



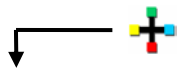
A Sermon Preached at the Thanksgiving Service for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the
Tambaram Conference of the International Missionary Council

1988

J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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There is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him.... But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news!" (Rom. 10:12,14f).

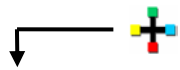
Here is one of Paul's great and unforgettable sayings, bringing together the universality of God's grace and what one may call the specificity of mission.

The universality of grace: "There is no distinction; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call him" – all, whether Jews or pagans. There are no privileged nations or communities. No one and no group of people can claim privileged access to God's grace. His covenant of grace is not a contract that entitles one of the parties to make exclusive claims upon him. He bestows his riches upon all who call him. The universality of grace.

But equally the specificity of mission. We know his grace by what he has done. There is a story to be told, the story of his grace. And those to whom he has entrusted the story must tell the story. The story is, strictly, story – not timeless truth that should be quarried out of the common stock of human reason or human piety. It has to be told, and what can be more lovely, more gracious, than the telling of the story of the Son of God who loved us and gave himself up for us? How beautiful indeed are the feet of those who bring good news.

The story of the telling, in every corner of the world, is itself a story – a story which has, we know, its darker as well as its brighter passages, but is – nonetheless – a glorious story. And we celebrate today one event in that long tale. But why, we may well ask, should the conference of 1938 be remembered? It was only one in a long series of such conferences. Edinburgh 1910 is remembered and its jubilee has been celebrated because – in retrospect – it was seen as the coming to birth of what we now call the ecumenical movement. (It is an odd irony that the

original title of the meeting was "The Third Ecumenical Missionary Conference," but Anglicans objected to the word "ecumenical" and so it was simply re-named "The World Missionary Conference," and it proved indeed to be far more significant than the previous world



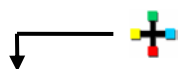
gatherings of 1890 and 1900, largely because of the brilliant vision and planning of its organizing secretary, J.H. Oldham.

But no one, as far as I know, celebrated the jubilee of the next in the series, the World Missionary Conference of Jerusalem in 1928. Why was Tambaram 1938 so important, so memorable? I think there are at least four reasons – all of them reasons for remembering it today in our different situation fifty years later, and here I am speaking not of its significance for India, where the meeting took place, but of its significance for the whole ecumenical scene.

The first reason, I think, is that it was held just at the moment when the world was reeling towards the appalling events of World War II. China was already in the grip of a Japanese Invasion; that was why the venue had to be changed at the last minute from China to India. A few months after the conference Europe was plunged into war. Most people in Europe still thought of their continent as "Christendom." They saw Christendom, the family of nations that had called themselves Christian, falling into the demonic power of new pagan ideologies. The apparently invincible Nazi war machine, having subdued and almost crushed the Christian spirit, the Christian culture of Germany, was now trampling over the whole European continent and destroying everything that had been treasured as – at least in intention – a Christian civilization. In those terribly dark days when – as we know now – the Nazi forces were within a hair's-breadth of total victory, the meeting at Tambaram stood out in Christian people's minds as a sign of hope.

It was not for nothing that William Temple, in his sermon when he was enthroned as Archbishop of Canterbury during those dark days of war, spoke of "the great new fact of our time" – namely the fact that a new Christendom, a family of Christian churches in every continent and in every culture, had come into being just at the moment when the old Christendom was apparently dissolving into chaos. It was the meeting here at Tambaram, bringing together for the first time a company which credibly represented that new world family of churches, that new Christendom, which made it possible for Temple to use that phrase. Tambaram stood for the great new fact. Those of us who lived through those days can never forget what new hope, what new courage, what renewal of faith was brought to the shattered churches of Europe by the new reality of which Tambaram was a symbol. That is one reason why it is remembered.

If that first reason concerns simply the *fact* of the conference and its representative character as a symbol of the great new fact, my second reason has more to do with the theological *content* of the 1938 meeting. By common consent, if there was one name among the theologians involved which dominated the rest, it was the name of Hendrik Kraemer. From our perspective fifty years later, we are apt to associate Kraemer's name only with the theological controversies that centred around his teaching during the two decades following the end of the war, the famous controversies about continuity and discontinuity between the gospel and the religions. But I invite you to look at the matter from the perspective not of 1988, but of 1938. Discussion about the theology of missions then was still largely dominated by the report of the famous Laymen's Enquiry



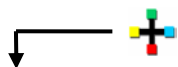
presided over by W.E. Hocking. This report proposed a future for missions in which the name of Jesus would no longer have a central place, except as an illustration of a style of life to be commended to people everywhere. But that style of life was interpreted in such a way that it was hard to distinguish it from the broad ideals of contemporary liberal democratic capitalism. The

business of missions was not to seek the conversion of people to Christ, but to assist all the religions to reconceive themselves around this picture of the human future.

Kraemer's book was – by implication – a direct repudiation of this attempt to domesticate the gospel within western, European and American values. It was an affirmation of the uniqueness, the decisiveness, the sufficiency of the gospel – of those mighty acts of God, which have their centre and climax in the incarnation, ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Kraemer did not claim uniqueness for Christianity, which is a changing, variegated and ambiguous human phenomenon; he claimed uniqueness for the events that form the substance of the gospel. In Kraemer's favourite phrase, these events are *sui generis*. There may be ideas, stories, myths, legends that reflect the same motives, but if we are talking about history, about what has actually happened as distinct from what people have thought and dreamed, there is nothing to be put alongside this story. The gospel is, strictly, *sui generis*, unique. Therefore we have no business trying to domesticate it within our cultures, our national projects and programmes, no business to confuse it with the so-called Christian civilization of the west. The gospel is unique, sovereign, unbound. Our business is to bear witness to it.

If you will again forgive an autobiographical note, for those of us who lived through those days it is hard to communicate to others the sheer liberation that this simple message brought. We had become accustomed to what Visser 't Hooft called "Hyphenated Christianity." We had been busy commending Christianity to our contemporaries because it was "relevant" to their concerns as they saw them. All our talk was of Christianity and this, Christianity and that. We were part of the great confusion, the great betrayal, which had bracketed the gospel with all sorts of causes and interests, above all the betrayal that had led to two world wars between so-called Christian nations. Christians in Europe had for long confused or conflated their Christian faith with their national identity. Throne and altar, God and nation had been confused in one blurred image. The phenomenon of the so-called "German Christians" was only the carrying to its logical conclusion of that disastrous syncretism between Christianity and the values of nation and of western civilization. The churches had become domestic chaplains to the nations, rather than bearers of the word of God *to* the nations.

It was against this European syncretism that Barth had raised his powerful (not to say strident) voice. And we must remember that when Barth used such provocative phrases as his famous chapter heading "Religion as Unbelief" he was not thinking of the great world religions of which he had no direct experience; he was talking about the religion all around him, the religion of liberal Protestant Europe. Kraemer, while having some criticisms to make of Barth, carried this protest into the heart of the missionary movement through



his book and the debates that followed here at Tambaram. His deepest concern was for the integrity of the Christian message, for its sovereign freedom, and therefore for its sharp separation from the contemporary confusion between the gospel and the values of western civilization.

Please permit me another autobiographical note. Kraemer always recognized that the most penetrating critic of his position was A.G. Hogg, principal of Madras Christian College. Kraemer and Hogg were both, for me, revered and beloved friends. Both were great missionaries. In the past forty years I have over and over again read and reflected upon their debate both here at Tambaram and in the following years, during which both of them (as in proper dialogue) modified their positions. I find myself more and more compelled to stand with Kraemer.

If we are speaking about religious ideas, or about religious experiences, then certainly to claim uniqueness and finality for one's own is intolerable arrogance. Kraemer's whole point is that we are not; we are talking about facts of history. If, in fact, it is true that almighty God, creator and sustainer of all that exists in heaven and on earth, has – at a known time and place in human history – so humbled himself as to become part of our sinful humanity and to suffer and die a shameful death to take away our sin and to rise from the dead as the first-fruit of a new creation;

if this is a fact, then to affirm it is not arrogance. To remain quiet about it is treason to our fellow human beings. If it is really true, as it is, that "the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me," how can I agree that this amazing act of matchless grace should merely become part of a syllabus for the "comparative study of religions"? One can, of course, deny the story. One can say that it is not fact but legend. But if it is fact it cannot be slotted into some way of understanding the world based on other pre-suppositions; it can only be the starting-point, the pre-supposition of all our struggle to understand the world, including our struggle to understand the world of the religions.

Whatever may be the judgement of history on the long debates which, following Tambaram, have centred upon Kraemer's position, the challenge which he presented here fifty years ago was a turning point in the history of the Christian world mission. It meant that the great new fact of which Tambaram became a symbol would not be the worldwide spread of colonial outposts of western Christendom (as to be frank some western Christians thought it should be), but would be a family of churches challenged by the gospel itself to make, in each cultural context, the proper response which the gospel invites.

I have used the phrase "a world-wide family of churches," and that leads me to speak of the third reason we should remember the conference of 1938. It was, we recall, a meeting called by the International Missionary Council, and that was not a council of churches. Once again, if we are to see the significance of the meeting we must suspend our present assumptions and think ourselves back into the assumptions of fifty years ago. Missions, it had long been assumed, were the responsibility of missionary societies supported by that minority of



Christians who thought they were important. Missions were a marginal activity on the fringes of churches. Missions were directed to the planting of churches but the church itself was not a mission. Churches, the great old churches of the west, were the religious aspect of the life of their nations; missions were an activity to which some Christians who were so inclined that way could devote their energies and their money.

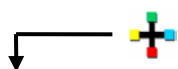
The conference of 1938 was the point at which it was firmly and decisively affirmed that mission is the responsibility of the whole church. It was Bishop Azariala of Dornakal, one of the most influential figures at the conference, who in his own ministry had shown what it means to be a missionary church, who sounded this note most clearly. In the opening sentence of his address he used these words:

That the Church is the divine society created by God for the continuation in the world of the work that Jesus Christ began through his life, death and resurrection is a truth that has not yet received universal recognition.

He went on further to point out that the Faith and Order conference of the previous year had propounded a definition of the church that was entirely silent about its missionary character. He ended with the affirmation, so central in his thinking, that if the church must be missionary, so also must missions be churchly. The work of the International Missionary Council and the work of Faith and Order must be brought together, so that the whole church may move together to finish its divinely given task – to bring the love of God in Christ to a sin-stricken world.

This message had implications which it took years and decades to translate into practice. In the areas that had been regarded from a western point of view as "the mission fields," it meant that powerful mission bodies had to acknowledge the right and duty of the local church to take over the responsibility of mission. For the churches in the old Christendom it meant that they had to learn to be missions to their nations, rather than the religious dimensions of their nations. This second lesson has been the hardest to learn. It has hardly been learned even now. Emil Brunner's famous sentence, "the Church exists by mission as fare exists by burning," now seems so obvious as to be hardly worth repeating. It is hard to realize that fifty years ago it needed to be said, and indeed that it was not easily accepted. From the side of missions there was strong protest against

the Tambaram line. Such an outstanding missionary as Stanley Jones was one among those who vehemently protested. The mission agencies professed doubt about the capacity of the church to carry the responsibilities of mission. That doubt has continued among some missionary leaders to the present day, and it took nearly twenty-five years after Tambaram for the International Missionary Council to become fully integrated with the World Council of Churches, which it had done so much to bring into being. And from the side of the churches there was, as there still is, a deep reluctance to acknowledge in real practice the truth of Brunner's saying. We remember the 1938 meeting today because it was the moment at which this point was decisively made, so obvious and yet so much forgotten, that the church exists



by mission as fire exists by burning, or – to put it negatively – that an unmissionary church and an unchurchly mission are both, from the point of view of the gospel, absurdities. That, I think, is a third reason for remembering the conference of 1938.

A fourth and final reason is this. Among the many detailed findings of that conference there was one in particular that was to have far-reaching consequences. The Tambaram meeting sharply criticized the work of the missionary societies over the previous decades for their neglect of theological education. Among all their manifold activities that the conference reviewed, this one, which should have had the highest priority, had been given only a minor place. The conference challenged the missionary societies and churches to put this right. That challenge was immediately taken up here in India by the National Christian Council, which initiated a bold and far-reaching programme for raising ministerial training throughout India to a more acceptable level. And, through the inspired leadership of Charles Ranson, who had master-minded the Indian programme, the challenge was taken up on a world scale. The creation of the Theological Education Fund, and the resulting transformation of the whole enterprise of ministerial training throughout the world, were among the long-term fruits of the Tambaram meeting. If third world theologians are now setting the pace in many respects for the whole of Christendom, and if it is helping to correct the long dominance of theologies too much shaped by the European synthesis of gospel and local culture, it is fitting that we remember that this has been made possible by moves that began in the meeting here fifty years ago.

I have suggested four reasons for remembering what happened here fifty years ago. It symbolized the coming to birth of a new Christendom at a moment when the old Christendom seemed to be almost doomed to destruction. It affirmed the sovereign freedom of the gospel and called for an end to alliances that had entangled its messengers in confusion and compromise. It affirmed the church, the whole universal church in all the world, as the bearer of the gospel to all peoples. And it initiated a new drive to equip the leadership of the churches everywhere for their task of confessing Christ in the idiom and language of their own cultures.

But while it is right to remember these particular elements, which made that conference fifty years ago so significant, it is right to conclude with a reminder that it was simply seeking to be faithful to those realities which remain the same in every age: the universality of God's grace and the specificity of our mission. Some words from the final statement of the conference on the witness of the church will remind us of this, for they are as true now as they were then.

The world mission of the Church... is inherent in the very nature of Christianity. Today the Church to a greater degree than formerly stands in a missionary relationship to the whole world... In no land is the cause won. Christians standing in humility with their fellow men under God's judgement see all mankind as the object of the Father's grace. They are thus under divine



compulsion to proclaim the mercy of God who so loved the world that he gave his only son that men might be saved: and the Church can only be obedient to the will of the Good Shepherd if it goes out to all men regardless of creed, or caste, or colour, to proclaim the Kingdom of God, to call people of all faiths by word and deed into the life of the Beloved Community.

That compulsion does not grow old; it remains until the end to time.

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