

Edinburgh 1910

The World Missionary Conference, the Great Century of Missions, and the birth of the modern ecumenical movement • 1792–1910

By Shane Gunn • Following Mark A. Noll, *Turning Points*, ch. 11

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Where this fits: Lesson 27 of the Pleasant Springs *Church History* series — Noll’s eleventh turning point. The Edinburgh Missionary Conference caps off the “Great Century” of Protestant missions (1800–1914) and launches the 20th-century ecumenical movement. See the full **Series Timeline**.

WHY THIS LESSON MATTERS

Between 14 and 23 June 1910, some 1,215 delegates from 159 mission-sending bodies gathered in the Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland on the Mound at Edinburgh for what organizers called the **World Missionary Conference**. It was not the first ecumenical missionary gathering — earlier meetings had been held in New York (1854), Liverpool (1860), London (1888), and New York again (1900). But Edinburgh was the largest, best organized, most carefully researched, and by universal later judgement the most consequential. Its chairman, the American YMCA leader **John R. Mott**, closed the conference on 23 June with the line that gave the early 20th century missionary movement its slogan: *“The end of the conference is the beginning of the conquest.”*

For the first time, representatives of Anglican, Presbyterian, Congregational, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Reformed, and Quaker mission boards sat together and planned global evangelization cooperatively. The conference’s Continuation Committee became the **International Missionary Council** (1921); its “Faith and Order” concerns became the modern **Faith and Order Commission**; its “Life and Work” concerns became the modern ecumenical movement; and in 1948 all three streams merged into the **World Council of Churches**. Edinburgh 1910 is therefore where modern ecumenism *began*.

But Edinburgh is a turning point for another reason. It marks the moment when the dominant Protestant confidence that Christianity would evangelize the world by the end of the 20th century met its first serious questioning — from the few non-Western delegates present, who asked uncomfortable questions that Mott and his organizers had not been prepared to answer. Over the next hundred years the *center of gravity* of global Christianity would shift decisively from the North Atlantic world to the Global South, and Protestant missions would have to learn the difference between sending and partnering. Edinburgh is where that question first surfaced.

Greek NT (Matt 28:19): πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.

Matthew 28:19 (ESV): “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

PART 1 — THE WORLD BEFORE EDINBURGH: THE GREAT CENTURY

The 19th century has been called the *Great Century* of Protestant missions (Kenneth Scott Latourette’s phrase). For the first time in Protestant history, a sustained, voluntary, cross-cultural, global missionary movement grew into a significant feature of Western Protestantism. Key moments:

1792 • William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. An English Baptist cobbler’s eighty-seven-page pamphlet demolished the Hyper-Calvinist argument that the Great Commission was given only to the original apostles. Carey sailed for India in 1793 with

the famous motto “*Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.*” He translated Scripture into multiple Indian languages, opened schools, fought *sati* (widow-burning), and became the symbolic father of the modern Protestant missionary movement. The **Baptist Missionary Society** (1792) was the first of the modern mission societies.

1795–1815 • The missionary society boom. London Missionary Society (1795, Congregational), Church Missionary Society (1799, Anglican), Scottish Missionary Society (1796), Netherlands Missionary Society (1797), American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810), American Baptist Foreign Mission Society (1814), Methodist Missionary Society (1813). Each raised funds, recruited missionaries, and sent them abroad.

1807 • Robert Morrison, the first Protestant missionary to China, arrived at Canton. He completed the first Chinese translation of the Bible in 1819.

1812 • Adoniram and Ann Judson sailed for India (eventually Burma), launching American Baptist missions abroad. Ann Judson was one of the first American women to learn an Asian language and conduct missionary work.

1835 • David Livingstone arrived in South Africa for the London Missionary Society. His three great African expeditions (1852–56, 1858–64, 1866–73) opened the continent’s interior to European Christianity and fought the Arab slave trade. He died in the African interior in 1873. His dictum: “*Sympathy is no substitute for action.*”

1865 • Hudson Taylor founded the China Inland Mission on radically new principles: missionaries would wear Chinese dress, live among the Chinese at Chinese standards of comfort, and the mission would accept any Protestant Christian without denominational test. The CIM became the largest mission in China and the model for “faith missions” — interdenominational agencies trusting God for support without salaries.

1886 • The Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions (SVM) was founded at D. L. Moody’s conference at Mount Hermon, Massachusetts. Its watchword, coined by John R. Mott: “*The evangelization of the world in this generation.*” Over its

40-year life the SVM recruited an estimated 20,000 American and Canadian college graduates for overseas missionary service.

By 1900 there were an estimated 10,000 Protestant missionaries in the field and 2 million Protestant converts outside the Western world. The numbers were still small as a proportion of global population, but the infrastructure was substantial.

PART 2 – THE ROAD TO EDINBURGH (1854–1910)

A series of interdenominational missionary conferences in the second half of the 19th century led to Edinburgh:

- **New York 1854 – Union Missionary Convention.** Small, modestly successful.
- **Liverpool 1860.** British mission society leaders, about 150 attending.
- **London 1878 and 1888.** The 1888 London conference is often called the first “Anglo-American” missionary gathering of real scale (1,579 attendees).
- **New York 1900 – Ecumenical Missionary Conference.** 2,500 delegates; addressed by President McKinley and former president Harrison. At this conference, Edinburgh’s basic pattern emerged – international, interdenominational, research-oriented.

Planning for Edinburgh began in 1907 under a joint British-American committee. Unlike earlier conferences, Edinburgh would be a *working* conference – not mainly inspirational speeches but eight commissions producing preliminary research volumes to be discussed and acted upon. The organizing committee, headed by Mott (USA) and Joseph Oldham (Scotland), sent out questionnaires to mission boards worldwide and compiled eight massive preparatory reports.

John Raleigh Mott — the ecumenical organizer

METHODIST LAYMAN • CORNELL UNIVERSITY • YMCA GENERAL SECRETARY • STUDENT VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT CHAIR • EDINBURGH 1910 CHAIRMAN • NOBEL PEACE PRIZE 1946

SVM chair

Edinburgh chairman

WCC forerunner

Mott was the most important Protestant ecumenical organizer of the first half of the 20th century. Converted under C. T. Studd's preaching at Cornell in 1886 at age 21, he devoted himself to student evangelism and mission mobilization. He crisscrossed the globe multiple times visiting mission fields and convening regional conferences. His writings — *The Evangelization of the World in this Generation* (1900), *The Decisive Hour of Christian Missions* (1910) — rallied a generation.

Mott's core conviction: the Great Commission could be substantially completed within one generation (the 20th century) if Christian missions cooperated rather than competed. His motto: "*The evangelization of the world in this generation,*" first uttered at the 1888 Northfield conference. His understanding of "evangelization" was precise: giving every living person *an intelligent opportunity to hear the gospel*. Not every person converted; every person heard.

Mott also served as President Wilson's unofficial ambassador to Mexico and Russia, declined appointment as US Ambassador to China (1912), and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1946 for his ecumenical and reconciliation work. He died in 1955 at age 89.

The delegates gathered at the Assembly Hall of the Church of Scotland on the Mound at Edinburgh on 14 June 1910. Mott opened:

“It is a solemnizing thought that no such assembly has ever before been convened. Probably no assembly has ever been convened on a level of such conscious responsibility.”

— **John R. Mott, opening address, Edinburgh World Missionary Conference, 14 June 1910**

The eight Commissions and their topics:

Commission I. Carrying the Gospel to All the Non-Christian World

Commission II. The Church in the Mission Field

Commission III. Education in Relation to the Christianization of National Life

Commission IV. The Missionary Message in Relation to Non-Christian Religions

Commission V. The Preparation of Missionaries

Commission VI. The Home Base of Missions

Commission VII. Missions and Governments

Commission VIII. Co-operation and the Promotion of Unity

Each Commission had produced a preliminary 300–500-page research volume (the eight-volume *World Missionary Conference 1910 Reports* are still in print and widely studied). The conference sessions were devoted to focused discussion of these reports.

Who was there, who was not. Of 1,215 delegates, approximately 1,200 were Western. **Only 17–18 were from the “younger churches” of the mission field itself** — a fact Edinburgh itself recognized as a problem. They included:

• **Cheng Ching-yi (1881–1939)**, a young Chinese Congregational minister who delivered one of the most remembered short addresses of the conference, pleading for a united “Chinese church” not divided by Western denominational labels.

• **V. S. Azariah (1874–1945)**, an Indian Anglican (soon to become the first Indian Anglican bishop, in 1912). Azariah’s address was the most pointed of the conference, and one that British and American delegates did not forget:

*“Through all the ages to come the Indian Church will rise up in gratitude to attest the heroism and self-denying labors of the missionary body. You have given your goods to feed the poor. You have given your bodies to be burned. **We also ask for love. Give us friends.**”*

— **V. S. Azariah, address to the Edinburgh Conference, 18 June 1910**

Azariah’s “Give us friends” line is the single most-quoted sentence from Edinburgh 1910 and a permanent correction to the missionary movement’s paternalism.

Who was absent. The Roman Catholic Church declined to send representatives (Pope Pius X was hostile to Protestant ecumenical gatherings). The Orthodox churches were only symbolically present. Most Pentecostal and some conservative evangelical bodies (just emerging from the Azusa Street revival four years earlier, see [Lesson 24](#)) were not represented. Edinburgh was largely a **Protestant mainline** conference.

The South American question. In deference to Anglican and mainline Protestant sensitivity to Roman Catholicism, the conference organizers explicitly excluded Latin America from its scope. Mission work in Roman Catholic countries was considered outside the proper missionary field. This decision was controversial and would be reversed at subsequent missionary conferences.

PART 5 — THE BIRTH OF THE ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT

Edinburgh’s most consequential outcome was the establishment of a **Continuation Committee** to carry its work forward between conferences. Under Mott’s chairmanship and

Joseph Oldham's secretaryship, the Committee launched *The International Review of Missions* (1912) and worked through the disruptions of the First World War.

1921 • The Continuation Committee became the **International Missionary Council (IMC)**, formally inaugurated at Lake Mohonk, New York. The IMC held subsequent world missionary conferences at Jerusalem (1928), Tambaram, India (1938), Whitby, Canada (1947), Willingen, Germany (1952), Ghana (1957–58), and New Delhi (1961, where it merged with the WCC).

1920s–1930s • Alongside the IMC, two other ecumenical streams developed from Edinburgh's concerns. The "**Life and Work**" movement (first conference at Stockholm 1925) addressed Christian responses to social, economic, and international questions. The "**Faith and Order**" movement (first conference at Lausanne 1927) addressed theological and ecclesial questions dividing the churches.

1948 • Faith and Order and Life and Work merged at Amsterdam to form the **World Council of Churches (WCC)**. At its founding, 147 churches from 44 countries were members. Today the WCC has 352 member churches representing more than 580 million Christians, including all major Orthodox churches, most historic Protestant bodies, and official observers from the Roman Catholic Church.

1961 • The International Missionary Council merged into the WCC at the New Delhi Assembly, completing the integration of Edinburgh's three streams.

The evangelical parting. By the 1960s and 1970s, evangelical Protestants became increasingly uneasy with the WCC's perceived theological drift and political activism. The **Lausanne Congress on World Evangelization** (1974), called by Billy Graham and chaired by John Stott, produced the *Lausanne Covenant* (1974) — a landmark evangelical statement reaffirming classical mission priorities: the authority of Scripture, the uniqueness of Christ, evangelism and social responsibility together, the whole church taking the whole gospel to the whole world. The Lausanne movement became the evangelical parallel to — and in many ways successor of — Edinburgh 1910.

In 2010, on the centenary, Edinburgh hosted a follow-up conference (*Edinburgh 2010*). The organizers took stock of a century's missiological changes. Five major shifts define the century:

1. The center of Christianity has moved south. In 1910, about 80% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today roughly 66% live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania. The "mission field" of 1910 has become the "mission force" of 2010. Nigerian missionaries are serving in London; South Korean missionaries are the largest national mission-sending body after the United States.

2. From sending to partnership. The unilateral "Western missionary to benighted heathen" model of 1910 has been replaced (slowly, imperfectly) by partnership models — Global South Christians leading, Western missions supporting. Azariah's "give us friends" eventually became the guiding missiological principle of the 21st century.

3. Pentecostal/charismatic dominance. The 1910 conference had few Pentecostals; in 2010 they were the dominant Christian force in most of the Global South. See [Lesson 24](#).

4. Missionary methods diversified. Translation, medicine, education, agriculture, business-as-mission, tentmaking, digital media, Bible translation (Wycliffe, SIL), radio (TWR), film (JESUS film), and countless local-language Bible translations each have their own post-1910 stories. Wycliffe Bible Translators, founded in 1942 by William Cameron Townsend, has now translated Scripture into more than 3,500 of the world's 7,000+ languages.

5. Martyrdom continues. 20th-century Christianity produced more martyrs than the previous nineteen centuries combined — under Communist regimes (Russia, China, Eastern Europe, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba), under Islamist pressure (Algeria, Iran, Nigeria, Sudan, Iraq, Syria), and in other contexts. Open Doors and other agencies estimate roughly 300–900 million Christians worldwide currently face significant persecution. The missionary century was also a martyrdom century.

Noll titles this chapter *A Faith for All the World: The Edinburgh Missionary Conference (1910)*. His assessment:

- **Edinburgh symbolized the emergence of a genuinely global Christian movement.** Earlier ecumenical efforts had been regional or continental. Edinburgh was a sincere attempt to plan cooperatively for the Christianization of the whole world — whatever the conference’s blind spots about the world it was trying to reach.

- **Edinburgh launched the institutional machinery of modern ecumenism.** The IMC, Faith and Order, Life and Work, the WCC, the Lausanne movement — all trace back to Edinburgh’s Continuation Committee. Whatever one thinks of the WCC’s later direction, the ecumenical structure of modern Christianity is Edinburgh’s work.

- **Edinburgh marked the high-water mark of Western Protestant missionary confidence.** Within four years the Great War had devastated Europe; within eight years the Russian Revolution had taken a fifth of the world for an atheist state; within fifty years Western Christianity would be in visible decline at home even as Christianity exploded in the Global South. Edinburgh’s optimism was not wholly misplaced — Christianity did become much more global in the 20th century than in 1910 — but it was very different from what Mott and Oldham expected.

- **Edinburgh is the birth of the missiological conversation we are still having.** How does Christianity move from Western to global? From sending to partnership? From competition to cooperation without theological compromise? The questions Cheng Ching-yi and V. S. Azariah raised in June 1910 are the same questions the modern mission movement still works on.

• **The Christianity you know is now a minority religion within global Christianity.** American evangelical Protestantism is one regional expression of a faith whose demographic center is now Lagos, Seoul, São Paulo, Manila, and Addis Ababa. That is not a loss; it is evidence that the Great Commission has been massively, if imperfectly, obeyed. It should shape how we read the Bible, how we pray, and whom we consider our teachers.

• **Azariah’s “give us friends” is the permanent missiological test.** Is our engagement with Christians of other races, cultures, and nations condescending (we give, they receive) or fraternal (we receive as well as give)? A century on, the test has not changed.

• **Cooperation without compromise is possible, but it is work.** Edinburgh hoped cooperation would not require theological minimization; its later institutional successors often disappointed that hope. A church that wants to cooperate across denominational lines has to learn how to do so without pretending real differences are not real.

• **The gospel is for every language.** The Wycliffe translation movement Bible Bible has now put Scripture into over 3,500 languages — a translation effort without precedent in human history. Every serious church should know this, give to it, and pray for the remaining languages.

Greek NT (Rev 7:9): μετα ταῦτα εἶδον, καὶ ἶδου ὄχλος πολὺς, ὃν ἀριθμῆσαι αὐτοὺς οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο, ἐκ παντὸς ἔθνους καὶ φυλῶν καὶ λαῶν καὶ γλωσσῶν.

Revelation 7:9 (ESV): “After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Mott believed the world could be evangelized in his generation. Was that confidence biblical, naive, Western, or all three?

2. V. S. Azariah asked not for more goods but for friends. How does that request press against the way our congregation currently relates to missionaries and to Global South Christians?

3. The Edinburgh conference excluded Roman Catholic mission territories from its scope. Was that wise ecumenical realism or a betrayal of its global ambition?

4. The WCC grew out of Edinburgh but has moved in directions many evangelicals cannot follow. Was there a point of no return? Or is the WCC still the right vehicle for Christian unity?

5. The Christian demographic center has moved south since 1910. What should that change about our reading list, our prayer list, our giving patterns, and our hope?

6. Bible translation into 3,500+ languages is the practical fruit of Edinburgh's missionary impulse. Does our congregation pray for, give to, or support this work?

CLOSING PRAYER

Father of every nation and tribe and language, we thank you for William Carey at his cobbler's bench with a map of the world pinned beside him; for Hudson Taylor in Chinese dress on the Yangtze; for David Livingstone walking alone into Africa; for the twenty thousand Student Volunteers who sailed in the Great Century. Thank you for V. S. Azariah's courage at Edinburgh to ask for love rather than only goods. Forgive the

missionary movement its paternalism, its colonial entanglements, and its triumphalism. Bless the Wycliffe translators working tonight on the final languages. Gather the great multitude of Revelation 7. Amen.

FURTHER READING

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