

"INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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CHAPTER THREE

THE UNIVERSALITY OF JESUS

“For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 8:26-29).

“After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb” (Revelation 7:9-10).

In the previous chapter we gave some of the evidence for the finality of JESUS CHRIST, challenged in our day as in the first century.

Here we deal with the universality of His mission and message in His own consciousness. CHRIST is final because He is universal, and He is universal because He is final. JESUS CHRIST is final in the sense of the absolute.

He is the conclusion and climax of GOD's revelation to man (Hebrews 1:1).

- His salvation is ultimate.
- His commands can never be abrogated.
- What He says precludes controversy.

He is the first and the last. His is the only Name. He is our only message. CHRIST confronts life as its universal Judge for He is the Son of GOD as well as the Son of Man. That is what we mean by the finality of JESUS CHRIST.

Here the question is: Was JESUS in the days of His flesh conscious of a universal mission? Was He "**the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe**"? Had He a universal horizon, a wider outlook than Judaism?

For nineteen hundred years all those who believe the Gospel would have answered yes to these questions, but modern rationalists and critics have made a problem of that which seems self-evident in the Gospel narrative.

Four views are advanced regarding the universality of JESUS:

The first is the extreme view of Hegel, Tolstoi and others that JESUS was anti-Semitic and conscious only of a universal mission!

The exact opposite view is that JESUS was at heart a Jew and limited His horizon and message to the house of Israel. Reimarus, Strauss, Wellhausen and Harnack are representatives of this other radical view and they have had many followers.

A third school of critics say that JESUS was at first narrow and Jewish and that only toward the end of His life did He become conscious of a world-mission (Keim, Hausrath, Bertholet, Bernard Weiss).

Against all of these radical views is the traditional one held by believing scholars, Roman Catholic and Protestant, namely, JESUS from the outset of His ministry had a view of humanity as a whole, but felt that He was sent especially to the lost sheep of the house of Israel; nevertheless He taught His apostles by degrees that He was to be the Saviour of all men and finally gave them their universal mission. [1]

It is worthwhile to study the Gospels carefully and find there:

- (1) the implied universalism of JESUS;
- (2) universalism expressed in His teaching;
- (3) the missionary ideas in His public ministry; and
- (4) the climax of this universalism in the Great Commission.

In following this outline we shall come to the conclusion of Johnston Ross in his *Universality of JESUS* (London, 1907):

"The singular freedom of JESUS CHRIST's message from all that would be hampering local and provincial in its setting takes new meaning when we begin to understand why the Gospel has so wonderfully acclimatized itself in all lands and why Christendom is already the one truly cosmopolitan state" (p. 113).

What we see before our eyes (despite the awful tragedy of the present World War), namely, an ecumenical Church and world-wide evangelism, was in the heart and mind of JESUS in the days of His flesh.

1. JESUS broke away from Jewish parochialism at the very beginning of His ministry.

He was the friend of publicans and sinners. His view of the kingdom of GOD was not temporal but spiritual, not national but super-national. That kingdom comes not with outward show, "**for, behold the kingdom of God is within you**" (Luke 17:21).

Those who heard the Sermon on the Mount were not exclusively Jews but came from Galilee of the Gentiles and Decapolis and from beyond Jordan (Matthew 4:25; Luke 6:17).

- The Beatitudes are, therefore, universal in their outlook.
- The disciples are "**the light of the World,**" not of Jewry (Matthew 5:14).
- The righteousness of the new kingdom exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees.
- Prayer is not limited to class or creed or place. "**After this manner pray ye: Our Father.**" He is the Father of all men and sends His rain and sunshine on the good and the evil.

Again we have the Name JESUS gave Himself, Son of Man. It includes His Messianic consciousness (Daniel 7:14, 27) but also His sense of a universal mission. When Nathanael confesses, "**Thou art the Son of God; Thou art the King of Israel,**" JESUS points to His greater mission: "**Ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man**" (John 1:51).

The Son of Man will come to judge all nations (Matthew 25:31) and not His own people only.

Although GOD is repeatedly termed "**Father**" in the Old Testament (Exodus 4:22; Deuteronomy 32:5; Isaiah 63:16; Jeremiah 8:4; Hosea 11:1), JESUS CHRIST first used the word "**Father**" in a deeper and more universal sense.

The entire New Testament uses this term "**Father,**" and it occurs in every one of the twenty-seven books save the Third Epistle of John. Even there men are called brethren - sons of a common Father who so loved the whole world that He gave His only begotten Son.

Here we emphasize a distinction often forgotten.

We must remember that the Fatherhood of GOD by creation is of wider range than that of redemption.

- By creation all mankind are sons of GOD (Luke 8:88).
- By redemption only those are sons who are reborn of the Spirit.

To believe in GOD's universal Fatherhood is not to deny that men are by nature sinful since the fall, and that only by adoption do we receive the Spirit that cries, "**Abba, Father.**"

But the Old and the New Testaments in many places teach the Fatherhood of GOD by creation. He is even called the Father of lights - that is, of the starry universe (James 1:17).

- Moses appeals to good and bad alike as children of the Father (Deuteronomy 82:6).
- Malachi says that even those who profane the covenant have one Father and one GOD (Malachi 1:6; 2:10).
- There are direct appeals that indicate GOD's universal Fatherhood (Isaiah 1:2; Hosea 11:8; 6:4, etc.).

GOD is not the GOD of the Jews only but also of the Gentiles. He is the Father of all races and hath made all of one blood (Acts 17:26). His universal call to repentance still is, "**Return, ye backsliding children**" (Jeremiah 8:12, 22; Luke 15:20). He is the Father of all prodigals even when they are "**a great way off.**"

No one can escape the universalism of John 8:16.

Even Harnack, who rejects the genuineness of John's Gospel, states that "it is saturated with statements of a directly universalistic character. JESUS is the Saviour of the world . . . The most significant thing of all is that this Gospel makes Greeks ask after JESUS (12:20). . . But He must first of all die. It is as the exalted One that He will succeed in drawing all men to Himself . . . JESUS, by preaching of GOD as the Father, and by His own death, founded the universal religion." [2]

If GOD is our Father, then men are brethren; and it is in this universal sense that JESUS uses the word "**brother**" (Matthew 28:8; 5:22; 7:8; John 18:14).

In these passages and many others JESUS does not refer to believers only but to humanity in the larger sense. This is evident in the answer to Peter's question, "**How often shall I forgive my brother who sins against me?**" His command to love our enemies and his prayer, "**Father; forgive them; for they know not what they do,**" both indicate universal love, not love toward believers only.

2. There is more than implied universalism.

It is expressed clearly and repeatedly. Tyre and Sidon and Sodom are to have more mercy in the day of doom than unrepentant Israel (Luke 10:18). In His words at Nazareth in the synagogue, recorded in all the Synoptic Gospels, JESUS points out GOD's redemptive love to the widow of Zarephath and to Naaman the Syrian - both beyond the pale of Israel. Nineveh hearkened to the preaching of Jonah and the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon. These examples He gave of the receptiveness of the heathen heart to GOD's message, in bitter contrast to Israel's unbelief.

Nor can we forget the announcement of John the Baptist, "**Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world** (cosmos)."

He was not the Lamb of propitiation for Israel alone but for the sin of the whole world, as John the Evangelist interprets it later (I John 2:2).

Consider also the first occasion when JESUS met one outside of Israel (Matthew 8:5), a centurion of another race, who said, "**I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof.**"

JESUS marveled at Gentile faith and then uttered the glorious promise "**that many shall come from the east and west**" to enter the kingdom, whereas the sons of the kingdom are cast forth into outer darkness.

Could there be a more striking example of universalism and Messianic consciousness? The universality of JESUS here transcends not only geographical boundaries but the boundaries of time. His horizon includes the final judgment of humanity.

Again, we have the attitude of JESUS toward the Samaritans, with whom no orthodox Jew in His day would have any dealings. In the Synoptic Gospels we have the rebuke of JESUS to James and John who wished to send fire on a Samaritan village (Luke 9:55). The parable of the Good Samaritan is proof of the sharp method of JESUS in teaching racial equality and human brotherhood. In Luke also, the one grateful man among the ten lepers was a Samaritan. Here again is the same emphasis.

In John's Gospel we are told that JESUS "**must needs go through Samaria**" (John 4:4).

This was not a geographical but a moral necessity. And at the well of Jacob, CHRIST revealed the wideness of His mediatorial work not only to her who came to draw water but to His disciples. "**Lift up your eyes, and look on the fields; for they are white already to harvest.**"

In His parables He had already interpreted this universal promise.

- "**The field is the world.**"
- "**The harvest is the end of the world.**"
- "**The reapers are the angels.**"

In John's Gospel also we read that when they reviled JESUS, saying, "**Thou art a Samaritan, and hast a devil,**" He entirely ignored the former taunt in His consciousness of racial unity with all humanity (John 8:49).

The universal invitation of JESUS in Matthew 11:28, taken in its full context, is one of the strongest proofs of His consciousness of Messianic world-mission. "**All things are delivered unto me of my Father . . . Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.**"

No wonder that destructive criticism has done its utmost to attack the genuineness of the passage, but without result.

Many of the parables of JESUS also have the note of universalism; e.g., the mustard seed, the leaven, the net cast into the sea. If Zacchaeus was a Gentile (as many commentators believe) we have in CHRIST's words to him another beautiful illustration of universality:

"This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:1-10).

The parable of the two sons (Matthew 21:28-30) is followed by a declaration that **"the publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom of God"** rather than unrepentant Jews.

The Temple was the palladium of Judaism in the time of CHRIST. What was CHRIST's attitude toward this central shrine which excluded Gentiles from its inner precincts? He cleansed the Temple and asserted, **"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."**

He met the Greeks in the Outer Court. He foretold its utter destruction and spoke of the temple of His body as the antitype of all that was sacred in the Temple worship.

- **"I am the light of the world."**

- **"I am the bread of life."**

At His death the veil into the Holy of Holies was rent from top to bottom, opening a way for all nations to the heart of GOD.

3. Why did JESUS choose twelve apostles?

What was their mission? Why did He send out the Seventy? Here we find the chief argument of those who would limit JESUS' horizon to Judaism. Do we not read (Matthew 10:5), **"Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not: but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"**; and again, in verse 23, **"Verily I say unto you, ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."**

Harnack flatly says, "If this verse is genuine, the work among Gentiles was not on the horizon of JESUS."

The reply is obvious.

This passage has two parts; verses 5-15 deal with the early mission of the Twelve to Israel, and verses 16-23 are concerned with their later apostolic work and that of their successors. Otherwise, why does verse 18 speak of being **"brought before governors and kings . . . for a testimony against them and the Gentiles"**? Or of being hated not by Jews but of **"all men for my name's sake"**?

CHRIST's early mission of the Twelve and later of the Seventy was preparatory but also predictive.

Persecution did follow the early Church in Jerusalem and those **"that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the word."**

The choice of the Seventy may have had reference to the ancient Jewish belief, based on Genesis 9, that the Gentile nations numbered seventy. [3]

We do not press the point, however, since they also were sent only to those places "**where he himself would come.**"

Pfleiderer says, "The mission of the Seventy was a symbolic anticipation of the Pauline Gospel to all the nations."

It was only after the Resurrection that the Gospel message was completed. CHRIST's death and resurrection were the apostolic message (I Corinthians 15:3), and this could not be preached universally until all had been accomplished.

The conversation of JESUS on the northern border of Palestine with the Syro-Phoenician woman has its difficulties (Matthew 15:21-28); but the fact is that JESUS honored faith and healed her daughter. Even although the Jews considered the uncircumcised Gentiles as "*little dogs*," they were to share the crumbs of the Master's table!

Before the Great Commission was given we have in Matthew 24:14 (cf. also Mark 13:10) the words: "**This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations.**"

Finally, we have the story of the anointing at the house of Simon in Bethany, which occurred at the beginning of Holy Week. There could be no stronger assertion of CHRIST's conscious universality than the prophetic words : "**Verily I say unto you, Wheresoever this gospel shall be preached in the whole world, there shall also this, that this woman hath done, be told for a memorial of her**" (Matthew 26:6-13).

Pilate's superscription on the Cross was in three languages:

- Hebrew, the language of scattered Israel;
- Greek, the language of world-culture; and
- Latin, that of world-empire.

Here again in the hour of His agony we see the universality of the Saviour. At the foot of the Cross were representatives of Europe, Asia and Africa (Simon the Cyrene). The Great Commission followed after the Resurrection. Then came Pentecost and Paul, the Gentile apostle.

The Old Testament, which CHRIST came to fulfill and not to destroy, clearly foreshadowed the universality of the promised Messiah.

It is remarkable how many of the ancient heathen religions are referred to in the Bible. Every careful reader of the Old Testament notices the number and variety of the forms of idolatry with which Israel came into contact: Babylonian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Phoenician, Moabite, Ammonite, Hittite, Philistine, Greek and Roman cults and deities - "**gods many and lords many.**"

Yet, in the midst of such an environment, the universal mission and message of Israel to the nations was never lost from sight.

The unity of the race, the Fatherhood of GOD, the promise of blessing to Noah, and to all nations of the earth through Abraham's seed in the fullness of time; the prophecies of Isaiah, Amos, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Joel, Haggai and Malachi concerning the Messiah - all proclaim that the Name of the Lord shall be great "**from the rising of the sun even unto the going down of the same**" and that this knowledge shall cover the whole earth "**as the waters cover the sea.**"

There shall be:

- Only one Saviour,
- Only one Servant of the Lord,
- Only one Name exalted above every name,
- Only one Messiah,
- Only one Son of Man sitting on the throne of judgment,
- Only one kingdom that is to be established forever when the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of the Lord and of His CHRIST.

The New Testament has the same universal outlook and the same emphasis on one, only Saviour.

Our Lord Himself and His apostles were conscious of a world-mission. Although He was sent primarily to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, He is the Good Shepherd who has other sheep among all nations. Even Harnack admits that this passage about the "**other sheep**" refers to the Gentiles and that the Fourth Gospel is saturated with statements of a directly universalistic character. And he concludes that "CHRIST shattered Judaism and brought out the kernel of the religion of Israel, thereby, and by His own death founded the universal religion."

But if Christianity is the universal religion it is also the absolute and final religion.

Many hold that Christianity is not a religion at all but a message of salvation, a Revelation.

Religions are man's groping after GOD. Christianity is GOD coming down to man.

But whatever words we use, the finality and universality of JESUS CHRIST constitute Christianity. He is all and in all.

"The absoluteness of JESUS," writes Dr. Robert E. Speer, "has both rootage and fruit in His universality. He is the contemporary of all ages. He is of organic significance for all mankind . . . JESUS CHRIST is the only catholic and universal personality of today. He is the one figure of the past with whom we all feel that we have to deal, either accepting or rejecting His claims, which confront us today more pressingly and urgently than they confronted men in the first century." [4]

We cannot escape the issue. It is precisely the same as it was in the days of apostolic missions. The Incarnation, the Atonement and the Resurrection proclaim not only the universality of JESUS but His deity. There can be no catholicity in the Church or on the mission field so long as there are men who deny that CHRIST is GOD.

There is much talk about the reunion of Christendom and there are many efforts to bring various groups and denominations together; but what is it essentially that drives or keeps Christians apart?

We close with a remarkable statement of Dorothy L. Sayers in a recent book review. Many of us have been held spellbound by the delightful detective fiction from her pen. Now she has joined the theologians and detected the great schism in what we call Christianity. She turns from crime in the slums to crime in the pulpit, from the heroes of Scotland Yard to the heroes and martyrs of orthodoxy, from betrayal of men to the betrayal of JESUS CHRIST.

This is what she writes in the *International Missionary Review* (January, 1942): "That there is a great split today in Christendom, nobody would deny; but the line of cleavage does not run between Catholic and Protestant or between Conformist and Nonconformist. It runs, as it ran sixteen centuries ago, between Arius and Athanasius, between those who believe that salvation is of GOD and those who believe that salvation is of man. Those who uphold 'Christian principles,' but assert at the same time that CHRIST was not GOD, are asserting (however much they may deny it) that in the last resort their faith and ethics rely only on a human sanction. The indiscriminate use of the word 'Christian' for those who follow CHRIST, as a Marxian follows Marx, and for those who believe that JESUS was incarnate GOD, 'consubstantial with the Father,' is responsible more than anything else for the popular impression that there is no agreement among the Churches. It is not an easy thing to force the issue, since many of the Arians occupy Protestant pulpits; but the matter is as vital now as in the days of Constantine or of CHRIST. Vague talk about 'divine inspiration,' 'religious genius,' 'unique like-mindedness with GOD' only bridges the gulf with a frail crust of words that will not stand up to the slightest pressure. If anybody thinks that Christian dogma leaves people cold, let him assert in unequivocal language that JESUS is very GOD, and the flood of angry correspondence swamping his letter box will promptly undeceive him. But this is not a quarrel between the Churches; it is a quarrel between Christianity and Humanism."

The supreme mark of the Church's catholicity, therefore, is her acceptance of and continuity in the testimony of the apostles concerning JESUS CHRIST, very GOD and very man. Apart from that He is not universal. [5]

FOOTNOTES:

1. Meinertz, *Die Heidenmission*, pp. 4-14.
2. Harnack, *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, pp. 42, 48.
3. Meinertz, (p. 127) gives the authorities in rabbinic literature.
4. *The Finality of JESUS CHRIST*, p. 287.
5. Cf. Daniel T. Jenkins, *The Nature of Catholicity*.

~ end of chapter 4 ~

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