

Towards 2010: Centenary of Edinburgh 1910
Commission V
“The Preparation of Missionaries”

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Commission V of the World Missionary Conference had the task of reporting on “The Preparation of Missionaries”. Under the Chairmanship of Professor Mackenzie – born of Scottish missionary parents in South Africa, Edinburgh educated, Professor of Systematic Theology in Chicago, and President of Hartford Seminary Foundation, Connecticut, from 1904 – the Commission gathered evidence from the United States, Britain, Germany and Scandinavia, and from a wide cross-section of missionaries. The Commissioners were mainly theological educators from European and North American universities/colleges and theological colleges/seminaries, 13 from Britain, 7 from the United States, 1 from Sweden, Germany and Canada respectively: 24 men and 4 women.

The Report, running to 219 pages, with a further 115 pages of appendices, is divided into five Parts: (1) a review of world conditions affecting Christian mission; (2) a review of the current theory and practice of missionary training; (3) an elaboration of principles for missionary training, and their application to various categories of missionary; (4) a consideration of what “special missionary preparation” requires, and how it could be provided; and (5) a review of principles and practices of committees responsible for the selection and preparation of candidates.

The heart of the Report lies in Parts 2 to 4. In light of the rapidly changing world situation that was seen to challenge churches to produce a higher standard of missionary – the need being for men and women who combine genuine vocation with the highest possible professional and theological training – Part 2 offers a frank assessment of contemporary concepts and methods of missionary preparation. Reflecting views expressed by missionaries themselves, the Report recognises “a marked disparity between their ideals and their actual, or working, standard.” This criticism is applied both to the standards of personal preparation – physical, social, intellectual, spiritual – and to the professional training of ordained missionaries, educational, medical and industrial missionaries, and lay evangelists. “It is clear”, this part of the Report concludes, “that the Mission Boards of America, the continent of Europe, and Great Britain, are, as a whole, aiming at a high standard of all-round missionary qualification...But in view of the admitted inability of the Societies to satisfy their own requirements, and because of the widespread opinion among missionaries that because of the modern situation abroad higher qualifications are needed, it is urgent that the richer resources of the Church should be more largely drawn upon.”

This set the ground for the Commission’s main task, “to determine as precisely as possible what steps the Boards can take against such relative failure by a better system of preparatory training.” Part 3 of the Report sets out the Commissioners’ understanding of the principles that should underlie effective missionary preparation in relation to their definition of the three fundamental tasks of mission: to present the Christian message through “direct evangelism;” to manifest the power of Christian living in the “personality and life of the evangelist;” and to organise “a living and effective church in a Christian nation.”

Missionary training, for all types of missionaries, should integrate spiritual, moral and intellectual elements. Since the spiritual element is “purely a gift from God”, it has to be nurtured throughout a missionary’s life, in which training both before and during missionary service is essential. Moral training should cultivate four qualities: “docility” in the sense of always being open and willing to learn; “gentleness” or “the spirit of courtesy” that enables missionaries to understand the customs of the people among whom they are called to live; and “sympathy” that empowers missionaries to love the people they serve. These

qualities combine to produce a fourth that all missionaries should seek to attain: namely, “leadership” in respect of “the special duties and responsibilities of a missionary’s position.”

In addition to such personal qualities, Part 3 of the Report addresses the importance of intellectual training. “The missionary must have the best education which his own country and the Church can give him, whatever is to be his department of labour.” For most missionaries this entails professional training for ordination, in medicine or education, or in nursing or a range of industrial skills, and it was recognised that such training can only be acquired in universities or colleges that are independent of the missionary societies themselves. But in nurturing potential missionary candidates in their professional studies, the Societies should encourage them to avoid the “parochialism of specialisation,” and cultivate a “wide culture” that will inspire them “to face the perils and the fascinations of independent thought”, rooting themselves in the Bible – “the missionaries’ Book” – while engaging the natural and social sciences and philosophy.

Anticipating that most missionaries would continue to be ordained clergy, and that their professional training would continue to take place alongside those preparing for home ministry, the Report gave extensive consideration to ways in which theological education could be improved by opening itself to missionary perspectives. Here the Commissioners spoke with the authority of theological educators themselves. Theological education, they opine, is best undertaken at the post-graduate level, on the basis of a good general education in the arts or sciences. Theological colleges/seminaries should pay more attention to missionary topics as an integral part of all theological training. Mission should not be considered an optional or elective subject, but should infuse the study of the Bible, the Church Fathers, historical and systematic theology, and practical theology. The Chair in Evangelistic Theology held by Professor Alexander Duff in New College, Edinburgh, was cited as an example, and it was regretted that it had lapsed.

The Report also gave extensive consideration to “the supreme importance of the women’s share” in missionary work. While betraying the Commission’s patriarchal complexion in the tone and content of its discussion of the preparation of women missionaries, it also produced one of its most insightful recommendations: that women missionaries should not be trained only for “women’s work for women”, but for the realisation of “the vision of the place of women in the building up of the whole fabric of national life.” The example cited was the Women’s Missionary College in Edinburgh, the Principal, Annie Small, being one of the four women Commissioners. An Appendix to the Report describes the philosophy of the College.

Part 4 of the Report deals with “special missionary training”, meaning the specific areas of training that could not be provided by universities or theological colleges. The ideal was a Central College, or Colleges, where missionary societies could co-operate in providing a curriculum including the sciences, history and methods of mission, comparative religion, social sciences, pedagogy, and linguistics. Yale and Hartford were already moving in this direction, as were German and Scandinavian colleges. To address the situation in Britain where there was less system, but no fewer resources, the Report recommended the creation of a Board of Missionary Studies, “the general purpose of which will be to supply guidance and to render assistance to Missionary Societies in the preparation of missionaries for their work.”

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