

# "INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:  
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### THE APOSTOLIC MESSAGE

**"For I determined not to know any thing among you, save JESUS CHRIST, and him crucified"** (I Corinthians 2:2)

**"But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God. And now, behold, I know that ye all, among whom I have gone preaching the kingdom of God, shall see my face no more. Wherefore I take you to record this day, that I am pure from the blood of all men. For I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God. Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood"** (Acts 20:24-28).

It will be all in vain for us to seek to emulate the apostolic methods in our day if we have lost the apostolic message. Evangelism without words, without a message, is a contradiction. Yet there are those in our day who use the term "evangelism" for anything and everything save preaching the Gospel.

There is danger, firstly, that we accommodate our essential message, "**Christ and Him crucified**" to the threefold trend in our day so evident in the non-Christian world. Dr. Edwards, editor of *Dnyanodaya*, the leading Christian paper of Western India, wrote (Oct. 23, 1930):

"There are three strands one can pick up out of the tangled skein: the current idealization of Hinduism; the growing revolt against the idea of GOD; and the exalting of politics and patriotism into a religion."

This is still true today.

These three currents or trends are found not only in India but in China, and in the Near East.

- The idealization of the old religions by efforts at reform or rehabilitation;
- The exaltation of nationalism into a new religion, in which patriotism becomes hero-worship;
- The repudiation of all religion as mere folly and superstition.

All three of these trends are due directly or indirectly to the impact of the West (its missions and its secularism) on the East. The disintegration of the old religious life manifests itself in these three ways everywhere. The tragedy of the situation is that all of them seem to lead away from CHRIST - the CHRIST of the Indian road and of every road.

"When we speak of the idealization of Hinduism," says Dr. Edwards, "we are largely thinking of the educated section of India. This idealization is marked by a double characteristic; the first is what the late Dr. Farquhar meant when he spoke of an outward revival of modern Hinduism accompanied by a deepening internal decay. None who studies modern Hinduism can have any doubt either about the external revival as seen in the observing of all festivals with a punctiliousness which only Hindus can show or about the internal decay which is spreading like a canker to every part of the Hindu system.

"The other characteristic marking what we have called the idealizing going on in present-day Hinduism is the marvelous power of assimilation Hinduism displays in relation to truth, by its being able to absorb Christian principles up to a certain point and shedding the remainder like a snake shedding its skin."

The peril of syncretism, especially in South India, is real. In North India, Islam and converts from Islam act as a strong bulwark for theism, but in South India the leaven of pantheism can with difficulty be kept out even from Christian thought and life. This present-day idealization of Hinduism is evident in rose-colored views of caste, and the repudiation of its evil influence, in a growing defense of idolatry, as mere symbolism, and in putting Krishna on a parallel with CHRIST as one of the world's saviours. Some Hindu writers compare the Bhagavad-Gita with the New Testament and profess to find better and higher teaching in the former book.

In Islam there are evidences of the same general tendency to idealize. It began with Seyyid Amir *Ali's life of Mohammed* and received impetus from the Western apologists for Islam or perverts to Islam. The unscrupulous efforts of the Ahmadiya Movement in Qadian, Lahore and London have broadcasted and emphasized all that could be gleaned from these writers.

Islam, they say, never used the sword, save in self-defense! They maintain that it is a religion of peace and good-will, of tolerance and brotherhood; that Mohammed's character and life were ideal in every respect. They go so far as to praise Mohammed as the champion of women's rights, to assert that he was a monogamist and that toleration was the chief characteristic of early Islam! One could give similar instances from Japan and China of attempts to idealize Shintoism and Buddhism. Everywhere the non-Christian world is super-sensitive to any criticism of heathen idolatry or ethics.

*Our godless civilization and the neo-paganism of the West is winning disciples in the East.*

The atheistic or materialistic philosophies of Europe and America have captivated many of the educated classes. Russian Communism and Fascism in many forms have extended to all lands.

The fool no longer says in his heart,  
"There is no GOD"  
- he shouts it on the radio.

Add to all this an ardent spirit of nationalism which knows no religion save patriotism. The secular republic of Turkey and the totalitarian states of Germany, Italy and Japan are outstanding examples.

When we turn from Asia and Europe to America, what do we find?

A writer in the *Christian Century* a few years ago gave a correct diagnosis of what he called the slump in foreign missions and said it was due to three causes:

"We have lost the sense of CHRIST's supremacy, of CHRIST's sufficiency and of the urgency of our message."

Some voices declare that the Gospel message of the apostles and of the early missionaries who laid the foundations of the national churches in Asia and Africa needs modification by way of addition, subtraction, compromise, syncretism, or synthesis.

Professor Hocking of Harvard University advocates a new World Faith with elements of value taken from all the living religions of humanity. Others plead for an entire change of missionary method and program. This newer form of "evangelism" wishes to spare the convert any violent break from his old environment. It speaks of "Christianizing Hinduism" and of "evangelizing Islam."

Dr. Duncan B. Macdonald of Hartford put the present-day issue very clearly:

"Are the missionaries of the future to be missionaries of CHRIST or missionaries of the Christian civilization of the West? This is the alternative which we face at present, although it is often disguised behind forms of words which conceal its real nature and essential importance. Do the missionaries of our Christian churches go out to proclaim to the world the unique and divine fact of the Incarnation or to carry to the non-Christian world the benefits-educational, medical, generally humanitarian - which have grown up in our civilization under the stimulus and guidance of the Christian faith?" [1]

And what is the message of the Evangel? It could not be stated more forcibly than by a writer in the latest edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Vol. XIX, p. 240): "Evangelism stands for a certain interpretation of Christianity emphasizing the objective atonement of CHRIST, the necessity of new birth or conversion and salvation through faith."

This is a fair statement of the essentials of the evangel. Paul made this very message central and primary. **"Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; By which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain"** (I Corinthians 15:1-2).

And what is this message of good news, this Gospel, so emphatically introduced by a fivefold repetition? **"That Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; And that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures."**

There is no other evangel than these historic facts and their tremendous implications. Any kind of evangelism that is silent in this respect is no evangelism at all. If CHRIST died for our sins His death was a reality and His resurrection confirms its necessity and validity as the only atonement for sin. The Cross is the one central message and method and power of Christianity. As Dr. Macdonald reminds us (in the article quoted):

"The whole Eastern, non-Christian world is theologically minded, and when our missionaries go to them with a non-theological temper of mind, they are simply unintelligible. The East is quite certain that these men know nothing of religion, that the Divine Spirit has never spoken to them. They may bring in their hands many very useful things for our present life, here and now; they may be teachers, physicians, helpers in many ways. But if they do not come to proclaim a definite theological teaching which produces a life-transforming faith they are a puzzle to the, Oriental. Why do they come? What is their motive? The whole East understands a theological motive; but when that is obscured, the East is only too ready to impute other and discreditable motives."

When the International Missionary Council met in Jerusalem, in 1928, such a clear distinction, as we have here, would have saved hours of time and reams of paper. For long and weary days we had been hearing and discussing papers on *"the spiritual values of the non-Christian religions."*

The Scandinavian and German delegates had entered a protest, before the Conference met, against this whole attitude in evangelism. And in the midst of the discussion Dr. Hendrik Kraemer of the Netherlands arose to ask startlingly, "What were the value of these values?" He compared them to the erstwhile value of the German mark! All the religions are spiritually bankrupt before the gold standard of CHRIST.

It was this Dr. Kraemer who prepared a volume, ten years later, for the Madras Conference, on *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*. He led us from Jerusalem to Madras and back to the Bible - a long journey but well worth his toil and scholarship. He states and proves that the heart of the Christian Message, without which it is lifeless, includes three great facts: the Incarnation; the Atonement; and Justification by faith. It is an entirely new way of life which has nothing in common with that of other faiths. The same unique distinction applies to Christian ethics, because only CHRIST reveals sin and holiness, and conquers sin (pages 73-85). His Chapter IV is a complete answer, a devastating reply, to those who tell us that CHRIST came to fulfill Hinduism or that Confucianism is the Old Testament of the new Chinese Church. Here the author seems to agree with Barth "in his thunder-stroke sentence" that there is no point of contact between Christianity and the pseudo-religions (page 131).

The missionary approach, according to Kraemer, is not at all "by sharing religious experience." We call men to repent. "Evangelization, proselytism and conversion then belong to the core of the missionary enterprise" (pages 283-290). When we reject "the validity of its apostolic and prophetic inspiration we have, fundamentally speaking, nothing else than the suicide of missions, though in practice they may continue for a certain period of time and even accomplish much work of noble quality" (page 209). These words of Dr. Kraemer are simply a new and bold expression of the central idea of the apostolic message.

Of Paul's preaching we have in the Acts three examples: The sermon at Antioch in Pisidia; the speech at Lystra; and that at Athens.

The first (Acts 13:16-41) deals with the Crucifixion, the Resurrection and a call to repent. This was addressed to the Jews. It is clear, definite and bold. It unfolds the story of the gospel and appeals for decision. The other two examples are Paul's method in preaching to the Gentiles. They are more brief but nevertheless typical of his approach to the central message and its climax, the Resurrection.

In his preaching at Corinth he determines "**to know nothing . . . save Jesus Christ, and him crucified**" (I Corinthians 2:2), while at Ephesus his message was "**repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Acts 20:21). [2]

He was not ashamed of the gospel (Romans 1:16). But he was ashamed of Roman civilization, of the Jews (because of whom the Name of GOD was blasphemed) and of himself because he had persecuted the early Church.

Paul in the first century faced a world much like that of our day. It was much smaller in area but also unified by Greek culture and Roman rule. He also witnessed grasping imperialism, subject races, vile slavery, emperor-worship, race-hatreds, abject poverty under the shadow of selfish luxury. Two empires were in deadly conflict, as today. It was Caesar or CHRIST; the Sword or the Cross.

Paul's was not a spineless, sentimental evangel. It was the good news of a living Saviour who died and rose again - of a joyful deliverance! To men and women of our day, with nerves on edge, with a world-order breaking up into chaos, with men's hearts failing for fear, *the gospel of CHRIST is not a challenge to do our best - to build a new world - to share each others' experiences.* That would be hopeless!

No - the gospel tells of human bankruptcy and CHRIST's wealth, of man's tragic failure and CHRIST's triumph, of a whole world guilty before GOD: because all have sinned and come short of GOD's righteousness.

The Gospel to Paul was a message of coming doom and of divine deliverance. It sounded the death-knell of all self-righteousness and proclaimed the joy and peace of CHRIST's perfect righteousness, first imputed and then imparted, both freely of GOD's grace. This Epistle to the Romans is the biography of Paul's own soul, pages from his spiritual diary.

We are often too close to the story of the Cross in the New Testament and too familiar with its language to appreciate its tremendous implications, deep significance and finality. It was "**the mystery hidden for ages**" and now revealed in CHRIST which was the heart of Paul's preaching. It was the content of that Gospel which held him spellbound: the breadth, the length, the height, the depth of GOD's love for the lost, in CHRIST JESUS.

There was a second reason why Paul was not ashamed of the Gospel. It was dynamic. It had power to produce new character - to transform society, to transfigure lives. For nineteen centuries the Gospel of CHRIST has been the dynamic of GOD in world-evangelism. It remained for Karl Marx and Lenin in this century to call it "the opiate of the people."

The Good News is the dynamic force that sets men right with GOD, with themselves, and toward their neighbors. Paul uses five figurative expressions in this one Epistle to show how GOD accomplishes this. The Epistle is not dry theology but living experience. We hide the truth and darken counsel by theological terms: justification, reconciliation, sanctification, redemption and adoption.

Paul saw:

- An accused person standing before a Roman court pronounced guiltless;
- An enemy changed into a friend;
- A debtor whose debts were all paid for him by another; and
- A slave set free and welcomed as a member of a Roman family.

The illustrations are all taken from the forum and market place.

"We shall not understand Paul," says Dr. Deissmann, "until all these various aspects of salvation become one single full chord of harmony. Once accused before GOD, an enemy of GOD, a debtor, a slave now in CHRIST, acquitted and redeemed free from debt, the friend of GOD and a son of GOD."

No wonder that this letter has its Hallelujah Chorus in the eighth chapter.

The Christians of Paul's day (as now in Poland and Germany and China) were suffering tribulation and distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril and sword. Nevertheless Paul writes, "**I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.**"

The apostolic message is the only Gospel for a day as dark as ours - a world at war and churches in the catacombs; hunger and starvation stalking over Europe and China in an atmosphere of despair and suicide; men's hearts failing them for fear; darkness where for many faith seems impossible. Hope is dead and love struggles against hate. We seem to be back in the dark ages of demonic persecution, heartless exile, sadistic cruelty.

Yet in this thick darkness the one ray of hope is the old Gospel.

Dr. Adolf Keller, than whom no one knows the churches better, asserts that "preaching today has no use for those shallow moralistic recipes and that utopian perfectionism which were the natural accompaniments of an optimistic Christian idealism . . . The central theme for present-day preaching is the Cross, the unfathomable depth of the world's sin and the unfathomable depth of GOD's love as revealed in CHRIST who died for us that we might live. **'Repent ye, the kingdom of God is at hand.'** And this kingdom begins with judgment, before the glory and mercy of GOD are revealed." [3]

This is still the Apostolic message.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

1 "The Essence of Christian Missions," *The Moslem World*, (October, 1939).

2 Cf. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* Chapter VII, "The Preaching."

3 *Christian. Europe Today*, New York, 1942, p. 142.

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