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Student Volunteer Mss.

THE  
VOLUNTEER DECLARATION

BY  
D. WILLARD LYON.



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## THE VOLUNTEER DECLARATION.

**"It is my purpose, if God permit, to become a Foreign Missionary."**

In personal interviews, and in correspondence, such questions as the following are frequently asked of the secretaries and officers of the Movement: Why should there be a Volunteer Declaration? Why does it exist in its present form? Exactly what and how much is implied in it? Why should one sign it who has fully decided to be a foreign missionary? When should it be signed? How can a volunteer make the declaration practically a more helpful thing in his own life? To what extent and in what ways may volunteer workers use the declaration among their fellow students? To the answer of these questions these pages are devoted.

## I. WHY A DECLARATION?

1. **To Lead Students to Face, in a Personal Way, the Question as to Whether or Not They Should Give Their Lives to Foreign Missions.**

In missionary addresses and missionary appeals the direct application of the message is too easily shifted to some other person who in the hearer's judgment ought to be a missionary instead of himself. there is need, therefore, of something which will speak to one when he is alone, and when he cannot escape the consideration of the claims of the work upon him individually. Dr. A. A. Hodge, who was for several years a missionary in India, in addressing an audience of Christian students nearly twelve years ago, said: "I believe that it is a great sin for any one in your condition to conclude to stay at home without a very thorough and honest examination of the case, and that not one of you has a right to stay unless you can point to a clear, unquestionable evidence that God wills you to stay. The presumption is in favor of the duty of going. The burden of proof lies wholly upon a proposal to stay."

The reason why some external force is needed to bring even Christian men face to face with this important question (which after all is but the question of their life-work), is the fact that they are prone either merely to drift into their life-work from force of circumstances, or to determine it without consulting their relation to God and His kingdom. The statement may sound startling, but let us prove it by the conditions that exist. If Christian people consult God's will in all their life plans, why is God's will not being done more fully to-day? It is God's will that the gospel should be preached to every creature. If Christian students, in deciding their life-work were honestly seeking to know God's will, would He permit more than half the world to remain without the gospel? Would He allow two hundred and fifty times as many ordained ministers in proportion to the population to be preaching the gospel at home as have been sent forth from Christian lands to proclaim the good tidings to the thousand millions who have not the opportunity of hearing it? There is but one conclusion: God's

will is not being done because man is not seeking to do it; he is not asking the question prayerfully and honestly "*Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?*"

But we are not confined to deduction to prove that students need to be brought to face the question of their life-work. A study of the lives of hundreds of students has brought the deep conviction that the great peril of the Christian student to-day is that he will not decide this supreme question of his life with sufficient prayer and thoughtfulness. He needs to be helped to conclusive thinking. He needs to be held to the question until he may "*understand* what the will of the *Lord* is."

Will the Volunteer Declaration help students to meet this question prayerfully and sincerely? The strongest answer which can be given is the fact that it has done so in many hundreds of instances. Not only has it been of value to those who have ultimately signed it, but it has been a blessing to many who, having considered it in the light of God's presence, have received clear leadings as to some other place that their lives should occupy in



God's great plan for the world's evangelization. A missionary of large experience writes: "If you have sufficient reason for remaining at home, it will always be a blessing to you that you considered the question of duty fairly, fully and faithfully."

## **II. To Secure Decisions for Foreign Missions.**

It is not enough that one face the question of what his life-work shall be. He must settle it. He must discover, so far as he may, God's plan for his life, and then decide to fall into his place in that plan.

Human nature demands that there shall be something to lead men to decisions. We are not prone to decide anything until we are required to do so by some cause external to ourselves. "‘Man, of all luggage, is the hardest to move.’ To show a man his sinfulness is comparatively easy; to move him to act is the most difficult part of evangelistic work. The head heeds the admonition; the heart postpones assent." Just so among Christians when the question of one's life-work is at stake. But indecision is paralysis. The strength

and positive influence of decision is needed. One volunteer writes: "The Declaration crystallized my purpose. A vague, general expectation of going was changed to a definite purpose."

The cause of missions demands that there shall be something which will bring many more students to the decision to become foreign missionaries. The lost world, the unrepealed Commission, the scarcity of laborers call loudly and incessantly for missionaries by the thousands; but they are going only by scores! Surely something needs to be done to enlist greater numbers of workers! It is the mission of the Volunteer Declaration to help in this enlisting of those whom God may choose.

### **III. To Secure Early Decisions.**

A well-known missionary in India states the case as follows:

"What are the advantages of an early decision? Men's minds are thus made up before prejudiced by other, and what may appear to some, more inviting spheres of work. If laymen are to be secured for foreign service, their decisions must be

reached while under-graduates in college; otherwise they may select some occupation calculated to keep them at home. It is well also for prospective divinity students to decide early, before the pressure of a 'good call' to a city church warps their judgment.

"An early decision allows more time for preparation. This is an age of specialists. To succeed in anything a man must concentrate time and study on that one thing. The man who goes to a strange land and stranger people should be trained in the religions, customs, literature and peculiarities of those among whom his life is to be spent. The student who decides in his freshman year can devote the remaining years in college, and three or four years of theology or medicine, to a prayerful study of the foreign field. Has not such a man an advantage over one whose decision is not reached until the senior year of his professional course, and who can give but a few weeks to personal study and preparation for foreign service?

"A volunteer can appeal more effectively for money and men. He says, 'Come;'

professors and pastors say, 'Go.' Let a number of students decide early; let them, during their collegiate, medical, and theological courses of study, enlist men and money for foreign service—and the problem of the world's evangelization will soon be solved."

**IV. To Help in Holding to Their Purpose Those Who Decide to be Foreign Missionaries.**

Our weak human nature too easily forgets the purposes formed in our holiest moments. To put these determinations into writing will not in itself enable us to keep them, for God's Spirit alone can give the power to the faithful. But the experience of the Volunteer Movement, both in Great Britain and America, clearly proves that just as the new convert needs to make a public confession of his faith in Christ, so the volunteer is greatly helped by stating with no uncertain sound the missionary purpose which God has given him.

**V. To Furnish a Tangible, Clearly Defined, Basis  
Upon Which to Unite all Students Who  
Expect to Become Foreign  
Missionaries.**

Without the Declaration what would the Volunteer Movement mean? Every organization must have a basis of membership. The Volunteer Declaration is the basis of membership of the Volunteer Movement. To deny the necessity of the former is to deny the mission of the latter. But no one who reads the Providential history of this Movement in its relation to our own times, can for a moment doubt that it ought to exist, and exist for the supreme mission which is clearly set forth in the Declaration.

**II. WHY THE PRESENT FORM?**

1. One class of friendly critics would suggest that a form something like the following be adopted: "I am willing to go anywhere for Christ." It is suggested that absolute consecration to go anywhere is more desirable than a specific consecration to some particular part of the world-field, on the ground that it is all one field. To

this form there are three objections. First: It would be valueless as the basis of an organization, for it could be signed by any conscientious Christian. It is too comprehensive, and would, therefore, be meaningless; for it is precisely the vow which every Christian makes when he accepts Christ. Secondly: It would be only a negative and submissive attitude; no positive purpose would be formed toward which the whole life could be directed. It would mean attitude, rather than action; it is a principle, rather than a purpose. In the use of the present form the principle of willingness to go anywhere is assumed and acted upon before the purpose to become a foreign missionary can be formed. Thirdly: It would practically leave the advantage to the home side of the question, for the decision to go anywhere means staying at home unless forced to go abroad. It is not right that the burden of proof should thus be thrown upon the side which has the greatest need and can offer the most urgent appeal. "While vast continents are shrouded in almost utter darkness, and hundreds of millions suffer the horrors of heathenism or

of Islam, the burden of proof lies upon you to show that the circumstances in which God has placed you were meant by him to keep you out of the foreign mission field" (Ion Keith—Falconer).

2. Another class suggests a *vow*, "God helping me, I will become a foreign missionary." It is argued that such a form would be more likely to hold the volunteers to their purpose. Our one and sufficient reply to this is that it is unscriptural. We have a right to vow what we know is immutably God's will. For example, we may vow absolute allegiance to Him, or we may vow to flee any sin. But in a matter wherein we do not know absolutely the will of the Lord, or wherein He may lead us differently in the future, we may only purpose under God's permission. "Go to now, ye that say, To-day or to-morrow we will go into this city, . . . whereas ye know not what shall be on the morrow. . . . For that ye ought to say, if the Lord will, we shall both live, and do this or that." The present form of the Declaration is not a vow; it is merely the statement of a purpose to do what, with

our present light, we believe God would have us do, and to do it only if he permit.

3. A third class would ask why the old form of the Declaration is not still employed, viz., "I am willing and desirous, God permitting, to become a foreign missionary." At the outset it should be stated that this form was always interpreted by the leaders of the Movement to mean precisely what the present form means. The first traveling secretaries who used it interpreted it in these words: "I am fully determined to become a foreign missionary unless God blocks the way." All the other regular secretaries who subsequently employed it interpreted it in the same way.

The change in form was made, however, only to avoid misinterpretation. While in theory a willingness coupled with a desire to go should result in a purpose to go, yet in practice this did not prove true. It was discovered by experience that both elements might co-exist without any purpose being formed. Some who were obviously disqualified, physically or otherwise, and who did not expect ever to be able to go,



were yet "willing and desirous." Others, though not disqualified, made only a passive interpretation of the so-called pledge. Their consciences permitted them to say that they were "willing and desirous" to become foreign missionaries, while at the same time they made no active effort, or laid no definite plans, to go. It can easily be understood how such a varied interpretation of the fundamental basis of the Movement proved a great peril to its unity and usefulness.

This brings us naturally to the consideration of what is implied in signing the present form of the Volunteer Declaration.

### III. ITS MEANING.

#### I. Negatively.

(1). It is not a vow or pledge. It is simply a declaration of a purpose which has been formed. (2). It does not imply the taking of one's life into his hands. In the clause "if God permit" we recognize that it is *only if God will* that we purpose to do this thing. (3). It does not imply that the way is perfectly clear ahead. There may be grave difficulties before one, but he be-

believes that the difficulties will be removed, and therefore purposes going, if God permit. (4). It does not prevent the subsequent guidance of the Holy Spirit in one's life. If one is led by the Spirit at a later time to see clearly that God wills otherwise for him, he does not therefore prove faithless to his declaration if he follows this new and clear indication from God. Each volunteer must decide for himself what constitutes a true Providential hindrance. There is a vast difference between a real hindrance and a mere obstacle. Obstacles are placed before us for our testing and training; they are made, not to hinder, but to be overcome. The failure of health may sometimes be a valid ground for not becoming a foreign missionary, but at other times it will only be a reason for going to some other heathen field than the one that was first contemplated. The volunteer's obligation to another dependent upon him for support may in some cases be a real hindrance; but in other cases it will be his duty to commit the dependent one to the care of another, and forsake father or mother, brother or sister, or even

wife, for Christ's sake and the gospel's. The true soldier of the cross will not court excuses; he will go where his Master calls and ask no questions about his own comfort or the desires of his friends.

## **II. Positively.**

(1). It is the expression of a firm and determined purpose to make the foreign missionary work one's life-work, if God permit. (2). It implies the shaping of all one's plans toward this end. (3). It means honest, persevering effort and prayer in overcoming all the obstacles which may appear to hinder one from going to the field. One who secretly rejoices when he discovers that he is hindered from going cannot be living up to his purpose. It ought to be his greatest cross to be compelled to remain at home. (4). It means a purpose which none but God can cause one to reconsider or alter.

## **IV. WHY SIGN THE DECLARATION?**

When a man has come to the point of deciding upon the foreign missionary work as his life-work, he is confronted by such thoughts as these: Why should I sign the

Volunteer Declaration? May I not be just as good a volunteer outside the Movement as in it? Will I not be abridging my liberties by committing my decision to writing and thus making it public? Suppose I should finally not go to the foreign field, would I not injure the cause less by never having signed? The prayerful attention of all who may be facing such questions is asked to a consideration of the following reasons for signing the Declaration:

1. It will strengthen your own convictions. Just as confession strengthens the new Christian so will an open and frank declaration of your purpose deepen that very purpose in your own heart. One volunteer gives this testimony: "It assured me that I had decided the question. It enabled me to put my attitude before others as a conclusion reached, and not as an indefinite possibility under consideration."

2. It will at once associate you with those who are sympathetic with your purpose and who will be of help to you in fostering it. You will receive a welcome from the General Secretary of the Move-

ment and the way will thus be opened for you to secure through him whatever suggestion or advice he may be able to give you. You will be brought into personal and helpful relations with the other volunteers in your college. They have passed through some of the struggles that you will be called upon to endure and will often be able to keep you from discouragement. Hundreds of volunteers have been able to say, with one who writes: "The Declaration has given to me my dearest friends."

3. It will help you to plan definitely and prepare thoroughly for your chosen life-work. For you will be thrown into close contact with others who will be thus planning and preparing. "It has helped me in the choice of my studies" is the testimony of one. Others have written that it has given them an intense desire to study missions.

4. It will help you to hold to your purpose. Read these testimonies out of many that might be given: "Not only have I been kept firm in my purpose by signing the Declaration, but what seemed at first a

duty has grown to be the strongest desire of my life." "The boyish resolve to go to those who had no Christian parents to tell them of Jesus, became under the Declaration the definite purpose of manhood, which only God can change." "It has brought the reconciliation of opposing parents, accustoming them to the thought of my going through an open, declared purpose." "I opposed it to the temptations, numerous and strong, which were suggested from within and from without."

5. It will increase your influence for foreign missions. Your influence will be more positive, for you will have stated clearly your attitude on the question. It will be more powerful, for if foreign missions can claim your life, it will claim the attention, at least, of those who know you. It will be more constant, for your life will be a living epistle on missions. It will be a wider influence for many will hear of your decision and be moved by it, whom your words alone would never reach.

6. It will give you the inspiration that comes from being a part of a great movement. Whose courage does not rise when

he hears the battle cry re-echoed by the voices of comrades by his side and from all over the battle field? Whose faith is not strengthened by knowing that he is a part of a mighty army moving on to conquer in the name of the Lord?

7. It will be a blessing to you after you have sailed to your field. Already in several of the heathen countries those who were volunteers when at home are banding themselves together for mutual stimulus and for advancing the cause which is so dear to their hearts, "the evangelization of the world in this generation." There will be a peculiar joy in being one of the number of those who, united by the bond of being fellow volunteers, may unite their prayers and forces to hasten the coming of the Lord who will claim the heathen as His inheritance and the uttermost parts of the earth as His possession.

8. It will also prove a blessing to you and to the cause even if it should so be ordered that you never go to the foreign field. You will have the joy of knowing that you did all that you could to go. You will be able to appeal more strongly for

foreign missions, for you will be able to say: "I was a volunteer; but the Lord kept me from going; it will be the greatest joy of my life to see many others going in my place." Your influence for missions will be increased, rather than lessened, by the fact that you have once signed the Declaration.

9. It will greatly increase the probability of your going. Being rejected by the board once or twice will not decide the question for you. Being temporarily hindered will only settle the question temporarily. When the temporary hindrance is removed you will seek again to go. No allurements of honor or position will suffice to keep you. Not even the fact of present usefulness in some field of labor will blind your eyes to see the greater field. You will not accept God's present blessing upon your work as a final proof that that work is what He wants of you. Like Paul, you will be moved by the ambition to preach where Christ has not been named, or like your Master you will in the midst of your success pass on to the "other cities also" in which you have been called



to witness. You will be as one who, having put his hand to the plow, dares not to look back.

## **V. UNDER WHAT CIRCUMSTANCES SIGN THE DECLARATION?**

### **I. When You are Face to Face with the Facts of the World's Great Need.**

God's Spirit guides us through our reason, as well as in seemingly more direct ways. No one can say that he knows the will of God until he has searched for it in the providential facts about him. We must be in possession of sufficient evidence to warrant a decision before we have a right to make the decision. But many are in the great danger of failing to act on the evidence which they already have. Another vital condition must therefore be fulfilled.

### **II. When You are Consciously in Communion with God.**

Only in the glory of His presence will you be able to see life in its true relations. Only under the revelation of His all-searching eye can you detect and avoid the selfish motives which are so prone to creep in, despite your best efforts. Only in the

solitude of communion with Him may you be certainly free from the unsafe influence of human friends; all human advice will there be measured by divine standards, and what is found wanting will be rejected.

Is it right to sign under impulse? Yes, if the impulse is of God. God lifts us up into the heights to give us larger visions of life. We should let our lives be controlled by these patterns that are shown us in the mount rather than by the groveling, narrow thoughts of our lives in the valley. Doubts may arise when once we have left the sacred place of communion; but are we therefore to plan our lives on the plane of our doubts?

“Tasks in hours of insight willed  
May be in hours of gloom fulfilled.”

If men were angels then might they trust to their common, everyday thoughts to mold their life plans. But since they are not thus free from the dominion of sin they need to plan their lives in their holiest and purest moments.

And the very remembrance of the voice of God in the sacred hour will make the daily thoughts more pure, and the doubts

that once appeared will, one by one, disappear. Many may testify in the words of the one who wrote thus of the hour when she decided to be a missionary: "The whole world has changed to me since the day I joyfully became obedient to the heavenly vision. There is a glory in life I never knew before." What volunteer cannot say: "It has brought me a peace that passed all my previous understanding?"

## **VI. HOW TO FOSTER THE MISSIONARY PURPOSE.**

Fellow volunteer, how much does the missionary purpose mean to you as a present blessing and constant force in your life? Is it any more to you than a mere decision arrived at in the past? Is it a factor in your daily life now? With the hope and prayer that it may mean more and more to you as the days pass by, the following suggestions are thrown out as a result of personal experience and contact with many volunteers:

1. Do you often meditate upon the Declaration, and upon what it implies in your life? With pencil and paper make

note of the motives which are operating to hold you to the volunteer purpose. Ask yourself whether any of these are wrong motives, and whether there are other motives which should move you. Make a note also of the things which may be undermining your purpose, and seek to know how to overcome them. Ask yourself, too: "What ought to be the manner of my daily life in view of the great work which is before me?" Such meditation cannot fail to make you a better volunteer and a truer Christian.

2. Has your life-purpose become an integral part of your prayer life? Make your Volunteer Declaration a form for the frequent renewing of your consecration to God and it will become freighted with a more sacred significance in your every remembrance of it. What has been wrought into one's being in the holy glow of the sacred hour is so securely welded to his soul that all the fires of temptation cannot prevail to remove it.

3. Does your declaration mean so much to you that you are seeking in every way to lead others to enter the same great work?

If the evangelization of the world means to you a duty—an imperative, urgent, present duty—ought you not to be intensely earnest in seeking to lead others to see the duty and to give their lives to help make possible its accomplishment? Let privilege and duty, opportunity and responsibility, fire us with a zeal for personal work for volunteers.

4. Is your purpose being fostered by a constant study of missions? If “facts are the fuel with which missionary fervor is fired and fed,” it behooves us thus to feed the missionary flame, and the fault will be ours if the fire burns low. To whatever degree the Declaration is a controlling factor in our lives, to that degree will we be eager to learn more about the battles which are being fought, or are yet to be fought, and the victories that are being won in this world-wide conquest.

5. Are you seizing every opportunity to speak about missions in conversation, in small gatherings, in Sabbath school, in young people’s meetings, in prayer meetings, in church? Christians everywhere need to be awakened to the great duty of

preaching the gospel to every creature, and none can plead so eloquently as the one who has given his life to the work. The reflex blessing, too, will be realized in our own lives; for who can arouse others without himself being strengthened?

6. If you are nearing the completion of your course of study, have you put yourself into touch with the Boards? Are you laying all your plans to go as soon as you are ready? If obstacles appear, are you endeavoring to remove them by "prayer and pains?" If the Board cannot send you because of a lack of money, are you prayerfully seeking the needed support from individuals, from churches, or from young people's societies? God will send whom He calls if they *seek* to go. God has given you a clearer vision of His purpose for the world than He has given many others. This is your talent. It is yours to use, and not wrap in a napkin until some one is willing to give the money to send you to a foreign field. By giving you this talent God may hold you responsible not only for going, but also for getting others to send.

## VII. HOW USE THE DECLARATION?

1. Never in a large meeting. In general no signatures should be called for in a meeting of any kind, whether large or small.

2. Chiefly in personal work. Even then we may only *present the claims* of God upon men for carrying the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth with all faithfulness and earnestness; but we may not urge one to sign the declaration until he has *faced the question alone with God*. We may help men towards conclusive thinking, but it is not ours to draw the conclusion for them.

3. Only in the spirit of prayer. The whole life of the one to whom we are speaking is at stake. Only God can know the secrets of his heart. We are helpless. If we speak in our own strength we fail. Let us look only to Him who says, "My grace is sufficient for thee; for my power is made perfect in meekness."

4. When a Declaration card has been signed it should be forwarded at once to the office of the Volunteer Movement.

“When I, therefore, was thus minded, did I show fickleness? or the things that I purpose, do I purpose according to the flesh, that with *me* should be the yea yea and the nay nay?” 2 Cor. i. 17.

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“And this will we do, *if God permit.*”  
Heb. vi. 3.

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“All that the *Lord* hath spoken *we will do.*” Ex. xix, 8.



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