

**AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE
STUDY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

by

HAROLD R. COOK

MOODY PRESS CHICAGO

CHAPTER THREE -

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND MISSIONS (Continued)

THE HOLY SPIRIT AND MISSIONS

IN READING the New Testament we discover that sometimes the disciples did not remember what JESUS had taught them. That was true of His resurrection. Matthew alone tells us of four times when JESUS spoke of His resurrection in advance (16:21; 17:9, 23; 26:32). He also tells us that the Jewish religious leaders were aware of that teaching. When He was crucified, they set a watch to make sure that He stayed in His grave. They didn't want His disciples to steal His body and then claim that He had risen. But they might have spared themselves the trouble. The disciples apparently had forgotten that teaching.

Besides this, they didn't fully understand some of His teachings. They showed it often when He was alive. Sometimes they asked for an explanation, but on at least one occasion they were afraid to ask. And when He died, they clearly didn't understand the meaning of His death. That is, they didn't understand it until after His resurrection. Even then we may question whether they grasped its full significance.

Of course this is what any experienced teacher learns to expect. He knows that those he teaches will not get all that he tries to give them. And of what they do seem to get, they will retain only a part. The inefficiency of the teacher may be partly to blame. But not chiefly. More often the cause is in the pupils. Man's ability to give full attention, to comprehend and then to remember, is quite limited.

From such conditions we would normally expect CHRIST's teachings to suffer change. No one wrote them down at the time, so it wouldn't be surprising if some were forgotten and others were twisted because of poor understanding or recollection. We would also expect some conflicting testimony about just what CHRIST did teach.

There are some who, looking at the purely human, say this actually happened. It is the normal thing. So if the New Testament writers agree too closely on any subject, it must be because they depended on the same document or source of information. Such persons emphasize strongly the differences between the Gospel of John and the other three, the "Synoptics." They like to draw

contrasts between the theology of Paul and the theology of Peter or James.

This is not the place to go into the arguments they use to support such reasoning. But there is one thing we can say. Without doubt the harmony between the various writings that make up the New Testament is much more remarkable than any supposed discrepancies. That such a varied group of writers, with no official board to check their writings, should present such a unified picture of CHRIST and His Gospel is astounding. It is this remarkable harmony that calls for explanation much more than any supposed discrepancies.

Of course CHRIST's disciples had imbibed much from simply being with Him during His ministry. Some might say that they had "caught the spirit of CHRIST." But as an explanation, of the harmony in the New Testament, this falls far short. Those who have "caught the spirit" of a great man don't wait long after his death to differ among themselves. Just look at the followers of any of our modern "great men."

Rather, what the New Testament itself shows to be the controlling factor is a different kind of spirit. It is not an intangible, impersonal influence; it is the HOLY SPIRIT of GOD. JESUS Himself had promised His coming before He died. In fact, JESUS went so far as to say that it was best for Him to leave so that the HOLY SPIRIT could come. He said that He would send Him (John 16:7). He had already told His disciples that part of the task of the HOLY SPIRIT would be to **"teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you"** (John 14:26).

Not only JESUS emphasized the importance of the coming of the HOLY SPIRIT. After He had come, the disciples did the same. The HOLY SPIRIT is so prominent in the Acts that long ago it was said that the book should be called, not "the Acts of the Apostles," but "the Acts of the HOLY SPIRIT." Moreover, in the rest of the New Testament, although He doesn't glorify Himself, the HOLY SPIRIT does take the leading part in directing and controlling the growth of the Church.

FORESHADOWINGS OF FOREIGN MISSIONS UNDER THE SPIRIT

The New Testament presents the HOLY SPIRIT both as the Initiator and as the one controlling factor in missions. He is prominent even in the foreshadowings of that movement. There were at least two such foreshadowings in the early chapters of the Acts.

The first is in Acts 2, where we have the account of the coming of the SPIRIT upon the believers after CHRIST's ascension. It is significant that the SPIRIT came on the Day of Pentecost. Pentecost was the feast which, perhaps more than others, brought to Jerusalem Jews from **"every nation under heaven."** It was as if the SPIRIT wanted to make it clear that the Gospel they began to preach that day should reach all nations.

Again, in the eighth chapter we have a most unusual account. We call it the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch. Philip, one of the first deacons of the Church, had preached the Gospel in Samaria with remarkable effect. But now the angel of the Lord told him to leave that work and go down to the desert road that led from Jerusalem to Gaza. Here he saw a chariot to which the SPIRIT directed him. The man in the chariot was a foreigner, an Ethiopian by birth and

residence, but apparently a convert to Judaism. Philip led him to faith in CHRIST and baptized him.

In both these cases there were foreshadowings of a work to come in other lands and among Gentiles who had never professed the Jewish faith. But they were only foreshadowings. The real work among the Gentiles had not yet begun. But even in the foreshadowings it was the HOLY SPIRIT who directed the work.

FIVE SPIRIT-DIRECTED STEPS

In spite of CHRIST's teaching, the Church did not at first see clearly that the whole world was to be its field. It had to be led out, step by step, into its world-wide missionary ministry. We can distinguish five such steps. They are represented by five crucial acts in which the HOLY SPIRIT played a leading part. We suggest that you read them for yourself in the Book of the Acts. Before the first step was taken, Christianity was limited to Jews and Jewish converts. After the last step it was obvious that Christianity was for the whole world.

Step one: Peter preaches to Cornelius (Acts 10)

The first time the Gospel was preached to a purely Gentile group was when Peter preached in the home of the Roman centurion, Cornelius. Peter had not wanted to do it. His prejudices as a Jew kept him back. It took three divine acts to convince him that Gentiles also could have a part in the Gospel.

The first act was the heavenly vision the Lord gave him in Joppa. Three times in the vision the Lord told him to kill the animals he saw for food. Three times he refused. To a Jew they were unclean animals. And three times the Lord told him, "**What God hath cleansed, that call not thou common.**"

On the heels of this vision came the men sent by Cornelius. Cornelius, too, had had a vision in which he was told to send for Peter. Before ever Peter saw the men, the HOLY SPIRIT told him, "**Go with them, doubting nothing: for I have sent them.**" So after some hesitation he went.

But going to Cornelius was one thing, and admitting him to the blessings of the Gospel was still another. Peter's reluctance was still seen in his asking why they had sent for him. When Cornelius told of his experience, Peter was partly persuaded, especially in the light of his own vision. But it took a third divine act to seal the whole thing. As Peter explained the Gospel to the assembled group, the HOLY SPIRIT came on them as he had on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost.

This final act of the SPIRIT convinced Peter. He baptized those who had believed. Later, when the Jewish believers in Jerusalem called on him to explain, he justified himself on the ground that he had only acknowledged what the SPIRIT had already done (Acts 11:17).

This case was an exceptional one. We never find it repeated in the New Testament. Some have said that it was Peter's use of the keys to open the door of faith to the Gentiles. It was certainly an important act. Its full significance becomes even more evident later, when Paul and Barnabas

were called to account for their ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 15:7-11). It was Peter who first opened the door, but it was others who were to bear the major burden of missions to the Gentiles. Peter became rather the apostle "**of the circumcision**," with his primary ministry to Jews.

Step two: the Church in Gentile Antioch (Acts 11:19-26)

Cornelius lived in Judea. We might call it the home field. But Antioch was far beyond the borders even of the northern region of Galilee. It was a Gentile city of great importance in the eastern Mediterranean.

To Antioch the Gospel was brought by refugees. They were refugees from the persecution that began in Jerusalem when Stephen was killed. Wherever they went they spoke of CHRIST, and here in Antioch a flourishing congregation of believers sprang up through their witness. Whether any of the congregation were really Gentiles may be doubted. But Antioch was to become the first major center for spreading the Gospel among the Gentiles.

The Church in Antioch began independently of the Church in Jerusalem. But before long that Church took a definite interest in it. To investigate the situation and to establish the believers in their faith, they sent to Antioch an official representative, Barnabas. Aside from having been born abroad, Barnabas' chief qualification seems to have been that "**he was a good man, and full of the Holy Ghost and of faith.**"

Barnabas looked over the situation and rejoiced in the evident working of the SPIRIT. He decided he would stay and help. But he also thought of another helper who would probably fit in very well. Not too far away, at Tarsus in Asia Minor, lived Saul, the man who later was called Paul. Barnabas had been the one to introduce Saul to the Church at Jerusalem. Perhaps at that time Saul had told him how that at his conversion the Lord had let him know that he was to work among the Gentiles (Acts 9:15; 26:17-18). When Saul had left Jerusalem, the Lord had said, "**Depart: for I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles**" (Acts 22:21). So Saul would be peculiarly fitted to work in a Gentile city like Antioch, and Barnabas brought him in. It was an important step.

Step three: Barnabas and Saul sent forth (Acts 13).

The third step was clearly dictated by the HOLY SPIRIT. "**Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them,**" He said (verse 2). "**So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed**" (verse 4). The SPIRIT had called the men before. Now the Church at Antioch set them apart for this advance missionary work.

We must not misunderstand the significance of what took place in Antioch. The Church there was not a modern missionary Church. That is, it did not have a mission board or society; it did not set up standards of acceptance for missionary candidates nor plan their training; it did not tell them where to go nor what to do; nor did it promise them financial support on the field. But that certainly does not mean that such things are wrong.

What the Church did is this. It demonstrated its real interest in missions by heeding the instructions of the SPIRIT and sending forth two of its Church leaders and teachers. It went even

farther. It identified itself with them and the work they were to do by a sort of commissioning service, the laying on of hands. These were not two individuals acting on their own responsibility; they were sent forth by the Church. And to the Church they rendered their report when they returned.

Step four: the Jerusalem council (Acts 15).

This fourth step followed the first missionary journey of Barnabas and Paul. In fact, it was a direct result of that step and the preceding one. There were still many who were not convinced that Gentiles could be Christians-at least not without becoming Jews. The issue came to a head in Antioch. Some who had come down there from Jerusalem were teaching that the converts had to become Jews in order to be Christians.

This has been called the first really great crisis in early Christianity. It was a momentous one for Christian missions. To use CHRIST's own figure of speech, it was a case of "**new wine in old bottles**." The new wine of the Gospel could not successfully be bottled in the old Judaism.

If the Judaizers had been successful, if the converts had been required to become Jews in order to be Christians, it is conceivable that Christianity might still have been missionary. But it would have been unsuccessful. The Gospel of CHRIST is a potent force. It has in itself the power to revolutionize men and societies. But when its messengers are weighted down with all sorts of forms and conditions that they have to propagate along with it, their task becomes almost impossible. These Judaizing Pharisees may well have been honest men and sincerely Christian - yet unenlightened by the SPIRIT. They did not see then what is so obvious today, that a Christianity of the sort they proposed, so closely attached to the Judaism of that day, could never win the world.

But while we may criticize them in the light of today, we need to look out lest we fall in the same sort of error. For it is all too common in missionary work today to insist that people accept not only the Gospel, but with it all the paraphernalia to be found in our churches at home. We are not Judaizers; but we do tend to become Americanizers.

A Church council was called in Jerusalem to consider the problem. And the turning point in its deliberations came when Peter gave his testimony of how the SPIRIT had worked in the case of Cornelius. Since GOD had accepted the Gentiles on the basis of simple faith in CHRIST, why should the Church try to lay greater burdens on them? To this word was added the testimony of Barnabas and Paul. They told how the SPIRIT had worked among the Gentiles on their missionary journey.

Then the council gave its decision. The Judaizers were repudiated. The Gentiles should not be troubled in their new faith. The simple prohibitions that the council laid down were in no way a hindrance to further missionary work. Instead, the way was now clear for a greater expansion.

It is important to note that when the council gave its decision it said, "**It seemed good to the Holy Ghost and to us**" (verse 28).

Step five: to the regions beyond in Europe (Acts 16)

Our fifth and final step was taken at Troas. Paul and his companions on the second missionary journey had gone clear across Asia Minor to the northwest. As they moved forward, the SPIRIT had hemmed them in on the right hand and on the left until they came down to the sea. To go any farther would mean crossing over into Europe. It would be a big step.

This step, too, was guided by the HOLY SPIRIT. Not only had He guided the missionaries to Troas. In that city he gave Paul the well-known vision of the man of Macedonia. This determined the missionaries to go on over into Europe.

But what did this step mean? It was not the first time the Gospel was proclaimed in Europe. There were probably believers already in Rome. In fact, Paul was soon to write a letter to them before visiting them.

It may have been an indication that Christianity was to turn westward and northward for its greatest successes-to Europe rather than Asia. But take note that the Asia mentioned in verse 6 is not the continent of Asia. It was a province of Asia Minor named Asia, with Ephesus as its chief city. Paul visited it later on this same journey. Perhaps we may say that this was the first missionary entrance of Europe-the first time men went there with the deliberate purpose of spreading the Gospel. Other missionaries would soon be following. And Europe was later to be the major center of Christendom.

But perhaps just as important is the fact that this was Paul. Not in vain was he called "**the apostle of the Gentiles**," Not for naught do modern writers call him "the greatest missionary." His work was dynamic and it took firm root. It is not uncommon today to study his work in order to improve our own. His work was intensive, yet it became much more extensive than that of others. No man has left a greater mark on Christian missions than Paul.

Now Paul's ministry up to this time had been in western Asia - especially in Syria, Palestine and Asia Minor. His original home was in southeastern Asia Minor. There were many Greeks in Asia Minor, but it was still different from Europe. A water barrier separated the two continents, but with it there seems to have been also a barrier in thinking.

At least in Paul's case this seems to have been true. When the SPIRIT led him to sail across to Macedonia, it appears that in his thinking the last barrier to a world ministry was passed. He didn't stop in Macedonia. On down into Greece he went. He conceived a great desire to go on to Rome. He wrote of this to the Church at Rome and mentioned that he would like them to help him on his way farther west to Spain (Romans 15:23-24).

The first step toward a full proclamation of the Gospel among the Gentiles was taken when Peter preached to Cornelius. The last was when Paul went to Macedonia. And all along the way it was the HOLY SPIRIT who was directing the movement.

~ end of chapter 3 ~
