

Eric Liddell and his father, James Liddell

"Hollywood Hid a Congregationalist"

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In 1981, the movie, "Chariots of Fire" won an Academy Award (Oscar) for Best Movie. Many Christians, including this writer, thought that the probability of the movie picking up an award was slim to none.

The movie focused on two young men in post World War 1 Britain who used their athletic ability to prove something to themselves, their compatriots and their country.

The first was Harold Abraham, the son of a Latvian Jewish immigrant and successful entrepreneur. Abraham was a student at Cambridge University and a fervent Anglophile (a more zealous Gilbert & Sullivan aficionado would be hard to find). A successful runner, he used his athletic prowess to fight against the real and perceived anti-Semitism he encountered in upper-class, "old school tie" English society.

The other individual portrayed in the movie was a Scottish science student at Edinburgh University, Eric Liddell. Liddell was a devout Christian, born in China of Scottish missionary parents commissioned by the London Missionary Society. Born in 1902, Liddell spent the first five years of his life in China but went to Scotland in 1907 when his father got his first furlough. Eric would not return back to China until 1925 and then as a missionary.



Liddell is noted in the movie as refusing to compete on a Sunday in the Paris 1924 Olympics because of his religious convictions to honor the Sabbath.

The movie depicts Liddell as a stout Christian of the Calvinist variety representative of much of Scottish Protestantism, however his exact church affiliation is never explicitly identified. He is seen in a number of Scottish churches, but the denomination is not revealed. On the Sunday during the Olympics in which he refuses to participate, he is seen as being the speaker at the morning service of the Church of Scotland parish in Paris. Therefore it would be natural to conclude that Liddell was a Presbyterian. Not so. Liddell was a devout Congregationalist in a family strongly involved in Scottish Congregationalism.

Eric's father, Rev. James Dunlop Liddell, was inspired in his youth by Scottish Congregationalist minister Rev. William Blair to be a foreign missionary. James Liddell

studied at the Scottish Congregational College (seminary) in Glasgow and was ordained at the Dundas Street Congregational Church of the same city. In 1898 he applied to the London Missionary Society (LMS) and was accepted for a post in Mongolia, northern China.

The LMS was founded in 1795 (the same year that the Scottish Congregational denomination was formed) as an inter-denominational body. However, it quickly became the foreign mission society of the Congregationalists. Notable missionary statesmen and Congregationalists who were sent out by the LMS include Robert Moffat and David Livingstone in Africa, Robert Morrison, first Protestant missionary in China and John Adam in India.

After Eric Liddell won the gold medal in the 400 metres at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, he enrolled at the Scottish Congregational College in Edinburgh. Interrupting his divinity studies, Eric made plans in the summer of 1925 to return to China as a missionary. In September he assumed his first job as a missionary teacher (science) at the Anglo-Chinese Christian College in Tientsin, run by the London Missionary Society.

The next five years were uneventful for Eric, comprised of teaching chemistry, being superintendent of the Union Church Sunday school, and competing in occasional amateur athletic events. Then in July, 1930, Eric announced that he was engaged to be married. The girl was Florence Jean McKenzie, the daughter of Canadian missionaries that Eric had known for years. It was a long engagement, like his parents', and Florence and Eric did not wed until 1934.

In the meantime, Eric desired to complete his theological studies. He furloughed back to Edinburgh in 1931 and re-enrolled at the Scottish Congregational College there. Completing his studies in June, 1932 he was ordained to the Congregational ministry in the school's chapel.

Returning again to China, Eric jumped back into his missionary duties. Married in 1934, he and Florence produced three daughters. Except for a second furlough back to Scotland in 1939-40, he never left China.

Because of Japanese activity in China, Eric painfully decided that it was necessary for their safety for Florence and the girls to leave the country. In May, 1941, Florence and the two children set sail for Canada. In September of that year, Eric received a telegram informing him of the birth of his third daughter, Maureen – whom he would never see.

Eric spent the next four years in China evangelizing and teaching the people. He kept in regular communication with his family whom he expected to join at the end of the war. On

March 12, 1943, Eric and his associates received the call to report to an internment camp in Weih sien, many hundreds of miles away. There he was to remain until his death.

Eric was just as active a Christian in a Japanese internment camp as he had been before. He organized sport events, educational activities and Christian worship services for his fellow British, Canadian and American detainees. However, his infectious enthusiasm and energy began to wane. Privation and hunger certainly contributed to his declining physical condition, but no doubt that separation from his wife and daughters took its toll.

In the middle of January, 1945, Eric, who like everyone else in the camp was suffering from incipient malnutrition, had an attack of what some thought was influenza with severe sinusitis. However the serious inflammation did not respond to treatment significantly and he suffered from severe headaches which caused him to lie in his room for hours at a time. On February 21st, while attending to the needs of his fellow prisoners he erupted into severe convulsions and vomiting. He then slipped into a coma and died. His last words were to his nurse, "Annie, it's complete surrender."

The next day an autopsy revealed an inoperable tumor on the left side of his brain. It was this and a massive haemorrhage that killed him.

When word reached the outside world that Eric Liddell had died, it is said that all of Scotland wept. Memorial services were held all over that land. In Glasgow, the Dundas Street Congregational Church, where Eric's father had been ordained, was packed. In Edinburgh, the service was at Morningside Congregational Church where Eric had been a member during his student days. Nearly a thousand were present.

What was the principle that guided Eric Liddell's Christian life, whether competing in the Olympics or serving on the mission field in China?

In 1942, the last full year before his internment, he published a book called "Prayers for Daily Use". In it he wrote about obedience as the key to knowing God: 'OBEDIENCE to God's will is the secret of spiritual knowledge and insight. It is not willingness to know, but willingness to DO (obey) God's Will that brings certainty.' So said Scotland's greatest athlete, a Congregationalist missionary.