

A Brief Reflection on Edinburgh 2010 (Vinoth Ramachandra)

It has been a great pleasure to participate in this centenary conference as well as in the study process leading up to it.

I am impressed by the way we have worked hard to listen to each other and to be challenged by one another. In terms of representation by ecclesiastical traditions, I think this has been one of the most comprehensive held in the past hundred years. But in some other aspects we don't seem to have progressed far beyond Edinburgh 1910: the proportion of women here, for instance, has not increased greatly, young people are largely absent, and many of the Africans and Asians present here seem to have made their permanent homes in the global North. So can this gathering be considered truly representative of the world church? And, except for Dana Robert's opening address, I confess I haven't sensed the passion for the Gospel and the deep sense of accountability to God for the nations that resonates through much of the 1910 reports.

However, I want to highlight this evening one massive "blind spot" concerning mission which prevails in many churches and which this conference has, in some ways, tended to perpetuate.

We seem to have forgotten that the primary way the church impacts the world is not through its programmes, or by multiplying religious professionals, or starting more mission agencies and ecumenical commissions; but, rather, through the daily work of Christian men and women in offices, schools, factories, village councils, research laboratories, company board rooms, and so on. These are the contemporary sites of Christian mission. Yet all the speakers who have addressed us during this conference have been Bishops and senior pastors, seminary professors or leaders of Christian institutions. We seem to talk only with one other and publish papers for one another to read. But are we listening to the millions of Christians who are following Jesus and witnessing to him *in the secular world*?

I was in Malaysia a few months ago and I spent a memorable morning with a handful of committed Christian politicians who were MPs representing different opposition political parties in that country. They came from a variety of church traditions, including Roman Catholic and Pentecostal. I asked them "What is the biggest source of frustration you experience in your work?" I expected them to say something like "The compromises we need to make as party members", but instead they were unanimous in their answer: "Our church". They did not receive any support from their churches, whether in the form of regular prayer, financial assistance or volunteers to help in implementing social policies or just running their offices. One woman told me her church raised huge funds to send

cross-cultural missionaries and young people on short-term “mission trips” to other parts of Asia. But their work as politicians was not considered as “mission”. The only time the church leaders showed any interest in what they did was when Christians themselves suffered political harassment.

This story is repeated all over the world. My wife and I work primarily with Christian in secular occupations, helping them to live out the Gospel and communicate God’s truth and justice in the fields of science, business, the arts, medicine, education and so on. These men and women who engage “Christianly” with the public square are at the cutting-edge of mission. They face huge ethical challenges thrown up by, say, new medical technologies or new social networking media, genetic engineering, venture capitalism and hedge funds, anti-terrorist legislation, euthanasia, climate change and biodiversity loss. These all call for deep missionary engagement and missiological reflection. India and China together produce more science and engineering graduates every year than North America and Europe combined. But Asian mission studies dissertations and the bulk of articles in mission studies journals focus on historical studies of religious sects and denominations, traditional tribal cultures or exotic new religious movements.

It seems that we have been blinded by the neat divisions we have been drawn between theology, ethics and mission. Those boundaries need to be deconstructed. We have been reminded in recent years that all theology is mission theology, that the church does theology “on the road” and not just in the library or the pulpit. But then theological education has to be re-oriented radically around the lives of “lay” people, not the agendas of clergy and mission societies. Social and political ethics has become the locus of evangelical proclamation.

We need to go further and deconstruct the boundary between clergy and laity. Yes, the church needs leaders. But clericalism has crippled the witness of the church. There are many thoughtful people who are profoundly attracted to Jesus but frankly “put off” by the church. They see a lack of integrity: a huge gulf between the message the church proclaims and the way its leaders behave, not least towards one another. How did a socially subversive, egalitarian movement centred in worshipping and following a crucified Jew change so quickly into a hierarchical, patriarchal and anti-Semitic religious institution? Whether we are Pentecostals, Eastern Orthodox or Roman Catholics we need to keep returning to and humbly pondering that old question. The younger churches seem destined to repeat the sins of the older churches. We in Asia and Africa cannot keep blaming Christendom. I am amused by how many of our Southern bishops and clergy who bitterly condemn Western Christendom cling so tenaciously to

titles and status honour and forms of address (and dress!) that they have inherited from Christendom.

In my experience, “lay” men and women of different church backgrounds rarely have problems working together in facing common concerns. They have no sacred turf to protect. Remember that John R. Mott, the architect of the 1910 Edinburgh conference was himself a layman. It was his experience of working with the Student Volunteer movement and the YMCA that lay the ecumenical ground work for that conference. If left to church leaders and church-based mission societies, Edinburgh 1910 is unlikely to have happened.

And if, as Dana Roberts reminded us on the first morning of this conference, one of the unintended consequences of Edinburgh 1910 was the dismantling of the boundaries between so-called Christian nations and non-Christian nations, can we pray that one of the consequences of this conference will be the steady erosion of clergy-laity boundaries and the recovery of the priesthood of all believers? And also that the identifying labels “ecumenical”, “evangelical”, “charismatic” and so on will also be dissolved, because they are unnecessary hindrances to our common mission? But for that to happen, we may have to be more intentional than our forebears.
