

"INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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CHAPTER NINE

THE APOSTOLIC AIM AND GOAL

“For this cause I bow my knees unto the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, of whom the whole family in heaven and earth is named, that he would grant you, according to the riches of his glory, to be strengthened with might by his Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, the length, and height; and to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God. Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen” (Ephesians 3:14-21).

A fanatic has been cleverly defined as "a man who redoubles his energies when he has forgotten his aim."

The aim of a running athlete is to win the race and he stops running when he has reached the goal. The words seem very simple but we will be led far astray if we fail to understand them in relation to the missionary enterprise.

As Dr. Robert E. Speer remarks:

"We must not confuse the aim of foreign missions with the results of foreign missions. There is no force in the world so powerful to accomplish accessory results as the work of missions . . . I read in a missionary paper a little while ago that the foreign mission that was to accomplish results of permanent value must aim at the total reorganization of the whole social fabric. This is mischievous doctrine." [1]

Nor must we confuse the aims of foreign missions with the methods used because it is too easy to forget our aim when we fall in love with our particular method. Sometimes successful operations result in the death of the patients.

Throughout the long centuries, theologians have agreed that primarily missions is not a philanthropic or political or secular work. It is a spiritual and a religious work. It deals with the other-worldly and the eternal values.

- It is to preach the Gospel;
- It is to make JESUS CHRIST known to all men;
- It is to evangelize the nations;
- It is to carry the message of salvation to every living soul.

In whatever words we express it, that is the primary, the determining and the supreme aim of missions.

But this includes more than the aim at individual conversion. It necessarily includes the gathering of converts into a Christian Church which shall be in every land self-extending, self-maintaining and self-directing.

This twofold aim runs like a single golden thread through the history of missions from Paul's day to our own.

Joseph Schmidlin, in a recent book on *Catholic Mission Theory*, approves in general the Protestant missionary theory and method of Gustav Warneck whom he calls "the master founder of the whole ground-work of the science of missions."

Where two such authorities agree we need not apologize for showing a fundamental unity in theory and practice in contrast with that of the superficial humanism and liberalism of today - or is it of yesterday?

"At the basis of all mission work," Dr. Schmidlin says, "is the word of GOD and the command of CHRIST. It is the commission which issued from GOD the Father, in the fullness of time, and was given to His apostles and His Church by CHRIST Himself, on the conclusion of His life on earth - a commission to go forth into the world and preach the Gospel to all peoples. This divine command assigned a double task or mission to the Church - first to preach and spread the Christian faith and, secondly, to preserve and confirm it . . . Again, since the Church and her mission is to endure until the end of time, the founding, guiding and regulating of the mission must be continued, actively and passively, during all periods of the existence of the Church. As the representative of CHRIST, the Church must continue the mission entrusted to her by her Founder, and must thereby perpetuate the task and authority assigned her. If, therefore, CHRIST is the real source - the last and supreme 'subject' and the invisible support of the missions - and the missionaries are thus the messengers, envoys, representatives and instruments of JESUS CHRIST, the immediate, direct and visible subject (or origin) of the missions is the Church."

He goes on to designate the essential task of those who are commissioned by the Church.

"The missionaries are thus essentially messengers, envoys or delegates of the Church to the non-Christian world; and, like all other ambassadors, they are so designated because (as distinguished from the clergy at home) they are sent forth 'beyond the frontiers of Christianity, to extend the kingdom of GOD among the non-Christians beyond these frontiers.' In this formal sending, emanating from GOD and His Church, the fundamental right and nature of the missions are not only etymologically, but actually and essentially, founded.

"Although the primary object is winning disciples and the conversion of individual souls, the work of missions has secondary activities: "Viewed from the intrinsic religious standpoint, 'missions' means the spreading of Christianity; from the visible social standpoint, it means the spreading of the Church. Both of these ideas are fundamentally and inseparably united, and constitute 'Christianizing' in its widest sense. With this Christianizing are associated, as already stated, a series of secondary activities and results which support and complete the main work, now paving the way for it, and now strengthening it. Among these subordinate tasks must be especially mentioned the establishment of schools and charitable activities." These are wise words.

Such has always been the historic aim and goal of the apostolic succession. We will be wise not to depart from these ancient paths into byways and cul-de-sacs. We present here a comparative table of the three great epochs:

TABLE OF THE THREE MISSIONARY EPOCHS

I. APOSTOLIC AND EARLY From Jerusalem A. D. 500	II. MEDIEVAL A.D. 500- 1600	III. MODERN A.D. 1600- 1928 Jerusalem Meeting International Missionary Council
1. <i>Area</i> – Mediterranean Basin Graeco-Roman	Germanic and Slavic races in Europe	Non-Christian Europe and across the seas, all races
2. <i>Scope</i> – Narrow and Insecure base, But wide field of action	Broad and firm base, but a narrower sphere	Both broad and firm base and a wide sphere of activity
3. <i>Method</i> – Incidental Spontaneous Individual expansion	Church hierarchy and state co-operation social impact	Hierarchical (Cath.) societies (Prot.) individual and social methods
4. <i>To Whom</i> – They dealt with Peoples of like race and culture.	With like races of lower culture	Various races of far different levels of culture everywhere

5. <i>Religions dealt with</i> Cultural Ethnic Religious	Naturalistic religions	All ethnic and primitive religions
6. <i>Aim –</i> Conversion of the individual	Conversion of the masses with social effort	Both individual and masses, social effort emphasized

Of course, the three periods of missions were distinguished from each other in many ways, as is indicated in the preceding table. But the apostles and their successors aimed at definite conversions and baptisms.

In this respect, although at times there was departure from the purity of apostolic message and the power of the apostolic spirit, the aim of missions remained apostolic. This was true of Ulphilas and Xavier as well as of Carey and Livingstone. Here we see the enormous influence of Paul's example.

He is, as Principal A. E. Garvie points out, the perpetual ideal of GOD's missionary.

"In the greatest of His apostles, the Jewish rabbi (inheritance), the Roman citizen (environment), and the Christian preacher, teacher, writer and founder of churches (individuality) were combined to give to mankind the profoundest interpretation of the Gospel, and the sublimest exposition of the one Holy, Catholic, Apostolic Church. If the churches cannot rise to the stature of CHRIST, they may at least strive to follow the apostle in his ideal of the Church as the body of CHRIST, the community of the Spirit and the temple of GOD." [2]

We may well ask, therefore, what was Paul's aim and goal in his travels and toil, his preaching and his Epistles to the churches.

Paul was an ambitious man, in the good sense of the word, but his ambitions were not ordinary.

Three times only he uses the Greek word for ambition (I Thessalonians 4:11; II Corinthians 5:9 and Romans 15:20).

- The first was related to conduct. He taught and practiced the ambition "**to be quiet and to do your own business and to work with your own hands.**"
- The second was related to his ideal of character - "**Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him.**"
- And the third passage which concerns us here, was his lifelong ambition in his career: "**Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation: but as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see: and they that have not heard shall understand.**"

He wrote this when leaving a city as important as Corinth, and goes on to state that this is the reason why he did not yet visit Rome, but that he hopes to do so on his way to Spain (Romans 15:20-24).

If the uttermost confines of the Roman Empire were part of the ambitious program of him who had already preached CHRIST from Jerusalem to Illyricum in the first century, we, surely, at the beginning of the twentieth century, should have no less ambition to enter every unoccupied field, and every neglected area of thought, "that they may see to whom no tidings came and that those who have not heard may understand. "

Paul was a missionary strategist because he was led by the Holy Spirit.

According to Dr. Deissmann, all the important centers of Paul's activity are now junctions for railroad or steamship connections - a proof of his wisdom in choosing strategic centers! [3]

About the year 50 A.D. Christianity was a small ellipse whose foci were Jerusalem and Antioch: fifty years later these foci were Ephesus and Rome. The change implied in this proves the greatness of Paul's work and of the work done by his earliest disciples (Harnack).

Paul's missionary aim was ever to enter "**the regions beyond**" (II Corinthians 10:16).

The context here also emphasizes Paul's great missionary aim.

"In the first days of Christianity there is an absence of the calculating spirit. Most of the apostles died outside of Palestine, though human logic would have forbidden them to leave the country until it had been Christianized. The calculating instinct is death to faith, and had the apostles allowed it to control their motives and actions, they would have said: 'The need in Jerusalem is so profound, our responsibilities to people of our own blood so obvious, that we must live up to the principle that charity begins at home. After we have won the people of Jerusalem, of Judea and of the Holy Land in general, then it will be time enough to go abroad; but our problems, political, moral and religious, are so unsolved here in this one spot that it is manifestly absurd to bend our shoulders to a new load.'" [4]

It was the bigness of the task and its difficulty that thrilled the early Church.

Its apparent impossibility was its glory, its world-wide character its grandeur. The same is true today.

"I am happy," wrote Neesima of Japan, "in a meditation on the marvelous growth of Christianity in the world, and believe that if it finds any obstacles it will advance still faster and swifter even as the stream runs faster when it finds any hindrances on its course." [5]

It is this ever expansive and ever propulsive aim that is truly apostolic. "**Woe is unto me, if I preach not the gospel!**"

There is here a sense of urgency and a categorical imperative that goes back to the source of it all - the missionary passion of JESUS CHRIST.

"**Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice**" (John 10:16).

It is hard to distinguish Paul's constant aim to preach CHRIST from his passion of love for the Saviour. His tears and travail and toil were all directed to the one aim. He calls himself a herald and apostle, a teacher of the Gentiles, an ambassador of CHRIST - but more often CHRIST's "servant" [bond-slave] (Romans 1:1; I Corinthians 4:1, etc.; Romans 15:15; I Timothy 2:7; II Corinthians 5:20).

He suffers for CHRIST in fulfillment of his aim and His aim. **"Who now rejoice in my sufferings for you, and fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church"** (Colossians 1:24).

"Then as I weary me and long and languish
Nowise availing from that pain to part
Desperate tides of the whole world's anguish
Forced through the channels of a single heart."

This brings us to ask: If all this was his aim, what was his goal?

He never swerved from his aim; what was the *skopos*, the goal, toward which he ever strove? That word is used by Paul only once (Philippians 3:14), where he **"presses toward the mark of the prize of his high calling."**

What did he expect at the end of the race? The apostle:

- Looked forward to the Return of CHRIST;
- He also looked forward to the completion of the preaching of the Gospel in the Roman Empire;
- And he looked forward, especially in his prison Epistles, to the prospect of martyrdom.

These three goals were ever before him; sometimes he laid emphasis on one more than the other. He felt a vast, compelling force to traverse the world from its eastern to its western end. "I go to Spain." "I must also see Rome" (Romans 15:22). To attain this goal he labored more abundantly and suffered more abundantly than any of his contemporaries.

Again he is conscious of CHRIST's imminent return. The time is short (Romans 13:11). The Lord cometh from heaven, and **"we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord"** (I Thessalonians 4:17). The hope of CHRIST's coming runs as a golden thread through all of Paul's Epistles. The Apostolic Church looked for the speedy return of the Saviour. And yet, Paul's second Epistle to the Thessalonians was a needed corrective to the misunderstood message of the first.

Again, Paul had a presentiment that his own goal perhaps was not to be caught up in the clouds but martyrdom. He had seen Stephen and other martyrs die for CHRIST and was ready to be poured out as a drink-offering (Philippians 2:17). The presentiment was fulfilled. At Rome in 68 A.D. he laid down his life as the completion of his fellowship of suffering and death with the Crucified. [6]

He had reached his goal. Great was the vision on the road to Damascus. Greater was the vision when he was caught up into the third heaven. But greatest of all was the vision of the martyr on the road to Ostia when the executioner's ax fell. With this threefold aim and goal always before him - world-wide evangelism, CHRIST's Advent and the certainty of persecution and martyrdom it is no wonder that Paul's message was not an easy Gospel.

As Roland Allen reminds us, two prominent elements in Paul's preaching were those of the wrath of GOD and of coming Judgment. Paul did not preach that in times past men had lived under the stern dominion of law and that with the Gospel had come a day of toleration; he preached that in times past GOD had been long-suffering, and that now He called upon all men everywhere to repent, because the Day of Judgment was at hand. He did not preach that the mission of the Gospel was to reveal the true beauty of heathen religions: but that it was to open a door of salvation to those who must flee from the wrath to come. He did not deny the virtues of good heathen: but he did not preach that men could be as certainly saved by being good heathen as by being Christians. He did not minimize the breach between Christianity and heathenism: he declared that the one was the kingdom of evil, the other the kingdom of GOD, and that his work was to turn men "**from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God.**"

"Not in soft speech is told the earthly story
Love of all loves! That showed Thee for an hour:
Shame was Thy kingdom and reproach
Thy glory, Death Thine eternity, the Cross Thy power,"

The Cross was not only the message of the apostles, but it was their motive, their aim and their goal. How very simply and terribly John puts it: "**He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren**" (I John 3:16). And Peter thinks it a matter of course that the Christians scattered abroad, Jews and Gentiles, should endure fiery trial. "**If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed**" (I Peter 4:12-16). Those who shared the suffering of CHRIST would be partakers of His glory.

And is it not true that in the book of the Revelation there stands out clearly the same threefold aim and goal for the Church in the present evil world? "**Behold, he cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see him.**" Each of the seven churches is approved or rebuked in accordance with its missionary record. And when the seven seals are opened, the seven trumpets have sounded and the seven vials of GOD's wrath are poured out, we also catch the vision of the innumerable company of the redeemed, the victory of the Lamb that was slain and hear the great Hallelujah Chorus! "**The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.**"

That is the final goal of apostolic missions - Victory for the Lamb of GOD! That goal is also found in the glorious Old Testament prophecies and promises, for example, in the sixtieth chapter of Isaiah and the visions of Daniel. The kingdom was to be not only world-wide in its geographical scope but cosmic in its Christological implications. Paul speaks of it in Ephesians and Colossians as the great mystery hidden for ages past and revealed in CHRIST. He calls it GOD's "**eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus . . . which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets**

by the Spirit; that the Gentiles should be fellow-heirs and of the same body, and partakers of his promise in Christ by the gospel" (Ephesians 3:11, 5, 6).

In the Epistle to the Colossians the furthest goal of evangelism goes beyond all the horizons of earth, and CHRIST's Cross assumes cosmic significance. **"It pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven . . . For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist"** (Colossians 1:19,20 and 16).

It is this cosmic, eternal, universal aspect and import of the missionary enterprise that inspired the writers of some of our greatest hymns of the coming kingdom. We have it in Eduard Perronet's Coronation - "All Hail the Power of JESUS' Name," and in the final stanza of Bishop Heber's "From Greenland's Icy Mountains":

Waft, waft, ye winds, His story,
And you, ye waters, roll,
Till, like a sea of glory,
It spreads from pole to pole;
Till o'er our ransomed nature
The Lamb for sinners slain,
Redeemer, King, Creator,
In bliss returns to reign.

And, then, as Paul says, "cometh **the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power . . . Then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all.**"

FOOTNOTES:

1. *Missionary Principles and Practice*, pp. 34, 85.
2. The Expository Time, (Edinburgh), August, 1942, p. 354.
3. *St. Paul: A Study in the Social and Religious History*, pp. 200-202.
4. C. G. Brent, *Adventure for GOD*, pp. 11-12.
5. R. E. Speer, *Missionary Principle, and Practice*, p. 641.
6. Concerning Paul's prophecies regarding the Second Advent and the Day of Judgment, see A. C. Gaebelein, *The Prophet St. Paul and His Eschatology*. New York, 1939.

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