

GOD And Missions Today

by Arthur T. Pierson

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1. GOD'S MEN AND WOMEN

IF WE CAN GET BEFORE US at the outset, the divine conception of missions, what a starting-point will that be! And to what an advance goal we may hope to reach if we do not deviate from our course! At the close of each of the four Gospels - as well as at the beginning of Acts - there are certain words of our LORD which are evidently meant for the guidance of His disciples, in all time to come, as to their great mission and commission. Each of these accounts contains something different from the others yet essential to the full and complete expression of our Lord's will and our duty.

In this whole body of instructions there is one word so central, so vital, so emphatic, that it is the only word which is made especially prominent by repetition. It is the word witness. "**Ye are witnesses of these things. . .; ye shall be witnesses unto me.**" The only other word that rivals this for prominence is the word preach which conveys essentially the same meaning, since the soul of preaching is witnessing.

It seems that if we desire to grasp the divine idea of missions, this is our starting-point toward the most advanced goal.

It is like GOD to be simple; in that one word witness is condensed the whole wisdom of GOD as to this world-wide work. We are to be witnesses unto Him. Let us seek to enter more fully into this thought of GOD.

The race of man is lost in sin - lost to GOD, to holiness and to Heaven.

The only condition of salvation is the acceptance of GOD's free gift of eternal life through JESUS CHRIST our LORD. "**God would have all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.**" How shall the unsaved be reached? Behold again how divinely simple is the thought of GOD! Let every believer become a witness, let every man who is saved seek to save. It is no irreverence to say that GOD's whole idea of missions may be found in essence in that one word witnessing. The salvation of GOD is full and free. To accept it freely is immediate justification; to accept it fully is complete sanctification; to witness to it fully and freely is complete service - it is to be a missionary wherever we are.

Let us dwell a moment on the simplicity of witnessing for CHRIST. Nothing can be more

primitive and simple. The world itself has a lesson; it is from the Saxon "*witan*" to know, the root of many kindred words: *wit*, *wist*, *wisdom*. A witness needs two characteristics: knowledge and utterance.

To know and to tell makes a witness, and hence even a little child is now admitted to our courts of law as competent to testify. And in the higher Court of Humanity, the Parliament of Man, even a little child is admitted before the tribunal of public opinion to bear witness to JESUS and the great salvation. Because a child can sin, can repent, can believe, he can therefore tell what he knows of salvation by faith. In fact, no testimony is more convincing than that of a guileless child.

This simplicity is in order for universality, for it brings the privilege within the range of all believers.

As the Gospel is marked by its universal adaptation to man as man, so the missionary charge is peculiar for its universal adaptation to believers as believers. It requires only the least measure of capacity to sin, and whoever can sin can be saved from sin; and so it requires only the least measure of capacity to be a witness, for whoever can sin and can be saved can tell of salvation.

We repeat: It is simple that it may be universal.

This duty, this privilege, is committed to all believers, and has reference to the whole race of man. It is therefore doubly universal; all believers are to witness and are to witness unto all. All who are saved are to bear testimony, and all who are unsaved are to hear that testimony.

Believers commonly have no sense of ether personal duty or responsibility toward lost souls. Whatever their duty, they believe it may be done indirectly and by proxy. The great bulk of professing Christians have no systematic work for unsaved souls. Many of them have never yet even looked upon it as a duty to seek and to save that which was lost.

In their conception of the Christian life this does not enter as a necessary integral factor.

To go to church with reasonable regularity, to be honest and honorable and charitable; to behave like a Christian in the church, in the home, and in society, especially if, to all else, they add a generous gift now and then to missions at home and abroad - this is, to most professed believers, to live the life of a disciple. Oh, for the trump of Gabriel to peal out this truth as with the voice of the thunder: *In all this a true child of GOD sees only the beginning, not the end of holy living!* Where shall we find adequate room for that grander thought of direct service to GOD in witnessing to souls in CHRIST's name?

We say unhesitatingly that the conception of Christian life which leaves out personal labor for lost souls is as radically lacking as that conception of salvation which leaves out faith. Believing is not more prominently connected with salvation than is witnessing connected with service to GOD! And because all new energy or enterprise in missions hinges on a revival of this apostolic faith and practice, we give it the most intense emphasis here at the outset of this discussion.

Careful comparison of the Gospel accounts of our Lord's last interviews with His disciples led

Dr. Robinson and others to believe that the gathering on the "**mountain in Galilee**" was the occasion when "**He was seen of above five hundred brethren at once**" (Cf. Matthew 28:16; I Corinthians 15:6). It was not needful that He should go into that northern province simply to meet the Eleven, whom He repeatedly met in Jerusalem; nor could it be that any of them "doubted," since even the skeptical Thomas had ceased to question. But CHRIST had spent the bulk of His active ministry in Galilee. There He had spoken most of His wondrous words and wrought most of His marvelous works; and there most of His disciples were found. That parting interview in Galilee seems meant to commit formally and finally to the great body of His followers the work of witnessing for Him.

To clothe that final scene, depicted by Matthew, with such an environment, is to invest it with a new grandeur. Not to a few apostles alone, in some secluded chamber in Capernaum, but to a multitude numbering upwards of five hundred; His pulpit a mountain peak; His audience chamber bounded only by the horizon, and roofed in only by the canopy of Heaven, the cathedral of nature! How fitting that the world's REDEEMER, stretching out His pierced hands as though to touch the farthest limits of the globe from sunrise to sunset, where no narrow walls could confine His voice, should say to all His disciples: "**Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature!**"

No more significant statement can be found, even in that great book of missions - the Acts of the Apostles - than that which follows the account of Stephen's martyrdom: "**There was a great persecution against the Church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered abroad through all the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles: therefore they that were scattered abroad went everywhere preaching the Word**" (Acts 8:1-4; 11:19, 20).

With what divine care is this fact framed into sacred history! The SPIRIT of GOD records a general scattering abroad, but records also that in that scattering the Apostles are not included. Those then that went everywhere preaching the Word were simply ordinary believers. Behold them, the elect dispersion, driven by the red hand of persecution into the remote parts of Judea and Samaria, and afterward to the Phoenician coast, to Cyprus, to Antioch. Without one ordained apostle even to lead the way, they preached the LORD JESUS; and GOD, who by His Providence dispersed them, by His grace set His seal upon their work, for "**the hand of the Lord was with them, and a great number believed and turned unto the Lord**" (Acts 11:21).

This witness, simple and universal, is also experimental; and in this sense it is not either so simple or so universal. It demands knowledge, not that of the schools, but of the school of CHRIST, and is based on the high attainment of experience. It is because so few know beyond doubt, because so few reach to the certainties of spiritual things, that so few are competent to give effective testimony.

There should be fixed firmly in our minds this axiom of spiritual life: experience limits testimony.

We can witness only so far as we know. Settled conviction, intelligent and immovable faith, however narrow its bounds, is indispensable to convincing others or developing faith in others. Better, like the blind man whose eyes JESUS opened, to be able to say "**One thing I know**" than to be half confident on many things. It is only the certainty of assured conviction that enables us

to convince. Since this witnessing is based on experiment and experience *it must be confined to believers.*

Two words we have already found to be conspicuous in the Great Commission - *preach and witness*. To preach is to proclaim as a herald; to witness is to testify from personal knowledge. The two are widely and essentially different, yet they complement each other. A herald is only the mouth of a *message*: a witness is the mouth of an *experience*.

For money the public crier may proclaim tidings in which he feels no interest and of the truth of which he has no knowledge. But a witness can speak only what he knows and testify only what he has seen, heard and felt. He is a herald, indeed, and a herald of good tidings; but he is more - he is an example and proof of their verity and value. And therefore only a believer can be a witness.

Doubtless the angels would gladly have been the bearers of this good news. We are told how they stand overawed before such a display of grace to sinners and, as from the verge of some unfathomable abyss, gaze down into the depths of a love which they "**desire to look into**" but cannot explore.

Had they been entrusted with this message, on what joyful wings would their legions have swept round the world trumpeting forth the blessed news! It would not have been nineteen centuries before even one-third of the race had been practically reached with the Gospel.

But there was one fatal deficiency in angelic preaching:

Never did angels taste above
Redeeming Grace and dying Love!

And so GOD crowds them back and thrusts forward, into the coveted place, saved sinners.

The poorest, humblest, most unlettered believer who has known penitence and faith can do a work for GOD which Gabriel himself could not do.

Thus only can we explain the fact that while an angel hovers about the chariot of the inquiring Ethiopian (Acts 8:26), he does not himself speak to the eunuch, but bids Philip approach and guide him. Even when the angel appears to Cornelius and announces to him GOD's acceptance of his alms and his prayers, he is restrained from further announcing to him the words of life and salvation, and significantly says: "**Send men to Joppa and call for one Simon, whose surname is Peter; he shall tell thee words whereby thou and thy house shall be saved**" (Acts 10:1-5; 11:13, 14).

How few believers appreciate the great truth that while GOD is pressing upon them this solemn duty of preaching the Gospel, it is a privilege so high and holy as to be coveted by angels! But there is quite another side to this matter. If believing disciples are essential to witnessing for GOD, witnessing for GOD is not less essential to believing souls.

In the Sermon on the Mount our LORD begins by a graphic portrait of a true disciple, and

immediately passes from character to influence. He presents this in two simple familiar figures: "**Ye are the salt of the earth . . . Ye are the light of the world.**" Salt that has no savor neither savors nor saves; light that has no ray neither shines nor burns. In those very figures our LORD is saying to us that a believer without a witness is worthless as savorless salt, or a rayless lamp. We must get beyond the conception of service to GOD as a mere help to growth; it is a condition of life. Salt without saltiness is no longer salt. A light without a ray is no longer a light. It is the nature of the Christian life to witness; *when there is no witness is it too much to say that, logically, there is no life?*

We shall never reach the heart of the difficulty in our foreign missionary work until, by the sword of the Spirit, we reach the consciences of many professing Christians; until we dare to arouse them from a self-complacent apathy and lethargy by a bold application of the truth.

We must dare to use GOD's own touchstone of piety.

Under outward ordinances and formalism thousands of church members are living a life essentially ungodly and unregenerate. They are not "**new creatures**" in whom "**old things have passed away, and all things have become new.**" There has never been a surrender to GOD; the will is unsubdued, the heart is unchanged, they are under the dominion of the flesh, the natural man, the carnal mind.

Worldly amusements ensnare them because they have no relish for higher joys - they are greedy of gain because they know nothing of the higher gain of counting all things loss for CHRIST.

Their names are on church rolls, but are they on the Book of Life? They cannot be depended on to work for GOD, or even to give, because their hearts are not right in His sight.

Such words as these cannot be said without giving personal anguish to one who is compelled to give such testimony. But let us remember CHRIST's own words: "**If any man will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me** (Luke 9:23)"

Cross-bearing is the one condition and sign of discipleship.

What is cross-bearing? In nothing, perhaps, has the tradition of men more made void the Word of GOD than in the common popular abuse of this phrase. We talk of "crosses," little and great. Every trial of our patience, every vexation of daily life, everything that crosses our inclination, is a cross. We make crosses so common that we lose sight of that unique and sublimely solitary self-offering which our LORD meant to convey by the phrase.

Let us notice that the word cross in the Scripture never occurs in the plural. There is but one cross: it is the cross of self-abnegation.

To CHRIST the cross meant one thing, and nothing less: His sacrifice of Himself to save others.

And that is what it must mean to every disciple. To take up the cross and bear it after Christ is to undertake, like the MASTER, a life of self-denial for the saving of others. It is to lose life and lose self for His sake. It is to be willing to die, if need be, that others may live. When our LORD

hung upon the Cross His enemies tauntingly said, "**He saved others; himself He can not save.**" No sneer ever hid a truth so sublime.

In the Christian life, saving self and saving others are utterly incompatible; and the one great difficulty with the whole body of professed disciples is that most of them are trying to save themselves and yet be saved.

And so it comes to pass that, while thousands go to church, come to the Lord's Table, say their prayers, and bear the name of CHRIST, they live a life essentially worldly, are engaged in no soul saving work, and have no relish for it; they have no experience of the sweetness of a voluntary self-denial for His sake, and spend a thousand times as much on self-indulgence as they give to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, or even give the living bread to dying souls!

Consider what would be the immediate result if every professed child of GOD could burn with Paul's passion for souls, could know the "**great heaviness and continual sorrow of heart**" for the unsaved that made it possible for him to wish himself accursed that they might be blessed!

If ten thousand out of the millions of professed believers burned with such a Christ like passion for souls for one year, the Gospel would within that year be carried round the globe! We strike here the very bottom of this divine philosophy of missions. We are to conceive such witnessing as a necessity to a truly saved soul.

A light that does not shine, a spring that does not flow, a germ that does not grow, is not more a contradiction than a life in CHRIST which does not witness to CHRIST. "**We cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard**" is the natural utterance of every believer whose eyes and ears have been opened to behold the charms and hear the voice of JESUS.

This word witness has in it a whole world of suggestion and inspiration touching the work of missions.

It outlines in one word the great purpose of our LORD in connecting His saints with His service. In both Testaments it is one of the dominant words. Around it the whole philosophy of missions crystallizes and the whole history of missions centralizes.

In the plan of GOD, every believer is a witness.
In the wide field of the world, every disciple is needed as a workman.

Without him, God cannot do this work, unless He abandons His Plan! The Church must be aroused to this great truth and fact that both CHRIST and the world are waiting for disciples to become heralds of the Gospel and witnesses to CHRIST; that a few thousand missionaries, scattered through cities and states at home or empires abroad, can never overtake the awful destitution of a thousand million of souls who know not the Gospel.

The only hope of the race is that, as in apostolic times, the whole Church shall become a body of evangelists, and every converted soul consider it a necessary part of discipleship to witness to all men that Christ died for all.

Christian missions originated with GOD. The commission of the Church is from Heaven, and can be wrought out only as it was thought out, along the lines and within the limits drawn by a divine hand.

Here there is no room for human invention or innovation: all such is interference and interruption to the plans of GOD. All human accumulations forming about the pure thought and plan of GOD like fungus growths and parasitic mosses about a tree, that both obscure its growth and endanger its life-need to be torn away that we may look again upon the plan of GOD in its bare simplicity.

our Lord's chosen definition of the work of His Church in this age hangs on this same little word, *witness*: "**And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations; and then shall the end come**" (Matthew 24:14).

This was, first and last, His form of statement. The very terms compel us to infer that not only is this work to be carried on to the very end of the age, but that the end somehow waits for this as a preparation and preliminary. This we believe - and it is a mighty impulse to a world's evangelization - that neither the complete salvation of the race of man can be reached until this condition is fulfilled. To you and me it belongs to "**fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ, in our flesh, for His body's sake, which is the Church,**" and so complete, by our own travail, the travail of His soul.

The Gospel witness is simple in character and universal in obligation, natural and necessary to a new-born soul, essential to the plan of GOD, experimental and therefore effectual. It is designed also to be perpetual.

If we carefully examine the Book of the Acts we find it is the one incomplete book of the Bible.

At the beginning we read, "**The former treatise. . . of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, until the day in which He was taken up.**" These words, former, began, until, imply something going before in the Gospel narrative and that, in the book which follows, the writer is to give us the latter treatise of all that JESUS continued to do and teach by the HOLY GHOST after He was taken up. And so the Book of the Acts implies something going before it.

If we turn to the close of the book, we observe equally plain signs of something to come after. "**And Paul dwelt two whole years in his own hired house, and received all that came in unto him, preaching the kingdom of GOD, and teaching those things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.**"

Matthew's Gospel ends with a manifest conclusion that leaves nothing to be added; the Apocalypse ends with a special injunction, forbidding any addition or subtraction; but here the curtain simply falls on Paul, teaching and preaching, without even bringing to a close the scene in which he last appears. And the reason is because this book is the Book of a Witnessing Church, and that book never will be closed until that witness is also ended; until the Gospel is borne to the uttermost parts of the earth and the last witness has been uttered, and believed or rejected.

Anyone of us, any believer to the end of the age, may write his own name where Paul's now stands and fill out the record with his own witness for CHRIST. Or, if he is too humble in his own esteem to venture on a record, there is another who, while he is living and working for his MASTER, is writing a new chapter to record how he also passed the years teaching and testifying of CHRIST and of the grace of GOD.

When the Bishop of Ripon read that narrative of John Williams' labors in the South Seas, he laid it down, exclaiming, "There is the Twenty-ninth chapter in the Acts of the Apostles!" Every believer has only to take his place among GOD's witnesses, and in his generation to testify to all men the Gospel of His grace, to be admitted to a place in the holy company of the apostles. He will have his name and life history recorded in that unwritten sequel of the Acts, which is to be read before an assembled universe in the Day when the Books are opened.

~ end of chapter 1 ~
