

THE CALL TO SERVICE • J. HUDSON TAYLOR

James Hudson Taylor, founder of the China Inland Mission, was herald of a new era in Protestant missions.

In “The Call to Service,” Taylor describes his spiritual, academic, and practical preparations for missionary service. After seven years in China with the Chinese Evangelization Society, he was compelled by failing health to return home to England in 1860. “A New Agency Needed” details Taylor’s growing convictions over the next five years that God was calling him to take personal responsibility for the millions in China’s Inland provinces by forming a mission agency exclusively focused on them.

His personal reflections provide a compelling picture of godly life stewardship; where all gifts, talents, time and possessions are fully utilized in worship and service to the Lord.

The Call to Service

The first joys of conversion passed away after a time, and were succeeded by a period of painful deadness of soul, with much conflict. But this also came to an end, leaving a deepened sense of personal weakness and dependence on the Lord as the only Keeper, as well as Savior, of His people. How sweet to the soul, wearied and disappointed in its struggle with sin, is the calm repose of trust in the Shepherd of Israel.

Not many months after my conversion, having a leisure afternoon, I retired to my own chamber to spend it largely in communion with God. Well do I remember that occasion. How in the gladness of my heart I poured out my soul before God; and again and again confessing my grateful love to Him who had done everything for me—who had saved me when I had given up all hope and even desire for salvation—I besought Him to give me some work to do for Him, as an outlet for love and gratitude; some self-denying service, no matter what it might be, however trying or however trivial; something with which He would be pleased, and that I might do for Him who had done so much for me. Well do I remember, as in unreserved consecration I put myself, my life, my friends, my all, upon the altar, the deep solemnity that came over my soul with the assurance that my offering was accepted. The presence of God became unutterably real and blessed; and though but a child under sixteen, I remember stretching myself on the ground, and lying there silent before Him with unspeakable awe and unspeakable joy.

For what service I was accepted I knew not; but a deep consciousness that I was no longer my own took possession of me, which has never since been effaced. It has been a very practical consciousness. Two or three years later, propositions of an unusually favorable nature were made to me with regard to medical study, on the condition of my becoming apprenticed to the medical man who was my friend and teacher. But I felt I dared not accept any binding engagement such as was suggested. I was not my own to give myself away; for I knew not when or how He whose alone I was, and for whose disposal I felt I must ever keep myself free, might call for service.

Within a few months of this time of consecration, the impression was wrought into my soul that it was in China the Lord wanted me. It seemed to me highly probable that the work to which I was thus called might cost my life; for China was not then open as it is now. But few missionary societies had at that time workers in China, and but few books on the subject of China missions were accessible to me. I learned, however, that the Congregational minister of my native town possessed a copy of Medhurst’s China, and I called upon him to ask a loan of the book. This he kindly granted, asking me why I wished to read it. I told him that God had called me to spend my life in missionary service in that land. “And how do you propose to go there?” he inquired. I answered that I did not at all know; that it seemed to me probable that I should need to do as the Twelve

and the Seventy had done in Judea—go without purse or scrip, relying on Him who had called me to supply all my need. Kindly placing his hand upon my shoulder, the minister replied, “Ah, my boy, as you grow older you will get wiser than that. Such an idea would do very well in the days when Christ Himself was on earth, but not now.”

I have grown older since then, but not wiser. I am more than ever convinced that if we were to take the direction of our Master and the assurances He gave to His first disciples more fully as our guide, we should find them to be just as suited to our times as to those in which they were originally given.

Medhurst’s book on China emphasized the value of medical missions there, and this directed my attention to medical studies as a valuable mode of preparation.

My beloved parents neither discouraged nor encouraged my desire to engage in missionary work. They advised me, with such convictions, to use all the means in my power to develop the resources of body, mind, heart, and soul, and to await prayerfully upon God, quite willing should He show me that I was mistaken, to follow His guidance, or to go forward if in due time He should open the way to missionary service. The importance of this advice I have often since had occasion to prove. I began to take more exercise in the open air to strengthen my physique. My feather bed I had taken away, and sought to dispense with as many other home comforts as I could in order to prepare myself for rougher lines of life. I began also to do what Christian work was in my power, in the way of tract distribution, Sunday-school teaching, and visiting the poor and sick, as opportunity afforded.

After a time of preparatory study at home, I went to Hull for medical and surgical training. There I became assistant to a doctor who was connected with the Hull School of Medicine, and was surgeon also to a number of factories, which brought many accident cases to our dispensary, and gave me the opportunity of seeing and practicing the minor operations of surgery.

And here an event took place I must not omit to mention. Before leaving home, my attention was drawn to the subject of setting apart the first fruits of all one’s increase and proportionate part of one’s possessions to the Lord’s service. I thought it well to study the question with my Bible in hand before I went away from home, and was placed in circumstances which might bias my conclusions by the pressure of surrounding wants and cares. I was thus led to the determination to set apart not less than one-tenth of whatever moneys I might earn or become possessed of for the Lord’s service. The salary I received as medical assistant in Hull at the time now referred to would have allowed me with ease to do this. But owing to changes in the family of my kind friend and employer, it was necessary for me to reside out of doors. Comfortable quarters were secured with a relative, and in addition to the sum determined on as remuneration for my services I received the exact amount I had to pay for board and lodging.

Now arose in my mind the question, “Ought not this sum also to be tithed?” It was surely a part of my income, and I felt that if it had been a question of government income tax it certainly would not have been excluded. On the other hand, to take a tithe from the whole would not leave me sufficient for other purposes; and for some little time I was much embarrassed to know what to do. After much thought and prayer I was led to leave the comfortable quarters and happy circle in which I was now residing, and to engage a little lodging in the suburbs—a sitting-room and bedroom in one—undertaking to board myself. In this way I was able without difficulty to tithe the whole of my income; and while I felt the change a good deal, it was attended with no small blessing.

More time was given in my solitude to the study of the Word of God, to visiting the poor, and to evangelistic work on summer evenings than would otherwise have been the case. Brought into contact in this way with many who were in distress, I soon saw the privilege of still further economizing, and found it not difficult to give away much more than the proportion of my income I had at first intended.

About this time a friend drew my attention to the question of the personal and pre-millennial coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and gave me a list of passages bearing upon it, without note or comment, advising me to ponder the subject. For a while I gave much time to studying the Scriptures about it, with the result that I was led to see that this same Jesus who left our earth in His resurrection body was so to come again, that His feet were to stand on the Mount of Olives, and that He was to take possession of the temporal throne of His father David which was promised before His birth. I saw, further, that all through the New Testament the coming of the Lord was the great hope of His people, and was always appealed to as the strongest motive for consecration and service, and as the greatest comfort in trial and affliction. I learned, too, that the period of His return for His people was not revealed, and that it was their privilege, from day to day and from hour to hour, to live as men who wait for the Lord; that thus living it was immaterial, so to speak, whether He should or should not come at any particular hour, the important thing being to be so ready for Him as to be able, whenever He might appear, to give an account of one’s stewardship with joy, and not with grief.

The effect of this blessed hope was a thoroughly practical one. It led me to look carefully through my little library to see if there were any books there that were not needed or likely to be of further service, and to examine my small wardrobe, to be quite sure that it contained nothing that I should be sorry to give an account of should the Master come at once. The result was that the library was considerably diminished, to the benefit of some poor neighbors, and to the far greater benefit of my own soul, and that I found I had articles of clothing also which might be put to better advantage in other directions.

It has been very helpful to me from time to time through life, as occasion has served, to act again in a similar way; and I have never gone through my house, from basement to attic, with this object in view, without receiving a great accession of spiritual joy and blessing. I believe we are all in danger of accumulating—it may be from thoughtlessness, or from pressure of occupation—things which would be useful to others, while not needed by ourselves, and the retention of which entails loss of blessing. If the whole resources of the Church of God were well utilized, how much more might be accomplished! How many poor might be fed and naked clothed, and to how many of those as yet unreached the Gospel might be carried! Let me advise this line: of things as a constant habit of mind, and a profitable course to be practically adopted whenever circumstances permit.

A New Agency Needed

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:8, 9). How true are these words! When the Lord is bringing in great blessing in the best possible way, how oftentimes our unbelieving hearts are feeling, if not saying, like Jacob of old, “All these things are against me.” Or we are filled with fear, as were the disciples when the Lord, walking on the waters, drew near to quiet the troubled sea, and to bring them quickly to their desired haven. And yet mere common-sense ought to tell us that He, whose way is perfect, can make no mistakes; that He who has promised to “perfect that which concerneth” us, and whose minute care counts the very hairs of our heads, and forms for us our circumstances, must know better than we the way to forward our truest interests and to glorify His own Name.

“Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own Interpreter,
And He will make it plain.”

To me it seemed a great calamity that failure of health compelled my relinquishing work for God in China, just when it was more fruitful than ever before; and to leave the little band of Christians in Ningpo, needing much care and teaching, was a great sorrow. Nor was the sorrow lessened when on reaching England, medical testimony assured me that return to China, at least for years to come, was impossible. Little did I then realize that the long separation from China was a necessary step towards the formation of a work which God would bless as He has blessed the China Inland Mission. While in the field, the pressure of claims immediately around me was so great that I could not think much of the still greater needs of the regions farther inland; and, if they were thought of, could do nothing for them. But while detained for some years in England, daily viewing the whole country on the large map on the wall of my study, I was as near to the vast regions of Inland China as to the smaller districts in which I had labored personally for God; and prayer was often the only resource by which the burdened heart could gain any relief.

As a long absence from China appeared inevitable, the next question was how best to serve China while in England, and this led to my engaging for several years, with the late Rev. F.E. Gough of the C.M.S., in the revision of a version of the New Testament in the colloquial of Ningpo for the British and Foreign Bible Society. In undertaking this work, in my short-sightedness I saw nothing beyond the use that the Book, and the marginal references, would be to the native Christians; but I have often seen since that, without those months of feeding and feasting on the Word of God, I should have been quite unprepared to form, on its present basis, a mission like the China Inland Mission.

In the study of that Divine Word I learned that, to obtain successful laborers, not elaborate appeals for help, but, first, earnest prayer to God to thrust forth laborers, and, second, the deepening of the spiritual life of the Church, so that men should be able to stay at home, were what was needed. I saw that the apostolic plan was not to raise ways and means, but to go and do the work, trusting in His sure Word who has said, “Seek ye First the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.”

In the meantime the prayer for workers for Chehkiang was being answered. The first, Mr. Meadows, sailed for China with his young wife in January 1862, through the kind cooperation and aid of our friend Mr. Berger. The second left England in 1864, having her passage provided by the Foreign Evangelization Society. The third and fourth reached Ningpo on July 24th, 1865. A fifth soon followed them, reaching Ningpo in September 1865. Thus the prayer for the five I workers was fully answered; and we were encouraged to look to God for still greater things.

Months of earnest prayer and not a few abortive efforts had resulted in a deep conviction that a special agency was essential for the evangelization of Inland China. At this time I had not only the daily help of prayer and conference with my beloved friend and fellow-worker, the late Rev. F. F. Gough, but also invaluable aid and counsel from Mr. and Mrs. Berger, with whom I and my dear wife (whose judgment and piety were of priceless value at this juncture) spent many days in prayerful deliberation. The grave difficulty of possibly interfering with existing missionary operations at home was foreseen; but it was concluded that, by simple trust in God, suitable agency might be raised up and sustained without interfering injuriously with any existing work. I had also a growing conviction that God would have me to seek from Him the needed workers, and to go forth with them. But for a long time unbelief hindered my taking the first step

How inconsistent unbelief always is! I had no doubt that, if I prayed for workers “in the name” of the Lord Jesus Christ, they would be given me. I had no doubt that, in answer to such prayer, the means for our going forth would be provided, and that doors would be opened before us in unreached parts of the Empire. But I had not then learned to trust God for keeping power and grace for myself, so no wonder that I could not trust Him to keep others who might be prepared to go with me. I feared that in the midst of the dangers, difficulties, and trials which would necessarily be connected with such a work, some who were comparatively inexperienced Christians might break down, and bitterly reproach me for having encouraged them to undertake an enterprise for which they were unequal.

Yet, what was I to do? The feeling of blood-guiltiness became more and more intense. Simply because I refused to ask for them, the laborers did not come forward—did not go out to China—and every day tens of thousands were passing away to Christless graves! Perishing China so filled my heart and mind that there was no rest by day, and little sleep by night, till health broke down. At the invitation of my beloved and honored friend, Mr. George Pearse (then of the Stock Exchange), I went to spend a few days with him in Brighton.

On Sunday, June 25th, 1865, unable to bear the sight of a congregation of a thousand or more Christian people rejoicing in their own security, while millions were perishing for lack of knowledge, I wandered out on the sands alone, in great spiritual agony; and there the Lord conquered my unbelief, and I surrendered myself to God for this service. I told Him that all the responsibility as to issues and consequences must rest with Him; that as His servant, it was mine to obey and follow Him—His, to direct, to care for, and to guide me and those who might labor with me. Need I say that peace at once flowed into my burdened heart? There and then I asked Him for twenty-four fellow-workers, two for each of eleven inland provinces which were without a missionary, and two for Mongolia; and writing the petition on the margin of the Bible I had with me, I returned home with a heart enjoying rest such as it had been a stranger to for months, and with an assurance that the Lord would bless His own work and that I should share in the blessing. I had previously prayed, and asked prayer, that workers might be raised up for the eleven then unoccupied provinces, and thrust forth and provided for, but had not surrendered myself to be their leader.

About this time, with the help of my dear wife, I wrote the little book, *China's Spiritual Need and Claims*. Every paragraph was steeped in prayer. With the help of Mr. Berger, who had given valued aid in the revision of the manuscript, and who bore the expense of printing an edition of 3000 copies, they were soon put in circulation. I spoke publicly of the proposed work as opportunity permitted, specially at the Perth and Mildmay Conferences of 1865, and continued in prayer for fellow-workers, who were soon raised up, and after due correspondence were invited to my home, then in the East of London. When one house became insufficient, the occupant of the adjoining house removed, and I was able to rent it; and when that in its turn became insufficient, further accommodation was provided close by. Soon there were a number of men and women under preparatory training, and engaging in evangelistic work which tested in some measure their qualifications as soul-winners.