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THE PLACE OF MISSIONS IN THE THOUGHT OF GOD

BY ROBERT E. SPEER, M.A.

LAYMEN'S MISSIONARY MOVEMENT

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THE PLACE OF MISSIONS IN THE THOUGHT OF GOD

An address delivered at the Foreign Missionary Jubilee Convention of
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IN thinking and planning about missions it is a wise thing for us to try to go down as deep as deep as we can and to lay this missionary enterprise on its very bottommost foundation. That foundation is not found in the consideration of the results and triumphs of the missionary work, great and beneficent and of divine character as we believe these to be. A powerful argument undoubtedly can be made on behalf of the missionary enterprise and the obligation of the Christian Church to carry it forward on the basis of the greatness and beneficence of its results. I believe it can be proved that there is no power in the world comparable with the power of Christian Missions to transform the lives of men and introduce better conditions of life. In his great book on Christian Missions and Social Progress, Dr. Dennis has made out his case unanswerably. I believe it can be proved that there is no force in the world comparable with the force of Christian Missions upon the politics of nations, to bring about better government in the world. And we all believe that there is no force like the force of missions comparable in power to accomplish the spiritual transformation

of character and to awaken in the dead souls of men the very life of God.

And there are circumstances, doubtless, when the argument on behalf of missions, grounded on considerations like these, is the most powerful argument that can be urged. It is wrong for us not to think of considerations like these. If our movement cannot be judged by its fruits it can make no appeal whatever to reasonable and thoughtful men. And nothing could be more natural than that now and then we should pause to look back over what we have tried to do, and ask ourselves, whether we have been doing wisely and whether what we have succeeded in doing has justified all its enormous cost of money and life.

And yet there is a deeper ground than this on which to rest the missionary enterprise. The consideration of its triumphs is not always applicable. If in the early days of your missionary enterprise men should have challenged your right to proceed with this enterprise, on the ground that the results were inadequate, you would have had no reply. I read only a few days ago a letter from one of our secretaries who has just gone out to visit our missions in western Africa, and he spoke of having met, on the steamship on which he was going, two missionaries of the English church who had wrought for seven years with only two converts, and one of those a little lad of twelve, in Hausaland. For eleven years the missionaries wrought in Foo Chow with only two converts, and after the first twenty-three years of our mission work in South China, we numbered only thirty converts. And if we are to justify our missionary enterprise in the Mohammedan world on the ground of the visi-

ble results and have no other evidence in its support, I suspect we would be able ill to command the support and sympathy of a great body of Christian men.

And not only is this argument not always applicable, but there is no such binding obligation in it as is to be found in the great foundation of missionary enterprise. I may persuade a man that the missionary enterprise can accomplish great results, that it ameliorates the conditions of human life, that it purifies the institutions under which men live, but I cannot convince him by arguments like these that he is bound by obligations that he cannot escape, to participate in this great enterprise. What we should want to do, it seems to me, is to discover to ourselves again those unassailable foundations on which this enterprise rests, and on which rests the obligation from which the Christian Church cannot release itself. What I should like to speak about for a little while, accordingly, in the place of missions in the thought of God, and the obligation to carry forward the missionary enterprise that rests on all Christians, because the missionary enterprise is thus grounded supremely in the thought of God himself.

Let us think at the outset for just a moment of the place of missions in the thought of God as revealed to us by what we know about His character. We believe in Him as the solitary God, the one God, the one true God. If men do not own Him for their God, they are Godless men. By just as much as we believe that our God is the one God, must we believe that He is the God of every man, the whole world around. As we believe in His Omnipotence and His solitariness we believe also in His love, and know that no man anywhere in the

world can slip out of the affection of the Father, that it is not His Will that any man should perish, but that all the world should come to repentance and to life; and that His great father heart is beating in patient and eager love for every human soul. We see these great affections of God going out toward men in the history of His revelation of His life in the world. We realize that He had to begin with some single race, and it is not strange that that race came to think that it was not the channel alone, but the end of the love and grace of God. But as we look back over the years we realize that He began with that one race, not that He might end with it, but because He must begin somewhere in the world of men, intending never to end until He had gathered in the whole world and every tongue should confess Him as its Father and its God. We cannot think of God without thinking of Him—I say it reverently—as a missionary God. If He were anything else than that, we could not think of Him as being God at all. Our very conception of Him, of His attributes, of His qualities, compels us to think of Him as the God of the whole world, and of the whole world as His.

Think in the second place of the revelation we have of the place of missions in His thought as revealed in His Son. Whatever limitation there may be to the law of heredity anywhere in life, there is no limitation to that law in God. Whatever we see in God's Son we may be sure we shall find in God. We think over the life of our Lord Jesus Christ, and His coming here was a missionary act, a mission, so to speak. He was always referring to it so. "I came not to do My own Will, but the Will of Him That sent me." "He that sent Me is

with Me." "The Father hath sent the Son to be the Saviour of the world." His conception of His coming into this world of ours was a purely missionary conception, and those who associated with Him, from old Simeon, as he took the little child in his arms in His infancy, down to the very last day, realized that His presence here was a great revelation of the missionary affections of God. The message that He spoke here in the world was a missionary message, a message to all men, Jew and Gentile, rich and poor, Pharisee and Publican. The message that He spoke was a message to all men, an adequate supply for every man's need, rich man, poor man, Jew and Gentile, saint and sinner, to every man He came, realizing that every man had need of Him.

The spirit that He manifested while He walked in the world was a missionary spirit. Born in the limitations of His own race and time, the noble thing about Him was that He saw no narrower horizon than the uttermost souls of men, that He went through the world free from all petty racial jealousies and ill feelings and divisions, *loving the whole world with an equal heart*. "I am the light of the world," was His Word. "The bread which I will give is My flesh which I will give for the life of the world." "And I, if I be lifted up, will draw all men unto Me." "Other sheep I have, not of this (Jewish) fold, them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice and there shall be one flock, and one Shepherd." The spirit that guided Him from the beginning until at the last He died a propitiation for the sins of the whole world, was the missionary spirit. His prayers were missionary prayers. We have only a few of those prayers preserved to us, some of them very

fragmentary, but in the two prayers that seem in some adequate measure to reveal to us His inner life of prayer, we get visions of what the missionary spirit must have been in His prayer life. When giving to His disciples what we call the "Lord's Prayer," He embodied in it at the beginning that great petition "Thy Kingdom Come," and I have often wondered over the meaning of that little phrase in His last high-priestly prayer as He walked out to His betrayal, where in His petition on behalf of His disciples, He remarks, "I pray not for the world, but for these whom Thou hast given Me out of the world." *Why does He say "not for the world" unless He meant to imply that that was what He was wont to do?* It might be supposed that that would be what He would do now. The disciples could have gathered no other interpretation from His life than that which they did gather, that God was in Him reconciling the world to Himself. A great German ethnologist has pointed out that after all one of the most commanding sayings of St. Paul is the expression where he describes the vast missionary influence of Christ, when he utters his opinion that in Christ the three great divisions that had divided the ancient world had all been obliterated, the line of distinction between male and female, between bond and freeman, between the privileged Jew and the outer and unprivileged world.

Those who touch Christ and feel His influence behold in Him the revelation of the great missionary heart of God, and not alone in the character of God, and in that character as revealed in Jesus Christ our Lord have we some clear conception of the place this missionary enterprise holds in God's thought; we have it also here in what we firmly believe to be

the word of God. It is this Book that tells us that to which I have just been giving expression regarding the spirit of Jesus Christ. This book itself is the record of the great missionary enterprise begun in the heart of God and carried on down until this day, and never to end until the Kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ. It is a missionary book not alone here and there, not in the force of some occasional missionary saying or in some clear word of missionary prophecy, but the missionary spirit is of the very essence of the Bible. So that you cannot take the missionary element out of the Bible and have any Bible left at all. It is grounded in every text of the Word of God as it is grounded in the very character of God himself. You cannot read this revelation without feeling your heart drawn out to the whole world as His heart was drawn out for it, and no man out in the darkened world can read it without feeling that the God of that book is his God because He is the God of all mankind.

In the fourth place we look out over history, and history reveals to us the place of missions in the thought of God. No man can understand human history who does not read it in the light of the place that the missionary enterprise fills in God's thought. We cannot understand the history of the Christian Church save on this basis. The history of that old Jewish church becomes just a torso, a fragment, a contradiction of the God who is superintending it, unless we read it all in its missionary implication, and as just a preparation for a great and universal expression of the love of God to all mankind. A Christian Church is founded on no other principle than this, the simple principle that it is by outgo that we live and that we have in

order that we may share. I believe myself that the Christian Church rests on the very same principle on which the individual Christian life rests and that the man who seeks to save his life shall lose it, and by the same law the Christian Church that seeks to save her life shall lose it. That the Christian Church is no more established for her own spiritual growth and self-cultivation than that individual Christians are called for the cultivation of their own characters as the supreme aim of their calling. We are called to serve our own generation and the character that we get is simply a by-product of our service, and by just the same law I believe that the Christian Church is called to serve the world, and her spiritual growth comes to her as she goes out in the furtherance of her great missionary unselfishness like the mission of unselfishness that led her Lord to come not to be ministered unto but to minister and to fulfil His life in laying it down as a ransom for many. And the very laws of God that have controlled the Christian Church in her history reveal to us the Will of God, that life should never be severed from the experience of missionary impulse. If at any time in her history the Christian Church had forgotten her duty to the world; if at any time the flames of missionary devotion had burned low upon her altars, she has paid for it invariably by alienation from Christ her Lord and by the dying down of the tides of His life through her veins. And if at any time in her history she has drawn close to Him once more, if the flames of her love to Christ have blazed up again on the altar, invariably that nearness to Him has expressed itself in a fresh outgo of love for the whole world, in a fresh devotion to the great purposes of Christ, to bring in those other sheep not of that

Jewish fold, that there might be one flock and one Shepherd.

In a little book on "Asia and Europe," one of the most suggestive and one of the most misleading books of our day, Mr. Meredith Townsend, the successor of Mr. Hutton, the editor of the London "Spectator," has said, that while he believes the missionary duty is a great duty, yet it is a perfectly futile duty, that we would never succeed in converting any large number of these masses, that the great multitudes of them will stop when they die, and there will be nothing more of them in this world or the world to come. But futile and vain as he believes the duty to be, it is duty, and the Christian Church should go out in obedience to the missionary impulse, and no Christian Church unless it is a mockery of a Christian Church can fall away from this purpose. We cannot understand the history of the Christian Church as we look back over the nineteen centuries through which it has come save as we see in that history a clear revelation of the purpose of it to bless the Church that falls in line with a missionary purpose and to curse the Church that denies Him by denying His character of love for all mankind.

And it is not alone the history of the Christian Church that is unintelligible to us save as we perceive the place which this missionary enterprise fills in the thought of God. I do not believe that we can understand what we speak of as secular history—which, of course, in our eyes has no existence at all—I don't believe that we can understand what we speak of as secular history except in the light of this great conception of the place of missions in the thought of God. Take such a great movement of the last century, to serve as a concrete illus-

tration of what I mean, as the Taiping rebellion. That was the greatest thing that happened in the nineteenth century so far as illustrating the upheaval of great institutions is concerned. The eyes of the world were fixed on other things, on the wretched Crimean war, on our Civil strife, on the changes in the development of Africa, on the throes out of which South American republics were growing. Men had little thought of what was going on among the four hundred millions of people in China, but there was a great upheaval that resulted in the death of thirty millions of our fellow human creatures, in the destruction perhaps of billions of dollars of wealth, and in the annihilation of organized government in large parts of half of the provinces of the Chinese Empire, and in the practical obliteration of India wherever its influence had extended. But no man will ever understand it who does not understand it in the light of what God is doing in the world to get His great missionary thought realized. That great upheaval, the greatest upheaval in human history I suppose, all sprang out of a bundle of simple Christian tracts dropped in the responsive mind of a Chinese who came down to take his competitive examinations in the last century in Canton. He was met by an old gray haired disciple of Robert Morrison, who carried in his hands some little tracts. The young man took them to his home in his country, and some years after he read them and found confirmation of some great visions that had come to him, and he started out with the imagination that the Christian God had commissioned him to become Emperor of China, and to destroy idolatry and the opium traffic in the whole of the Chinese Empire, and if it had not been for the interference of "Chinese

Gordon" the Taiping rebellion might have prevailed. But no man will ever understand that great movement who does not understand it in its relationship to that steady activity of the Spirit of God in the world trying to get His missionary purpose realized and fulfilled.

And in the great occurrences of our own time, what is the meaning of these upheavals that have come upon us in the far East? Do they have significance merely in Russian political history? Are they of interest to the world only as they bear on Japanese political institutions? The strife in the East is of no larger significance in human history save as it bears on great spiritual ends, as it is some real way an unfolding of God's great purpose, and another step toward the establishment here on earth of His kingdom that shall embrace all mankind. We look out in the world in which we live and back on the world in which our fathers lived, and it all speaks to us with just a clear and unmistakable voice of God's interest in all humanity and God's tireless insistence that all His children throughout the whole world should be brought home again at last and sheltered in His love and the security of His kingdom.

And now, at last, we can come back on a basis like this to think of the blessing which God has poured out on the missionary enterprise, realizing that our enterprise is grounded not on its failures or on its successes, that it rests on the great character of God and the manifestations of that character in His revelation of it in human history.

Think for a moment of the way in which he has gone beyond all that we have done, acting Himself far beyond the limits of our utmost activities, touching human hearts that we

have scarcely touched save as we have just dropped a seed there in the ground to be cared for and nourished and brought to its fruition by Him.

I cannot think of any more vivid illustration of what I have in mind than the story Lord Radstock gave in the *London Times* this last summer with reference to the triumphant success of Christian missions in India. He was speaking of the great transformation in India since he himself had gone there thirty years before. And he cited one instance of the way in which far beyond the knowledge of any man, God was working to secure the conversion of Swami Abhedananda. Seven years ago he was in Delhi and heard an Englishman speaking and he just caught the words, "I am the true Vine." That awakened in the breast of that Hindoo devotee an idea of the possibilities of the communicated life. He carried around on his body a little amulet filled with the dust from the three hundred sacred Hindoo places. No missionary talked with him, nobody knew what was going on in that Hindoo devotee's heart, but that single sentence began to work the story of the divine life in that man's soul. He visited the Armenians and he went to Rome that he might study Mohammedanism and Christianity, he went to China and Japan to study Confucianism and Buddhism, and after seventeen years of wandering he came back to Bengal to profess his belief in the Bible as the word of God and Jesus Christ the Son of God as the only Saviour of mankind. He has not connected himself with any Christian Church. You and I would find very much unsatisfactory in his Christian opinions, but the love of God had struck into that Hindoo soul beyond any power of ours. The life of

God has worked in that single life as it is working in many little children and men and women in Asia. No missionary has visited them, but the love of God that is in the world has struck its roots deep in these countries, and beyond any touch of our influence is doing the great work of transforming the kingdoms.

Mr. Cleland was referring to the grand momentum of the missionary activities of the early Church. We are just beginning to feel now at the dawn of this new century the great heave and surge of the missionary activities of the past. The last census of India shows a population that in the decade ending 1901 has increased three per cent. over the whole of India, but the Hindoo population had decreased about one-third of one per cent., the Mohammedan population had increased nine per cent., and the Christian population increased twenty-seven per cent., and the Protestant Christian population has increased thirty per cent. I remember hearing Bishop Moule of Hang Chow of the Church of England saying that when he first came to China fifty years ago there were only fifty Protestant Christians in the whole of the Chinese Empire, not a single Protestant Christian in Japan, in Korea, in the Laos states or in Siam, and in his lifetime he had seen the Christian Church in Japan grow from nothing to more than forty thousand; in Korea from nothing to more than ten thousand; and the Protestant population of China grew from that little handful of fifty when he went there to more than a hundred and twenty thousand when the devastation of the Boxer uprising swept across the empire. There are many here this evening who will live to see the people of Asia coming every year by the hundred thousand into the Christian Church.

Far beyond any power we have put forth, the loving power of God has wrought through these small companies of ours, these five loaves and a few small fishes that we have brought for His use.

We look out over the world where all we see in it of the activities and blessing of God convinces us that the first thing in the thought of God is the end that He had in view when "He so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him might not perish but have everlasting life," when He sent forth His Son, "not to condemn, but to save the whole world."

So friends, if the missionary enterprise has this place in the thought of God, will we not ask ourselves whether it holds any corresponding place in our lives? *Shall that be second with us which was first with God?* Shall that for which God gave up His Son make no appeal to us that we should give up our sons, and that for which Jesus Christ gave up His life strike no such chord in our hearts as shall call upon us to give up our lives for Him? What ought the individual life to think of that of which God thought so much? If the missionary enterprise is first in the thought of God, ought it not to be the first in our own thoughts and lives? Is it the first in our lives? I speak to you men here this evening, is the missionary enterprise the first business in your life? Does it have a place above your own business by which you earn your living? Does it have a place in your affections beyond any of your personal cares or concerns? If this thing is first with God, and we believe in God, must this thing not be first with us, God's sons?

There is a passage in Blaikie's personal life of Livingstone in which he has pictured that last night before he went

out from his Scotch home to his great work in Africa. He says all that last night Livingstone and his father sat up talking. Midnight came and still the old man and his son sat side by side and the hours ran on until the morning of the day on which David Livingstone was to sail from his home to Africa. And the one subject of their conversation that night as they sat there in that humble Scotch home was the prospect of the coming of the day when man would look for the coming of the Kingdom of God, and they agreed that the day would come when men would live to make money for the Kingdom of God, when there would be Christian men who would support missionaries and even entire mission stations. Has that day come in the lives of the men of this church? If we believe in God, and the men of this church do believe in God, ought not the missionary enterprise to have practically in our lives the place that it has in the thought of God? And if it has that place in His thoughts and in His care, and in His family life, then ought it not to have that place in our family lives?

Think of what the missionary enterprise called forth from the family life of God, how the dearest sacrifice this world ever saw was made in the bosom of God in behalf of the evangelization of the world. If God gave up His only Son that He might go out as a missionary to the unevangelized, to preach the Gospel of God to the children of God, should you and I be reluctant to yield up the dearest that we possess? Should not the missionary enterprise be the first thing in our home? Is it, my friends? Do we talk about it around our firesides? Do we make it the subject of conversation with our children? Do our little children instinctively pray for the whole world and

the little children on the other side of the world? Believe me, if we believed in God as we say we believe in Him, and realized that the chief concern of God is that His world might be brought back again to Him, we should feel as eager to achieve it as He felt eager to achieve it when he yielded up His Son.

I know what men say when the missionary obligation is pressed home on them in this broad way. They say if you speak of missions in that way you are simply using "missions" as though the word were synonymous with Christian activity. You have no right to focus on the evangelization of the heathen world the entire missionary love of God. But what a simple device it is on our part for holding to the theory of a God of all mankind while we pull Him down to be a little racial God, which is all He is to most of us, an Anglo-Saxon God, an American God, a European God, no God of all mankind. If we believed in Him as the God of all mankind we should be driven by that very conception of him to go with our Gospel to all mankind and to deem no single human soul dearer to Him than any other human soul, and every human soul entitled to the Gospel on the same grounds which entitle us to it, and needing the Gospel on the same terms as we need the Gospel. No consideration gives men the Gospel or makes the Gospel of any worth to men that does not lay man under the obligation to give that Gospel to all mankind. We have it on terms that make it the property of every human soul. We have it because it is the Gospel of a God who loved the whole world and whose child every child of man is. And I am no true child of His nor any true member of the Church that bears the name of His Son if I do not live in obedience to the same great

passion that swayed him in desiring to see the ideals of His heart, realized in the coming of His kingdom throughout the whole world. There never yet has been any branch of the Christian Church that rose to the level of this great conception.

Once a Christian Church arose resolved to achieve this thing, there is no power on earth that could stay it. With God acting with it, fulfilling the specific mission God set for it, there is no power on earth that would stay it in its course. If the Christian Church throughout the whole world only would live by the faith that she professes, to believe we could make this whole world God's in fact as it is God's in truth, before the generation to which we belong had passed away to render its account to Him. Oh my friends, what unbelief, what coldness of heart, what attachment to evil, keeps us back from our glorious duty and our splendid privilege. You remember the word of Keshub Chunder Sen. He did not see very clearly the face of Jesus Christ on which we have looked. He had touched only the distant border of his garment, and you recall the words he spoke in the last of all those strange addresses of his before the collapse that came at the end. "None but Jesus, none but Jesus, none but Jesus is worthy to wear the diadem of India, and He shall have it." And if none but Jesus is worthy to wear the diadem of India who but Jesus is worthy to wear the diadem of Egypt or of South America, or of China, or of the islands of the sea? Shall He have it, shall He have it? My friends, let us do our best to get it for Him, and when we have got it let us lay it down upon His brow, the brow of the Saviour of all mankind, and cover with its glory forever the scars of that crown of thorns which He won in seeking to save the whole round world.

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