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***‘A Work so rich in Promise’:
the 1901 Simultaneous Mission and
the Failure of Co-operative Evangelism***

Derek J. Tidball

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During its brief heyday¹ the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches initiated, in 1901, a united mission to the nation in an attempt to stem the growing tide of secularism and bring the masses back to church. The nineteenth century had seen a growing proliferation of home mission agencies both of a denominational and independent kind but this was to be evangelism conducted on an unprecedented scale and would attempt, for the first time, to secure the national co-operation of the Free Churches.

The 1901 Simultaneous Mission is significant in that it established a pattern of co-operative evangelism which has subsequently been repeatedly adopted with approximately the same results being achieved. It is surprising, therefore, that it has been so neglected by historians and so ignored by churchmen.²

The background to the mission

The nonconformists entered the new century in a mood of hopeful confidence which was sadly ironic in view of their rapid decline from 1906 onwards. Underneath the confidence, however, many knew that all was not well. Although continuing to grow in absolute terms the growth rate of the Free Churches had already slowed down and membership—population ratios were in decline.³ The churches were aware that new measures were called for if genuine growth was to be established and if they were to maintain their significant place at the heart of Victorian culture, so the opportunity of a major recruitment programme was welcomed. Among the Congregationalists, the Church-Aid Society, founded as recently as 1878, had failed to gain any widespread support in the churches and was facing a serious recession.⁴ They readily co-operated with the planning of the 1901 Mission in the hope that it would spell the end of suicidal competition between the churches and lead to their work being preserved in the villages.⁵

Methodism appeared to be in a healthier condition, since the 1890’ had been, for them, years of steady, if uneven, growth and the spirit of the Forward Movement was spreading rapidly. Even so, *The Methodist Times* had expressed great concern in 1897 at the leakage of members from Methodist Churches, which between 1881 and 1897 was never less than 8.2% of members per annum and once rose to 10.6% per annum. A total of 645,853 people had been lost to their cause during those years.⁶ The

¹ D. W. Bebbington, *The Nonconformist Conscience, Chapel And Politics 1870-1914* (London 1982) 83.

² For the only detailed account see E. K. H. Jordan, *Free Church Unity, History of the Free Church Council Movement 1896-1941* (London 1956) 35-37, 56-67.

³ R. Currie, A. D. Gilbert and L. Horsley, *Churches and Church-goers, Patterns of Church Growth in the British Isles since 1700* (Oxford 1977) *passim*.

⁴ *Church-Aid Society Report* (1899-1900) 16f.

⁵ *ibid.* 19

⁶ *Methodist Times* (24 March 1897) 195-197 Other Methodist groups recorded approximately the same proportions of losses except the Primitive Methodists who recorded a staggering 17.6% per annum loss.

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modern craze for amusement; the growing practice of converts flitting from one denomination to another and the failure to maintain high standards of membership entry requirements were all blamed for the losses. But there was even more concern for those who never came near the church. The annual address of the Conference for 1898 bemoaned, 'the mass of irreligion and indifference at our doors shows little sign of disintegration and abatement although aggressive unbelief is for the moment discredited'.⁷

The Baptists had perhaps been the most active in home missionary work of a specifically evangelistic rather than social kind. The Baptist Home Missionary Society was however in a poor state in 1897, its centenary year. In the denomination generally they were experiencing modest growth but they were not unaware of the obstacles they faced outside the churches in the race against secularism. E. C. Gange, in his presidential address to the assembly of the Baptist Union in 1898 reviewed the century with mixed emotions. Baptists could rejoice, he claimed, that their numbers, wealth, influence and opportunities had increased. And yet on the debit side there now existed many intellectual issues which caused doubt. He saw it as an educated and luxurious age when 'subtle unbelief' was at work. Sacerdotalism was equally rampant and in order to overcome these enemies a new spirit of compassionate aggression was needed.⁸

The united mission, then, was born at a time when each denomination was conscious of difficulty. In a major address setting out the objectives of the Simultaneous Mission, the Rev. J. Tolfree Parr, a Primitive Methodist who was later to become an evangelist with the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches, asserted that no-one would question the need for a missionary effort in England on an unprecedented scale. Intemperance, gambling, Romanism and the expansion of the cities made, he believed, the demand for such a move imperative. Using Sheffield as an example, he stated that 250,000 out of 350,000 never entered a place of worship.⁹

The public agenda, then, was the onslaught against unbelief, but there was a hidden agenda too, composed of the need to surmount the difficulties the denominations themselves were facing in organizing home missions and to counter the progress of Romanism. Alan Gilbert's assertion that, 'Historically the correlation is clear. Movements towards unity have coincided with mounting evidence of secular apathy outside the churches and institutional difficulties within',¹⁰ seems therefore to receive further support from the conception of the Simultaneous Mission.

Spokesmen for the mission viewed its prospects with cautious optimism. The most optimistic, F. W. Bourne, saw no reason why one million Londoners should not be converted if all the Free Churches threw their weight behind it.¹¹ Others preferred to be less specific.¹² *The British Weekly* hedged its bets,

⁷ *Minutes of the Methodist Conference* (1898) 427.

⁸ *Baptist Union Handbook* (1898) 91-106.

⁹ *Free Church Year Book and Official Report* (1900) 28.

¹⁰ A. D. Gilbert, *The Making of Post-Christian Britain* (London and New York 1980) 127.

¹¹ cited in the leader, *MT* (16 November 1899) 799.

¹² *BU Handbook* (1901) 109, 128.

The vast enterprise is contemplated not indeed without some mis-

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givings but so far as we can judge with a wise and sober hope. A new attack is to be made on the strangleholds of evil. But the success of the mission is not to be judged merely by its effect upon outsiders. It ought to do very much for the warriors themselves.¹³

The perceptive J. Tolfree Parr was even more specific in his cautious forecast. He refused to believe that the great masses outside the church would be permanently reached by one mission. Some might be converted but he believed that its real value would lie in securing the commitment of those on the outer fringe of the church. In London alone he hoped that this would provide 100,000 new members thus creating a great new force with which to subsequently evangelize the masses.¹⁴

Even before the 1901 mission was envisaged, the National Council of Evangelical Free Churches (hereafter cited as FCC) had made a significant contribution to home missions. The council’s constitution, adopted in 1896, made no explicit reference to evangelism but even so there was a recognition that united endeavours of local Free Church Councils and the absence of friction between them would lead to the increasing effectiveness of the Free Churches.¹⁵ The absence of a specifically evangelistic mandate did not inhibit local Free Church Councils from engaging in evangelistic missions from the start. The Birmingham Free Church Council, under the inspiration of George Cadbury and organization of Thomas Law, provided the lead by adopting a scheme of systematic visitation to the whole city by over 4,000 visitors and the concept of parochial visitation was accepted on a wider scale and pursued by many for several years subsequently.¹⁶

Thomas Law, a United Methodist Free Church minister for twentythree years, became the organizing secretary of the FCC in 1895 and in spite of all his administrative skills and political activity he insisted that the FCC was a spiritual movement. Throughout his office he maintained the impressive commitment to home evangelism.¹⁷ It was he who persuaded the council to employ full-time missionaries in 1897. Gipsy Smith, the first of these, worked with the council in that capacity until 1912. In 1900 not only could Gipsy Smith boast that in a recent mission in Luton 1 in 40 of the town’s population had entered his enquiry room¹⁸ but that half the local Free Church Councils in England had held united missions under his leadership. Even John Clifford, who differed from Gipsy Smith in so many ways, had become one of his enthusiastic supporters and had used him for a mission at Westbourne Park, Paddington. Clifford was willing publicly to applaud Smith’s clear message, heart-searching methods, reasonable presentation and ethical content.¹⁹

¹³ *British Weekly* (17 January 1901) 361.

¹⁴ *FCYB* (1900) 30.

¹⁵ D. P. Hughes, *The Life of Hugh Price Hughes* (London 1907) 447.

¹⁶ Jordan, *op. cit.* 35-37, 56-67.

¹⁷ Bebbington, *op. cit.* 69f.

¹⁸ Gipsy Smith, *Gipsy Smith, His Life and Work* (London n.d.) 296.

¹⁹ *FCYB* (1900) 107.

In addition to Gipsy Smith, the FCC employed W. C. Lane as an evangelist to young men and following the Simultaneous Mission they were to employ the Rev. J. Tolfree Parr, too, as a missionary.

The idea of the Simultaneous Mission also originated with Thomas Law

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who hoped that, by giving such prominence to evangelism, the National Council would dispel the fear of many—R. W. Dale among them—that they would be a political body or even an offshoot of the Liberation Society.²⁰ Law’s inspiration had come from D. L. Moody who would probably have played a prominent part in the campaign had he not died in 1897.²¹ Moody had taught English evangelists ‘the infinite strategic importance of the cities’, especially the university cities, and through his success had given them confidence to attempt this particular type of mission.²² *The Methodist Times* argued that his success came, not from the ability of the evangelist himself, but from the fact that the campaigns were united. This led them to predict that the 1901 Mission would be even more united since it would take unity even further and would be organized not, as in Moody’s case, by scratch committees of individuals, but officially by the churches themselves.²³

The mission was to be held in three phases. Firstly, in London between 27 January and 5 February. Secondly, the missionaries would visit the provinces from 2 to 10 March. Each major town or city was to be divided into an appropriate number of districts and a church or hall was to be chosen to act as a centre in that district. London was to have two hundred centres; Leeds twenty-seven; Liverpool twenty-nine; and so on. When the second phase in the provinces took place it was estimated that some three thousand missions were to be held simultaneously.²⁴

It was recommended that preparation should begin almost ten months in advance so that prayer meetings could be held, visitors sent out and counsellors and choirs trained. After extensive visitation of the district each location would hold, as appropriate, lunchtime meetings, special meetings at various times to reach various classes, afternoon Bible readings and great evangelistic rallies in the evening. The missionaries were recommended by a central committee who provided short lists of suitable names on request. As a sequel to the mission it was recommended that a number of meetings should be planned for new converts.

The quality of co-operation

The central committee, which was appointed on 30 March 1900,²⁵ consisted of Hugh Price Hughes, a Wesleyan Methodist; J. Tolfree Parr, a Primitive Methodist; Dr. Townsend of the Methodist New Connexion; C. F. Aked, Dr. John Clifford, F. B. Meyer and W. Cuff of the Baptists; J. C. Rickett M.P., Silvester Horne and Dr. R. F. Horton, Congregationalists; P. W. Bunting, a Wesleyan Methodist; F. W. Bourne, a Methodist; Professor Rendei Harris, a Quaker; and J. Bamford Slack.²⁶

²⁰ *ibid.* 106.

²¹ *ibid.* 32.

²² *ibid.* 29.

²³ *MT* (13 September 1900) 648.

²⁴ *FCYB* (1901) 213.

²⁵ Minutes of the General Committee of the Free Church Council, MS, (30 March 1900).

²⁶ J. Bamford Slack was briefly a Liberal M. P. (1904-6) gaining and losing his seat against national trends.

The Free Churches greeted the proposals for the mission with enthusiasm. The Methodist conference commended it to the people and hoped it would be eminently successful.²⁷ The Baptists said it was 'a work so rich in promise for the country and the world' and prayed that it would be 'crowned with the blessing of God'.²⁸ All other nonconformist bodies

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followed suit. Even some Anglicans, of the Evangelical party, were happy to support the mission and participate in it.²⁹

The quality of the interdenominational co-operation achieved, seems, as judged by extant reports, to have been excellent. *The Methodist Times* had parodied the words of Jesus before the mission and warned that it should not be frustrated by the denominational devil for 'whoever will lose his denomination for my sake and the sinners' sake, the same will gain it'.³⁰ The warning was heeded for, following the mission, *The Baptist Times* claimed,

Differences in doctrine, church government, worship have been lost in the blessed impulse of a Christ-like love for the souls of men. No-one has remembered whether he belonged to the right or the left wing of the army, to the van or the rear guard, but only that he with his brethren was fighting under the banner of Christ.³¹

From now on, *The Baptist Times* prophesied, the opponents of the truth would have to fight, not scattered units, but a great united army. *The British Weekly* spoke of the mission as 'a signed manifestation of Christian unity'.³²

The unity was not comprehensive enough to embrace too many Anglicans. Indeed, in view of the references to the threat of Romanism and sacerdotalism made by many Free Churchmen it is easy to understand why many Anglicans were suspicious of it. *The Church Times* deplored the campaign as an attempt 'to sow dissension in every parish in the land' and warned its readers that it was to be 'a campaign of wholesale proselytism'.³³ But such accusations were not serious threats to the mission and were either ignored by the Free Churches or lightly dismissed. *The Christian*, an evangelical but not exclusively Free Church paper, founded after the 1859 revival, dismissed *The Church Times* as a 'prejudiced organ' making false accusations.³⁴

The most serious threat to the unity of the mission came from the Evangelical Alliance, but even that did little real damage to the quality of co-operation. On 11 October 1900 *The Christian* raised the question of the role of Charles Frederick Aked, of Liverpool, in the mission.

²⁷ *Meth. Conf. Mins.* (1900) 341.

²⁸ *BU Handbook* (1901) 95.

²⁹ The mission was, for example, inaugurated at Ripon by the Dean of the Cathedral and at Portsmouth and Blackburn Anglican clergy played a leading role at the mission's meetings.

³⁰ *MT* (21 June 1900) 417.

³¹ *Baptist Times* (12 April 1901) 239.

³² *BW* (17 January 1901) 362.

³³ *Church Times* cited in *The Christian* (31 January 1901) 9.

³⁴ *Christian* (31 January 1901) 9; see also *Christian World* (17 January 1901) 13.

Charles Aked was always somewhat of a controversial character; a lively man who came into his own when his indignation was aroused and when some dispute was sparked.³⁵ He had been invited to the pastorate of Pembroke Chapel, Liverpool, when the church was at a very low ebb and there, through his remarkable personality, soon built up large congregations. He was well-known as an extreme temperance advocate and his leftwing political views made many uncomfortable. He was a Fabian, pro-Boer and on the Sabbath of Mourning following the death of Queen Victoria he used his pulpit to deliver a vicious attack on the new sovereign. In 1906 he was to go to New York to become the pastor of Fifth Avenue

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Baptist Church and the congregation he built up in Liverpool quickly evaporated.

As far as *The Christian* was concerned it was Aked's theological orthodoxy which was suspect and his involvement raised the question of what gospel the mission was to proclaim. Aked had published a book in 1893 called *Changing Creeds and Social Struggles* in which he firmly rejected traditional Evangelicalism and its methods as quite incapable of reaching the masses. 'Thoughtful capable men' he argued, 'have abandoned dogma'.³⁶ 'Revival missions and the like,' he claimed, 'leave no abiding impression upon the masses'.³⁷ Yet men were still seen asking religious questions and flocking to hear broader churchmen like John Clifford or R. F. Horton. He advocated the adoption of a more human gospel in order to revive the evangelical spirit and wrote that, 'The Gospel for the day is a gospel of social service; the Gospel of the Golden Rule and the Sermon on the Mount; the gospel of him who was rich and for our sake became poor; the gospel whose supreme expression is Calvary and the Cross'.³⁸

It was precisely for his views on Calvary and the cross that Aked was being called into question. In his chapter on 'The Gospel for the Day' Aked had accused traditional evangelical theories of the atonement of leading 'to horrible misrepresentations of the Christian faith and to revolting caricatures of the character of God'.³⁹ The idea that Christ's death satisfied the justice of God and appeased his wrath was nothing short of 'modified savagery'.⁴⁰

In Aked's view, much influenced by Robertson Smith's argument that sacrifices were at heart communion meals, the cross was a manifestation of God's love intended to overcome the terror which kept men from approaching God. It was like human self-giving when, for example, a wife was prepared to bear the agony of body and martyrdom of mind in being married to a drunken and lustful husband. Calvary was 'the crown and climax of love'—a picture of God renouncing himself for the sake of his loved ones.⁴¹

Why Aked, rather than other more liberally-minded preachers who took part in the mission, should have been the focus of controversy has probably more to do with his character than the theology itself. But even so he was far less theologically able than, say, Clifford or Horton. Ian Sellers has recently written of him that,

³⁵ CW (10 January 1901) 13.

³⁶ C. F. Aked, *Changing Creeds and Social Struggles* (London 1893) 9.

³⁷ *ibid.* 10.

³⁸ *ibid.* 19.

³⁹ *ibid.* 103.

⁴⁰ *ibid.* 122.

⁴¹ *ibid.* 145-151.

As a religious teacher Aked, of course, floundered in a hopeless theological murk; his Christology was as impossible as the rest of his beliefs; which were full of half-truths and glaring contradictions; he coquetted with Unitarianism most of the time and then wondered why the less theologically advanced treated him as a heretic.⁴²

In the light of Aked’s published views, *The Christian*, not unreasonably, stated

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It is a question of foremost and vital importance whether the Gospel to be preached is according to the ‘old Evangelicalism’ or the ‘New Evangel’ of Mr. Aked; or whether they are both to be preached simultaneously or alternately.⁴³

Archibald Brown, a stout defender of Evangelical orthodoxy, took up the cause, firstly by declining to serve as missionary to Leicester because of Aked’s involvement, secondly through discussions at the Evangelical Alliance, and thirdly by protesting strongly against the decision to appoint Aked as missionary to Swindon where Aked had vaguely declared his views of the mission as ‘the greatest attempt since Pentecost to lift society to the platform of God’.⁴⁴

On 8 October 1900, when the council of the Evangelical Alliance met, the matter concerned them greatly. They immediately deputed two of their number to draft a letter to the FCC expressing their disquiet whilst the rest of them resorted to a prayer meeting about the issue.

For their part, the FCC held a special meeting of its officers early in December to consider their reply to the Evangelical Alliance’s letter, as a result of which they published a manifesto which received wide circulation through the religious press. It read in part,

Pre-eminently the mission must be a preaching of the gospel. The doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world, involves both His divine authority to forgive sins and His divine grace in saving; and the faith of this will make the efforts of the Churches powerful and tender.

The greatness of Christ’s sacrifice, and the reality of His atonement for the sins of the whole world, will prove an appeal to which the hearts and consciences of quickened sinners will respond.⁴⁵

The Christian welcomed the statement and was glad that it ‘emphasized the truths which must lie at the foundation of Gospel preaching’ and had indicated a ‘sincere loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ on the part of the Free Church Council’.⁴⁶

The Evangelical Alliance council was not to be quite so easily pacified, recognizing that the FCC statement did not actually deal with the specific issues at stake. They resolved that,

...while thankfully recognizing the truths of the statements made by the National Free Church Council on the positive side [we] cannot but regret that the Free Church Council

⁴² I. Sellers, ‘Liverpool Nonconformity 1786-1914’ (Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Keele 1968) 139.

⁴³ *Christian* (11 October 1900) 11.

⁴⁴ *CW* (29 November 1900) 5.

⁴⁵ FCC Mins. (3 November 1900).

⁴⁶ *Christian* (13 December 1900) 9.

have not spoken with greater clearness in disclaiming the opinions of the writer of the book referred to in a letter of the Evangelical Alliance dated November 9th...⁴⁷

The position of the Evangelical Alliance was made clear to the Christian public through the next edition of the *Evangelical Alliance Quarterly* which not only published the full details of the correspondence between

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them and the FCC but also two strongly orthodox articles by Dr. McEwan and the late C. H. Spurgeon on the nature of the gospel.⁴⁸ Subsequently, the Evangelical Alliance dropped the matter. It appeared that, having made their protest and having satisfied the more fundamentalist wing of their constituency, they were content.

The significance of the Aked dispute lies in how quickly it passed. In spite of the issues involved, no one seemed anxious to cause controversy or jeopardize the success of the mission. In a former age, Aked's views would have caused traditional evangelicals to part company from their more tolerant colleagues, but there is no indication that this was so in 1901. They were aware that the divisions between them and the world were of far more importance than any differences they might have among themselves, and they were prepared to forget the latter in order to join together in rescuing the nation.

The excellent quality of the co-operation achieved was possible because there was widespread consensus about the gospel to be preached and the methods to be used. All the missionaries seem to have been more or less of an evangelical persuasion and happy, for the duration of this mission at least, to adopt evangelical mission tactics—whatever they did in their personal ministries. The evangelical consensus shunned the extremes of both obscurantist evangelicalism and humanitarian liberalism. It was a mission sufficiently evangelical for the Particular Baptists of Cambridge to participate for the first time in any ecumenical venture and for C. F. Aked to continue his part.⁴⁹ It was a mission in which John Clifford and Gipsy Smith could act as joint missionaries. It represented an evangelicalism of the centre, of F. B. Meyer, Silvester Horne, Hugh Price Hughes, R. F. Horton, P. T. Forsyth, and of Campbell Morgan.

The realization of the plan

The organizing committee for London was chaired by F. B. Meyer who threw himself with utmost enthusiasm into the work.⁵⁰ This central committee provided the missionaries, the general advertising for the 200 centres involved and a special hymn book of 149 hymns.

They launched the mission with an All Day Prayer Meeting at the Queen's Hall on 21 January and this was followed by the official inauguration at the Guildhall a week later in the presence of the Lord Mayor and Sheriffs of London; an unprecedented honour, it was claimed, for non-conformists. In reality the service left a lot to be desired. The acoustics were dreadful and the service was constantly interrupted by people using a right-of-way which had to be maintained

⁴⁷ Minutes of the Evangelical Alliance Council, MS (13 December 1900).

⁴⁸ *Evangelical Alliance Quarterly* (1901) 104-111.

⁴⁹ *FCYB* (1901) 108.

⁵⁰ M. Jennie Street, F. B. Meyer, *His Life and Work* (London 1902) 113-115.

throughout on the platform.⁵¹ Dr. Joseph Parker preached on Matthew 9:36 and a galaxy of other Free Church leaders took part.⁵² Many hundreds were turned away from the meeting, unable to find seats.

The day after the prayer meeting Queen Victoria died. The sovereign's death epitomized the passing of all that was considered enduring and

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added a dimension of seriousness to the mission, which its organizers had prayed for but could not have planned. The missionaries exploited the tolling of her mourning bells to the full and their addresses were preached with added persuasiveness.⁵³

In inner London the main centres were the City Temple, Bishopsgate Chapel, Exeter Hall and the Metropolitan Tabernacle. John McNeill the missionary at the City Temple, did not relish his task. The organization was poor; there was little chance of following up any converts; the suburbs, he feared, would prove more attractive centres and the apathy of Londoners was well known. Yet he successfully conducted ten lunch-time meetings and six evening meetings for audiences composed of city gentlemen. The apathy he anticipated did not materialize and on the final Sunday of the mission the road was entirely blocked by the crowd waiting to get into City Temple, and the police were quite overwhelmed.⁵⁴

Others felt that Dr. Clifford had, in fact, 'the most difficult mission centre in London' at Bishopsgate Chapel. He preached there every day at noon on the theme of reconciliation which, he insisted, began when men thought the same as God about self, sin, life and Christ. In such a situation it was impossible to hold enquirers' meetings and so response cards were placed in the pews and people invited to return them to their local minister.⁵⁵ Five-sixths of his audience were said to be men.⁵⁶ Other lunchtime meetings were held by F. B. Meyer at Exeter Hall, and H. P. Hughes at the Metropolitan Tabernacles.⁵⁷

The most successful centre was undoubtedly the Metropolitan Tabernacle where Gipsy Smith was the main missionary. 350,000 invitations were printed and distributed in relation to this centre alone. Smith's nightly preaching was only the hub of a whole variety of activity. Assisted by the Revs. W. Stott and J. B. Anderson there were sectional meetings for young men and women; they had seven centres for children and special meetings for bus and train men and policemen. 36 churches and 63 Sunday schools invested their energies in this one centre.⁵⁸ 12,000 people passed through the enquiry room at the Metropolitan Tabernacle and subsequently crowded meetings were held for the instruction of converts. As late as October, Thomas Spurgeon commented: 'Converts resulting from Gipsy Smith's mission are still appearing and asking to be united with God's people.'⁵⁹

⁵¹ CW (31 January 1901) 8.

⁵² W. Adamson, *The Life of the Rev. Joseph Parker DD* (Glasgow and London 1902) 329-331.

⁵³ F. B. Meyer proposed that members of the Christian Endeavour movement should distribute tracts along Queen Victoria's funeral route. *Christian* (31 January 1901) 9 cf.; *FCYB* (1901) 212.

⁵⁴ *FCYB* (1901) 109-196.

⁵⁵ *ibid.* 192.

⁵⁶ CW (31 January 1901) 8.

⁵⁷ *FCYB* (1901) 193.

⁵⁸ *ibid.* 193f.

⁵⁹ Smith, *op. cit.* 301-303, *Christian* (14 February 1901).

Meetings in other centres were less spectacular in their results. At Wesley’s Chapel the congregation was chiefly composed of young men from the warehouses.⁶⁰ At Union Chapel, where Silvester Horne was the missionary, proceedings got off to a slow start but eventually the chapel was filled, mainly, however, with church-going people.⁶¹

In the suburbs numerous conversions were recorded. At Kingston 80 professed conversion⁶² and at Peckham Park Road Chapel 55 entered the enquiry room.⁶³ The chief feature of the mission at South West Ham was the conversion of children and young people and one Sunday school

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teacher rejoiced that every member of her class had decided for Christ.⁶⁴ All in all, F. B. Meyer estimated that some 200,000 were reached each day of the mission in London, a figure which *The Times* accepted as correct.⁶⁵ Even so the claim that 100,000 new disciples were won to Christ was certainly an overestimate.⁶⁶

Once the mission to London had finished, the same energetic evangelists turned their attention to the Provinces, in which it was expected that 3,000 missions would be held simultaneously.⁶⁷ In this phase of the mission the most spectacular events were those in Birmingham where the Lord Mayor launched it, even changing the date of the Mayoral Banquet to do so. The whole city was visited three times prior to the missions and once during it. 60,000 invitations were issued to Sunday school scholars. And a choir of 250 voices had been trained.⁶⁸

The most remarkable feature of the Birmingham mission was the surprising combination of Dr. John Clifford and Gipsy Smith as missionaries. Dr. Clifford addressed the lunch-time meetings of 1000 to 1500 daily, again on the theme of ‘Reconciliation with God’ while Gipsy Smith addressed the evening meetings which were attended by 5,000; the hall being full one and a half hours before the service was due to commence.⁶⁹ Gipsy Smith’s verdict on the partnership was that no missionary had had a better colleague than he. As he told the National Council of Free Churches at their sixth annual meeting,

They tell a story of a coloured man going to preach to his people. He said, ‘In the first place I shall splanify. In the second place I shall argify. In the third place, I shall come to the rousification’. Dr. Clifford, in the afternoon, did the splanification and the

⁶⁰ *FCYB* (1901) 197.

⁶¹ *ibid.* 198.

⁶² *ibid.* 209.

⁶³ *ibid.* 209.

⁶⁴ *ibid.* 204.

⁶⁵ *ibid.* 204, *Times* (2 February 1901) 9.

⁶⁶ Jordan, *op. cit.* 68.

⁶⁷ *FCYB* (1901) 213.

⁶⁸ *ibid.* 213.

⁶⁹ *ibid.* 214f. Clifford had only accepted his previous assignment in London reluctantly as he had no experience as a missionary and was unwilling to adapt to the methods usually associated with missions. Nonetheless he preached on the understanding that he could carry on in the same way as in his own pulpit. *CW* (7 February 1901) 12.

argification and at night I worked up the rousifications and I rejoice to have been allowed that part of the work. It is not everybody can do that.⁷⁰

Although, as *The Baptist Times* put it, they were 'strikingly dissimilar in many respects' and worked on individual lines, they were one in purpose and 'admirably supplemented the work of each other'.⁷¹ It was a successful combination and 1,500 passed through the enquiry room, almost 400 of these of the last Sunday alone.⁷² The only disappointment about Birmingham was that the Press made remarkably little of the mission in contrast to the enthusiastic support received from them in most other places.⁷³

At Bradford, where the team was composed of 24 missionaries, it was estimated that, because services were held at the mills, 20,000 people heard the gospel daily.⁷⁴

At Brighton the mission was held in the Dome. The chief missionary was the Rev. J. Odell, a Primitive Methodist and, encouraged by a message from the mayor to employers asking them to allow their workers time to attend at least one Bible reading, 1500 attended his afternoon Bible

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studies. The most outstanding feature of the week was the late-night meeting held on 21 February. During that evening 100 workers were sent to visit the public houses and then at closing time a procession, led by the Salvation Army band, wound its way through the streets to the Dome to a service held between 11.00 p.m and midnight, attended by 1500, most of whom were not church-goers. No results of this meeting are recorded although by the Thursday evening 780 enquirers had passed through the enquiry room.⁷⁵ The visitation of the public houses was also a feature of the mission in Cardiff where 40 ladies undertook the work. The Rev. J. McNeill, who had gone from the City Temple to be the chief missionary at Cardiff, said that 'the experiment was as novel as it was daring', and was glad to report that there was no shortage of volunteers for it. Businesses closed on the Wednesday afternoon to allow their employees to attend.⁷⁶

At Cambridge the strategy was altogether different. The town was divided into six sections and in each of these a week of evangelistic meetings was held before the week of united meetings at which Silvester Horne preached. Being Cambridge, a more apologetic approach was adopted and on one night he refrained from preaching altogether and solely answered questions, previously submitted, about the difficulties faced by the audience concerning the Christian faith.⁷⁷ In spite of appalling weather the mission hall was packed out each night and many enquiries regarding salvation took place. Furthermore, a previously unarranged and 'hastily got-up' Bible study was introduced and by the end of the week four hundred were attending it.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ *FCYB* (1901) 114.

⁷¹ For a full report see C. T. Bateman, *John Clifford, Free Church Leader and Preacher* (London 1904) 235-237.

⁷² *FCYB* (1901) 214.

⁷³ *BT* (15 March 1901) 174.

⁷⁴ *FCYB* (1901) 216.

⁷⁵ *ibid.* 217f., *BW* (28 February 1901) 510.

⁷⁶ *FCYB* (1901) 220, *BW* (21 February 1901) 483.

⁷⁷ *FCYB* (1901) 219.

⁷⁸ *ibid.* 244.

Dr. R. F. Horton went to Halifax for the mission and received the wholehearted support of every Free Church minister in the town.⁷⁹ Judging from his *Autobiography*, which records only briefly another Mission engagement, and his later comments, it may not altogether have been a success.⁸⁰ Later Dr. Horton suggested that another strategy was needed rather than that of the Simultaneous Mission, if the nation really was to be won to Christ, which would involve evangelism being conducted in neutral halls by those with the distinct office of evangelist.⁸¹

The missionary at Hull was the Free Church Council's own evangelist Mr. W. R. Lane. 2,400 attended Albion Chapel to hear him and on the second Saturday of the mission a procession of between two and three thousand went through the streets as an act of witness.⁸²

In Leeds, where there were twenty-seven centres, the most impressive features were F. B. Meyer's lunchtime meetings for business men, his meetings for students at Yorkshire College,⁸³ and the visits of Samuel Chadwick to the Midland Engine Works where he addressed 400 engineers and commented that no congregation had ever listened better.⁸⁴

It was estimated that 30,000 people attended the various centres in Liverpool on the opening Sunday evening of the mission, where it was 'emphatically a mission to everybody, rich and poor'. The enquiry rooms were filled. Other special features in Liverpool included regular supper

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meetings held as the public houses closed, and children's meetings attended by 900.⁸⁵

Problems were encountered in Manchester because Hugh Price Hughes, the appointed missionary, fell ill after launching the mission. Nonetheless, the mission and its 600 meetings went well with Samuel Chadwick, Drs. McLaren and Clifford, the Rev. J. H. Jowett, among others, stepping into Hughes' shoes.⁸⁶

Campbell Morgan, a rising star on the evangelical scene, led the mission at Portsmouth, where the 3,000-seater Town Hall was filled to capacity each night an hour before the start of the meeting and overflow meetings had to be held by other missionaries in nearby churches. Being Portsmouth, special services were held in the Dockyard and there were also special services for shop assistants between 9.30 p.m. and 11.00 p.m. each night.⁸⁷

Not every mission centre had a well known minister as the evangelist. Although Plymouth had a visit from Pastor Thomas Spurgeon, nearby Torquay held a mission conducted entirely by resident ministers. Much of their mission was taken up with visits to the police, the railway

⁷⁹ *ibid.* 221.

⁸⁰ R. F. Horton, *An Autobiography* (London² 1918) 208.

⁸¹ *FCYB* (1901) 245.

⁸² *ibid.* 222.

⁸³ Street, *op. cit.* 115.

⁸⁴ *FCYB* (1901) 223-5.

⁸⁵ *ibid.* 226f.

⁸⁶ *ibid.* 228.

⁸⁷ *ibid.* 230f.

stations, the post office workers and the cab stands. But great rallies were also held, filling the largest churches in Torquay, and on some nights the Royal Public Hall as well.⁸⁸ Even where such concerted Free Church effort was not possible, F. B. Meyer believed some action was possible and encouraged Christians to throw open their kitchens, parlours and drawing-rooms and read one of Aitken's, Moody's or Spurgeon's sermons to their neighbours.⁸⁹

An evaluation of its effectiveness

For several weeks after the close of the Simultaneous Mission, the religious Press continued to report statistics detailing the number of converts in the various centres. It was not until mid-April that such reports began to disappear from their columns.⁹⁰ Once all the various statistics from London and elsewhere were calculated it would appear that the mission had been a large-scale success. Indeed Thomas Law announced with the full and enthusiastic agreement of the FCC that it had been 'a decided success' and 'a great success'. He was as much pleased by the general reception to the mission and of the Press's reception of it as he was to the number of converts. He reported that there had 'scarcely been any criticism to the work'.⁹¹

And yet, underneath the triumphalist image projected, all was not well. All agreed that the Simultaneous Mission had been a failure in reaching those outside the church. *The Baptist Times* lamented that public houses had not been emptied, theatres not closed and that the majority of England had been left undisturbed in their indifference.⁹² Even *The Christian*, which tended to glamourize the results of the mission, confessed that the masses had revealed a deep prejudice against going into church, although it was at a loss to explain why, and admitted that new

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methods would have to be tried to win them.⁹³ The general verdict was that 'The people we wanted to reach were not there. The man outside refused to be drawn into our chapels by the bait of a special mission'.⁹⁴ *The Times* accepted that the effect had been considerable, but said bluntly that few non-Church-goers had attended.⁹⁵

Only one magazine, of more Calvinist persuasion, expressed no surprise at the result. *The Baptist Magazine* argued that, 'If our ordinary methods of ministry have any rightness in them we should expect to reap our harvests in fields which we have carefully tilled, and not amongst those beyond the hearing of the message'.⁹⁶

An examination of the percentage growth rates of six main nonconformist bodies (Table 1) shows that the effect of the mission on overall church growth was marginal.

⁸⁸ *ibid.* 230, 237.

⁸⁹ *BW* (24 January 1901) 399.

⁹⁰ *The Christian* took a particularly keen interest in reporting responses to the mission. See especially 14 and 21 March 1901.

⁹¹ FCC Mins. (11 February 1901 and 11 March 1901).

⁹² *BT* (12 April 1901) 239.

⁹³ *Christian* (7 March 1901) 9.

⁹⁴ *BT* (29 March 1901) 198; cf. *FCYB* (1901) 211.

⁹⁵ *Times* (5 February 1901) 7.

⁹⁶ *The Baptist Magazine* (March 1901) 145. This viewpoint harps back to the unrevived evangelical attitude of a century earlier; cf. R. W. Dale, *The Evangelical Revival* (London 1880) 9.

TABLE 1⁹⁷

Percentage Growth Rates, per annum, for Nonconformist Churches, 1899-1903.

| | 1899 | 1900 | 1901 | 1902 | 1903 |
|--------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|------|------|
| Wesleyan Methodist Church | 1.06 | 1.25 | 0.44 | 1.81 | 1.11 |
| Primitive Methodist Church | 0.75 | 0.19 | 1.18 | 1.66 | 1.35 |
| United Free Methodist Churches | 1.06 | 0.28 | 0.67 | 3.27 | 1.74 |
| Baptists | 0.23 | 2.95 | 1.84 | 0.85 | 2.86 |
| Congregationalists | 4.73 | 3.88 | 0.38 | 3.95 | 1.20 |
| Presbyterian Church of England | -0.45 | -0.81 | 11.34 | 1.70 | 4.17 |

The Methodists, Primitive Methodists, United Free Methodists and Congregationalists show a greater than average percentage growth rate in 1902, the year in which the results of the mission could expect to be seen in church membership figures. Only the Primitive Methodists and the Presbyterian Church of England show an increase for 1901 itself. The latter show a particularly high growth of rate which dramatically reversed a situation of decline. The Baptist growth rate declined for both years. By 1903 no significant long-term effect of the mission is visible in these figures. The explanation of these figures probably lies more in terms of normal cyclical patterns of growth and decline rather than being attributable to the Simultaneous Mission.⁹⁸ By the end of the decade the new growth which they had predicted failed to materialize and every nonconformist denomination was experiencing absolute, not just relative, decline.⁹⁹

The leaders of the mission rationalized its failure in a number of ways. They rejoiced that many young people and others on the fringe of the church had made firmer commitments. They argued that a new force had been created, as they had hoped, with which to evangelize the masses. They said that the converts they had won were not to be despised. And they

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pronounced the mission but the first battle in a long war which they would go on to win.¹⁰⁰

Part of the blame for the failure to translate mission enquirers into church members was laid squarely at the door of the churches. The welcome given by many to the new converts had ‘partaken of the nature of a tragedy’. They were abodes of ‘chilliest worldliness, with hidebound conventions which made some wonder if in proposing to convert the world the church had anything worth converting it to’.¹⁰¹

Other positive if unintended benefits were claimed to have resulted from the mission, despite its failure. Firstly, it had demonstrated how easy it was to be united whilst engaging in spiritual work.¹⁰² Ironically, other controversial issues of war and education were soon to

⁹⁷ Currie, Gilbert and Horsley, *op. cit.* 142f., 149f. and 175.

⁹⁸ *ibid.* 44.

⁹⁹ The years in which the absolute decline first took place were as follows: Methodists, 1907; Primitive Methodists, 1908; United Free Methodists, 1909; Baptists, 1908; Congregationalists, 1909 and Presbyterians, 1906.

¹⁰⁰ *FCYB* (1901) 246f.

¹⁰¹ *CW* (4 February 1901) 12 (14 February 1901) 12f.

¹⁰² *FCYB* (1901) 245 cf. Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People in London* (London 1902) Third Series, 7, 150.

prove how fragile that unity was and how difficult to maintain once their vision was deflected away from the task of evangelism.¹⁰³

Secondly, the mission was judged to be beneficial in its effect in revitalizing preaching. The mission had challenged pastors to preach as evangelists. This, it was hoped, would not only give them greater sympathy for the work of the missionary but would induce the pastors to continue to preach with evangelical zeal and simplicity.¹⁰⁴ Favourable note had been taken of Hugh Price Hughes and P. T. Forsyth preaching as evangelists rather than as social reformer or theologian, and it was hoped that they would continue to do so.¹⁰⁵ Not all however saw this as a benefit.

The Times admitted that the adoption of an unusual style of preaching was responsible for the size of the audiences. It characterized the mission preaching as

a free use of homily, illustration and anecdote, an unflinching realism in style, plenty of sarcasm and persiflage, stories, and harmless jests instead of reflections, with here and there a touch of wit, or in lack of it buffoonery.

But it warned that ‘the vulgarizing of the sermon may not in the long run be a gain’.¹⁰⁶

A third result of the Simultaneous Mission was to be seen in the new wave of evangelism it spawned at both local and national levels. Locally, many were persuaded to introduce mission-type services as part of their regular programmes.¹⁰⁷ Nationally, the Free Church Council organized various vans for evangelism in rural areas¹⁰⁸ and London theatre services after regular worship services had ceased on Sunday evenings.¹⁰⁹ Consideration was also given to the possibility of holding another national mission in 1902, presumably this time with the real intent of reaching the masses. But it was later decided that 1904 would be a more appropriate time.¹¹⁰ The Free Church Council, however, did support a Simultaneous Mission to children in 1902 which was sponsored by the Sunday School Union.¹¹¹

A balanced evaluation of the mission was given in a perceptive and prophetic address to the Free Church Council in 1902 by F. B. Meyer,

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entitled ‘Twentieth Century Evangelism’. Churches, he claimed, were facing a new set of problems unknown to their fathers. Urbanization had so dislocated the old order that, for the first time since the conversion of Britain, the great mass of folk were entirely unaffected by the church.

¹⁰³ Jordan, *op. cit.*, 72-112 and Bebbington, *op. cit.*, *passim*.

¹⁰⁴ *FCYB* (1901) 210ff.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid.* 199, 205.

¹⁰⁶ *Times* (2 February 1901) 9.

¹⁰⁷ *FCYB* (1901) 212, (1902) 93 f.

¹⁰⁸ *FCYB* (1901) 179.

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.* 178.

¹¹⁰ FCC Mins. (7 October 1901).

¹¹¹ *FCYB* (1902) 189.

Meyer voiced the fear that the Free Churches would become a ghetto cut off from mainstream society, content to pay off its chapel debts and ‘to perpetuate what was called “a comfortable pew rent Evangelical religion”’.¹¹² They were still too inward-looking in his view and wrongly demanded that their pastors should cater exclusively for the needs of their own members rather than being involved in the wider community as friend and missionary.¹¹³ Their services were inflexible and unattractive.¹¹⁴ Furthermore, their evangelism had been content to perpetuate class distinctions by creating mission halls for the working classes whilst permitting employers to remain undisturbed at church. He longed to see these worldly distinctions overcome.¹¹⁵ A further debit in the nonconformist account, as Meyer understood it, was that during the nineteenth century they had been prepared to grieve the Holy Spirit and compromise with the world by permitting entertainments such as dancing to encroach upon their activities.¹¹⁶

Meyer had no room for the glib assumption that all the churches needed to do was preach a simple gospel and multitudes would willingly respond to it. He was all too aware that secular thinking had not only penetrated the minds of individuals but was now socially pervasive and shaped the consciousness of the masses. The pulpit alone would never counter that trend. How then did Meyer see the way forward? He advocated that the churches must embody the idea of Settlement and be open every night of the week ‘for the service of the neighbourhood in which they are placed’. A host of clubs, societies and recreational activities must be offered. The preacher must become an inspirer of the people and enable them to use their talents to the full, not just as Sunday school teachers, but as neighbours who could meet the down-to-earth needs of the people.¹¹⁷

Such views were consistent with Meyer’s long-standing approach to ministry. To some evangelicals it was an approach that detracted from preaching the simple gospel as ‘the power of God to salvation’. But Meyer advocated this approach not merely in response to the failure of more traditional evangelical methods but from solid theological foundation. ‘I submit’, he argued, ‘the gospel has to be lived as well as preached, and must be incarnated again in our self-sacrificing efforts for the good of the communities in which we dwell.’¹¹⁸

Judged from the perspective of ecumenism, the 1901 Simultaneous Mission may be seen as a success. It was a triumph of organization and cooperation. Different denominations and diverse personalities worked together as never before, united behind a consensus of moderate evangelicalism.

Judged from the perspective of evangelism, however, the story is some-

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what different. Undoubtedly it achieved much of value and many were converted, but the stated objectives of reaching the masses or even of creating a force by which they could be reached in the future were never fulfilled. The mission simply continued the pattern, already

¹¹² *ibid.* 91f.

¹¹³ *ibid.* 92.

¹¹⁴ *ibid.* 93f.

¹¹⁵ *ibid.* 94.

¹¹⁶ *ibid.* 95f.

¹¹⁷ *ibid.* 93f.

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* 94.

established, that more and more evangelical effort produced less and less result as the nineteenth century progressed.¹¹⁹ They had failed to adjust their methods of recruitment to the new situation they faced and had assumed, wrongly, that they still had a significant voice in the nation to which many might respond.

To account for this failure in terms of the progress of secularization is, as Jeffery Cox has recently argued, true but superficial. More can be said with regard to the specific situation of the Free Churches. Cox points out that Nonconformity went into eclipse because it ceased to offer services which the nation needed; other agencies and bureaucracies had taken over the educational, philanthropic and recreational functions of the Free Churches. They had got out of touch with the people. To this he adds that it failed to hold the children of Nonconformist parents who deserted to secularism, socialism or to an artistic life. This generation often felt the need to shake off the stigma of dissent.¹²⁰ No single mission could cure these problems generated by a fundamental shift in the social context.

Meyer and others tried to face the dilemma,¹²¹ but the church as a whole refused to do so and perpetuated patterns of evangelism which, appropriate as they may have been in Nonconformity's heyday, were ineffective in the new context. Meyer's fear that the Free Churches would become a ghetto were largely to be realized and evangelism largely became a preaching to the converted. Sadly, eight decades later, the same methods and style of evangelism are still being adopted, in the mistaken belief that it is a means of reaching the nation. If it was a work 'so rich in promise' it has to be said that the promise has never been realized.

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¹¹⁹ R. Carwardine, *Transatlantic Revivalism, Popular Evangelicalism in Britain and America 1790-1865* (Westport 1978), John Kent, *Holding the Fort* (London 1978).

¹²⁰ J. Cox, *The English Churches in a Secular Society* (Oxford 1982) 221-276.

¹²¹ A comparison of F. C. Spurr's two works on evangelism is a further illustration of an attempt to face the problem. See *Special Missions and How to Make them Successful* (London 1893) and *The Evangelism of our Time* (London 1937).