

May C. Kelly

# Centennial Addresses

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SYNOD OF NORTH CAROLINA



*Delivered at Alamance Church, Greens-  
boro, N. C., October 7, 1913*

# CENTENNIAL ADDRESSES

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Delivered at

ALAMANCE CHURCH

GREENSBORO, N. C.

OCTOBER 7, 1913

## THE LAST FIFTY YEARS—THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH AN EVANGELISTIC AGENCY

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The subject assigned me implies two things: That during the first half century of its existence this Synod was not, to a high degree, an evangelistic agency; and, on the other hand, that its history for the last fifty years has furnished a notable object lesson in aggressive evangelism of the Presbyterian type.

I say "of the Presbyterian type", because, according to the definition of our standards, an evangelist is not an irresponsible "revivalist", but a minister under ecclesiastical control, who is "commissioned to preach the word and administer the sacraments in foreign countries, frontier settlements, or the destitute parts of the church". A Synodical evangelist, therefore, is simply a home missionary in the destitute parts of the Synod, and Synodical evangelism is only another name for domestic or home missions conducted by the Synod. I am to speak, therefore, of the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina during the last fifty years as an active and successful agency in home missions.

The growth of an institution may be illustrated by the growth of a plant. "The kingdom of Heaven is like a grain of mustard seed". Carrying out the simile of vegetation, the development of the Synod's evangelistic work has passed through four stages or periods: (1) The period of early germination; (2) A period of blight; (3) A period of re-vegetation; and (4) A period of vigorous growth and propagation.

### 1. The Period of Early Germination (1852-1861).

To include the beginning of this period I must go back eleven years beyond the date indicated by the title of my address, for as I examine the life history of this tree with its wide-spreading branches, I find that the seed of the Synod's home mission work was planted in 1852, when the following resolution was adopted: "Resolved, That this Synod will appoint one agent on each of the boards of foreign missions, domestic missions, and education, and that these agents be required to take into consideration the whole field committed to their supervision, and present at each meeting of Synod a written report of all that is doing within the boundaries of the Synod on the subject assigned to them; and that the consideration of these reports shall be a special order at each meeting of the Synod."

*This marked the beginning of a new era. It indicated that the Synod had begun to feel the community consciousness, a sense of corporate responsibility for evangelization at home and abroad.*

A contemporary witness declares that "*before this no order of the day was ever made on the docket for an hour to be devoted to the consideration of missions.* Often did the Synod meet and adjourn without speaking a single word or hearing a single report for the furtherance of any of the boards, only as it came from some agent from abroad." (Rev. Archibald Baker.)

The good results of the new policy soon became manifest. By 1859 the contributions to Foreign Missions had increased more than \$3,000 and the gifts to home missions had grown from \$1,714 to \$6,424, an increase of nearly 275 per cent. in seven years.

If the Synod ever erects a Hall of Fame, there should be placed upon its walls a conspicuous tablet to the memory of the Rev. S. A. Stanfield, who introduced the resolution that marked the change from the old order to the new.

It was in this period that the Synod, having become conscious of itself as an evangelistic agency, felt the need of an organ for the expression of this consciousness and established in 1857 "*The North Carolina Presbyterian*", now "*The Presbyterian Standard*".

Other religious papers have made attempts from time to time to swallow and assimilate this organ, but the Synod has always risen in its might and rescued its "*darling from the power of the dogs*".

## 2. A Period of Blight (1861-1868).

The young tree which had made so fair a start was now blistered and blighted by the fires of the war between the sections.

The army was recognized as the neediest and most clamant field of evangelism, and many of the Synod's ministers went as chaplains to kindle and keep alive the flame of piety in the hearts of those who were enveloped in the flames of war.

*During these four years of blasting heat, the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina gained only eight ministers and five churches, and lost more than two thousand communicants!* The loss consisted very largely of young men, in the prime of life, who were the hope of the church, some of them candidates for the ministry.

At the close of the war there were only five home missionaries at work within the bounds of the Synod, as against nineteen at the opening of the great conflict, and the contributions to home missions had fallen from \$6,424 to about \$1,000.

## 3. The Period of Revegetation (1868-1888).

For several years after the close of the war, the interest in home missions seemed almost dead. But, as the patriarch Job remarked long ago, "*There is hope of a tree, even if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease. Though the root thereof wax old in the earth, and the stock thereof die in the ground; yet through the scent of water it will bud, and bring forth boughs like a plant.*" A few years ago there was a great freeze in California in the spring of the year, when the sap was beginning to rise. As a result many trees several feet in diameter seemed to be hopelessly blighted. The bark was not only blackened through and through, but in many cases was split clear to the wood almost from top to bottom of the trees. Scores of these trees were cut down, on the theory that they

were beyond resuscitation. In many instances, however, wiser counsels prevailed and, after pruning, the blighted trunks were allowed to stand. And now the news comes that these trees on which the bark was split and black and loosened from the wood have been rejuvenated. The bark is green and full of sap, and the boughs have put forth rich and abundant foliage.

So it was with the Synod's tree of home missions. Blighted by the war, it stood several years like a blackened trunk without hope of resuscitation. But all at once the pruned and blighted tree began to show fresh signs of life. In 1868 it sent out a bough toward the sea in the new Presbytery of Wilmington, which was formed with the avowed purpose of evangelizing eastern North Carolina. The next year it put forth a branch toward the mountains in the erection of the Presbytery of Mecklenburg for the evangelization of the western part of the state.

As this multiplication by division has been a distinctive element in the policy of this Synod's work of home missions, the cutting off of territory belonging to the older Presbyteries to form new ones for the purpose of more thorough evangelization, ought not to pass unnoticed. The Rev. S. C. Alexander, in his little book, "Miracles and Events", has given an interesting account of the struggle that took place over this question. "Immediately after the war," says he, "some of us thought it best to have Wilmington Presbytery set up for the express purpose of evangelizing eastern North Carolina. The proposition met with earnest opposition by some strong men in the Presbytery, who said it would be a waste of men and money to try any more to evangelize that country. They said we have sent men into that section of the state for forty years and nothing has been done. We answered that was because the men you sent into that wilderness ran in and then out; they did not stay long enough to raise a crop of saints. The night before Presbytery met was spent by Mr. Alexander in prayer—the only time in his life, he says, that he ever spent a whole night in prayer. The next day the opposition gradually melted away. The Presbytery decided by practically a unanimous vote to ask for the erection of the new Presbytery and Mr. Alexander was elected evangelist for eastern North Carolina.

The struggle over the setting off of Wilmington Presbytery was one of the decisive battles in the development of the Synod's policy of reaching the destitutions within its bounds. Since that battle was won, the Presbyteries of Mecklenburg, Albemarle, Asheville and King's Mountain have been erected, and a movement for the creation of several additional Presbyteries has been inaugurated.

This policy should be projected to a higher plane in an overture from the Synods concerned, asking the General Assembly to erect the Synod of Appalachia, to be constituted of the Presbyteries in the Appalachian Mountains. Why should not this venerable body signalize the beginning of the second century of its life by requesting the other Synods having mountain mission fields to unite with it in appointing a joint committee to investigate this question and report the result as a basis for future action?



From 1869 to 1881 the Synod, though not yet engaged in home mission work, showed an increasing interest in the work of home missions carried on by the Presbyteries. In reviewing the history of this period, we can touch only two or three of the high places. In 1875 a committee was appointed to consider "the whole question of the absolute and relative aggressiveness of the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina, to indicate the causes of delinquencies and point out the remedy." The committee reported that the church had not done its full duty, and recommended the more general employment of evangelists, more earnest efforts of pastors to do missionary work in regions bordering on their churches, and an awakening of the elders and deacons to the importance of their work as an aid to evangelization. Again in 1879 the Synod took a long step forward in electing a Synodical Agent of Evangelistic Labor. *By this action the work of home missions was given separate and individual standing*, having been previously combined with sustentation and the invalid fund under the care of the agent of sustentation. The following year the Rev. C. M. Payne, who had been elected agent of evangelistic labor, made his first report in which he showed that of the 94 counties in the State, there were 29 in which there was no Presbyterian Church, and 24 which had only one Presbyterian Church each, and that for these 53 counties there were only two evangelists, and that the total amount contributed in all the Presbyteries for evangelistic work was less than \$2,300.

The year 1881 deserves to be marked with red, or to speak in accordance with the color scheme of Presbyterianism, with ultra-marine letters, on the Synod's calendar. The Synod met in Salisbury. A paper was offered by the Reverend (they should be styled the *Right-Reverend*) H. G. Hill, Luther McKinnon, D. E. Jordan, W. E. McIlwaine, and C. M. Payne, recommending *that the Synod itself undertake by Synodical effort to reach the unevangelized parts of the State*. This was considered so radical and dangerous a proposition that only after a hard fought battle, extending at intervals through several days, did victory perch on the banner of the progressives. Following this action the Synod elected two Synodical evangelists, the first of their kind, and a Synodical committee of home missions, the first of its kind, was appointed, consisting of the chairmen of the Presbyterial committees, to take supervision of the Synod's work.

This action cleared the way for the later development of Synodical home missions. It prepared room for the tree that had been planted in 1852, that "it might take root and fill the land, that the mountains might be covered with the shadow of it, and that the boughs thereof might be like the goodly cedars; that it might send out its branches unto the sea, and its shoots unto the river."

Memorable, however, as this action was, it was followed by a period of reaction and discouragement, owing to financial difficulties. The new policy was almost immediately abandoned as a sad failure. The Synod thus estopped from evangelistic activity, expended its energy for the next seven years in the discussion of constitutional and judicial questions. These discussions may have had their value, but there was no new story to tell during these years of churches established in the 53 counties

reported at the beginning of the period as destitute, or nearly destitute, of the Presbyterian faith and order. It was a period of arrested development. But, as we shall see, the arrest of the Synod's evangelistic and vital functions was only temporary.

4. *And this brings us to the period of vigorous Growth and Propagation (1888-1913).*

In these years, the plant having reached maturity, not only blossoms and bears fruit, but scatters its seeds to germinate far and wide.

Once more, after seven years of drought, the languishing tree began to scent the water, and to bud and put forth boughs. In 1888 the Synod was to meet in Goldsboro. The first sign of a new flow of sap in the drought-stricken tree was manifested in the call for a convention to be held the day before the meeting of Synod, to consider the interests of home missions. This call was issued by the Rev. W. E. McIlwaine, and was signed by the chairmen of the home mission committees of the five Presbyteries.

When the Synod convened the next day two memorials of far-reaching influence were presented. One of these came from the convention, the other from the Presbytery of Orange. Both memorials called for a more equal distribution of the territory among the Presbyteries, inasmuch as Orange had twice as large an evangelistic field as the other four Presbyteries combined. The memorials also called for the placing of at least one Synodical evangelist in the field, in accordance with the plan inaugurated and abandoned in 1881.

The debate that followed was, perhaps, the most memorable in the history of the Synod. Certainly the most quotable, if not the most notable, of the masterly speeches delivered by the giants of those days, was that of the Rev. Dr. Marable. I owe to Dr. Peyton H. Hoge the following report of part of Dr. Marable's speech: Speaking of the Synod, he said he sometimes wondered whether the Synod of North Carolina could be saved if it were an individual. "Not the members of the Synod, mind you, but the Synod. Can anybody be saved that does nothing to save his fellowman? But in all my knowledge of this Synod, I have never known it to do anything to save one human soul. Why is this? Not because the members are not alive to the matter of saving souls, but because the Synod has formed a wrong idea of its functions. It has believed itself to be merely a body of review and control! And every year a hundred and fifty ministers and elders leave their homes and their work merely as a body of review and control! To review what? To review the records of five Presbyteries. To control what? To control Mecklenburg Presbytery!"

The immediate outcome of this debate was the adoption of the memorial of the convention, which called for three things: (1) The appointment of a committee to consider the question of the more equal division of the territory of Synod among the Presbyteries; (2) The appointment of a standing order to consider at each meeting of Synod the subject of home missions; (3) The placing of at least one Synodical evangelist in the field.

In accordance with the first recommendation of this report, a committee was appointed, to which was referred the memorial from Orange

Presbytery, and the selection of the evangelist to be placed in the field. Soon after the adjournment of Synod this committee met in Raleigh and elected, subject to confirmation by the Synod, the Rev. W. D. Morton, D. D., as Synodical evangelist. It also decided to recommend the erection of a new Presbytery in the northeastern part of the State, thus relieving the Presbytery of Orange of its surplus of missionary territory. The new Presbytery was baptized "Albemarle". With Wilmington and Mecklenburg, it formed a trio, set off by the Synod with the express purpose of reaching the more destitute parts of the State with the gospel as preached by the Presbyterian Church. Most of the counties without Presbyterian churches lay within these Presbyteries, and constituted chiefly the Synod's field of home missions, though the other Presbyteries, especially Concord and Orange, still had within their borders much unevangelized territory. The famous debate of 1888 settled the question, so long agitated, as to the right and the duty of the Synod to undertake the work of evangelization.

The decision reached was clearly formulated in the first article of the report adopted in 1891: "*Synod recognizes that upon it and its Presbyteries is laid the responsibility for the evangelization of its territory, so far as it can be done by the Presbyterian Church in the United States, and in humble reliance upon the Head of the Church receives this trust from His hand and pledges itself to its faithful prosecution.*"

The subsequent history of the Synod's home missions to the present time is just the story of the Synod's earnest efforts to discharge this solemn trust.

Into the details of this story I cannot go, for the time would fail me to tell of all those who in this period wrought righteousness and obtained promises, greeting from afar the long results of time and toil. Nor is it necessary for me to recount either their names or their deeds. Are they not written in the book of the chronicles of D. I. Craig, the scribe?

When Synod comes to erect its hall of fame, there will be no dearth of names to be commemorated. I can mention now, and only *mention*, the eight superintendents who have successfully directed the work: J. W. Primrose, Alexander Sprunt, Egbert W. Smith, William Black, A. J. McKelway, E. E. Gillespie, R. P. Smith and the present faithful and efficient incumbent, M. McG. Shields. These have been the worthy captains of the old ship of Zion. Of the stokers, who in dust and darkness, sweat and grime, have fed the furnaces and generated the steam, and who should be held in everlasting remembrance, it would be impossible to speak without transcending the limits of this address. Their record is on high.

"A tree is known by its fruits." What are the fruits of this tree? There are now eight Presbyteries in the Synod, whereas at the beginning of the half century we have had under consideration there were only three. And all five of the later ones were created with a view to the more vigorous prosecution of home missions.

Since 1888, when the Synod recognized its responsibility as a Synod for the evangelization of the destitute parts of the State, there has been a marked increase in fruitfulness. For the forty years preceding 1888



there was an average addition of three hundred communicants yearly to the Presbyterian Church in North Carolina; for the twenty-five years since 1888, there has been an average annual increase of 900. A quarter of a century ago, as we have seen, there were 29 counties in which there was no Presbyterian Church. Today there are only 13. There were 24 counties with only one Presbyterian Church each; now there are only 10. Seventy-nine churches and one hundred and seven Sunday schools have been organized through the Synod's work. Twenty-three thousand persons have professed conversion under the preaching of the Synod's evangelists, and thirteen thousand of these have united with the Presbyterian church. Twenty-five years ago this work began with one man, employed by the Synod's Committee; today there are thirty-seven.

The first year the contributions to Synodical missions amounted to \$3,764; last year to \$10,262.

This work, so far from hurting the work done by the Presbyteries, has immensely stimulated that work. When we remember that in 1880 the amount contributed for Presbyterian missions in North Carolina was less than \$2,300, and that in 1912 it was over \$55,000, we begin to appreciate what a quickening influence has come out of the principle adopted after a long struggle, that it is the Synod's right and the Synod's duty, as a Synod, to carry on the work of evangelization. The tree planted more than fifty years ago has weathered the storms and survived the blights that have come upon it, and has blossomed and brought forth fruit abundantly.

Not only so, but its seeds have been scattered far and wide. In 1893, when the General Assembly was considering the re-organization of its plan of home mission work, the North Carolina plan was adopted, and has continued in operation to the present time. Other Synods, too, have taken it up. And that not only in our branch of the church. The plan has been worked with great success by the Northern Presbyterian Church in the Synods of the great middle west. Certainly this tree has vindicated the wisdom of those who planted it and justified the labor of those who have nourished it.

And now, dear brethren, this history of home missions in North Carolina, so imperfectly sketched, lays upon us of this generation a solemn responsibility. This work is not only a heritage. It is a challenge. Other men labored, and we have entered into their labors. Should we not in our turn send up the prayer, "Let thy work appear unto thy servants, and thy glory unto their children"? There is much yet to be done. There are still 13 counties without a Presbyterian church, and 10 with only one each. If the destitutions were being reached by other denominations, there might be some excuse for lack of strenuous efforts on our part. But it is estimated that there are at least a million people in North Carolina who are not communicants of any church, and there are hundreds of thousands of children that have not been gathered into Sunday schools.

There is abundant room for the further growth of the tree planted by our fathers and watered with their tears. Shall it become barren and unfruitful through our neglect? Let us hear the word of the Lord, that a keener edge may be given to our hope and to our activity. "I will be

as the dew unto Israel; he shall blossom as the lily, and cast forth his roots as Lebanon. His branches shall spread, and his beauty shall be as the olive tree, and his smell as Lebanon. They that dwell under his shadow shall return; they shall revive as the corn, and blossom as the vine; the scent thereof shall be as the wine of Lebanon. From me is thy fruit found.”