

# The Legacy of Max Warren

F. W. Dillistone

Max Warren (August 13, 1904–August 22, 1977) was the outstanding missionary leader in Britain in the mid-twentieth century. He became general secretary of the Church Missionary Society in 1942 and served in that position for twenty-one years. During the last fourteen years of his life he continued to remain in close touch with overseas missionaries and to think and write and speak about many aspects of the missionary cause. As leader in the theology of mission, as well as in the policies and organization of a great missionary society, he occupies an unparalleled position in the history of overseas missions from Britain in the twentieth century.

## I

Max was of Irish parentage. Father and mother had each responded to the missionary challenge and were on furlough when Max was born. He went out with them to India and during most of the first eight years of his life absorbed the sounds and sights of a great Eastern civilization. A sister had died of bubonic plague and his two brothers were at school in the homeland. In consequence, he was in many ways a lonely child but maintained in his autobiography that the effect of this on his imagination and love of reading had been altogether beneficial. At length it was necessary for him to take up school life in England. This brought him eventually to one of the famous English public schools, Marlborough, where he showed promise on the hockey field and gained a love of the study of history through the influence of an enthusiastic master.

This love of history never faded from schooldays onward. He won highest honors at Cambridge in this discipline and could have taken up an academic career. But he had already been seized by a more intense devotion—a devotion to Jesus Christ and his service. This meant that the study of history was to be dominantly focused upon God's activity in history and in particular in the Christ-event and the succeeding history of the Christian church. The sending of the Son, and the consequent sending of his disciples to continue his mission, became to Max the theme of supreme interest, though this did not prevent him from stretching out through books in all directions in order to learn about the customs and histories and cultures of people the world over. He read voraciously, and constantly did his utmost to pass on to others the insights gained thereby.

The dedication to discipleship was made within the context of evangelical Christianity. The Church Missionary Society (CMS) drew its support from the evangelical wing of Anglicanism in the British Isles and in some of the Dominions: Max took a share in seaside missions in which his brother was leader; at Cambridge he became a vigorous member of the Evangelical Christian Union. Even before he entered university he had become convinced that

his calling was to missionary service, and in his very first term an appeal for recruits to go out to begin new work in northern Nigeria led him to a firm commitment. Throughout his period at Cambridge, however fully occupied he might be with academic work, athletic pursuits, and personal witness, he never lost the burning enthusiasm to make the gospel of Christ known among Muslims in the borderland between Nigeria and the Sudan.

He was accepted as a layman by the CMS and sailed for Nigeria in 1927, hoping to be married on his first furlough to Mary Collett, to whom he had become engaged some months before leaving England. He threw himself into the work at the mission station in Zaria, learning the language, teaching in the school, helping in the dispensary. But before a year had passed his health collapsed, he was sent home to England critically ill and for three years struggled to survive the ravages of tuberculosis, which had infected his body. In hospital he passed through travail of soul as well as of body, but ultimately came forth a new man, with scars still on him but ready now to begin his life's work. He was married and shortly afterward ordained into the Christian ministry. After a comparatively brief period spent mainly in youth work, he was appointed to the incumbency of the strategically important parish of Holy Trinity, Cambridge.

## II

Holy Trinity became famous in the nineteenth century by reason of the outstanding ministry of Charles Simeon, one of the most distinguished of Anglican evangelicals and a wholehearted supporter of CMS in its early days. The church, situated in a central position in Cambridge, provided rich opportunities for a ministry of preaching and leadership in worship and at the same time made possible the outreach in personal evangelism and counseling in which Max excelled. He built up the congregation and prepared them for the crisis of war, seeking to strengthen their confidence in the unceasing providence of the living God. At the same time he kept steadily before his people the call from the wider world and soon was appointed to serve on the Executive Committee of the CMS in London. When the general secretary of the CMS resigned in 1942, the young man of thirty-eight had already made so marked an impression by his obvious ability and promise of leadership that he was chosen to fill the post.

It is hard now to imagine a more daunting task in Christian leadership for any man to have been called to undertake at that particular time. There were more than a thousand CMS missionaries scattered over Africa and the East, some in prison camps, some prevented from returning to England for furlough, many cut off from any regular communication with headquarters, many uncertain regarding the possibilities of war in their own territory. In addition there was widespread disruption among those parishes in England that supported the CMS, and the financial outlook was therefore precarious. Finally, the air raids on London were making work in the city, where CMS headquarters was situated, dangerous and exhausting for the society's staff. Yet Max had little hesitation in responding to the call to responsibility for the society whose members had been a supportive community for him since childhood and in whose particular function in the calling of God he most firmly believed.

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Voluntary, Evangelical, W.A.S. N. For a S. W. Dillistone



He set to work at once to renew the vision and energies of the home staff by establishing personal relationships with them and by recalling in his writings the history of the CMS in the purpose of God. The work of mission had never been easy. Heroic men and women had labored in the nineteenth century, often against fearful odds. However difficult the present situation might be through the shaking of the nations, the call to evangelize still sounded insistently in the ears of all who honored Christ as Lord. Max tried to build up a dedicated team in Britain of those willing to consecrate their varying gifts to the one task of communicating the gospel.

Only once during his first five years as secretary was he able to travel abroad, though to visit overseas and see mission stations at firsthand was his ambition as soon as conditions allowed. In 1943 he faced the hazards of a transatlantic crossing in order to attend the Jubilee meeting of the Foreign Missions Conference of North America in Chicago in January 1944. By so doing he began to establish the links with American missionary leaders that were to prove so valuable in days to come. He saw, as few others in Britain did at that time, how vitally important the contribution of America within the total missionary enterprise was going to be in the postwar world. The old concept of empire was on its way out, and yet that was the context within which so much of Anglican missionary activity had been carried on. Within the new world order, it was supremely desirable that cooperation among the missionary societies—and many of those were American-based—should be fostered in every possible way. Questions of denomination were secondary. The all-important matter was to promote intelligent interchange within the common task of world evangelization.

Such an attitude would have gained general approval within the Church of England but there was still too strong a tradition of seeking to plant Anglicanism within the countries united within the British Commonwealth. Max was a keen patriot and a loyal Anglican, but he knew that transcending all particular loyalties was the universal obligation to be faithful to the Lord of the gospel. So he rejoiced whenever an opportunity occurred to make friends with those who owed their primary obedience to Him and to His commission. From 1947 onward Max visited America frequently, and friendships, for example, made at one of the great Meadville conferences, remained with him to the end of his life.

### III

By 1947 the way was open for Max to begin his long series of visitations (I use this term because they were much more than casual or even merely friendly visits) to different parts of the world. On each of his journeys he kept a careful and yet lively travel diary. However exhausted he might be at the end of a day, he still found strength to write down his impressions, his memories of significant interviews, his comments on important issues raised. When he returned to London, the whole diary for the particular trip was typed and circulated to his fellow secretaries for information, and ultimately all the diaries were bound into separate volumes. There are nearly forty of these volumes in existence and in some respects they constitute Max's most distinctive legacy. I do not know of any comparable record of developments international, political, ecclesiastical, and missiological between the years 1944 and 1970.

Max had a deep concern for accuracy of reporting and believed that one way to achieve this was to accept the discipline of a *daily* recall of events. He possessed an unusual command of language, which enabled him to transmit vivid impressions of social intercourse, lively descriptions of scenery, and pen-portraits of those whom he met on his journeys. He knew well the value of such records to a trained historian and he was determined to do

everything in his power to make the future historian's task easier. But this was not the only use to which the diaries could be put. Not long before Max assumed his responsibilities at CMS the general secretary had launched a *monthly News-Letter* as a way of keeping home members of the society in touch with significant developments on the field. Max quickly saw the potentialities of this medium and decided to make it a major instrument in his strategy of communication. He was convinced that it was necessary for people at large to become aware of the realities of the world situation. It was not enough for the *News-Letter* to record statistics of conversions or stories of the successful establishment of new Christian institutions. Rather, it was of the first importance that those concerned with the missionary enterprise should come to realize what great changes were taking place in the world, the emergent problems of race, the burgeoning of nationalistic aspirations, the decline of European influence, the resurgence of non-Christian faiths, in short, the wholly new context within which the missionary enterprise must be carried on.

Gradually, not only CMS supporters but also a wider body of missionary sympathizers recognized that here was a balanced, informed, farsighted commentary on what was happening in the world, based on careful reading of up-to-date books and on a constant flow of letters coming in from different parts of the mission field. There was nothing quite like it. Every issue was carefully planned, sometimes months ahead, and every issue dealt with an important feature affecting the spread of the gospel. Often events proved that Max's insights regarding likely developments were better informed than those of many politicians or journalists. Yet he had no desire to establish himself as an authority on world affairs. He wanted, rather, to discern the signs of the times and to summon those obeying the Great Commission to face the realities of the movements of peoples and to work out appropriate policies accordingly.

For Max was convinced that no individual can survive in a closed shop, secular or sacred. We are all subject to the influences that surround us, social, economic, cultural, and religious. The gospel must be proclaimed to the individual in his particular setting and that means in his language, in his social context, in his aspirations, in his fears. To help readers grasp the nature of these varying settings, Max spared no pains. He engaged research assistants, but still never recommended a book that he had not read himself. He kept the CMS *News-Letter* as his own personal medium and in twenty-one years produced an invaluable series reflecting world events and what he believed to be the courageous Christian reaction to them.

In addition he found time to write an impressive array of relatively small books and pamphlets and articles, dealing with such subjects as the missionary imperative, partnership, and the pastoral care of missionaries. A special interest, to which he devoted time and attention, was that of the recruitment and training of missionaries; his insights he freely shared with American leaders, and much thought has been given to the subject in the past twenty-five years. It was only after his retirement from the general secretaryship that he could attempt to write larger books, and not until the last three years of his life did two major volumes appear: his autobiography, entitled *Crowded Canvas*, and his apologia for his missionary calling, *I Believe in the Great Commission*. In and through these two books he gathered up his life experiences and his understanding of the Christian mission. They can be regarded as a major part of his legacy to the future.

### IV

If there was one issue in missionary policy about which Max felt more deeply and expressed himself more forcefully than about any



other, it was that to which he constantly referred as the "voluntary principle." In some respects it has a particular relevance, historical and organizational, to the situation within the Church of England, but he was convinced that other churches and denominations needed to remind themselves of its importance. In the laudable desire of many Christians to view the missionary calling as addressed to *the whole church*, there was ever the danger that missions would become just one among many other interests and would cease to be the major, even consuming, interest for a particular band of devoted disciples. He did not dispute the fact that every church in its corporate life must make provision for worship, for relief work, for care of the aged and sick, for youth organizations, and so on. But he was ever jealous for priority to be given to the commission from the One who had said, "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you." And he believed that this sense of priority could be preserved only if there were bands of volunteers, dedicated specifically to this task, on behalf of and as a continuing example to, the whole church. A task force, a band of pioneers, a reconnaissance team was, he believed, essential if the missionary response to the divine calling were to receive its rightful expression.

This insistence on the voluntary principle involved him in two famous encounters. In the Church of England, since the end of World War I, there had been a strong movement toward a fuller independence of the church in relation to the state. In consequence the Church Assembly, the church's "parliament," was set up with its sectional committees. Not unnaturally a Missionary Council of the Assembly was established to keep in touch with the varying activities of the missionary societies within the Church of England. By the time Max assumed his responsibilities as general secretary, questions were arising: Could not all the societies be integrated and become a single department of the Church Assembly under its control? Was not the missionary call a challenge to the *whole church*? Would there not be significant economies and increased efficiency if all could work together under one strategic control? An authoritative book was written, surveying all the overseas commitments of the Church of England, and a commission was appointed to consider how these might be brought under more unified control.

But Max saw immediately that the voluntary principle, on which he set so much store, was at stake. He sensed the dangers of standardization and remote control. In a brilliant pamphlet entitled *Iona or Rome*, he looked back on the history of Christianity in England and drew attention to the *two* strands that had characterized it from the beginning. There was the Celtic strand, the result of heroic efforts by bands of monastic missionaries from Ireland, held together within their order by a common loyalty; there was the Roman strand, the result of the extension of Roman Christianity by more authoritarian means. Max did not deny that there was a place for both concepts of mission but deplored the possibility of the first being nullified by being swallowed up in the second.

Few men, I suspect, have ever gloried in the history and character of the Church Missionary Society in the way that Max did. He wanted it to make a major contribution to the establishment of the church in other lands but also, at the same time, to be ever pressing forward into the regions beyond. He was convinced that a voluntary society, whose members shared one dominant purpose, and who were linked together by one common loyalty, constituted an essential element within the strategy of world evangelization. So far as the Church of England was concerned, the commission to which I have referred reported in favor of the continuance of missionary societies, and the CMS (though smaller today in its number of overseas workers) survives as a vital part of the life of the Church of England.

The second encounter took place in Ghana on the occasion of the meeting of the International Missionary Council (IMC) in December 1957-January 1958. Here the issue at stake was the possi-

bility of the IMC becoming a division or department of the World Council of Churches (WCC). At first sight this seemed an eminently desirable development. Since 1948 the WCC had fostered ecumenical relationships and coordinated Christian witness in various spheres. The IMC had a long and distinguished history in the field of mission. Could it not become even more effective if it acted under the umbrella of the WCC? And could not its representatives at Geneva ensure a proper place for mission within the many and varied activities of the WCC?

Max, however, was not convinced. Again he saw the danger of the damping down, if not of the extinguishing, of the voluntary principle. It was not the case for a moment that he was cool on ecumenism. He had crusaded in favor of the united Church of South India being recognized in England, and the CMS had continued to give it full support. Moreover, he had rejoiced in his links with members of other denominations and had welcomed possibilities of cooperation with other missionary societies. But again he feared that the great and free fellowship of missionary societies within the IMC could easily lose its drive and enthusiasm if regarded simply as a department of the WCC. He was too well aware of the history of officialdom and institutionalism and believed that the proposal as presented at Ghana was premature and could lead to the withdrawal of certain valued societies that had hitherto been glad to be associated with the IMC.

On this occasion Max's protest, though treated with respect, did not prevent the proposed integration taking place at New Delhi in 1961. One of the last essays he wrote was a contribution to the *Festschrift* for Professor Dr. J. Verkuyl (happily reprinted in the *Occasional Bulletin of Missionary Research* for July 1979). In this he looked back on the decade and a half that had passed since the fusion. It is a fair, careful, and wide-ranging survey, which does not seek simply to justify his own doubts and apprehensions. Nevertheless, it is impossible not to feel the throb of his never-ceasing concern for world mission and his conviction that this can best be implemented by voluntary societies fostering that "spiritual energy" to which he alludes and directing their efforts toward that goal of world evangelization that was so near to his own heart.

## V

Bearing all the responsibilities of administration, correspondence, personal counseling, travel, authorship of books and news-letters, Max might surely have been justified in concluding that he could give little time to wide reading and deep thinking. On the contrary, however, this was the part of his ministry that he regarded as so important that only by paying constant attention to it could he adequately fulfill his other duties. In spite of all that there was to be proud of in the history of evangelical missionary activity, it could not be claimed that the *theology* of mission had received the attention it deserved.

He determined, therefore, to spare no effort in working at the subject himself and in encouraging young scholars in particular to devote themselves to it. Missionaries had always responded to the call to bear witness to the good news of God's saving activity through Christ. But it is not sufficient, he held, simply to utter a form of words, however orthodox the form may seem to be. It is necessary, rather, to relate the gospel to all that we can discern of God's activity in history both before and after the Christ-event.

Ever since the earliest years of his own Christian discipleship, he had been fascinated by the prophetic books of the Old Testament. Here were the utterances of men who looked out toward the horizon of their world scene and discerned signs of God's working, not only in the experiences of the covenant people, but also in the movements of other nations. His favorite was the prophet Habakkuk, a noble watchman, who faced the reality of events in the



world around, yet declared that those who maintained a true reliance upon God would live. Max saw a developing pattern emerging, the result of God's controlling hand in world affairs, a pattern that was to receive its definitive shape in and through the sending of the Christ. Here was the first stage in a theology of mission.

But this was not enough. What had been happening in the world since the great events of the first century? What had God been doing through his servants in the church? What had God been doing, what was God still doing, *outside* the obvious borders of Christian communities? These were questions that pressed in upon Max with increasing insistence. In part they could be tackled academically, but he himself was deeply involved in the actual missionary enterprise, and these questions were intimately related to it.

While trying in every way possible to watch world developments and to discern signs of God's providence, he read, in the late 1950s, a book that made a profound impression upon him. It was Kenneth Cragg's *The Call of the Minaret*. Can we with all honesty affirm that God is at work in the world of Islam as well as within the Christian community? If so, what does this mean for the task of communicating the gospel? In the history of Christian missions there have been shining examples of men and women who have become exceedingly proficient in Arabic and thereby able to bear witness to their faith among Muslims. But has there been a sufficient willingness to enter into the actual world-view of the Muslim, his outlook on God, humankind, and the world, and to discern signs of the divine presence in areas hitherto regarded as pagan?

Max resigned his post as general secretary in 1963 but this did not imply any relaxing of his concern for missiology. During the last period of his life the new emphases in his theology, which began to find expression around 1960, occupied his thinking and writing more and more. He edited *The Christian Presence* series of books. These were written by men who had labored as missionaries among Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and devotees of primitive religions. In these books they attempted to understand how God was at work in the hearts of those committed to other faiths. In addition, Max sought to explore more comprehensively the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, trying to discern evidences of the Spirit operating within non-Christian cultures. At the same time he tried to penetrate more deeply into the central Christian affirmation concerning the *uniqueness of Jesus Christ* and into the meaning of the cross as the power of God unto salvation for all people.

Nothing, however, brought him greater joy and satisfaction than the opportunity in the last twelve years of his life to enter vicariously into the actual work of mission in India. In the course of her training for missionary service, his daughter met Roger Hooker, himself in training for work in north India. They were married and went out to work, first in theological training, and

then in a pioneering adventure in evangelism in the city of Varanasi. Roger entered the university as a student and gained proficiency in Hindi and Sanskrit languages and literature. Meanwhile he and his wife were seeking to carry on their evangelistic mission through *dialogue*, a word that has gained increasing attention in missionary circles in recent years.

In his characteristically imaginative way, Max allied himself enthusiastically with this new venture. Whatever other demands there might be on his energies (and often toward the end of his life his bodily energy was severely limited), the weekly letter went out, conveying news and comments and responding to the equally regular letters coming from the field. The exchange of correspondence became, as it were, a primal dialogue giving continuing inspiration to Roger in his dialogues with Hindus and Muslims, and to Max in his dialogues through personal conversation and correspondence and writing. "Dialogue" was no mere gimmick or catchword. It described a process of establishing real friendship and of obtaining, through that process, a *deepening understanding of the faith by which each other lived*.

All this, Max believed, could be theologically grounded in the nature of God's activity through his prophets, through his Son, and through his Holy Spirit. The gospel could not be forced upon human consciousnesses. Nor could it be broadcast as a mere item of information. God's way had always been the way of self-involvement in a situation leading to understanding, sacrifice, and love. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you."

In the year of his seventieth birthday, Max, in his autobiography, looked back on his experiences of divine goodness and guidance, and two years later gave his final extended testimony in the book *I Believe in the Great Commission*. He never ceased to be an evangelist. He believed that the supremely important method of evangelism was through friendship. He and his wife opened their home and maintained a program of boundless hospitality to make friendships possible. And behind all outward engagements there was the firm discipline of disciplined intercession which, as one of his closest friends wrote, "embraced the world."

Let me conclude with words of his written in a *News-Letter* in 1962. They reveal the nature of the "dialogue" with God that inspired and undergirded all his self-giving in "dialogue" to his fellow men and women.

If we are to pray "without ceasing" to pray: if we are to pray expecting the answer which we know to be God's will: then we need all the time to be deepening our understanding of those for whom we pray. Only through understanding, itself nourished by the exercise of imagination which places us within the spiritual circumstance of those for whom we are praying, can we know the full meaning of intercession, its discipline, its pain, its joy.

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## Bibliography

An extensive collection of Max Warren's letters, articles, and books is now housed in the CMS Archives at 157 Waterloo Road, London SE 1. The *CMS News-Letters* (1942-63) constitute his chief legacy in the field of missionary literature. Though written to deal with issues of importance at the time of writing, they set forth insights and principles of abiding value.

Max Warren's major books are:

- 1951 *The Christian Mission*. London: SCM Press.
- 1955 *The Christian Imperative*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- 1955 *Caesar, the Beloved Enemy: Three Studies in the Relation of Church and State*. London: SCM Press.
- 1956 *Partnership: The Study of an Idea*. London: SCM Press.
- 1964 *Perspective in Mission*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

- 1965 *The Missionary Movement from Britain in Modern History*. London: SCM Press.
- 1966 *Interpreting the Cross*. London: SCM Press.
- 1967 *Social History and Christian Mission*. London: SCM Press.
- 1974 *Crowded Canvas*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- 1976 *I Believe in the Great Commission*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans.

An unpublished thesis, "The Theology of Mission in the Writings of Max Warren," was written by Francis Eamon Furey in partial fulfillment of requirements for the Licentiate in Sacred Theology from Louvain University in 1974.