

OPENING ADDRESS EUCRC 2010

Edinburgh, Scotland

It has been a long winter. I suppose there will have been opportunities for winter sports in each of the countries represented here. Here, in Edinburgh, in the National Galleries of Scotland, you can see this famous painting. It was painted around 1795 by Sir Henry Raeburn and it is called "*Reverend Robert Walker skating on Duddingston Loch*". That is not far from here, just outside Edinburgh.



Quite a few reverends are gathered here for the next few days, but you will not have brought your skates. There is no more ice on Duddingston Loch and we are not here for sport. There is work to be done. The theme of this conference is 'ROUTE' reaching out unitedly to Europe. We have come together as European Reformed churches and we see a calling to spread the redeeming Word of Jesus Christ further over our continent.

It is not a coincidence that we meet in Edinburgh. In this city 100 years ago, the first World Missionary Conference took place. Just a few historic lines. At the time of rev. Robert Walker there was a keen missionary sense. De revival movement and the colonial expansion were important contributing factors. The English Baptist William Carey may be seen as the father of the mission of the new era. His life's motto was: "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God". He became a missionary in India, a Bible translator, a printer and founder of a missionary school.

In the course of the 19th century biblical societies and missionary organization were founded all through Europe. First in England, but later The Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland, France, Scandinavia. Very much good work has been done: millions of people all over the world were converted to the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, thousands and thousands of congregations were founded.

There also were downsides: There often was a sense of Western superiority, the Word was not embedded into the culture and perhaps worst of all: the confessional division grew to be an important item for export. Among those, who noticed that, the desire arose to a greater extent of unity in Christianity. That first lead to a number of regional conferences and consequently in 1910 to the first World Missionary Conference here in Edinburgh. The intention of this conference was to come up with a collective strategy for the Christianization of the part of the world not yet reached.

It is, of course, not our intention to repeat and improve that conference. On the one hand that would show underestimation. That is; of the good that was there then. On the other hand it would show overestimation, namely of ourselves and of our possibilities. Comparing the ECRC 2010 with the WMC 1910 leaves us at least three differences:

- I. We aim at a different field of mission. Back in 1910 Europe sent missionaries, now we need to welcome them. Since 1910 Europe has seen storms of communism, national Socialism, and materialism. In great parts of Europe this has lead to deserting faith and secularization, first in the cities, but now more and more in the countryside too. And there is now a revival of religiosity, but of a very individual and pluralistic nature. Many people have altars in their houses along with crucifixes, Buddhas, Chanukahs, flowers and photos of deceased forefathers. The Islam is winning ground.
- II. The scale. At Edinburgh 1910 there were 1200 delegates from 160 missionary organizations. The ECRC has 8 member churches, we will be here these few days with about 80 delegates of those 8 churches, the churches linked to them and missionary organizations. If we look at the field of mission there is much more work than we can do. And we should not be too quick to consider ourselves a Gideon's Gang. Fortunately God doesn't only have children in the Reformed churches, but in all churches. And out of the mouth of all his children he wants to ordain strength. In spite of His enemies. By the way, speaking about reformed, there is in Europe more reformed confession, experience and religious life than is represented by the churches present here. We do right when we look to find allies in our own countries and when we are open to a broadening of participants our conference.
- III. We may be grateful for the clarity of our unity of confession. There wasn't one in 1910 and the urgency of that need was soon felt. Beside in 'Life and Work' they started to look for unity in 'Faith and Order'. In 1948 the World Council of Churches came into being, in which, unfortunately, the still lasting confessional division and disagreement are covered up by 'social gospel' and 'inter-religious dialogue'. Our 'Unitedly' stands for our united grateful acceptance of what God gives us in the reformed tradition: sola Scriptura, sola gratia, sola fide. This year, here in Scotland, 450 years of reformation are celebrated. Also because of that, it is good to be here.

It is the challenge of this conference to find consider how we as reformed churches of Europe can be missionary. Theologically, in our outreaching projects and activities and in our whole church practice. It is often said, that being reformed and being missionary is an impossible combination; especially in Europe. Because 'reformed' is diametrically opposed to the longing for autonomy and authenticity of modern man. In his book *A secular Age*, the canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, makes the point that modern autonomy and

authenticity at the very least *also* have Christian sources. Augustine's *Confessiones* woke up authenticity and the Reformation enhanced individuality in the experience of faith. And with that there is a growing awareness of transcendence.

The cross remains to be a stumbling-block for the Jews and for the Greeks foolishness and real faith is a gift of grace from God's Spirit. But we may see it as homework to make clear that the great dogmas about God the Creator, Redeemer and Renewer do not correspond with an old fashioned worldview. It is up to us to make clear that in the communion with Christ our whole human existence as in reason, will, emotion gets its proper place. And that in a Christian congregation the individual flourishes in the communion. In peace with God and a blessing for the world.

So we are skating on thin ice and in a *Waste Land* under a grey sky. Like Reverend Walker on Dunnington Loch. But look closer at his bearing. Certainly the flush on his cheeks shows effort.... And yet he looks so relaxed. There is balance, dignity and in his eyes a twinkle of joy. The arms confidently crossed in front of his breast. And his eyes fixed on a point on the horizon. May the Lord give us a blessed conference with yet a little bit of skating on Duddingston Loch.

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