effectively to postmoderns!!

Well, risks there are. More risks there will be. But to risk the gospel in order to communicate the gospel? That kind of risk is inadmissible and should be unthinkable!

4) Finally, not to be overlooked is a pronounced tendency on the part of Christians generally, but perhaps missions people especially, to resort to a selective use of Scripture. Illustrations of this are numerous and some of them are egregious. By way of illustration, I will point to one that is particularly pertinent in this context. It has to do with the familiar passage in Titus 1:5-9 where missionary Titus is commissioned by Paul to appoint elders in the fledgling churches of Crete. My experience in this regard leads me to believe that in schools, churches and missions alike significantly more emphasis is placed on those qualifications for eldership stated in verses 6-8 as compared to those stated in verse 9. In fact, upon reflection I find myself guilty of this. Over many years of teaching church planting and development I have often dealt with qualifications for leadership such as “husband of one wife,” “above reproach,” “self-controlled” and so on. Only in recent years, however, has it occurred to me that Paul himself placed great importance on the ability to “. . . give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (vs. 9). It is this qualification that Paul elaborates in subsequent verses. We ordinarily do not emphasize it, but the elders and pastors of even those early fledgling churches of culturally depraved Crete were required to be “pastor-apologists.” Paul himself was a “missionary-apologist” and many of the apologists of the early centuries were “missionary-apologists” as well! Why should it be different today when those who “contradict sound doctrine” continue to multiply at home and abroad?

**Correct the Edinburgh error by “doing kingdom business” in God’s way.** As noted previously, James Scherer writes that Edinburgh

. . . launched a movement for missionary cooperation and consultation without prior doctrinal consensus. . . . consensus . . . did not need to be put to the test of doctrinal definition. Delegates were ready to accept one another in good faith. . . . *From the time of Edinburgh, it became an accepted method of doing together the business of the kingdom* (italics mine).<sup>28</sup>

As history shows, the problem with this is not so much to be found in the phrase “ready to accept one another” as it is to be found in the phrase “did not need to be put to the test of doctrinal definition.” Consultation and cooperation in kingdom business that is based on trust among children of the kingdom are to be commended. But consultation and cooperation in kingdom business that is based on **the revelation of the King is what has been commanded!**

*Only a knowledge of, and a commitment to, the revealed truth of God will sustain the church and its missions in the years ahead. The most crucial challenges of this century and until our Lord returns will not have to do so much with our innovative strategies as with our basic beliefs—with what those beliefs really are and with how deeply they are actually held. The response of church and mission leaders to the challenges of postmodernism and globalization must be the exact opposite of the Edinburgh response. They must give first consideration to Christian doctrine, not only when planning for centennials of Edinburgh in 2010, but also when planning other missionary gatherings; when researching, writing and teaching missiology; and when preparing and publishing missionary materials of whatever kind. No individual or collective vision, calling, interest, or enthusiasm—not even heartfelt compassion—can be allowed to preempt the primacy of complete biblical authority and core Christian truths. No postponement of theological and doctrinal deliberation should be contemplated except in the most unusual circumstances. Biblical mission and world evangelization are now at stake and will be for the foreseeable future!*

The present situation calls upon conservative missionary leaders to take measures such as the following.

<sup>28</sup> James A. Scherer in Horner, ed., 1968:22-23.

1) Review and reaffirm the “faith once delivered to the saints.” Mission books, study series, consultations and conferences—many of them best-selling, award-winning, celebrity-led, and promising world change—now flood the market. Included propositions and proposals are usually Bible-related but often extra-biblical and sometimes unbiblical. Not all merit, but all demand, Scriptural evaluation. Of course, all of them cannot be dealt with at once so what are we to do? I suggest that we periodically remember, reconsider and renew those teachings that necessitated and nurtured mission in the first place, and that we do so not just by reiterating them but also by showing how they relate to 21<sup>st</sup> century pagan cultures and Christian mission.

In his insightful analysis of the Emergent Church Movement, D. A. Carson summarizes our responsibility in this regard by citing First Peter 1:12-21. He enjoins continued confidence in revealed truth on the part of all true Christians by noting that truth is

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*Stabilized by constant review* (1:12-15),  
*Established on historical witness* (1:16-18), and  
*Grounded in biblical revelation* (1:19-21) (italics his).<sup>29</sup>

We do well to remember that the first words Luke employed in describing the church of Pentecost were “they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.”<sup>30</sup> The last admonition of Paul to Timothy was that he be “a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of good doctrine.”<sup>31</sup> The apostles’ doctrine—sound doctrine—is unchangeable but it is not static. It had to be encoded in words, but it must not be entombed in them. Confessional statements such as those of CrossGlobal Link and The Mission Exchange (formerly IFMA and EFMA respectively) should be constantly revisited and reaffirmed. Either they are all-important or they are not important at all.

2) Distinguish carefully between theological/doctrinal and practical/strategic issues. There is an inter-relationship between all aspects of Christian mission, of course. No aspect exists in isolation. But some missionary proposals are primarily theological with practical implications. Others are primarily practical with theological ramifications. Priority should ordinarily be given to the former, but both types must be considered.

The importance of this can hardly be over-estimated. Take, by way of example, the relationship between evangelism and social concern to which reference has been made in previous paragraphs. Most theological conservatives can be expected to agree that, in an ultimate sense, the battle in which we are engaged is a battle for the *soul*, not the *stomach*, of humankind. However, some will immediately add, “Yes, but the way to the soul is through the stomach!” Others will say, “Yes, but the stomach is important. You cannot expect a person with an empty stomach to listen to the gospel.” Still others will answer, “Yes, but the stomach and the soul cannot be separated in that way. We are dealing with whole persons. To deal with the stomach *is* to deal with the soul.”

Expressed in this fashion the differences may seem to be trite. But they are not. What we have here is an admixture of considerations that are at once theological and practical, doctrinal and strategic. To explore them in depth would take us far afield. But it should be clear that theological and practical distinctions are of the essence and that precedence must be given to biblical theology and doctrine if we hope to reach a conclusion that is truly Christian. After all, people of good will of all religions and no religion can and do address the human need for food, clothing, shelter, health, education, justice and so on. But Christians—and Christians only—can be expected to preach the gospel, win men and women of all nations to Jesus Christ, and establish churches that will worship and witness until Christ returns. *And they only so long as, and to the extent that, they embrace the truth of divine revelation!*

3) Encourage group discussion and evaluation of the theological/doctrinal validity of proposals having to do with missionary practice and strategy. This suggestion flows logically from the previous

<sup>29</sup> Don (D. A.) Carson. *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Zondervan 2005:231-33.

<sup>30</sup> Acts 2:42.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Tim. 4:6.

one. We cannot but be appreciative of the creativity, ingenuity and energy that contribute to the thinking and doing of Christian mission these days. But that is not the end of the matter. It is obvious that some of the products of that creativity are superior to others. Some are biblically valid. Some are not. And that determination should be made by groups of qualified evaluators, not just by interested individuals.

Three types of problems and issues almost literally cry out for evaluation. First comes those perennial problems having to do with the lostness of humankind, the fate of the unevangelized, the necessity of conversion, the significance of John 14:6, and so on. It is to be remembered that, though old, issues such as these are nevertheless new to every generation of Christians. And they often come in forms that appear to be especially new and enticing, as in the case of a “new” type of universalism that nevertheless insists on the truth of a verse traditionally thought of as most exclusivistic--John 14:6. To return to Edinburgh for a moment, if a Social Gospel that had been around for several decades had been given serious consideration in that time, it is reasonable to think that its outcroppings at Jerusalem 1928 and subsequent ecumenical conferences would have been easier to deal with. Admittedly, complete agreement on such issues is not easy to come by. But that only underscores the importance of continued dialogue, it does not militate against it.

Next comes that large number of strategy proposals and programs of somewhat newer vintage that merit examination and evaluation. I refer to proposals such as **concept fulfillment** rcising territorial spirits, prayer walking, redemptive analogies, business as mission, churchless Christianity, M 1-5 mission to Muslims, planting church-planting movements and eradicating poverty, ame but a few. Our missions stand to benefit significantly when such proposals are subjected to careful scrutiny in the light of Scripture, especially when this is done as soon as they see the light of day. Of course, evaluations of varied extensiveness and value at times do appear in conference agendas and in missionary literature as well. But what is needed is a process of evaluation that is more standardized and thoroughgoing. As things stand now a process such as this seems difficult to attain. Nevertheless it should be encouraged.

Thirdly comes those common “missionary clichés” used to engender missionary interest and promote the missionary causes of various kinds. **Most of them are half-truths based**  on a selective use of Scripture. I refer to propositions such as “We are all missionaries;” “The mission field has now come to us;” “Your mission field is right next door;” “No one should hear the gospel twice before all have heard it once,” and “Inasmuch as you have done it to these . . . you have done it to me.” Let us admit that there is a sense in which most or all of these clichés contain a kernel of truth. Nevertheless, they certainly are not the whole truth and they can be counterproductive in the long run. The “inasmuch passage” in Matthew 25:40, for example, has served as a most powerful incentive to undertake a variety of Christian undertakings from digging wells to feeding the hungry. However, the usual interpretation is highly questionable at best. Closer examination will show that this passage has to do with the final judgment where the world’s peoples are to be judged on the basis of their response to Christ’s ambassadors.<sup>32</sup> It is entirely possible to undermine both biblical theology *and* Christian mission by the ways we advocate the latter.

 4) **Schedule Bible study and prayer for prime times in** mission gatherings of all kinds. How well some of us recall the Consultation on World Evangelization held in Pattaya, Thailand in 1980. Midway through the consultation an ecumenical leader who had been attending a concurrent conference in Melbourne, Australia stopped by to give a greeting. To our embarrassment he reported that one of the most rewarding aspects of the Melbourne conference had been times of Bible study and prayer. For all the emphasis on the authority of Scripture and the power of prayer at Pattaya, the agenda itself had been packed with so many strategy sessions that Bible study and prayer had been consigned to inopportune times and were poorly attended. Whether in international conference halls or

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. David J. Hesselgrave. *Paradigms in Conflict: 10 Key Questions in Christian Missions Today*. Kregel, 2005: 303-305.

in local churches, we conservative Christians would do well to listen—really listen—to our own affirmations and exhortations!

5) Invite theologians, apologists and pastors to participate in some of our mission conferences and consultations, and also to contribute to missionary research and publications. There can be little doubt that Edinburgh benefited in some ways by virtue of the fact that participation was confined to those who were actually engaged in missionary endeavors and who best understood missionary life and work. There can be little doubt that the International Missionary Council and its conferences became bogged down at times because of the presence of church leaders who introduced ecclesiastical issues not germane to missions per se. Churches are churches. Missions are missions. They are not the same. But they are complementary and inseparable. The church and its various institutions and expressions can make tremendous contributions to the way we think and do mission, especially in this time of rapid globalization. In the past, for example, counter-cult ministries have tended to be a thing apart, but with the incursion of Eastern religions counter-cult experts and cross-cultural mission specialists have come ever closer together.<sup>33</sup> Again, of inestimable potential value to our missions now can be the personnel and productions of the Gospel Coalition recently organized by Bible scholars and theologians such as D. C. Carson, John Piper and Tim Keller. One of their primary objectives is to produce a comprehensive confessional statement of core evangelical beliefs that comprise the biblical gospel.<sup>34</sup> Thinking in terms of Christian apologetics, the worldwide ministry of Ravi Zacharias demonstrates both the need for, and the potential of, giving a larger place to apologetics when thinking and doing the work of missions. Missions will do well to incorporate the insights of scholars such as Norman Geisler, Chad Meister and their colleagues who soon will be inaugurating the *Journal of the International Society of Christian Apologetics*.

What I am advocating here is not new, of course. Conversations and cooperation between missionaries and specialists in theology, medicine, arts, science, sports and other disciplines have been longstanding and rewarding. What I am encouraging here is an increased participation of theologians, Bible scholars and apologists in missionary gatherings and a heightened infusion of theological, biblical and apologetic understandings into the missionary enterprise in a day when both are so desperately needed and, all too often, so conspicuously limited. At this juncture in history, missions stand in need of the very best thinking that the church and its institutions can provide in order to raise up pastors and other leaders who are able to instruct in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict it. Either all of us will serve together in Christian missions today and tomorrow or some of us will not be in the will of God.

### Conclusion

In conclusion I would suggest that, whether intentionally or unintentionally, the error of Edinburgh is being repeated too often and by too many. Assuredly, that will not ultimately doom God's plan for the evangelization of the world. But it will greatly diminish our part in his plan in this 21<sup>st</sup> century just as surely as it did in the case of some of our well-meaning forebears in the 20<sup>th</sup>. We would do well to listen to the likes of Drs. McGavran and Henry. In the end they did not resort to terms such as "fundamentalism," "evangelicalism," "conservatism," and "orthodoxy"—good and serviceable as those terms are. They simply but earnestly urged us to be confessedly, consistently and uncompromisingly *Christian*. And, after all, what are we if not *Christian*? What do we believe if not *Christian* beliefs? What kind of behavior do we enjoy if not *Christian* behavior? What kind of unity do we seek if not *Christian* unity? What kind of mission do we undertake if not *Christian* mission? And what kind of people do we seek to persuade the peoples of the world to become? What kind, indeed, if not truly and biblically *Christian*?

Rockford, Illinois  
October 15, 2007

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Irving Hexham, Stephen Rost, and John W. Morehead II, gen. eds. *Encountering New Religious Movements: A Holistic Evangelical Approach*. Kregel 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Collin Hansen. "Tethered to the Center: The Gospel Coalition is committed to core evangelical beliefs and wide-ranging cultural engagement." *Christianity Today*, Oct. 7, 2007:71.