Surge of Christian Missions: Causes for the Emergence of a Student Missionary Movement in England at the end of the Nineteenth Century

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What motivates a university student in the prime of life to set aside all former ambitions, uproot, and move to an unfamiliar country for an indefinite length of time to work in a setting that potentially offers little more than toil, disease, persecution, and death? This is a paradoxical human choice, and its frequent occurrence among a specific group of people in history invites explanation. At the end of the nineteenth century, a large number of university students in Britain chose to commit the remainder of their lives to the propagation of the Christian message of salvation in foreign countries. An examination of the circumstances and voices that gave rise to this undertaking provides a window into understanding why they decided to go abroad. The opening of numerous foreign regions by the advance of British imperialism made the student missionary movement possible, but it was the content of verbal and written messages delivered by older missionaries and pastors in England that sparked the surge.

Before investigating the themes that characterized the writings and speeches that moved students to become missionaries, a lengthy preliminary investigation is necessary. Two historians offer detailed analysis of developments in Christian foreign missions at the end of the nineteenth century. King’s College professor Andrew Porter remains the leading scholar in this field. His work is an essential component for compilations of writings on Christianity and the British Empire. Jeffrey Cox’s *The British Missionary Enterprise Since 1700* also offers a thorough picture pertaining to the subject. For the most part, there is little discord between Porter’s and Cox’s assessments. Their work, supplemented by minor additions from several other historians, explains the foundational historical causes of the increased drive for overseas missions. Porter and Cox chronicle the events surrounding the rise of the student missionary movement. They neglect, however, to discuss at length the core ideas that actually drove students to participate, a subject that will be the focus of the second part of this study.
Based upon Porter and Cox’s scholarship, there are five discernible developments that gave rise to English Christianity’s push for overseas missionary efforts. Although these were not the primary elements that sparked student commitments, they did shape the setting in which a drive for securing those commitments arose. First, and most complex, the meshing of the missionary enterprise with British imperialism led to the decline of traditional mission approaches and the rise of “faith missions.” Second, an increased acceptance of “premillennial eschatology” infused Victorian Christians with an urgency to take the gospel to unreached peoples. Third, the “holiness movement” that emerged from the Keswick Conventions, combined with the American revivalism imported by D. L. Moody, electrified British Christianity with an activism that yielded a stronger call for volunteers to shoulder the task of overseas missions. Fourth, Hudson Taylor’s account of the China Inland Mission’s work and the consequent tour of the “Cambridge Seven” spread the call for missions among university students. Fifth, the American Student Volunteer Movement crossed the Atlantic and started winning recruits for the missionary enterprise. Each of the five developments requires examination before looking at the actual messages that moved several thousand British university students to become missionaries.

The first development was the meshing of the Christian missionary enterprise with British imperialism. This relationship started to form with the awakening of efforts to propagate the Christian religion among foreign peoples at the end of the eighteenth century. While the extent of overseas missionary work had been minor before then, the 1790s saw the formation of large voluntary lay missionary societies in England. Among these were the three that would become the largest in the nineteenth century: the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the London
Missionary Society (1795), and the Anglican Church Missionary Society (1799).\(^1\) Initially represented by such figureheads as William Carey, these missionary organizations spearheaded efforts to plant the Christian message in foreign lands.

Parallel to that development was the growth of the British Empire. As the nineteenth century progressed, a link between Christian foreign missions and British imperialism gradually formed. The relationship between the two was certainly complex. At times, British officials resented missionaries as a dangerous nuisance, and the missionaries likewise chafed beneath imperial restraints. By the 1840s, however, the public and the British government generally accepted that missions had helped extend Britain’s global presence.\(^2\) Imperial administrators recognized the educational, linguistic, and cultural services provided by missionaries, so they increasingly offered their endorsement of the missionary enterprise. Missionary organizations meanwhile sought to Christianize as well as Anglicize native populations.\(^3\) Justifications for imperial rule started to define missionary rhetoric.\(^4\) Porter writes that the ensuing “convergence of missionary thinking with official and public opinion generated an increasingly explicit association of evangelical Christianity with commerce and civilization.”\(^5\) By 1865, British overseas expansion was a two-pronged secular and religious mission.\(^6\) David Livingstone’s famous African explorations, opening the “Dark Continent” to Christianity as well as commerce, epitomized this development.

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\(^2\) Ibid., 47.
\(^6\) Ibid., 53.
Despite extensive achievements overseas, the British missionary endeavor began to lose momentum in the 1850s and 1860s.\(^7\) Reports of success were fewer than expected, and recruits and finances declined.\(^8\) Even Livingstone’s efforts in Africa ended in his abandonment of attempts to link Christianity and civilization. Eugene Stock, a contemporary historian of the mission movement, noted in 1872, “for the first time in many years… not one single University man had offered for missionary service.”\(^9\) Similarly, the number of missionaries maintained in India by the five largest sending organizations fell by twelve percent. It became clearer that the typical “Commerce, Civilization, and Christianity” approach to missions was no longer working.

People started to demand new ways forward. Men and women within the church disagreed with how much money organizations were allocating toward church buildings, missionary housing, school buildings and teachers, medical missionaries, printing presses, and an expanding administration. Critics argued that societies should focus on sending to the field missionaries who would devote themselves almost entirely to evangelistic preaching.\(^10\) Porter notes that reformers also insisted “on the separation of evangelization and the essentials of the faith from empire and western culture.”\(^11\) They wanted to remove visible and rhetorical links to British commercial interests.\(^12\) For example, missionaries were to separate themselves from western culture by identifying as much as possible with native ways of living, thus removing what had become a hindrance to the dissemination of the Christian message of salvation.\(^13\)

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\(^7\) Porter, “Overview,” 53.


\(^11\) Ibid., 564.

\(^12\) Porter, “Overview,” 54.

\(^13\) Porter, “Missions” 561.
A major development that stemmed from the critiques and would later provide a large vessel for the student missionary movement was the rise of “faith missions.”

Leaders of this movement believed God’s divine provision made elaborate fundraising largely unnecessary, which meant that mission organizers should dismantle the highly bureaucratic structure of the missionary societies. Even without excessive fundraising, the monies needed for overseas work would still be available because of God’s provision. Foreign missions required only a small administration consisting of a committee of referees to approve missionaries and channel donations to local fields for the primary purpose of spreading biblical teaching. Faith missions also “deliberately sought isolated and unfamiliar territory, far from European colonialism and other missions.” This meant penetrating into un reach ed and particularly difficult parts of Africa, India, the Muslim world, and China.

The greatest expression of the faith missions approach was the China Inland Mission (CIM), founded by Hudson Taylor in 1865. The CIM soon became the largest British missionary venture in China and the second largest in the world. Taylor and his followers sought to move beyond the safe and protected enclaves of Chinese European treaty ports and penetrate to unreached peoples within China’s interior. CIM missionaries also shocked many traditional missionaries by adopting the dress and hairstyles of the Chinese people to whom they were ministering. Furthermore, the organization’s administrative structure exemplified the faith mission. Cox writes that the CIM “sent missionaries out only with a clear understanding that

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14 Cox, 183.
15 Porter, “Overview,” 54; Cox, 184.
they could not guarantee a regular salary or income, the mission would not go into debt,
individual missionaries could not solicit funds directly, and God would provide.”19

The popularization of the faith mission approach led to growth in the overall British
missionary enterprise. The faith mission’s central idea that “God will provide” struck a chord
with a late Victorian public’s yearning for “the evangelization of the world in our generation.”20
Multiple foreign endeavors developed outside the normal channels of the established missionary
societies.21 Porter argues that expansion was almost everywhere the order of the day.22 Even the
traditional sending organizations, having revised their approach, saw significant growth. In the
last two decades of the nineteenth century, the number of overseas Church Missionary Society
workers grew from 250 to nearly 1,000.23

The second development that shaped the setting in which the student missionary
movement emerged was the increased acceptance of “premillennial eschatology.” The dominant
pattern of Protestant thought before 1860 had been “postmillennial,” which likened strongly to
Enlightenment ideas of progress. Postmillennial Christians generally expected the inevitable
conversion of the whole world to usher in a millennium of peace, happiness, and plenty, at the
end of which Christ would return.24 This also aligned with the outlook that linked Christian
missions with the British Empire, because it viewed the two undertakings as driving toward the
same essential goals. One reason seems evident for the decline of postmillennialism, at least
among missionaries. While earlier theorists expected missionaries to encounter natives eager to
become Christians (thus establishing Christianity’s spiritual and political hegemony that

19 Cox, 184.
20 Ibid., 184.
21 David Filbeck, The First Fifty Years: A Brief History of the Direct-Support Missionary Movement,
22 Porter, “Missions,” 568.
23 Cox, 182.
postmillennialists expected), many discovered realities that were far more sobering. The result
of this, combined with the growing desire for separation of the Christian missionary project from
British imperialism, was the emergence of a more pessimistic “premillennial” view.25

Premillennialists saw troubling contemporary events as harbingers of the fulfillment of
apocalyptic prophecies in the Bible. They therefore expected the imminent return of Christ to
judge the world. Porter adds that premillennialism caused Christians in Britain to adopt an
urgency to push “ahead with evangelism on the widest possible front, so that as many sinners as
possible might have the opportunity to repent before the Second Coming.”26 D.L. Moody’s
approach to evangelism embodied this idea. He said he could not find any place in the Christian
scriptures where God says the world is going to get better and better. Instead, he remarked, “I
look upon this world as a wrecked vessel, God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody,
save all you can.’”27 Premillennial thought thus encouraged new missionaries to adopt the “faith
missions” approach.

The budding influence of the Keswick Conventions and the American revivalism
imported to Britain by Moody was the third development. A growing emphasis in British
Christianity on “sanctification” or “practical holiness” focused on the deepening of an individual
Christian’s spiritual life after conversion in order to achieve a “more complete surrender to the
spirit of Christ.”28 The first Keswick Convention, a gathering of several hundred Christians in
the town of Keswick, embodied this drive for personal holiness. The first convention took place
in 1875, the same year that Moody visited Britain for a large preaching tour. Moody’s revivalist

25 Cox, 182.
27 D.L. Moody, Quoted from “The Life and Theology of D.L. Moody,”
http://www.cprf.co.uk/articles/moody.htm [Website Accessed on April 18, 2012].
28 Cox, 185.
campaign, combined with the Keswick meetings, ultimately provided a major source of propulsion drawing university students into foreign missions.\textsuperscript{29}

The fourth development was the publication of Hudson Taylor’s book, \textit{China’s Spiritual Needs and Claims}, in the early 1880s. The volume, describing the China Inland Mission’s work, influenced a number of students at Cambridge. Several of the students, famously dubbed the “Cambridge Seven,” committed their lives to serving the China Inland Mission. Before they departed for the East, they made a tour of Britain for several months in 1884-1885 to help encourage the establishment of student missionary organizations. Numerous student groups formed on major campuses because of this, and their tour inspired the compilation of many writings and sermons on missions into the book, \textit{The Evangelization of the World}, which disseminated even further the drive for missionary work.\textsuperscript{30}

The growing student groups had a strong example to follow in the American Student Volunteer Movement, which was the fifth and final development that gave rise to English Christianity’s push for overseas missionary efforts. Founded in 1886 under the influence of Moody’s revivals, its organizers claimed that within four years 6,200 students in American universities had signed a form stating, “It is my purpose, if God permit, to become a foreign missionary.”\textsuperscript{31} The SVM crossed the Atlantic to retrieve similar pledges from British students. In 1896, 715 student delegates attended the International Students’ Missionary Conference in Liverpool, an event well-documented by \textit{“Make Jesus King”: The Report of the International Students’ Missionary Conference, Liverpool, January 1-5, 1896}. The speakers at the conference made a deep impression on those who attended. Between 1892 and 1899, 1,621 British students signed a declaration of intent with the SVM to be a missionary. The SVM claimed that 506

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item\textsuperscript{29} Cox, 185; Porter, “Overview,” 59.
\item\textsuperscript{30} Cox, 186.
\item\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 186.
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actually sailed. Of the 1,571 men appointed by the Church Missionary Society in the last two
decades of the nineteenth century, 400 were university graduates. Referring to the universities,
Porter writes, “The enormous late-century increase in missionary volunteers came
overwhelmingly from these institutions.”

Having established the five foundational developments, it is now appropriate to turn to a
more specific investigation of why students decided to become missionaries. Jeffrey Cox offers
several insightful explanations. He argues that the increase in student missionaries is largely
attributable to the gradual societal acceptance of missions as a respectable profession that an
educated person might find attractive. The Cambridge Seven’s tour of Britain helped dispel
misgivings about the image of missionaries “by featuring socially prestigious missionary
heroes.” Not only did they already have the admiration of their fellow students, but they also
came from respected families. One of them, Stanley Smith, was a key rower on the Cambridge
crew team. Another, C. T. Studd, was a well-known cricket player. Thus, students followed in
their wake after becoming convinced that this was a noble and honored career path. Cox extends
this idea further by noting that the majority of missionaries in the field at the end of the
nineteenth century had not come out of the universities. Yet one major motivation for people
who were not students to become missionaries was to take advantage of the opportunities for
upward mobility offered by the missionary life.

The improved social status acquired after committing to be a missionary likely did
contribute to some people’s decision to go overseas, but what about students who found
themselves alienated by loved ones and even friends when they decided to go? Additionally,

33 Cox, 184.
34 Ibid., 185.
35 Ibid., 185-186.
36 Ibid., 187.
how could poorer recruits view their transition to missionary life as a step toward upward mobility when it often meant the sacrifice of numerous comforts and freedoms? Cox offers a plausible but incomplete conclusion on the primary reasons why so many student missionaries went overseas.

Cox also argues that the Moody campaigns often used methods in large evangelistic gatherings that heightened the emotions of his listeners. Thus, those who signed the missionary pledge “often failed to follow up, despite the expansive claims by the SVM.” Yet Cox provides no evidence to prove that the SVM, whose record-keeping was quite meticulous, deliberately inflated their numbers in order to deceive people into thinking the success of the missionary movement was anything more than it actually was. Cox only assumes that the use of emotional methods must have been far more of a failure in the long-term than is reported by the SVM. The SVM openly acknowledges that around two-thirds of those who signed pledges did not go overseas. Yet the other third uprooted and went abroad. The temporary manipulation of emotions cannot explain this follow-through. Furthermore, how can mere emotional appeals at a single event have sustained thousands of missionaries in their mission fields for years and even decades on end? The messages preached to students must have contained within them an intellectual tenacity that transcended one day’s excitement. Again, Cox does make legitimate causal explanations, but they cannot satisfactorily account for why British students chose to go and stay in foreign lands preaching the Christian message of salvation. Consider the Cambridge Seven. After their much-publicized six-month tour of Britain, the seven student missionaries from Cambridge spent a combined total of 230 years on the mission field. Surely, there was

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37 Cox, 186.
38 Ibid.
something deeper and more profound acting on their lives to compel them to such commitment than just shallow revivalistic enthusiasms.

A large number of missionary sermons, reports, and books are available for examination. These works constitute the bulk of the sources that provide a window into the motives that inspired student missionaries to go abroad. Cox notes that many late Victorians had an unquenchable appetite for preaching on the topic of missions, “and the published volumes were widely circulated.”39 Studying those works is essential. Although Andrew Porter stops short of providing extensive explanation, he acknowledges that only “through an understanding of missionaries’ faith and their trust in Providence and the Bible can historians hope to explain the incurable optimism, and missions’ persistence in the face of death, hardship, deprivation, and the tiny number of converts.”40

Even a cursory inspection of the available material conveys the consistency of the messages preached and published in England from the 1870s to the 1890s. Representative texts will suffice to illustrate the major themes. In order to lend more weight to the pieces chosen, most of the speakers selected were relatively popular at the time they preached or published their work. Among those included in this study are Hudson Taylor and the Cambridge Seven; C. H. Spurgeon, perhaps the most well-known nineteenth-century English pastor; Robert Moffat and David Livingstone, two of the most famous British missionaries to Africa; and A. T. Pierson, who helped found the American Student Volunteer Movement and did much to develop similar organizations in Britain. The works range from pieces produced in the mid-1870s, when the student missionary movement began, to the mid-1890s, when it reached a highpoint with the International Students’ Missionary Conference in Liverpool.

39 Cox, 174.
Five major themes remain consistent throughout the messages. First, and predominantly, leaders challenged students to acknowledge the spiritual needs of foreign peoples and simultaneously to recognize the Bible’s command to carry the Christian message of salvation to those people. Second, they presented a temporal glorification of the missionary and his task. Third, they drew attention to the eternal hope and rewards guaranteed by the Christian scriptures to those who surrender their lives to the work of Christ. Fourth, they encouraged students with the assurance that God would be with them, even when they were weakest and circumstances appeared most bleak. Fifth, leaders preached a message that inclined students to savor their own salvation because of the sacrificial work of Jesus Christ for them. With this fifth point, they aroused in students an essential, deep passion to see people all over the world worship Christ as God.

The first major theme, and the one that appears most often in the sermons and writings that motivated students to become missionaries, was a challenge to acknowledge the spiritual needs of foreign peoples while simultaneously recognizing the Bible’s command to carry the Christian message of salvation to those peoples. Statistics often permeated these portions of the message. Hudson Taylor wrote about the vastness of China. He estimated that its area was 104 times the size of England and 176 times that of Scotland. He approximated that 250 million people lived in China. That was 10 times the population of England and 67 times that of Scotland. Of that multitude, an estimated 22,000 were Christians connected to Protestant missions.\footnote{Hudson Taylor, \textit{China’s Spiritual Need and Claims}, 7\textsuperscript{th} ed., (London: Morgan & Scott, 1887), 8, 11, [E-book Accessed on April 10, 2012, from Kobo Books].} Taylor sought to convict his readers further. He pointed out that, according to the Bible, millions of people in China “are in a fallen state, are unclean, unthankful, unholy.”\footnote{Ibid., 38.} He calculated that every day tens of thousands died, and every three months about 2,000,000
Chinese subjects “pass into eternity, very few of them ever having heard the gospel.”\textsuperscript{43} Thus, he called believers to make strenuous efforts to bring the Chinese people to Jesus.

The Cambridge Seven, having realized the paucity of Christian workers in China soon after beginning their work in that country, wrote to young believers in England for help. They noted that in one southern Chinese province, there were 15 million people and only two workers there to preach to them.\textsuperscript{44} C. T. Studd, the most prominent of the Cambridge Seven, returned to England after almost twenty years of missionary work in China to speak at the International Students’ Missionary Conference in Liverpool. He also employed the extensive use of statistics, writing, “Think of that land of China with 300,000,000 souls, who know nothing of God and the Lord Jesus Christ, and then think of the British Isles with their 38,000,000 inhabitants, and tens of thousands of ministers to preach the Gospel to them.”\textsuperscript{45} Indeed, G. Sherwood Eddy, also preaching at the Liverpool conference, noted that there were more Christian workers in London than in all of India, which had seven times the population of Great Britain at the time.\textsuperscript{46} Such numbers presented a serious challenge to Britain’s university students.

The challenge to meet the spiritual needs of foreign multitudes attained a heightened sense of importance when combined with a reminder of clear commands in the Christian scriptures. Hudson Taylor challenged his readers to consider whether they will obey God’s callings on their lives. He asked, “will you tell Him that you are busy fishing and cannot go? that you have bought a piece of ground and cannot go? that you purchased five yoke of oxen, or have

\textsuperscript{43} Taylor, 38.
married a wife, or are engaged in other and more interesting pursuits, and cannot go?"47 He reminded them that they would soon appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so obeying the call of God in the Bible was of utmost importance. If the Christian student truly believed that only Jesus is "‘the Door of the sheep-fold,’ … ‘the Way, the Truth, and the Life?’ – that ‘no man cometh unto the Father but by Him?’" then that student would examine his life and determine how he might do more to make Christ known to the lost.48 C. H. Spurgeon reminded his listeners that Christ clearly commanded his followers to "‘Go and make disciples.’ But have you sought this?” he asked, keying on the need for obedience.49 A. T. Pierson also highlighted the responsibility of the Christian to obey God’s command, writing, “God could have the whole legions of angels to tell the Gospel story, but the angels must not do it, it must be a believer.”50 Pierson argued that the numbers of workers and amounts of finances were ultimately minor issues. What mattered most was “that there must be absolute obedience to the Lord Jesus Christ” in those who choose to follow the call into missions.51 Enthusiasm that arose because of conferences and moving sermons would die out, so he implored his listeners to desire “calm, constant, holy obedience.”52

A desperate urgency for radical obedience while time remains courses through the missionary sermons and publications. Similar to presenting their listeners with astonishing numbers and shockingly clear biblical commands, the authors tried to instill in their listeners a

47 Taylor, 37.
48 Ibid., 39.
52 Ibid., 182.
conviction that time is short. Robert Moffat wrote, “This is the time when we can work… This time is passing fast away. Oh! do it – whatever requires to be done for your own salvation and for the salvation of your fellow men, do it, do it now!”53 The Cambridge Seven, writing corporately from China soon after the beginning of their work in that country, called upon students to obey Christ’s commands in scripture: “The Master says, ‘Go!’ We urge, ‘Come!’ Come! for the souls of men. Come! for the sake of Christ. Come! for the glory of God.”54 Eddy earnestly implored his listeners, “We must begin at once. The task is great. The time is short. But God lives! The word is ‘Forward!’”55 C. T. Studd unflinchingly challenged students, saying, “I have one word for you tonight. It is this. Do it. Do what? Do what we have come for. Do it… go and evangelise the world, preach the Gospel to every creature.”56 Even though this meant the abandonment of many comforts, these writers and preachers tried to show that Jesus demanded extreme commitment from those who were truly his followers. Studd wrote, “God wants the whole life,” meaning that he required total submission to the will of God.57

A second major theme that appears in many of the messages preached and published on missions was the temporal glorification of the missionary and his task. Leaders occasionally glorified such examples as the Cambridge Seven, partially because they were already attractive to society. As mentioned before, several of them were prominent athletes. All of them hailed from good families and had prestigious academic backgrounds. It made missionary work appear to be a noble and desirable profession. R. N. Cust wrote, “I never see a Missionary but I blame my fate that I am not of them. Are they not to be envied whose duties in this world harmonize

54 The Cambridge Seven, 160.
55 Eddy, 187.
56 Studd, 59.
57 Ibid., 66.
with those of the next[?].”⁵⁸ A. T. Pierson similarly glorified the missionary endeavor. He viewed mission work as something linked directly to Western culture’s unstoppable march toward progress. He looked at all the technological innovations of recent years that enabled missionaries to expand their influence. He noted the large numbers of men and women in North America, Great Britain, and the European Continent who had made the pledge to go to the foreign field. Pierson perceived that God was calling the men and women of that generation “to achieve in the ordinary time of a human life, results so colossal that even the intelligence of an archangel or the love of a seraph shall be overwhelmed at the prospect of what can be done by one holy, humble, devout life.”⁵⁹ Furthermore, he pictured missionaries as soldiers who were not going to stand at arms like a unit in a parade but rather plunge into the fight and prove themselves as worthy warriors.⁶⁰ Such rhetoric shaped a positive perception of missionary work. It made overseas ministry more desirable to students.

A third theme prevalent in missionary recruitment relates to the second, but it sheds light on a different kind of benefit by focusing on the eternal hope and rewards guaranteed to those who surrender their lives to the work of Christ. In his 57 years as a missionary in Africa, Moffat faced danger and death numerous times, “but it was a glorious work… and had I perished beneath it, I should have lost nothing and gained everything.”⁶¹ David Livingstone voiced a similar idea. Although suffering, sickness, anxiety, and danger might “cause the spirit to waver and the soul to sink,” he wrote, “let this only be for a moment. All these are nothing when

⁵⁹ Ibid., 26.
⁶¹ Moffat, 94; Philippians 1:21: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”; Matthew 10:39: “Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.”
compared with the glory which shall hereafter be revealed in, and for, us.”62 Moffat and Livingstone drew out a powerful ideological element within Christian doctrine: the understanding that this present life is temporary, but the life awaiting the believer after death is eternal. If a person came to believe that idea as truth, trusting that the sufferings endured in this world will only make eternity more glorious, then a willingness to sacrifice comfort and temporal pleasures and to adopt a deep commitment to an incredibly difficult work becomes far more conceivable. Veteran missionaries like Moffat often recounted the stories of their sufferings in order to show how fiercely difficult the work would be, but they consistently acknowledged that the work was worth doing. Moffat wrote that he would willingly go back to Africa if he had the choice to do so. Despite toiling there under oppressive heat and often suffering hunger and thirst, he wrote, “I never complained. I never felt a murmur. I knew that the work in which I was engaged was the work to which God in His merciful providence had appointed me, and I knew that if I labored and did not faint I should surely reap!”63

A fourth theme that permeates much of the writing on Christian missions is an encouragement rooted in the idea that God would watch over those who risked their lives for the spreading of the Christian message of salvation, even when missionaries were weakest and life appeared most bleak. This contrasted sharply to the triumphalist rhetoric previously described. In one of Spurgeon’s sermons, which a later missions historian hailed as “more adapted to inspire the true missionary spirit” than anything else, he focused on Jesus' claim, “All power is

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62 David Livingstone, “It is Emphatically No Sacrifice,” in The Evangelization of the World, A Missionary Band: A Record of Consecration, and an Appeal, ed. B. Broomhall, (London: Morgan & Scott, 1885), 95, [E-book Accessed on April 10, 2012, from Princeton Theological Seminary Internet Archive]; Romans 8:18: “I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us.”

63 Moffat, 94.
Missionaries should therefore take comfort in the sovereignty of Christ, whose leadership in the missionary enterprise guaranteed that it would succeed exactly according to God’s design. Even if all human measurements showed that a task was impossible, “all calculation is done with” when one acknowledged the power of God in Christ, because there was “a factor here that is absolutely infinite.”

Hudson Taylor made a similar profession. He pointed out that the great question before he formed the China Inland Mission was whether the interior of China, though obviously needing the gospel, would prove accessible. According to Taylor, such doubts had no place in Christian decision-making. If Jesus gave a command, then it was the Christian’s place to obey it rather than question its practicality. Yet the fulfillment of the task would not depend on human effort. Rather, Taylor remembered the scriptural promise that “all power is given unto Him in heaven and in earth,” thus entailing that Jesus is able to open and shut doors as he pleases. Taylor rested in the idea that this same Christ promised to be “with us always, even unto the end of the world.” Taylor even argued that dangers and difficulties, though daunting, would ultimately lead to a greater display of Christ’s power. Trials would cause missionaries to realize their “own weakness, and poverty, and need” and would consequently constrain them “to lean more constantly, to draw more deeply, and to rest more implicitly, on the strength, the riches, the fullness of CHRIST.” The times of greatest danger would be the times when Christ’s delivering power would be most conspicuous. If Christ chose not to deliver from trial, then his

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65 Spurgeon, 128.
66 Taylor, 62.
67 Ibid., 62, 65.
sustaining grace would prove sufficient for even the weakest servant. Taylor testified that Christ had been faithful to him and to his companions amidst numerous difficulties in China.

C. T. Studd offered a similar testimony. He encouraged his listeners to stand fast in the faith that Christ would fulfill his promises. In order to have Christ back on earth again soon, he challenged, rising generations of youth would have to preach the Christian message all over the world. To quiet fears stirred by this daunting prospect, he reminded them, ‘“With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.’ We must know that we can do nothing of ourselves; and knowing this, we must give up the work to the Lord Jesus Christ.” 68 Thus, although some preachers and missionary leaders tried to describe the individual missionary as a heroic warrior, others focused on imploring young believers to embrace a paradoxical meekness and humility that ultimately placed the individual in a position of great need and desperation for the provision of Christ. This latter approach certainly aligned with the growing prevalence of faith missions in England.

The fifth and final theme that frequently emerges in the writings was a message that inclined students to savor their own salvation because of the sacrificial work of Christ and which thereby aroused a deep passion to see people all over the world worship Christ as God. Mrs. Grattan Guinness wrote that hearts given wholly to Jesus would cause missionaries to long for his wishes to be gratified. A surrendered heart should yearn passionately to see others repent and turn to Christ. If students acknowledged that millions of their fellow humans were lost and yet make no effort to share the Christian message of salvation with them, “how do we show our devoted attachment to JESUS CHRIST our LORD?” 69 She lamented that people’s devotion

68 Studd, 60.
paled in comparison to what Christ deserved from them. Christ’s devotion to the interests of his church led him to great “suffering, loss, and shame, because of the state in which we were.”

Thus, his followers, saved from the just wrath of God for their wrongdoing, should treasure their undeserved salvation so much that they willingly embrace the heavy toil and self-denial required of a missionary trying to tell other people about Christ’s redemptive work.

A particular account of spiritual renewal among a group of students illustrates the fifth theme well. Several accounts describe a year-long spiritual awakening sparked at Edinburgh University when Stanley Smith and C. T. Studd, two of the Cambridge Seven, visited to speak to the students about overseas missionary work. According to A. H. Charteris, Studd and Smith were themselves fresh from college. The young Edinburgh students, most of whom had heard of the two athletes, embraced the chance to hear them speak. About a thousand students attended the first meeting. Smith spoke of how “the love of Christ constrained him’ to give up all home prospects and go to far-off China to preach the Gospel.” Charteris notes that Studd followed by staying that “he was ready to forsake father and mother and home and friends because of his love for his redeemer.” According to Smith and Studd, the most fundamental reason they were going abroad was their love for Christ. The students were spellbound at this profession. The fact that these two men in possession of great gifting and high prospects for success in the world should devote themselves and their fortunes to overseas missionary work defied easy explanation. The university invited them back to speak three more times, with up to 2,000

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70 Guinness, viii.
72 Charteris, 57.
attending. Many of the young students became new followers of Christ and continued to minister to one another long after Smith and Studd left the campus.

While Smith and Studd were just beginning their missionary careers, a similar statement came from a veteran missionary at the end of his career. One of the clearest expressions of a commitment born out of gratitude for the saving work of Christ comes from the famous explorer-missionary David Livingstone, whose example was an inspiration to many young Christians. He noted that people often talked about the sacrifices he made in spending so much of his life in Africa. He responded, “Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paid back as a small part of a great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay?” Livingstone amazingly concluded, “I never made a sacrifice.” His recollection of Jesus’ condescension in leaving God’s throne to sacrifice himself for sinful people dispelled the idea that God owed Livingstone anything for his services. Thus, Livingstone is another example of a missionary whose motivation stems from a personal understanding of what Christ had done for him, and which thereby made him yearn to be Christ’s willing servant.

A Church Missionary Society worker, Miss Gollock, delivered a speech entitled, “To Me to Live is Christ” at the Liverpool conference. She shared what she thought was the core motivation that drove the Apostle Paul to do his missionary work. The “secret of his service in the Gospel” was that he found his joy and contentment in the person of Jesus. Miss Gollock challenged her listeners to examine themselves and see if this was the case for them. To have true life was “not Christian service, not missionary work, not success, but Christ.”

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73 Charteris, 58.
74 Livingstone, 95.
75 Ibid., 95.
77 Ibid., 92.
experience on the mission field in India, Ceylon, and Egypt, she saw that temptations and difficulties abroad are greater than they were at home. Thus, if a student’s spiritual life depends on anything other than relationship with Christ, that student will fail overseas. She wrote, “If the student does not know at home the abiding joy of his Lord, abroad he will become discouraged.” Gollock implored her listeners to give their time before going to the field “to the deepening of your inner life with your Lord. Seek to walk with Him, seek to know Him.” In being so close to the heart of Jesus, she said, and knowing how lovingly Christ sacrificed his life for the lost, missionaries would realize that they “cannot do better than throw yourselves away like that!”

Several clear developments explain the emergence of a strong push for a young missionary movement that arose in Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century. The decline of traditional missionary approaches and the burgeoning of faith missions, the increased acceptance of premillennial eschatology, the activism inspired by the Keswick Conventions and Moody’s revivalism, Hudson Taylor’s account of the CIM combined with the Cambridge Seven’s tour of England, and the American Student Volunteer Movement all created a strong calling for young people in Britain to surrender their lives to overseas missionary work. Yet this does not sufficiently explain the actual decisions made by thousands of university students to make such radical commitments. More revealing is the examination of the writings and speeches made by pastors and veteran missionaries that catalyzed the individual’s decision to go. The five main themes that remain consistent throughout the messages include a challenge to acknowledge the spiritual needs of foreign peoples as well as recognize the Bible’s commands, the glorification of the missionary and his work, the highlighting of eternal hope and rewards, the

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78 Gollock, 93.  
79 Ibid., 93.  
80 Ibid., 96.
encouragement of students with the assurance that God would be with them, and the illumination of Christ being worthy of total commitment because of his work in saving sinners, including the missionaries themselves. These were the primary ideas that fueled the student’s choice to uproot and go overseas to be a missionary. As shown, the same ideas also provided much of the sustaining power that helped numerous missionaries remain in the work for many years after arriving on the field. The evidence that certain messages caused dramatic ruptures in the natural course of many students’ lives demonstrates that ideas sometimes possess tremendous potential to be effective in causing change.
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