

The Genesis of Missions:

The Very First Missionary Movement

By Dr. Iain D. Campbell

...That all the ends of the earth may see the salvation of our God. Isaiah 52:10

Genesis 1:3

Dr. Duncan: Amen. Please be seated. It is my joy to introduce to you the Reverend Dr. Iain D. Campbell, of the Free Church in Back, on the Isle of Lewis, not far from Stornoway, the Western Islands, the Hebrides, of Scotland. It's been my privilege to know Iain D. for closing in on twenty years now. I've learned so much from him. He's a published author, very prolific in his writing...writes for the newspaper every week, but has written so many wonderful theological books. What I love most about Iain is he's a faithful preacher of God's word. Derek and I have been talking over the last few weeks — we can't imagine anyone who is more faithful and gifted in the preaching of the word of the living God in Britain today than our friend Iain Campbell. And we look forward, dear brother, to sitting under your ministry in these days to come.

Dr. Campbell: Well, thank you very much. And thank you for the invitation to be with you at this Missions Conference. If I had any worry that my accent might be a problem, it was completely dispelled when young Jennings told me today that I speak like Dr. Thomas! I'm not sure who received the compliment in that statement, but it is good to be with you and to share God's word with you, not just because of our common interest in missions, but particularly because of a shared interest we have in Uganda. I know that you support very much the work that Palmer Robertson is doing in the Africa Bible University as it is now in Uganda, and one of our own elders has been helping with the construction work there on campus. So it's good to have these shared projects.

And we are here because of a shared project. We are here because the gospel has brought us together, and I hope as we come to study God's word and to hear missionary reports and to learn about the work of the gospel in our different cultures that it will generate in us a deeper appreciation of what God is doing. This is His mission, through His word, by His people, in His word, and for His glory. So I do thank you for the opportunity to be part of the Conference here.

I have given my sermons the general title of “The Genesis of Missions” partly

because they're all going to be from the book of Genesis, and also because we do need to recover our theological roots way back at the very beginning of the Bible story. I wonder if I were to ask you what the very first missionary passage of Scripture is what you might suggest. Some people might suggest, well, the call of Abraham in Genesis 12, and that's a strong contender, I think. There is God calling one man to be a means of blessing for the whole world, what Gerhard Vos called "a particular means for a universal end." It's a great missionary impulse, is it not? Some have even suggested that the Great Commission at the end of Matthew is really just a christologizing of Abraham's call.

Some might even press further back than that and go, for example, to Genesis 3, to the *protevangelium*, to the very first gospel message preached after the fall, and say, well, there's our first missionary text. And what a contender that would be! What a sermon that was, preached by God to the whole human race and the devil, explaining that one day the devil will be crushed. And everything that has ever happened outside of the Garden since that point has happened because of what happened in the Garden. And the whole Scripture is really a footnote on Genesis 3:15, and it's still being worked out, and God is saying to us one day soon the God of peace will crush Satan under our feet.

I actually want to push even further back this evening, as I suggest that the very first missionary movement is recorded for us in the very opening words of the Bible. They're familiar to us, but let's just read them together.

Let's turn to Genesis 1:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.

And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. And God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

These verses record for us the first spoken words of God. God said, "Let there be light." It is a magnificent moment. It is the moment in which this universe, which bears on every part the stamp of the glory of its maker, comes into being. God says, "Let there be light," and there was light. And here is something quite distinctive that is going to be before us at every point of the Bible story: the fact that God exists eternally, and we exist in time; and He is sovereign God, and we are creatures of a moment; and there is distinction to be made and to be drawn between the God who makes all things and everything that is made. Everything comes from Him and everything is for Him. It shows His glory, and it is for His glory, and it is programmatic for everything that takes place in the whole of human history, running right through the Scriptures. God says, "Let there be

light.”

And I am simply suggesting this evening that the very first missionary movement is this one, where God Himself moves to create the universe, and does it first of all by saying, “Let there be light.” So let me just highlight one or two things this evening.

I. God's purpose of mission.

Let me suggest first of all that in these words God is actually indicating a purpose of mission.

He is under no obligation to do what He is doing at this point. There is no intrinsic necessity on God's part to create a world. There is no need in Him that is going to be met by the creation of the world. There is no lack in God's being or in the fellowship of the Holy Trinity that creating a world will address. And yet, God does it. He is Himself in existence in a fellowship of persons, and we worship Him as we worship them. And we think of the one, and we think of the three. And as we think of the three, we think of the one, and the perfect harmony and unity that exists in the Godhead.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word is face to face with God, and the Word is God. And the remarkable glory of the gospel is that it is precisely into fellowship with the Triune God that grace brings us. “God is faithful,” says Paul, writing to the Corinthians, “who has called you into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.” So, in this great and glorious life of the Triune being there is a perfection and there is a completeness that does not require anything outside of itself to make it better. God exists and He is perfectly, divinely, unchangeably, eternally happy in that existence. And yet He says, “Let there be light.” He is in the light; He is light; but He says let there be light elsewhere. And He's looking outside of Himself and outside of the parameters of this being who is infinite and has no parameters, and He is saying let light be there.

And all of a sudden, there is some purpose deep in the divine being now being realized: not a need that is being met, but a purpose that is being intimated; that God is going to exist now in relation to something outside of the divine fellowship that is the life of God. And so God says, “Let there be light.”

Francis Turretin puts it like this:

The first work of nature is creation, by which God formed out of nothing as to its whole being this entire universe and all that is in it. Hence, it is called the beginning of the ways of God because having come forth from the secret sanctuary of His eternal majesty, He willed to communicate himself *ad extra* by it, and manifest himself unto men.

God is coming forth from this secret sanctuary of His eternal majesty, and He is going to communicate the glory of what He is and who He is to a world that has always existed in His own mind and purpose, and is now going to exist in reality. That's why I want to say that from the very beginning, from the moment God creates the world, this first action that He performs outside of Himself, resplendent with all of its glory, has as its ultimate view that He will relate magnificently, gloriously, and savingly to the world that He is going to make. So He says, "Let there be light." And He is indicating His purpose to move outside of himself and to relate to this world. He is indicating a purpose of mission.

II. God creates the possibility of mission.

But then let me say, secondly, that by saying, "Let there be light," God is now actually creating the possibility of mission.

He is going to create a world not in order to leave it; not to wind it up and just let it tick away: He is making it so that it will be His world, and it will be the theater of His glory. That's what He's doing when He's making a world. He's constructing this magnificent stage upon which He is going to do some of His most glorious works. And however glorious this particular work is, this work of creating the universe...however much His own glory is stamped upon it, what He is going to do in it and what He's going to do for it is going to be an even greater conduit of His glory, and He's going to display it before men in this world that He's making.

All the world is a stage, and it is God Himself who will be the principal actor on that stage, and He will drive forward the great drama of His redemption until at last it reaches its consummation and its ultimate goal.

That's why it's so magnificent, and so magnificently exciting to be here this evening! Because the very first word is not spoken by any man, it's not spoken by any created angel: it's spoken by God Himself, and He's now putting everything in place so that this word will become the arena of His glory to be displayed and His attributes to be paraded before a watching universe, so that men will rejoice in Him and come through faith in the Son that He will send into this world to become His people and give Him glory forever and ever. So He's creating the possibility of mission.

III. God's principle of mission.

But I want to move on to express, thirdly, that these words actually set before us a principle of mission, because what God does in the creation of the universe is in a sense what He's going to keep on doing as He drives the great drama of His salvation forward.

“Let there be light,” He says. That’s the very first creation principle. Without the light, there will be no world. And without light the world cannot be sustained. And God’s first creative act is to separate the light from the darkness, and to name them, and to give them their different spheres. “Let there be light...let there be light.” That’s the principle of creation, and I’m saying we need to translate that and make it also the principle of mission, because in a fundamental sense this world is soon — very, very soon — going to be plunged into an altogether different kind of darkness. Not the darkness of night, but the darkness of spiritual alienation and the darkness of hostility against its own Creator.

And as Paul explicates and opens for us the great implications of man’s fall, isn’t that exactly what he says? “They changed the glory of the Creator and gave glory to the creature.” And that’s the very essence of the rebellion...what happened on the stage ought not to have been.

Man’s fall is the greatest absurdity of all: that with everything going for him, with Paradise in his hands, man should believe the lie that by disobeying God he can improve what he has. And he soon discovers that there is nothing on the path of sin but loss, and ultimately death. And suddenly in this glorious, bright paradise, everything becomes dark. Man becomes alienated from God and his understanding becomes darkened; and professing himself to be wise, he becomes a fool.

And everyone in Adam has done the same ever since these terrible, terrible things happened in the Garden. We’re still doing it, and we’re still shrouded in the darkness. And men love the darkness rather than the light precisely because their deeds are evil. And the distinction still exists between the light and the darkness, between the light that is in God and the darkness that is in us.

And yet, God says, “Let there be light.” And God sets before us the very principle on which all mission is based, and by which all mission is driven. And even given the darkness into which man brings himself by the fall, God says, “Let there be light for man in this darkness.”

And the first rays of gospel light begin to shine into man’s darkness with that primitive gospel declaration that at last, at last, the seed of the woman will come and crush the head of the serpent and wage war with that old enemy the devil, and triumph over him at the cross. Only by entering into our darkness.... And isn’t it remarkable that at the cross itself, in all the mystery of this incarnate redemptive Savior who has come into this creation, that He should be shrouded in darkness at the point of His dying, precisely because God says, “Let there be light”?

And there can be light in no other way other than this Jesus, who dwells in the light from all eternity in the fellowship of God, being made sin for us that we might

become the righteousness of God in Him. So when He says, "I am the light of the world," it is the most glorious thing in the world. God does not leave man to perish in his own undoing, because God has a purpose of redoing and remaking and setting things right again, and He has said, "Let there be light." And He sends the light into the world, and John, echoing these great opening words of Genesis, reminds us that that's why the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us:

"In Him was life, and His life is the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it."

And it is the most glorious thing that the mission of the gospel is predicated on God's saying, "Let there be light," and man is not going to be left in darkness.

God says to a lost world, 'I give you Jesus. Let there be light.' And He sends that message out with His people, makes them the bearers of the good news, continues to say, "Let there be light." Jesus says to the disciples, does He not, 'You...you are the light...you are the light of the world. Let your light shine in the darkness. Don't let anything obscure it. Don't hide the candlestick, but make sure that it shines and that it shines faithfully, and that it shines brightly in every area of your life and conduct and behavior.'

God is still saying, "Let there be light," and He is saying it about His people. And He is making them, as the image-bearers of Jesus and the sharers of the word of Jesus, He's making them...He's making you, He's making us...the missionaries of this dark world, and He's saying 'I want there to be light in this darkness.' And the only light that there is is the light that His people carry as they live for Jesus in all their various callings in life, and all their various responsibilities of life.

And we're either tonight in the darkness and needing the mission to reach us, or we're in the light and the very bearers of it. So we need to make sure tonight, my Christian friends, that the God who says, "Let there be light," is speaking to us: to you young believers in here tonight, to give all your energies and all your interests to living for Christ, where He has put you and where He has called you; to you homemakers in here this evening, bringing up your children for the Lord, let there be light in these homes. Your children are naturally, natively, spiritually in darkness. "Let there be light," God says. You're their pastor. You're responsible for their souls. This is the flock God has given to you, and in your home and in your family. God says, "Let there be light." And in your workplace, with so much evidence perhaps of the darkness all around—maybe you're the only Christian there—that you're there because God does not want that place to be absolutely dark. He says, "Let there be light," and He's put you there for that very reason, so that you will let your light shine, and men will see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven. And with the words you speak and the steps you take and the work your hands do and everything about you, you communicate the glorious gospel of the blessed Lord, and you let the light

shine.

And fundamentally God says, “Let there be light,” because He’s given us His word. And He says this is the light men need: this great body of truth. There is no book like this in the whole of the world. This is God’s book, God’s inspired, infallible, inerrant book from beginning to end. It breathes God and it declares God, and it reveals God in all His majesty and magnificence, and God says, “Let there be light.” Let this book go into every corner of the world. Pray for its translation and pray for its distribution, and pray for every place where it’s read and where it’s sung, and above all where it’s proclaimed.

How we rejoice that this place is a beacon of light, only because and wholly because the word of God is proclaimed faithfully from this pulpit. And how much we need in the evangelical church of our present day to return to that given of church life and of evangelicalism that we proclaim the whole counsel of God, and that we preach Christ crucified. God says to our pulpits, “Let there be light.” And He says to us to proclaim the message that will bring light, because nothing — nothing! — will scatter the darkness except the light. And it does not matter what you bring with you into a dark room. You may be well dressed, but you’re still in a dark room. You may be exemplary in your conduct, but you’re still in a dark room. You may have great programs and great activities planned, but you’re still in a dark room unless you take light with you. And God says, “Let there be light.” Let’s proclaim the great doctrines that bring light.

Do you remember the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 43? “Oh, send forth Your light and Your truth; let them be my guides.” And how much the church needs that prayer. We have new perspectives on absolutely everything today. New perspectives on every doctrine. New perspectives on every Bible character. New perspectives on Jesus himself. God says these are only obscuring the light. Let there be light!

Let’s get back to the great fundamental doctrines that we received in our Reformation heritage. It’s not without reason that the Reformation monument in Geneva plasters these great words over the world: *Post Tenebras Lux* — “After darkness, the light.” The light came. The light came with the Reformed doctrines that spread like a wildfire through Europe! The gospel was preached and souls were saved. And Christ...Christ in all the riches of His person and all the magnificence of His finished work, and all the sufficiency and the fullness of His offices, was paraded before men in the proclamation of the gospel. And that old, old story carried the light into a dark world. And I do not know of any substitute, I do not know of anything that can effect the things that faithful gospel proclamation can effect, because the light is carried in the proclamation of this word, and God mandates our churches and all our missionary agencies to go into a dark world and let there be light.

And let’s tell men what they are in reality: dead in their trespasses and sins;

alienated from God; absolutely helpless in the matter of their souls' salvation; and yet, wholly accountable to the Judge even for their helplessness. And let's proclaim the remedy: the remedy of God's providing and of God's prescribing; the remedy given in Jesus Christ, in the God-man, in the Word made flesh who dwelt among us...not so that He would dwell among us, but so that He would die among us and so that He would die on a cross...not because of anything that He had done, but in spite of what He had not done. He'd never sinned against God, never broken the Law. Not one indefensible word, not one unjustifiable action on His part. Absolute perfection: the very embodiment of God's Law, and yet He dies on the cross. Why does He die on the cross? It's the greatest injustice in the world if it is not because He is carrying the sins of others.

Let there be light. Let men know that there is such a thing as imputation, and it's at the very heart of the gospel that my sins are imputed to Him and He dies, not for His own sins, but for mine. And it's absolutely just. And because of that, how can God not justify the ungodly who believes in Jesus? And in that moment, every sin is forgiven and there is peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Let there be light.

Let there be light. Let's tell the world of this dying Savior and go to all men without exception and say to them, "Christ is dead for you at Calvary, and you come to the dead Christ of Calvary and you will find life, justified by His blood and saved only through that substitutionary penal atonement at the cross of Golgotha."

Let there be light. Let's make sure that the preaching of the gospel is not driven by the needs of the church, so that we become just a place for self-help and of therapy in the name of Jesus. Let's make sure our preaching is not driven by the deeds of the church, so that people come just to know what they should do with their lives. Let's make sure our preaching is driven by the creeds of the church, so that as we set Christ before the church of God, deeds will be done and needs will be met as people bow before the awesome glory of God's salvation in the Christ He has exalted and made a Prince and a Savior to grant on repentance a remission of sins to Israel. And sinners fall down, and say, "I am undone."

That's what will give the mission work of the church its impetus and its impulse in our Post-modern Age. Let there be light. And let's make sure we are preaching the light-carrying gospel to a world in darkness.

IV. God establishes the pattern of mission.

But I need to come to this. I need to say that these words also communicate the paradigm of mission, the pattern of mission, by which I simply mean this.

Doesn't Paul take us back here in his great excursus on why he is not

discouraged? He has every reason to be discouraged. Corinth is not an easy place for the gospel. And the devil's busy at Corinth blinding the eyes of those who do not believe, lest the glorious gospel of Christ should shine into them. Do you see? He knows "Let there be light." He knows what to preach. But he's up against this terrible, terrible opposition that comes from hell itself as the devil keeps men spiritually blind in case the light should shine. But he says, 'We don't give up. We keep preaching, and we keep scattering the seed, and we keep sowing and we keep going out with the gospel.' Why? 'Because,' he says, '...because the God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness shines into the hearts of men to give them the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.'

And what a privilege to minister and to mission to those who are in darkness, and to see God saying, "Let there be light." And in every soul that bows the knee to Jesus and in every life that is transformed through the proclamation of the evangel, God says, 'I did that. I made a new creation there, and I brought light into the darkness of this soul. And you see that man praying, who wasn't praying before? I did that. And you see that woman repenting of her sins now, who never repented of her sins before? I did that.' God says, 'I said, 'Let there be light.'

We're only being the carriers of the message. We're only holding the torch and hoping that we can faithfully keep the baton and pass the torch on to another generation, but it takes this creative sovereign power that is unparalleled in the universe to make a sinner a saint. But it happens. And here and there one is born in Zion, and God says in the hearts of men and women whom He gives to Jesus, 'I did that. I did that. I said, 'Let there be light.'" And we rejoice after the fact that in this once dark life there is now light.

You, my Christian friend here tonight, you can testify of that. Doesn't Paul tell you? You were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk...walk as children of the light. Oh, I know you need to mourn over the darkness that is still there and how much more of the light you would love to experience day by day, but I never forgot these great words that Andrew Bonar wrote in his diary long ago as he looked back over his Christian life and said,

"It was not always bright sunshine; but since Christ came in, it was always light and never darkness in my soul."

Not always bright sunshine... but the path of the righteous, as Proverbs taught us, is like the shining light that shines more and more to the perfect day.

V. God's promise of mission — a new day, a new world, and a new creation.

Which brings me at last to this: that these words actually set before me the promise of mission, and raise my eyes beyond what I can see around me here to

the promise of a new day and of a new world and of a new creation, where all that Jesus suffered at Calvary is repaid with the presence, the physical glorified presence of all that the Father promised Him in a world separated from the darkness, just as at the beginning.

John sees into that new heaven and new earth; sees the wicked condemned into a place called “outer darkness,” and the redeemed gathered into a place where there is light. And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God lightens it. The Lamb is its light.

God said at the beginning, “Let there be light,” because in His mind's eye, He was fixed on the end, and a place where at last — at last! — God's people in the light made new because the light has shone into their experience, at last know...and for the first time ever they are in a place with light and no shadow. Light but no shadow...and all the shadows that cut across their path here, they are gone. The last vestiges of the darkness have scattered in the ultimate separation when God says finally, “Let there be light.” And that's the promise of mission: that at last, through this gospel, He will have His people in the glory with Him, and they will relate to Him forever and ever, and walk with Him in the light. And John says, “There was no night there.”

Tonight I'm not so much interested in the question “Will you be in the light then?” as I am in the question “Are you in the light now?” Because this Jesus is the true light. And if we walk in the light as He is in the light, that's where we have forgiveness, and that's where we have fellowship, and that's where we know the blessing of the God of the covenant. And may we all know the assurance that we are a new creation, and that into our souls God has come and God has said, “Let there be light there.” And let's fulfill our calling, and let our light shine before men. Amen.

Let's conclude with prayer.

O gracious God, how we rejoice tonight in the fact that You did not leave us in the darkness, but You came our way with the light of grace and of gospel truth. And we pray that we might know the power of that light in our experience and see its effect in every place where we are called to live and labor, and work and minister. And for our world tonight we cry to You, “Let there be light,” and pray that You will come with gospel power to scatter the darkness so that men and women and boys and girls will enjoy the light of life. Bless us, we pray; encourage us, we pray; be with us now in our parting as in our meeting. May grace, mercy, and peace rest upon us all. Amen.

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