

John R. Mott Missionary Letters

by John R. Mott

John R. Mott shares his transformative journey from aspiring lawyer to devoted missionary, emphasizing the importance of prayer and divine calling.

Scripture: Joshua 1:9, Daniel 12:3, Mark 16:15, Romans 8:31, 2 Corinthians 11:23

Topics: "Gods Calling", "Christian Service"

Description

John R. Mott shares his journey of discerning God's calling to devote his life to the service of Jesus, despite initial plans for a legal career, through prayer, Bible study, and seeking guidance from trusted friends. He reflects on the struggle between worldly opportunities and the call to preach the gospel, ultimately choosing to follow God's will and pursue Christian work, particularly in the Y.M.C.A. and missionary endeavors, emphasizing the importance of consecration, faith, and obedience to God's leading.

Transcript

JANUARY 17, 1886

Dear Father and Mother, I have glad news for you for your prayers have been answered. The past week has seen a great change in my plans for life and it has not been a sudden change nor did it occur during the revival. I came to Cornell intending to devote my energies through life to the legal profession and the service of my country; I can truly say that I never was prompted to any other calling other than this prior to coming here, but since I have been here I have not been contented with my plans and there has been a constantly increasing impulse in me urging me to devote my whole life and talents to the service of Jesus.

I at first warded off this prompting but it gave me no rest and so for several weeks past I gave up and determined to see where the Spirit would impel me. About the time I decided on this course I became friends with a young man of my age at the Y.M.C.A. who was in the same frame of mind exactly as I was. We had several honest talks on the subject, read some sermons on this line and also the Bible, I also recalled Bishop Simpson's lectures on the call to the ministry. This all took place last term.

I did not settle the point so I then went to God in prayer and night after night I implored Him to reveal to me in an unmistakable manner what He would have me do in this world. This term came and my prayer was unanswered; last week opened up and still I was in doubt; last Tuesday morning found me very earnest but yet vacillating. After dinner that day I went up to study with my friend and although we needed every

moment to get our lesson something forced us back to the old question; and we did not look at a book that afternoon.

We talked candidly and coolly and closely examined each other. I never was so earnest as then in my life; it was the same with Grant - we went right down to the bottom of things and looked at our motives and in silence listened to conscience. Mine would say nothing but "consecrate yourself to My service". We then went upon our knees and if ever I prayed with faith it was then, and God told me in reply that I must work the vineyard. Friend Grant received the same reply. We then arose and took two Bibles and looked for the first thing that suggested itself to us.

Almost instantly the following verse from Daniel flashed into my mind. I turned to it and read: "They that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever." My friend then read as follows the verse that occurred to him: "And He said unto them: Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." I then recalled the following from Joshua: "Have I not commanded thee! Be strong and of good courage; be not afraid, neither be thou dismayed for the Lord thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest."

Since that moment I have been free from a great load. All that oppresses me now is a deep sense of weakness and imperfection. I have a hard fight before me in crushing self but it must and will be done. I shall be wholly consecrated and strive to be like Christ. All I am now is "an empty and broken vessel for the Master's use made weak." It is a glorious life and a field for great usefulness that opens up before me. And now dear parents, you who have done so much for me, pray that I may be kept pure in heart and inspired with a love for souls.

That your lives may be spared to see me do much for Christ is my prayer. Affectionately your son, John R. Mott P.S. Please send me your copies of the "Guide to Christian Holiness" as fast as you are through with them - I will care for them. "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform." "God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty." FEBRUARY 7, 1886

Dear Mother, Your letter has been read and reread time and again; it has made better although parts of it moved me very much. I don't want to leave you nor will I in this new work before me more than in any other field I should have entered - you shall not be left alone wherever I am you shall always have a home; you and pa must not think that after you have done so much for me that I shall prove ungrateful to you in your old age - far from it. But I must not desert my Master who has even done more for me; I must follow wherever he points henceforth if I would be at peace; just as sure as I waver in this determination and turn back I feel that I shall fail in life; I have a hard fight in my own spirit.

My own spirit says "you are gifted for the legal profession - by work you can achieve eminence in that field - friends whom you respect tell you that you are meant for that work therefore go in and win!" Again the same spirit says "go into business - your father has built up a fine trade and you can have the benefit of his experience and work on his good name and by energy and application you will acquire property therefore enter the busy marts of trade"; over once more this spirit says "go on the farm - the leading phrenologist of the U.S. has examined your head recently and tells you that you would make marked success in scientific husbandry, your grandfather and many other dear relatives who know your own nature better than you do yourself say 'go on the farm' - it will be a peaceful, healthy, contented, happy life - you will always be sure of enough and to spare - you never be without a home therefore settle down on the farm" - this same spirit says "you can do enough good for the world in either of these spheres" and

further it says "you are not physically capacitated to bear the arduous duties of the minister."

This spirit stops not here but taunts me still more saying " just think what your friends and acquaintances will say, think how foolish they will call you for relinquishing such fine opportunities as you have in the political, commercial or farm life. That spirit ma, is the spirit of flesh of the world and of the devil! Am I wrong? On the other hand there is a still small voice saying "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature - the harvest is great but the laborers are few - he who would save his life shall lose it but he who would lose his life for my sake the same shall save it" - it points out a world full of sin - everywhere - in heathen lands, in the slums, in the glittering parlor - it shows thousands of young men throwing away their talents and going down to hell each year - it shows a church in many places yielding to worldliness and losing the old spiritual fire of Fletcher, Wesley and Whitefield - it shows a church "at ease in Zion" - a world trifling with the things of eternity.

It calls to mind what a Savior has suffered for me - how He has spared me among my sins - how He has called me back from backsliding - how He has given me Christian parents - how He has place intellectual advantages of rare type in my grasp - how He has prompted me to the work. Can I in the face of such promptings turn from them without being damned! Oh I wish I had more of the Spirit! I do want to keep awake and moving I do long to get up on the heights of holiness - nearer my crown.

Pray for me with all your faith that I may never again go to sleep and that I may be a light unto the feet of many and save many souls and cover a multitude of sins. Good night and God bless you and pa. You shall not be deserted by your children nor your God. Your son, John R. Mott

APRIL 24, 1886

Dear Parents, I write tonight about a very important matter. Mr. Moody the great revivalist is going to hold a College Students' Summer School during the entire month of July at his home in Northfield Mass. The object of the school will be the study of the Bible and of such methods of Christian work as are adapted to college life. Mr. Moody, while conducting the meeting every day, will also bring to his aid men of wide experience in Bible study and Christian work. The regular exercises are not to exceed two hours a day, the balance of the time being devoted to just such recreation as students need after the work of the college year.

Mountains surround the place in every direction also the Connecticut River passes through Northfield; thus affording abundant opportunities for good, invigorating exercise. There will be no expense except R.R. fare and the ordinary expenses of living, which will not exceed five dollars a week. Mr. Moody has room for only about 200 men he has, therefore, in order to extend the influence of his work as far as possible, decided to receive only one man from each college in the U.S. which has a Y.M.C.A.

He wishes not only to benefit the individual student but also the institution which he represents accordingly he has requested "that every college Association should select as its representative, a student who will be in college at least two years longer, and one well qualified to impart to others during that time the benefit which he shall have received. The invitation offers to Christian students a rare opportunity of spending enough time with Mr. Moody to gain the benefit of his thorough practical experience in Christian work and of his knowledge of the Bible for use in such work.

Out of 150 members in our Association, they have chosen me to represent the Association. According to Mr. Moody's requirement that the delegate should be a freshman or a sophomore, no junior or senior can

be sent. Owing to the active part I have taken during the past year in the Christian work in the University and owing to the deep interest I am taken in such work - they have seen fit to relent me. It was necessary that I make my decision at once in order that the Association could report to Mr.

Moody at the time he appointed. I thought and prayed over the matter a day; I was then convinced that it was my duty to go. I then thought I would telegraph to you but on meditating a moment I say I could not explain the matter in that way in its true light. I then went to my pastor and handed him Mr. Moody's letter and told him of the action of the Association and also of my home relations, and asked his advice, He told me to "Go by all means" - "that I would derive more benefit from Mr.

Moody in one month than from any theological school in a whole year" - he further said that he believed it to be a direct provision of Providence in my life, and that I should not let the opportunity pass unimproved. Dear parents I have made the first decision of any importance, which I have ever made without your advice; but it was no matter of self; it was of God from beginning to end - and I do not think you will object to my decision. Mark me when I say that it was not the solicitation of the Association, nor the prompting of my pastor which lead me to this decision, but conscience alone. Your affectionate son, John R. Mott

JULY 30, 1886

Dear Father, Yours of the 26th with \$20 received for which I am deeply thankful. I shall not go to any of those places I mentioned but shall come home by the most direct route via N.Y. Central. The reason is this: do not want to spend so much money on myself when I need the money for Christ's work. I can take in those places at some more convenient and less expensive time. Now everything must tell for Christ. I shall leave here next Monday morning at 10:30. I have to stop in Buffalo at least 12 hours on Y.M.C.A. business (I shall try and make it during the night time). I shall then press right through to Dubuque where I should like to stay over night in answer to four invitations from Mr. Wheeler's folks and one from Will Darling; they want me to stop a day or two at least but I cannot do it. So you can expect me about Friday I think. The Holy Spirit is working with mighty power here. He has brought about the greatest missionary revival the world has ever known. Up to this noon over 80 of the students have consecrated themselves to the foreign missionary work and ere Sunday night I know they will number 100. It thrills me through and through to record the fact. I have received a far richer anointing of the Spirit than I had dared to ask for before I came here. God be with you and the rest at home till we meet within one short week. Affectionately your son, John R. Mott

MARCH 20, 1887

Dear Grandpa, I am very glad to know that you are at our home and am double desirous of being there also. I hope you will stay right through until I get home about the middle of June. I just finished my Spring examinations yesterday and will now have a vacation of about two weeks. I got through the examinations in fine shape although it involved hard grinding as the students say. Before examinations we have what is called cram week; that means that for a solid week most of the students study day and night - doing scarcely anything else - neglecting exercise, sleep; everything in order to make up for time wasted during the term and also to get the term's acquisitions systematized in the head ready to give any fraction of it on instant's notice.

I have known some fellows to study all night in order to pass well in examinations; and right here in this house are two fellows who in cram week study through till midnight and then drink a couple of cups of coffee and go at it again. I do not approve of this system, and if a man does good honest work during the

term there will be little need of subjecting himself to such an exacting course. Last Sunday Wilder and Forman - two Princeton College men - spent the day here talking to the students of our Association on Foreign Missions.

They present the subject in a forcible way and as a consequence 35 students signed the paper expressing that they were "willing and desirous, God permitting, to become foreign missionaries." It may be that God will see fit to use many of this number in our country for there is much need of mission work at home, but at the same time the claims of the Dark Lands are so imperative, yet so neglected, that it does seem that the whole 35 were needed there, because there are so many who are perfectly willing to stay here.

This matter of choosing a life field is a very serious question. I thought that everything was settled when I determined about a year ago to give my life to Christian work; but now looms up a question just as vital - What part of Christian work will you go into? There is the Y.M.C.A. work which needs men very much and which has already opened up a good door to me; - then there is evangelistic work to be done in the neglected parts of our country especially our great cities which if allowed to become much corrupt will be a constant menace to our civilization.

Again the ministry presents the opportunity to shape the character of thousands - and suggests that the question where should a man do his preaching - in this land where there is already one minister to every 700 persons; or in the heathen lands where there is not one minister to every 140,000 who know nothing of the Bible, of heaven or hell. Then there are still other vocations such as Christian lectureship in colleges and editing the Christian press. Oh you see it is a confusing problem to settle.

The elements entering into it are so conflicting and complex that I believe that only God can lead a man to a right decision. I mean to keep myself often and study the whole field and then go just where God calls. It took a struggle to give up other plans and prospects last year when I obeyed the call of the Spirit and gave myself up to Christian work but I have never had occasion to doubt for a moment that my course was the right one; and so I believe that God will lead me out on the ground He wants me to work on - and it will be the right ground for His words has said that the "Holy Spirit will lead you into all truth."

I just received a letter from Clara which tells me that she is in perplexity as to whether to come home this summer or not; it is a question she must settle I think. This letter must count for my weekly letter home. Please tell all that I have arranged for that Missionary Review some time ago and that I want the last copy at least forwarded to me - if the other copies are in the office yet have them sent also. I will put them on file in the Christian Association room. I do hope I will find you at our home next time. Fill my vacancy. Your Grandson, J.R. Mott

MARCH 26, 1888 (PORTION)

Dear Father, This is vacation time and I am busy as ever working on my final graduating thesis. When I get it off of my hands I shall take a rest to make up for this extra work. A great many of the seniors are staying here doing as I am. My roommate is also here. We take an hour every afternoon for a vigorous tramp up the valley which keeps us in good working trim. Tomorrow I am going to enter a new boarding club which has just been opened in order to save a little if possible. I suppose you have read over my problem for next year as I put it last week. But that was only one phase of it. I shall now give you another section. I have about decided that if I take up either of the things mentioned in my last letter, it will be the College Secretaryship because of the two I believe it would bear more directly on my life work. But this week I have been giving the intercollegiate secretaryship a fair and candid examination. In my last letter I

slighted the point entirely in order to give the other points a more thorough statement. The College Secretaryship was offered to me a few weeks ago by the International Committee of the Y.M.C.A. There are at present two College Secretaries, Wishard and Ober. Wishard is to sail this coming fall for foreign lands where he will spend at least four years introducing the Y.M.C.A. work to their colleges. This gives rise to a vacancy, which they want me to fill. They are perfectly willing to have me try it one year and if at that time I am not satisfied with the position I can abandon it. I first did not give the matter much thought but this week I have considered it conscientiously and will indicate to you the steps in my thought explaining them but briefly. I shall do it in the form of questions put to myself and answered myself. What are your possible life works? The ministry (either at home or abroad) The College Secretary of Y.M.C.A. What leads you to consider this position on par with the ministry and therefore as a possible life work? Because the nature of the work of the College Secretary is such that its influence will be as great as that of any minister provided a man is adapted to the work. The College Y.M.C.A. exists at present in only about 300 of the 1200 colleges of the U.S. and Canada that ought to have it. Wherever it does exist it meets a want that no other agency can. It is therefore likely to be as permanent as the college itself. The tendency is increasing especially in non-denominational colleges to take religious matters out of the hands of the faculty and leave them to the spontaneous action of the student organizations. The work of the Associations consists in brief in:

Emphasizing upon Christian students their duty to look after the spiritual welfare of their fellow students - to save their souls while in college. To show the importance of earnest, devout, practical study of the Bible in college. To train young men in methods of Christian work so that they can go out from college and help in the work of the home churches and Associations. To press upon young men the vast importance of social charity by means of the White Cross movement. To quicken an interest among young men in the cause of home and foreign missions - leading them to consecrate their lives to religious work.

As I said there are about 300 of these Associations now in the U.S. and Canada having a total membership of 10,000. It is the duty of the College Secretary to go from college to college spending a few days in each giving the young men instruction on the best methods of doing the above mentioned objects of the Association as well as stimulating them to greater Christian activity and more thorough consecration; also to hold evangelistic meetings where time will permit. From this rough sketch you will at once see that the work is of immense importance and has more influence than any other single position on the evangelization of the world.

College Sec. Ober had intended to be a Missionary but then decided that if by staying here and doing this work he would influence 100 others to go as Missionaries it was his duty to do it. It is needless to add that he and Wishard have been instrumental in leading far more than 100 to enter the foreign field because they are responsible for its whole student missionary movement of the last two years because they got up the Mt. Hermon conference where the Missionary interest sprang up.

And this is only speaking of one of the five departments of the Association's work. It is due to such considerations that I think it right to give the College Secretaryship a hearing and side of the work of any minister of whom I know. Which of the two works do you prefer? The one where I can make my life tell most for Christ. Which, in your present judgment, will that be? The College Secretaryship provided I am adapted to the work and the work adapted to me. I have tried to give this question a fair examination as well as much prayer, and I hope you will bear me up at home in your prayers that my decision may accord with God's will.

That is all I want to be assured of - that I am acting in harmony with His unerring plans. I believe a man's life in religious work will fall far short of what it might do when it is conducted on the plans of men. I want to have any thoughts that come to you and Ma on this subject. They will help me in reaching a solution. I am aware that I have been unable to present the matter in all its details on paper but I hope I have shown enough to commend the plan to you - at least enough so that if I feel it is my duty to give it a year's trial you will not think I am making a big blunder or doing what I will regret in after years. With prayers and good wishes to all of you. I am yours affectionately, John R. Mott

APRIL 28, 1888

Dear Father, Your letter with enclosure of \$125 thankfully received. I meant to indicate in my last letter to you that I still needed \$225 to carry me through - making a total of \$625 - for the year's total expenses. If you are coming this way on your trip East you can bring the other \$100 with you for I shall not need it until then. We are having intensely hot weather here this week for the first time this year. It is bringing flowers and leaves out in great profusion. Work is progressing rapidly on our new Association Building so that it will be done by the first of next term without doubt.

During the coming week, the members of the Association expect to raise \$750 - the amount of the salary for the General Secretary for the first year. That is as high as the salary paid at Yale and I think we should pay no more especially if we let a man take some studies in the University in connection with it. It must never be made a position which men will take for the money that is in it. We want men to stay a year who can command a much higher salary. This influence will be doubly greater.

I have just written and sent my letter of acceptance of the Intercollegiate Secretaryship for one year on trial with the privilege of withdrawing at that time if the work is unsatisfactory, or for that matter, anytime if the work does not agree with me. I think you will agree with me that I have not made a hasty decision for it has now been over six weeks since the committee was here to see me. Since they or anyone else have brought any pressure whatever to bear upon me from that side.

On the contrary, as you can well imagine everybody here at Ithaca and in the University have had their minds set on holding me at the head of the work here next year. So I can say with truth that I have reached the decision by my own self and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. My line of argument is contained in the long letter I wrote to you not long ago and has not been changed since then. Unless that argument could be overthrown I regarded it as my duty to stand by its conclusions no matter what my feelings might be.

The Holy Spirit leads in harmony with Word, reason, conscience and providential events - never in harmony with feeling alone, nor with feeling necessarily at any time. My decision has accorded with the above four things as far as I am able to interpret them. More over I have gone over my chain of argument with between twenty and thirty of my most trusted advisors in all stations of life - students, professors, city Y.M.C.A. workers, ministers, business men, etc. and as I said before not one of them was prejudiced in favor of the Intercollegiate word but a man had hope to have me here next year - still they were obliged to yield to the argument that it would be necessary for me to give the work a trial and that next year was the best time to make that trial.

Neither you nor Ma gave any answer to the argument so I inferred that you did not seriously question my judgment. There are two things that I hope to convince you of in my life: First, that I do not jump at a decision but consider it from all sides, getting advice from every reliable source and then reaching from the

conflicting opinion my own decision. Second, that I am not led by others, even by a large majority unless they happen to be in harmony with my standards of decision. Those standards are:

Holy Spirit who guides in cooperation with: The Scriptures Reason (not feeling) Conscience Providential Events I never regretted a decision I made by these five standards. If you have them on your side what matters it though the whole world be against you for God is then on your side and "if God is for you, who can be against you." At the same time I do not undertake this work without a deep distrust of my own abilities. I expect to meet all sorts of disappointments, trials, hardships, cold blankets, but I need such things for I have found that they bring me nearer to God in whom we have all things. When I think of sacrifice for Christ it always does me good to read II Corinthians 11:23-24; 11:1-10. It will be a source of great strength to me throughout the year to know that the prayers of the home circle follow me as they do now that God may bless me in m work. I am glad that I am to see you all soon. Let me know which time you expect to strike Ithaca - on your way out or at Commencement time? Your affectionate son, John R Mott

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