

"INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

WHAT CONSTITUTES A CALL

"In the year that king Uzziah died I saw also the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple. Above it stood the seraphims: each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face, and with twain he covered his feet, and with twain he did fly. And one cried unto another, and said, Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord of hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory. And the posts of the door moved at the voice of him that cried, and the house was filled with smoke. Then said I, Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphims unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar: and he laid it upon my mouth, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged. Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. And he said, Go" (Isaiah 6:1-9a)

All the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament were deeply conscious of vocation.

They were called of GOD; separated for a special task or mission; they were conscious of divine authority in their message. They were GOD's spokesmen.

Abraham (Genesis 12:1), Moses (Exodus 3:2), Gideon (Judges 6:11), Samuel (I Samuel 3:4), Isaiah (Chapter 6), Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Amos (7:14) are outstanding examples, although the circumstances of their call were diverse.

Paul, too, was convinced of his vocation - that he was an apostle **"not of men, neither by man"** but **"by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead"** (Galatians 1:1).

He begins many of his Epistles by stating that he was called to be an apostle (Romans 1:1, I Corinthians 1:1; II Corinthians 1:1; Ephesians 1:1; Colossians 1:1; I Timothy 1:1; II Timothy 1:1) and this call is "**by the will of God**" or "**by the commandment of God our Saviour.**"

Peter likewise refers to his call to be an apostle (I Peter 1:1; II Peter 1:1). John and Jude do not speak of their call directly but we read of it in the Synoptic Gospels. JESUS called the Twelve. JESUS chose and commissioned the Seventy.

Paul considered his call and his conversion simultaneous. Then and there, on the way to Damascus, he was "**separated unto the gospel**" and commissioned to carry the Good News to the Gentiles. Three times he gives a circumstantial account of what took place. He "**could not see for the glory of that light**" . . . and he "**was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision.**"

There is no doubt that in apostolic days men were called to apostolic tasks.

The Acts of the Apostles tells the story from the day of Pentecost and Peter's vision on the housetop at Joppa, to the call that came to Timothy and Titus and Epaphroditus and Silas and Luke and Mark and all the others through human instrumentality but with divine power and distinctness.

No one doubts that Raymond Lull and Francis Xavier, William Carey and Henry Martyn, Adoniram Judson and John Paton, David Livingstone and Mary Slessor, and Hudson Taylor were each severally "called" to be GOD's missionaries.

But what constitutes a call is a difficult question to answer.

It is a practical question for every earnest Christian but especially for those in training for the Gospel ministry. Is there a special call for service across the seas? Is there a special call to non-Christian lands when we face today a non-Christian world? Does GOD still say as He did to Paul, "**I will send thee far hence unto the Gentiles**"?

No class of people faces these questions from a more practical standpoint than the students in theological seminaries. They are nearly all looking forward to the Gospel ministry. They discuss the question among themselves. They know the needs of the foreign field and its opportunities from their study of missions. They know something of conditions in non-Christian lands by their study of the great religions. Most of all, it becomes an urgent personal question, the answer to which is vital when we seek to know GOD's will.

In reply to a questionnaire given to a group of students in Princeton Theological Seminary a few years ago, the following answers were characteristic.

They may not be startling in their novelty, but they are encouraging in their discernment and meaning for the present generation of students. Among fifty replies there was none that expressed doubt of the necessity for a special call of GOD for the ministry, or implied that service abroad required no special qualifications. One hesitated as to whether a special call is needed to leave the homeland, saying:

"Complete consecration is the essential thing in a call. Thus every man who is wholly consecrated to CHRIST must consider where he can be of most service in bringing the kingdom on earth. Every Christian therefore has a call to the foreign field because the need there is so great. It would be more to the point to need a special call in order to stay in this country where the need does not seem so great."

A foreign student wrote:

"In general there are two ways in which GOD calls to a certain work, whether that work be on the mission field or at home. He may speak to us directly through a vision, or we may hear His voice in our inner consciousness. This direct method is, however, rare in the present day - at least, not so common as a second method, namely, He brings about certain circumstances in our lives which determine a definite line of action.

"This method seems to be of two forms, which I shall call internal and external. In the internal instance, certain problems are raised which challenge human interest and thought. GOD calls us by illuminating our mind so that we are given insight as to the full significance of the problem, and He brings circumstances to bear upon our training and environment which fits us for that particular work.

"The call comes from an external stimulus when GOD directs outside factors to serve as stimuli, such as the advice of friends, parents, and others, or the reading of certain books, or GOD may touch our hearts by a speaker whose message is His call to us. Through my own experience I am sure that GOD's call is something very definite which is irresistible."

Another student emphasizes the idea, somewhat fancifully, that the various factors in a call are not easily determined:

"As a man may fall in love in various ways, so is a man called to the mission field. Suddenly, or gradually, he realizes that there is nothing else worthwhile in life but this. GOD has ordained that he should do this. The reason for a call is neither emotional nor entirely a matter of reason, but a combination of both."

Another said:

"The missionary call should be definite and dynamic in the life of the missionary. *To my mind the sense of need in any land is not enough.* People may be perishing; and there may be dire need for preaching and ministering in the name of CHRIST; yet these are not enough. The individual must have a sense of 'oughtness' in his own life or he won't be able to stand the challenge of the given field. A dynamic purpose, a sense of definite call must be experienced or the drive is lacking. Paul and Barnabas were good, wise preachers and ministers at Antioch, but it took a definite call of the Spirit to send them to the Gentile world."

Our last quotation is from an Oriental student pleading for his own nation and summing up the testimony:

"What constituted the missionary call for Paul at Troas constitutes the missionary call today. It was the vision of a man voicing the needs of a nation and begging Paul: '**Come over and help us.**' Paul could not resist the call and went over to help them. To those who love the Lord JESUS and who are willing to give their lives to His service and to His cause today, there comes the same vision - the vision of a nation yearning for Truth and Life. And when the vision comes, who can resist it?"

A careful study of how GOD called men and women to special tasks both in the Old and New Testament days as well as the actual experience of modern missionaries as recorded in their biographies, seems to show that there are three elements in a "call."

First, there is the revelation of a great need for the salvation of GOD or of a special task to be performed for Him. This may come by vision or dream or study or by some providential guidance.

Second, there is a sense of inadequacy, of inability or of an obstacle or difficulty that prevents acquiescence to GOD's call.

And third, there is the removal of this hindrance by divine assistance or illumination.

We have these three elements in the call of Moses, of Gideon, of Isaiah and of Jeremiah as well as in New Testament men; and yet how entirely different in other respects were their tasks and their environment. We would emphasize the fact that a sense of personal weakness or unworthiness is part of GOD's call. Humility and dependence on GOD are requisites for special service. This includes primarily the conviction that those whom GOD has saved from sin and death must tell others. "**Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel.**" First, GOD calls to salvation, and then to service: "**Son, go work today in my vineyard.**"

When GOD steps in to overcome Moses' reluctance, Gideon's fear, Isaiah's sense of sin, and Jeremiah's youthful timidity, they are each conscious of the presence of a Power not of themselves to enable them to undertake what seemed impossible.

The study of missionary biographies is proof that this is GOD's method of calling men to foreign service today. And what a fascinating study it is to trace a least common denominator in lives exceedingly different, talents utterly diverse, and labors exceptionally multiform. William Carey, Adoniram Judson, William Burns, David Livingstone, Alexander Mackay, Hudson Taylor, Albert Schweitzer - all of them heard the call, felt reluctant, unfit, or hindered by outward circumstance or inward heart-searching. And yet without doubt all were called and were faithful.

Perhaps we can best define an effectual call to service across the seas by modifying the Westminster Catechism definition of "effectual call" in the plan of salvation. It would then read:

"It is the work of GOD's Spirit, whereby convincing us of the sin and misery of the non-Christian world, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of CHRIST's command and loving purpose to save mankind, He so renews our wills that we offer ourselves unreservedly for His service wherever His providence may send us."

In answer to such an effectual call George Grenfell went to the Congo, the better-known Grenfell to Labrador, Coillard to Basutoland, Pandita Ramabai to the widows of India, Verbeck to Japan, Griffith John to China, Allen Gardiner to Patagonia, Dr. Pennell to the borders of Afghanistan, Bishop Bompas to the Far North and Bishop Patterson to the South Seas, David Brainerd to the Delaware Indians and Van der Kemp to the Hottentots.

Here we have the real apostolic succession and the continuation of the story of the heroes of faith given in the eleventh chapter of the Hebrews.

Missionary biographies are a fascinating study, but should we attempt to refer all, time would fail us.

Here is the story of two missionaries not widely known but whose influence in widely different spheres and fields of work was astonishing. Both were conscious of a definite call and through their life and death they are calling others today to the great task.

The first was W. Temple Gairdner of Cairo, Egypt; the other was Ingwer L. Nommensen of Sumatra.

On May 22, 1928, there entered into rest and the glorious life of the triumphant faithful one of the most distinguished leaders of missionary work in the Near East. From Cairo, as the center of his life activities, that wonderful spirit influenced wide circles far beyond Egypt, while in the great intellectual capital of the Moslem world his soul burned with the ardor of a star of the first magnitude in its intellectual brilliancy and the versatility of his genius.

Gairdner from his youth up had the best educational advantages, not only in a Christian home of culture and refinement, but in his preparatory studies and at Oxford. There he was soon distinguished as a scholar and he remained one all his life. He loved books and devoured them, but always with discrimination. The best Book of all books was therefore worthy of his most earnest study and most rigid spiritual discipline. While still an undergraduate he gave an address on "The First Duty of Students" which is a key to his own life:

"If once a man goes down from college without having acquired the habit of study, he will never acquire it. These years at college are our one chance. Often enough even studious men, who get caught into the busy whirl of a practical life, have perforce to drop this habit of study. But they can never lose the benefit of past habits . . . Why should Christians have narrow minds? What grace is there in them? None whatever. In fact, the very reverse. Have you never heard real unfairness in argument - a total want of sympathy with any point of view save the speaker's own - an ungracious intolerance, which makes one feel inclined to take sides against what one really believes? These are characteristics of the warped mind. And such minds are often produced by failure to study while at college. Let us be broad-minded in the true sense of that much misused, much-abused word."

One can judge how wide was the range of his scholarship by an incident that took place during the first World War.

There were more than a score of Y.M.C.A. centers and camps for the armies in Egypt. Gairdner among many others was expected to lecture at Kantara for some days to the soldiers. In answer to a question about subjects, he sent the following list of topics from which to select:

"Mohammed; Mohammedanism; The History of Egypt, Ancient, Middle, or Modern; Modern Novelists and H. G. Wells; Ancient and Modern Cosmogonies (Early Systems of Astronomy and the Latest); The Causes of the War from Caesar to Kaiser (Race Movements and European History); Some Shakespearean Plays; Robert Louis Stevenson; The development and structure of Music; How the Hieroglyphics were deciphered."

Such was the list on that half sheet of paper and he asked for half a day's notice before giving a lecture!

Judge from this the force, the grace, the versatility of the man who proposed, mid the flies and tobacco smoke of a Y.M.C.A. hut, to talk to newly enlisted men and veteran officers on such themes and yet hold their attention.

Gairdner, moreover, was not a naturally fluent speaker. His manner of speech was often hesitating and his bodily presence was sometimes against him. A friend at Oxford described him as "active, vigorous, athletic, with a well-built figure but which he generally covered with unattractive and ill-fitting clothes." Who can forget seeing him minus collar and necktie, on a bicycle reading a newspaper and pushing the pedals to be on time at a committee.

With one great purpose in life, to exalt and preach CHRIST crucified, Gairdner was careless of many conventionalities. He was too busy about men's souls to spend much time on dress; his versatile mind, ever ready to turn its attention in a new and unexplored quarter, could not fix itself on the trivial things of life and sometimes seemed to wander far from the obviously close at hand. This explains his frequent absent-mindedness. He was a good storyteller, an excellent companion, a skillful musician (on the piano and the organ, which he often played simultaneously); he was also an artist in temperament, a dramatist and a poet in English and Arabic. All of these gifts of genius he laid on the altar of service for the King.

Here was a missionary who gave one short lifetime of service, in one place, to one great idea - the evangelization of Moslems. He found his lever and fulcrum in Cairo and set out to move a world.

His call to special service in Egypt came through a godly woman, Miss Annie Van Sommer, at a summer conference, and her penetrating word spoken in faith had results far beyond all expectation. He never doubted it was GOD's definite, irrevocable summons to a great task.

Before he sailed for Egypt to work under the Church Missionary Society he gave unstinted service to the Christian Student Movement in Great Britain. He wrote three study textbooks on prayer and on the Gospel of John; he won recruits immediately for service abroad; he deepened spiritual life in the universities, for he had already come under the influence of men such as John R. Mott, Robert P. Wilder and Robert E. Speer. No wonder that he wrote:

"Our purpose must be, then to enter every college in the Kingdom, and having entered it, win it wholly for CHRIST. Or, to put it into a phrase, must not our aims be: to win the colleges for CHRIST, each of all and all of each? . . . While our Unions are touching a mere set, as many of them still are, and not reaching much of the strongest and best material at all; while men are not being won - and how few men are being won! - while the very desire to win them, instead of burning like a fire within the bones of those who profess CHRIST, is often cold, or sometimes positively does not exist - is our ideal realized?"

Gairdner's missionary ideals were lofty but sober. No one realized so keenly as he that the evangelization of Egypt was humanly an impossible task. He did not underestimate the strength of Islam, nor was he ignorant of the tremendous undertow in the surf for those who tried to save the lost. If ever a man travailed and toiled to bring a rescued man through the breakers, it was Gairdner. At his funeral some of these trophies of GOD's saving grace broke down in tears when they remembered what their salvation had cost him.

In his little book, *The Rebuke of Islam*, he stated truly that Islam was "the impossible-possible problem. For it is the only one of the great religions to come after Christianity; the only one that definitely claims to correct, complete and supercede Christianity; the only one that categorically denies the truth of Christianity; the only one that has in the past signally defeated Christianity; the only one that seriously disputes the world with Christianity; the only one which, in several parts of the world, is today forestalling and gaining on Christianity."

Face to face with such a problem, in the presentation of CHRIST, Gairdner was not only an earnest missionary but an able apologist and theologian.

All through his quarter of a century of service in Egypt, preaching, organizing, and dealing with many inquirers - the missionary found time (nay, took the golden hours) to write. The list of Gairdner's Arabic publications cover many fields of literature. Eleven tracts and books on Islam and Christianity came from his fertile pen and some of them were often reprinted and translated; all of them are increasingly valuable. He also wrote twelve books on Bible study and Bible biography; six on prayer and the devotional life, for Oriental Christians.

In the English language we have from his pen *The Life of D. L. Thornton, Edinburgh 1910*, *The Rebuke of Islam*, *Notes on the Epistle to the Romans*, and three important works on the Arabic language, its grammar, prosody and phonetics. In addition to all this he founded a Christian monthly Magazine in Arabic and English and was its chief editor for twenty-one years. Its circulation and support was his constant care, and, before his death, his pen was able to extend its influence in widening circles, from Alexandria to Khartoum and beyond.

It is, however, not the quantity but the quality of Gairdner's literary work that is astonishing. His *What Happened Before the Hegira?* is one of the most telling approaches to the Moslem mind ever written. The same is true of his *Death of the Perfect Man* as an interpretation of the very heart of the Atonement.

Most of all, this man of ten talents was a friend.

He had the genius and the passion for making and holding friendships regardless of racial, social, or linguistic differences. His mind was international; he loved to bridge differences; he had a passion for Christian unity and felt personally humiliated when missionary groups or individuals failed to understand each other.

During the last months of Gairdner's severe illness, the circle of friends which surrounded him was composed of men, women and children, Syrians, Egyptians, Americans, Germans, Swedes, British, of every church and from among Moslems. At the funeral all Christian Cairo was represented - it was a common sorrow for the loss of a friend that brought so heterogeneous a company to the church and around the grave. Like Daniel, he was "**a man greatly beloved.**"

Called of GOD, beloved of GOD and faithful unto death - yet if we count results in converts his harvest was only a handful of souls!

How different was the life of the German pioneer to Sumatra who reaped a rich harvest from a field ripe through earlier martyrdoms.

Ingwer Lodewijk Nommensen was a five-month-old infant when the American Baptist missionaries Lyman and Munson were murdered at Sibolga in 1834. His home was on a little island of the North Sea called Noordstrand, off the coast of Schleswig-Holstein. It was a home of desperate poverty. When scarcely more than a baby, Nommensen learned to linger at the homes of his little playmates until they had eaten, in order that he might obtain the scraps of food left on the plates. At the age of four, he crouched behind his mother while an angry rent-collector threatened and berated her. When he was eight years old he supplemented his mother's earnings by working as a shepherd during the summer months. At the age of ten he labored on a farm and did a man's work.

Two years later he was wrestling with some other boys beside the road and fell under the feet of a horse. The horse and the wheels of the carriage which he drew passed over the boy, crushing his leg. A year of intense suffering followed. Nommensen still longed to assist his mother. He learned to knit and sew and dragged himself about the hut preparing the food. A new teacher came to the school that winter and every day Nommensen's old schoolmates came to tell him the stories which the teacher had told them that day. These were stories of missionaries who had gone to far lands to take the message of the Gospel to those "**who dwelt in darkness.**" The boy's heart burned within him as he listened. The Bible was the only book which his parents possessed and he read it avidly.

One day a doctor came to the island and visited the Nommensen hut. He looked at the diseased leg and said, "His foot must be cut off as the bone is full of pus. It is the only way to save his life."

Nommensen heard the words of the doctor but he felt that would defeat his life-plan. He opened his Bible and read:

"Verily, verily I say unto you. Whatsoever ye shall ask the Father in my name, He will give it you."

The boy pondered these words for a long time, and then called his mother.

"Mother, is it really so, that these words are true, even to this time?"

"Yes, they are true."

"Well, if they are, let us be zealous in asking from now on, that GOD heal my foot." He bowed his head and folded his thin little hands reverently as he prayed, "Oh GOD! Heal my foot! - and after that, send me to the heathen!"

Six weeks later the people of the village were astonished to learn that the lad's foot was completely healed.

When Nommensen was nineteen years of age a rich woman adopted his youngest sister, and he was no longer needed to assist in the support of his family. He felt that the time had come to fulfil his promise to GOD. He bought a new Bible, a Testament, catechism and hymn book and prepared to go to the heathen.

He set out for Okholm where an uncle lived whose sons were sailors. He hoped they would take him to the heathen. But he had to wait long.

In the meantime he had secured a good training for his life work. In June, 1861, he graduated from the seminary at Batmen, Germany, and in October of the same year was ordained a minister of the gospel.

On December 24th, 1861, he sailed from Amsterdam, Holland, and one hundred forty-two days later reached Padang, Sumatra!

Nommensen arrived in Sibolga on June 23rd, 1862, just twenty-eight years from the day on which Lyman and Munson left Sibolga to begin the journey to Silindung, which ended in their murder five days later. They were eaten by cannibals.

Nommensen started his journey to Silindung. He encountered many hardships on the journey and suffered from frequent attacks of malaria, but finally reached his destination. He was not welcomed by the Bataks of Silindung, however.

Everywhere he met hostility and distrust and he was frequently ordered to leave. After long patience he won the heart of a Raja and built a house and small school on a small islet.

When Nommensen's house was completed he began to seek information concerning the murder of Lyman and Munson. When he learned that Raja Panggalamei, chief of their murderers, was still alive and dwelling in the little village of Sisangkak, he decided to take the Gospel to him.

He reached the village in late afternoon and found the Raja's house enclosed by a bamboo hedge four meters high. He entered the enclosure quietly and motioned his Batak companions to wait outside in silence while he went into the house.

Raja Panggalamei was seated by the fire. Thirty years had passed since the killing of Lyman and Munson and he had never seen another white man. When Nommensen entered and sat down beside him the Raja was stricken with terror and began to tremble violently and fled.

New trials awaited him but he preached until heathen hearts relented. At a great heathen feast the first break came. Many believed and were baptized. He labored on for fifty-seven years among these cannibal tribes. When he died in 1918 there were over 100,000 baptized Batak-Christians, fifty-five missionaries and over seven hundred native workers. This work of the Rhenish mission begun by Nommensen is one of the miracles of GOD's grace. Today there are over 300,000 Christians in Sumatra.

Who can doubt that the dauntless German lad with a crushed foot but uncrushed faith was called of GOD to be a missionary. [1]

In each case we have the three elements of an effectual call. And so many others were called, and are being called today. Called to preach the Gospel; to go into all the world; to finish the task of evangelism; to **"occupy till He come."**

Gairdner and Nommensen are striking examples of the effectual call of GOD to the foreign field. Even as CHRIST chose His apostles and called them to forsake all and follow Him; even as Paul was called to be an apostle and **"separated unto the gospel,"** so GOD's Spirit and GOD's providence call and separate today.

When great multitudes followed JESUS, He turned and said to them: **"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple"** (Luke 14:25-27).

A generation ago, Robert E. Speer said to a great student convention: "The Evangelization of the World in this Generation is the summons of JESUS CHRIST to every one of the disciples to lay himself upon a cross, himself to walk in the footsteps of Him who, though He was rich, for our sakes became poor, that we through His poverty might be rich, himself to count his life as of no account, that he may spend it as CHRIST spent His for the redemption of the world."

"INTO ALL THE WORLD" signifies for each of us the world of our day, the post-war world of tomorrow. We must carry the good news to the most neglected and difficult fields, as well as to countries where the harvest is ripe and the call is for reapers in ever-increasing numbers. The plea of destitution is even stronger than that of opportunity. Opportunism is not the last word in missions. The open door beckons; the closed door challenges him who has a right to enter. The unoccupied fields of the world have therefore a claim of peculiar weight and urgency. In this twentieth century of Christian missions there should be no unoccupied fields.

There are great and effectual open doors. And there are also gates of brass and bars of iron that remind us of many adversaries. But JESUS calls o'er the tumult of the present wild and restless world to follow Him.

"As of old apostles heard it
By the Galilean lake
Turned from home and toil and kindred
Leaving all for His dear sake."

We can best vindicate and interpret the Great Commission as the apostles did: "**They went forth and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word with signs following**" (Mark 16:20).

FOOTNOTES:

1 This sketch is based on a brief biography by Vera E. Ostrom of Sumatra in *The Malaysia Messenger*. The only biographies of this pioneer are in German.

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