

# **ROOTS OF THE GREAT DEBATE IN MISSION**

*Mission in Historical and Theological Perspective*

Revised and Enlarged

**Roger E. Hedlund**

Theological Book Trust  
Bangalore

ROOTS OF THE GREAT DEBATE IN MISSION:  
*Mission in Historical and Theological Perspective*

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ISBN : 81-7475-008-8

First published 1981 by Evangelical Literature Service  
Revised edition 1993 by Theological Book Trust  
Third edition 1997 by Theological Book Trust  
Fourth edition 2002 by Theological Book Trust

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*Printed at : The J & P Print & Allied Industries, Bangalore.*

## CONTENTS

<b>1. Perspective One:</b>	1
EVANGELICAL AND ECUMENICAL ANTECEDENTS	
1.1. Document One: "The Supreme and Determining Aim" by Robert E. Speer, Ecumenical Missionary Conference, New York 1900	15
<b>2. Perspective Two:</b>	21
EDINBURGH 1910	
2.1. Document Two: "The Central Place of Missions in the Life of the Church" by the Archbishop of Canterbury	38
2.2. Document Three: "The Problem of Co-operation Between Foreign and Native Workers" by the Rev. V. S. Azariah	42
2.3. Document Four: "Closing Address" by John R. Mott, World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910	49
<b>3. Perspective Three:</b>	53
THE INTERNATIONAL MISSIONARY COUNCIL	
<b>4. Perspective Four:</b>	61
JERUSALEM 1928	
4.1. Document Five: "The Christian Message", Jerusalem Meeting, International Missionary Council 1928	71

<p><b>5. Perspective Five:</b> THE HOCKING-KRAEMER DEBATE</p> <p><b>6. Perspective Six:</b> MADRAS 1939, THE WORLD MISSION OF THE CHURCH</p> <p>6.1 Document Six: "The Unfinished Evangelistic Task" Madras Conference, International Missionary Council 1952</p> <p><b>7. Perspective Seven:</b> FROM MADRAS TO NEW DELHI AND BEYOND</p> <p>7.1 Document Seven: "The Role of the Missionary Society"</p> <p>7.2 Document Eight: "Reshaping the Pattern of Missionary Activity" Willingen Meeting, International Missionary Council 1952</p> <p>7.3 Document Nine: "The International Missionary Council and the World Council of Churches"</p> <p>7.4 Document Ten: "Work in the Field of Consultation and Mutual Assistance" Final Assembly, International Missionary Council, and Third Assembly, World Council of Churches, New Delhi 1961</p> <p><b>8. Perspective Eight:</b> MEANWHILE, THE EVANGELICALS</p> <p>8.1. Document Eleven: "The Wheaton Declaration" Congress on the Church's Worldwide Mission, Wheaton 1966</p> <p>8.2. Document Twelve: "Why the Berlin Congress?" by Billy Graham, World Congress on Evangelism, Berlin 1966</p>	<p>81</p> <p>97</p> <p>110</p> <p>117</p> <p>134</p> <p>139</p> <p>150</p> <p>152</p> <p>155</p> <p>169</p> <p>185</p>	<p><b>9. Perspective Nine:</b> MEANWHILE, THE ROMAN CATHOLICS</p> <p>9.1. Document Thirteen: "Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church"</p> <p>9.2. Document Fourteen: "Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions", The Second Vatican Council</p> <p>9.3. Document Fifteen: "Salvation of the Non-Evangelized" by Karl Rahner</p> <p><b>10. Perspective Ten:</b> RENEWAL IN MISSION, UPPSALA 1968</p> <p>10.1. Document Sixteen: "Will Uppsala Betray the Two Billion?" by D.A. McGavran</p> <p>10.2. Document Seventeen: "Renewal in Mission" Report as Adopted by the Assembly, World Council of Churches Fourth Assembly, Uppsala 1968</p> <p>10.3. Document Eighteen: "The Frankfurt Declaration" by Peter Beyerhaus</p> <p><b>11. Perspective Eleven:</b> SALVATION TODAY, BANGKOK 1973</p> <p>11.1. Document Nineteen: "The Meaning of Salvation Today—A Personal Statement" by M. M. Thomas</p> <p>11.2. Document Twenty: "Salvation and Social Justice in a Divided Humanity"</p> <p>11.3. Document Twenty One: "Churches in Relationship"</p>	<p>197</p> <p>213</p> <p>216</p> <p>220</p> <p>223</p> <p>235</p> <p>242</p> <p>250</p> <p>257</p> <p>269</p> <p>278</p> <p>281</p>
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11.4.	Document Twenty Two: "A Litany", Salvation Today, Bangkok 1973	284	14.	<b>Perspective Fourteen:</b> MORE EVANGELICAL INITIATIVES — PATAYA, WHEATON, GRAND RAPIDS, & THE LCWE AT MANILA	407
11.5.	Document Twenty Three: "Salvation Today: A Critical Report" by Manuel Gaxiola	286	14.1	Document Thirty one: "The Manila Manifesto"	419
<b>12.</b>	<b>Perspective Twelve:</b> LAUSANNE 1974, INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS ON WORLD EVANGELIZATION	291	<b>15.</b>	<b>Perspective Fifteen:</b> CONTINUING ECUMENICAL CONCERNS MELBOURNE, VANCOUVER, SAN ANTONIO	433
12.1.	Document Twenty Four: "The Lausanne Covenant"	304	15.1	Document Thirty two: "Mission and Evangelism"	443
12.2.	Document Twenty Five: "Why Lausanne?" by Billy Graham	311	15.2	Document Thirty three: "Come Holy Spirit, Renew the whole creation"	461
12.3.	Document Twenty Six: "The Highest Priority: Cross-Cultural Evangelization" by Ralph D. Winter, International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne 1974	328	<b>16.</b>	<b>Perspective Sixteen:</b> MEANWHILE, THE PENTECOSTAL/ CHARISMATICS	469
<b>13.</b>	<b>Perspective Thirteen:</b> MEANWHILE, THE CONCILIARS: NAIROBI 1975	341	16.1	Document Thirty four: A Covenant on World Evangelization	478
13.1.	Document Twenty Seven: "Spirituality for Combat" by M. M. Thomas	355	<b>17.</b>	<b>Perspective Seventeen:</b> INTO THE FUTURE? THE DEBATE CONTINUES	481
13.2.	Document Twenty Eight: "Confessing Christ Today" as Adopted by the Assembly	374	<b>Bibliography</b>		485
13.3.	Document Twenty Nine: "That the World May Believe" by Mortimer Arias	388			
13.4.	Document Thirty: "Response to Bishop Mortimer Arias" by John R. Stott, World Council of Churches Fifth Assembly, Nairobi 1975	402			

## FOREWORD

The history of mission has taken an interesting course over the past two millenia. Each generation has seen its task in a unique way and many have been faithful to fulfil whatever they have seen as the essence of this task. So deep was this commitment that many lives have been sacrificed for the cause.

The past two decades has been a tumultous period, out of which we have seen the fleshing out of mission in its fullness. Holism has become the concern. The debate over the relationship between evangelism and social responsibility has consumed much of our attention. Narrow perspectives have been challenged, liberal attitudes have been questioned and newer ways of demonstrating God's mission to the world have been sought.

Evangelicals have matured in the process. Today, we have gone beyond arguing over the content of mission and are concerned about the context. Whether we call it contextualisation or anything else, we are eager to see our mission become effective in a world where relatives have become absolute and traditional values are being questioned in the light of post-modern attitudes. The Bible has to come alive in our context today so that mission will be all that God wants it to be.

Roger Hedlund's book traces the history of the evolution of the concept of mission with meticulous documentation. It is an extremely useful tool for any missiologist, the student of mission whether in the classroom or the field. The diversity of the material represents the diversity of perspectives and is certainly a help to those interested in the study of mission in its broadest sense. And in doing so, we are led to see God's work in the widest way possible.

Hedlund has been faithful to his evangelical perspective which is evidenced in the comments he makes. The centrality of Jesus Christ, the priority of the proclamation of the Gospel and the necessity of the Bible as the authoritative revelation of God are the yardstick used for evaluation. These comments, rather than diverting one's attention will help the student understand God's mission in a more concrete manner.

I personally have found "Roots of the Great Debate in Mission" an invaluable tool. It is one that will take you through the history of the emergence of mission and its growth as we see it today. Having benefited from it personally, I wholeheartedly recommend it to every student or practitioner of mission.

**Ken R. Gnanakan**

*Chairman*

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*1997*

## PREFACE

A growing polarization over the meaning of mission has become evident during the past two decades. Leadership is divided over this issue. The rift is felt in the Christian movement in the Third World as well as in Churches of the West. Ideology has practical ramifications. Whence this divergence of thought and action?

The present study is an attempt to trace the roots of the debate. We begin at Edinburgh. The World Missionary Conference must be seen in historical perspective. Edinburgh 1910 was both a culmination and a beginning. As culmination it represents the climax of a century of Protestant mission in the traditional sense of world evangelization. Edinburgh also began a process with other emphases and goals and which eventually led to a different conception of mission. The traditional conception was questioned in the decades after Edinburgh. Events following the 1961 integration of the International Missionary Council into the World Council of Churches resulted in two divergent trends: one away from world evangelization, the other affirming the historical stance. It is the scope of the present study to give an historical overview of theological trends and implications in mission as seen in major world conferences.

Such a study has certain limitations. It is not a study in ecumenics although there is considerable overlap between the ecumenical and missionary movements. Nor is it a study of evangelism except in the specialized sense of world evangelization, i.e. historical cross-cultural mission — hence the comparatively little attention given to the World Congress on Evangelism at Berlin. Similarly, this study is not concerned with the broad spectrum of theology, but confines itself to those issues raised in the conferences which bear on the definition of mission. The time period of the survey is the twentieth century from 1910 (Edinburgh) to 1976 (Nairobi). Nor is it possible to include all the conferences and all the

trends of all branches of the Church. Only a scanty survey of Roman Catholic developments is included, and Orthodoxy is outside the investigation. Primarily this is a study of Protestant trends. For the most part local and regional conferences are not treated. This study is largely confined to world conferences that impinge on world mission. The documents included reflect the selectivity. •

The purpose in tracing the roots of the present debate is to clarify issues which are not always clear to some of the participants on both sides of the debate. If the process seems critical, it is in order to show where both sides have gone astray.

The issue at Edinburgh was world evangelization. It is the thesis of the present study that this is still the issue and that this was neither nullified by Bangkok nor adequately delineated at Lausanne. A most relevant issue for the developing Church in the Third World – particularly in Asia – is the discipling of unevangelized and unreached populations for whom the day of cross-cultural evangelism must not be over.

**Roger E. Hedlund**

*Madras, 1979*

- A further limitation was imposed by availability and non-availability of source materials. Why were not more “Third World” references cited? It should be noted that this study is an historical survey of the major mission conferences and not of other mission issues. For the most part Asian Christians, especially evangelicals, have not yet written a great deal on these events.