

“Edinburgh 1910” World Missionary Conference
Commission Two
“The Church in the Mission Field”

Recognising the ambiguity of its title, Commission Two defined *The Church in the Mission Field* to mean “the Church...not as a by-product of mission work, but as itself by far the most efficient element in Christian propaganda”(2). The Commission explained its task as being to re-conceive mission, no longer as simply the movement of Christianity from the western to the southern and eastern hemispheres, but in terms of “an actual Church now in being, strongly rooted, and fruitful in many lands”(3). Using the imagery of the child to characterise the new relationship between western missionary societies and the Church in the Mission Field, the Commission Report states: “The child has, in many places, reached, and in others is fast reaching, maturity; and it is now both fitted and willing, perhaps in a few cases too eager, to take upon itself its full burden of responsibility and service”(3).

The Commission’s purpose was therefore to affirm and strengthen the mission capability of “the native Church” as “a powerful element in the reshaping of the national life” to which it belonged. Far from excluding western missions and missionaries, the Commission sought to re-envision them as being in “a parental relation...[that] still offers it [i.e. the new church] such help, leadership, and even control, as may seem appropriate to the present stage of its development”(5).

The findings of the Commission, recorded in a 275-page Report in 8 chapters (with a library of 13 appendices), can be divided into two broad areas of concern.

Firstly, there were issues of “church organisation and polity”, less to do with structural details than with “the fact that questions of polity and organisation are impressing themselves upon the minds of Christian folk all over the world in the mission field”, and that this is “an epoch-making fact”(340-1). Recurrent throughout the Report, and especially in Chapter 1 that deals with issues of “constitution and organisation”, emphasis is laid on the need to cultivate the three principles of self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation. Chapter 2 addresses “conditions of membership”, these being understood less as qualifications for membership – though “disqualifications and hindrances” such as “bigamy and polygamy” are discussed – and more in terms of the deepening Christian faith and discipleship as the imperative “condition” of life in the Church. Chapter 3 deals with “church discipline”, where the concern lies mainly with pastoral questions that arise in relation to Christian life in non-Christian cultures: for example, how to observe the Lord’s Day in societies where Sunday is an ordinary weekday; inter-marriage between Christians and non-Christians; is it legitimate for Chinese Christians to associate themselves with ancestor worship, or Indian Christians with caste? Chapter Four is devoted to the “edification of Christian community”, by which is meant the “building up in faith and godliness all ages and classes of the Christian people”(279) through worship, Christian education, family life, conferences and visitation.

The chapters comprising the second half of the Report discuss issues that have broadly to do with “training”. Recognising that each member of the Church has a personal vocation for some kind of Christian service, Chapter Five is specifically concerned with “workers” for whom “the Church assumes some definite responsibility, and for whom it is bound to provide some form both of preparation and of oversight”(172). These fall into two categories: workers who are employed as “evangelists, colporteurs, and catechists, or in other posts in connections with hospitals, colleges and schools” (173), for whom “general training” in Christian knowledge is considered sufficient; and “the preachers and clergy of the Church in the

mission field”, for whom more thorough theological education is necessary. This chapter includes a lengthy section on the inadequacy of the existing provision for theological education, the paucity of students qualified for theological education, the need for theologically trained missionary teachers who can avoid introducing “from without, in an external and mechanical way, systems of truth, knowledge, and practice, which are the results of western experience, but do not vitally appeal to the mind, or even the Christian consciousness of the local Church”(190). The Report emphasises that all such training – both “general” and “theological” – needs appropriate financial support, but strongly affirms the necessity for funding to strengthen, not weaken, the self-support that is essential for a truly self-governing and self-propagating national church. Chapter 6 broadens Christian training into realm of “spiritual fruitfulness”, understood in terms both of the inner life of the Christian community, and its wider social impact, the two dimensions being embraced within the understanding of evangelism. Chapter 7 is devoted entirely to issues of Christian literature, with extensive discussion of Bible translation as a missionary priority that must address different challenges in cultures without previous scriptural traditions (as in Africa), and those with their own ancient scriptures (as in Asia).

The final chapter (8) was added after the plenary discussion of the Report, and contains general comments on the seven chapters of the Report itself. Among these comments I select four that seem to reflect contributions to the plenary discussion by four Asian Christians: (1) the importance of finding the right balance between the autonomy of the “younger” Church in the mission field and “the older Church in the West” that ensures “mutual affection and respect”(267); (2) the danger of “overloading the young Church in the mission field by the over-multiplication of organisations of a western type”(270); (3) the need for “a due appreciation of the non-Christian life, religion, and social surroundings, out of which the Christian people have been gathered, in order to form a just estimate of the standard of character and life to which as Christians they have attained”(272); (4) the importance of encouraging “native Christians of ability to write freely on subjects with which they are familiar, and in which they are likely to express the truth in forms adapted to the thought of their own people”(274).

Having started with the ambiguity of the Commission’s title, *The Church in the Mission Field*, let me conclude with two others. Firstly, the term “Church” implies universality, but actually meant the churches that existed “in connection with the missions represented in this Conference in all parts of the non-Christian world”(340). The missions that gathered in Edinburgh 1910 were entirely Protestant, mainly British and North American. Secondly, although the Commission title speaks clearly of *The Church in the Mission Field*, the phrase “the Church *on* the mission field” occurs frequently in the Report. Ambivalence as to which preposition was correct reminds us that the Report was researched, written and debated overwhelmingly by western Christians who would have considered themselves as being *on* the mission field, while the contributions from indigenous Christians *in* the mission field were minimal. Of the 218 correspondents whose letters fed into the preparation of the Report, only 16 were non-Western Christians; none was included in the Commission itself; and only 4 were reported as contributing to the plenary discussion. Add in the fact that only 20 women appear among the contributors to the Report, and only 42 lay people (which included all the women), and we have to conclude that Commission Two’s perspective on *The Church in the Mission Field* was exclusively Protestant, and overwhelmingly western, clerical and male in provenance. Is this really, one wonders, how the Holy Spirit works?

Prepared by Professor DA Kerr (with page references to *Report of Commission Two: The Church in the Mission Field*, Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier: Edinburgh & London)