

"INTO ALL THE WORLD"

The Great Commission:
A Vindication and an Interpretation

by

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CHAPTER TEN

APOSTOLIC METHODS

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder. Yea, all of you be subject one to another, and be clothed with humility: for God resisteth the proud, and giveth grace to the humble” (I Peter 5:1-5).

Etymologically, method means to follow the road, the well-beaten path; which would indicate that every method owes a debt to those who have gone before.

Method is procedure according to principles and our method is right only when it follows the right principles.

The well-known book by Roland Allen on Paul's missionary methods in contrast with present-day methods is worthy of careful study. The Bishop of Madras summarized Paul's method, or lack of method, in these words:

"He had no preconceived plan of campaign; he went where the Spirit led; he sought for the open doors; he chose the centers most suitable for the gathering of converts; he aimed definitely at converting men and women to faith in CHRIST; we never find him simply preparing the ground for future conversions. He planted churches which rapidly became self-supporting and self-governing. We never find Paul governing a church by means of workers paid from foreign sources." [1]

There is obviously a wide and marked difference between such methods and those in vogue today. Have we gone astray from the right road? Can we still apply these apostolic methods in the altered circumstances and the utterly different environment of modern missions?

Roland Allen compares present-day methods with those of Paul in regard to the presentation of the Gospel, the financial support of the work, the training of converts, and the conditions for baptism, authority and discipline in the newly organized churches.

In contrast to all this, today we found native churches and keep them in leading-strings for half a century; we transplant elaborate and expensive systems of Western education and organization; we fail to trust our simple message and are burdened with technique and theory; we emphasize financial matters and walk not by faith but by budgets! Perhaps we should in wisdom seek the old paths and go back to old principles. Yet there is always a difference between walking in Paul's sandals and in his footsteps!

1. The method of apostolic preaching was so simple that it could be summed up in a few brief sentences and understood in a single crisis of the inner life.

Paul says it was "**the preaching of the Cross.**" Yet this word was so versatile and rich and profound in its interpretation that it stimulated thought, awoke the deepest emotions, and stirred the conscience of the hearer. It was not spoken in worldly wisdom, nor by emotional eloquence but directed to the will.

"By manifestation of the truth commending ourselves" says Paul, **"to every man's conscience in the sight of God . . . We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord; and ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake"** (II Corinthians 4:2, 5).

In the first Epistle to the Thessalonians we have a picture of earliest Christianity and the earliest Gospel. It was written less than twenty-two years after the Crucifixion. What is its teaching for a group of believers with whom Paul had spent only five months? (Ramsay).

It had the following elements:

- (1) There is one living and true GOD (1:9).
- (2) Idolatry is sinful and must be forsaken (1:9).
- (3) The wrath of GOD is ready to be revealed against the heathen for their impurity (4:6), and against the Jews for their rejection of CHRIST and their opposition to the Gospel (2:15, 16).
- (4) The judgment will come suddenly and unexpectedly (vss. 2, 3).
- (5) JESUS the Son of GOD (1:10), given over to death (vs. 10) and raised from the dead (4:14), is the Saviour from the wrath of GOD (1:10).
- (6) The kingdom of JESUS is now set up and all men are invited to enter it (2:12).
- (7) Those who believe and turn to GOD are now expecting the coming of the Saviour who will return from heaven to receive them (1:10; 4:15-17).
- (8) Meanwhile their life must be pure (4:1-8), useful (4: II, 12), and watchful (5:4-8). (9) To that end GOD has given His Holy Spirit (4:8; vs. 19). [2]

Paul's sermon at Athens has been misjudged by those who read it superficially. It is a marvel of tactful and powerful preaching. He recognized all the good he found in Athens and then laid the ax to the root of Attic pride, which was fourfold.

- They declared themselves to be autochthonous (sprung from the soil). Paul said, "**God made the world and all things that are therein.**"
- They pointed to the Acropolis and its grand architecture. Paul said, "**God dwelleth not in temples made with hands.**"
- They felt themselves superior to the barbarians. Paul said, "**God hath made of one blood all nations.**"
- They were proud of their chronology and antiquity.

Paul stated that not Herodotus but GOD had determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation. Their golden age of Pericles was in "**the times of ignorance which God winked at.**" Now He commands repentance in the Name of JESUS CHRIST raised from the dead; and He is not far from anyone of us, even those who worship at the shrine of an unknown god. [3]

But whether on Mars' Hill, or in Corinth, whether in Jerusalem or in Rome, whether to Jews or to Gentiles, Paul had only one message: "**Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God**" (I Corinthians 1:23, 24).

The apostolic method of preaching was not after a set pattern yet always led to the same goal. It was doctrinal and ethical. It was expository of the Old Testament promises and full of New Testament experience.

The apostles often used the Socratic method of question and answer as we see in Paul's Epistles (e.g., I Corinthians 15) and in that of James. They did not shun controversy to establish the truth, nor did they seek it (II Timothy 2:23-25).

Those missionaries who at present deplore all "controversy" and are opposed apparently to the polemic and apologetic method of an earlier generation would do well to consider that, after all, this method was on occasion used by our Lord Himself and by His apostles.

What was CHRIST's method of teaching the Pharisees and Sadducees?

Even as a boy in the Temple He began by both hearing and asking them questions. Nearly all the discourses recorded in the Fourth Gospel were occasioned by controversy with those whose formal religion greatly resembled present-day Islam. Stephen's address is a masterpiece of apologetic, and ended in his martyrdom, but also in the conversion of Saul. Was such boldness of speech all a mistake?

Paul disputed in the synagogues (Acts 17:17), in the school of one Tyrannus, daily (Acts 19:9) for three months; in Jerusalem he disputed against the Grecians until they sought to slay him (Acts 9:29).

What are Paul's great Epistles but loving apologetic arguments addressed to the mind and heart to convince men of the truths of the Gospel? Second Corinthians, Galatians and Colossians could be classified as controversial literature of the first century. In Philippians Paul speaks of "**the defence and confirmation of the gospel**" as his apologetic task and states that he is divinely set for the defense of his message (Philippians 1:7, 17). His military vocabulary is proof enough that he was no spiritual pacifist but fought a good fight against the enemies of the Cross of CHRIST and all those who preached "**another gospel.**"

The early Christian apologists fought for the truth because they held it worth fighting for, even unto death. The witnesses became martyrs. Perhaps if there were bolder witness today there would also be martyrs.

Furthermore, we must emphasize the fact, too often forgotten, that the apostles preached with their pens as well as with their voices. They wrote their message and it was carried in ever wider circles to all the churches.

2. But their chief method was itineration.

They went everywhere evangelizing. The Acts of the Apostles is a book of itineraries and we need a map of the Roman world to understand it.

The Resurrection Gospel began its triumphal march when on the first Easter Sunday the women ran to bring the disciples word.

The early Church learned its lesson from the lips and from the life of our Lord. It was a company of believers who went everywhere preaching the Word. Each convert was a willing evangelist! Driven by an inner impulse or scattered by persecution they were always on the go. Their feet were on the march (not marking time) - willing feet, weary feet, bleeding feet! Their sandals were consecrated to CHRIST.

The life of JESUS Himself can be rightly understood only when we follow on the map of Palestine the itinerary of His ceaseless travel for three years' ministry, when He literally went about doing good. He walked by the sea of Galilee, preaching the Gospel of the kingdom. And what an itinerant evangelist Paul was!

The record in the Acts, as supplemented in all of his Epistles, is astounding!

- Paul the Roman citizen going across the empire: Jerusalem, Damascus, Ephesus, Antioch, Rome and Spain;
- Paul the intrepid traveler, by sea and by land;
- Paul the dauntless and the bold pioneer;
- Paul the prisoner, still preaching by his letters and messengers.

Alone and in prison, Paul still thought not of retirement or surrender, but of world-conquest. The two empires - the totalitarian state of Rome and the kingdom of GOD - were already engaged in a death struggle, and Paul knew which was to win.

At Ephesus, we read, he was teaching in public not only, but "**from house to house for three years.**" Such patient and persistent house-to-house itineration produced churches that carried the message from the great centers across the empire. Not only the early apostles but their true successor felt this same urge. They might have used the words of Theresa: "CHRIST has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours; yours are the eyes through which He is to look out compassion to the world; yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good, and yours are the hands with which He is to bless men now."

The apostles and their successors carried the message into the regions beyond. They were the bridge-builders and pioneers at home and abroad. Every place the soles of their feet trod upon became a Promised Land. Think of Patrick of Ireland, Boniface of Germany, Savonarola in Italy, Francis in Europe, Hudson Taylor in China, John Wesley and Bishop Asbury in America, or David Livingstone in Africa! Who is worthy to loose the latchet of their shoes or follow in their footsteps? Ten thousand times ten thousand miles they traveled, preaching, teaching, healing, until at length exhausted, not by going the second mile but the second thousandth mile, they fell in their tracks.

3. A third apostolic method that needs emphasis today is their training of helpers, associates, elders, and bishops, ordained by the laying on of hands, to carry forward the work in the churches.

The list of these given in the Acts and in the Epistles is an eloquent testimony to the power of spiritual leadership.

Stephen, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas were the first deacons, honest men full of the Holy Ghost (Acts 6:5). Barnabas, Silas, John, Mark, Timothy, Titus, Luke, Phebe, Priscilla, Aquila, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Euodia and Syntyche, Aristobulus, Tertius, Quartus - these and many other unknown soldiers of the Cross, both men and women, are recorded by Paul in his brief letters. Apollos, the learned and eloquent Alexandrian, is in a class by himself. So also is Epaphroditus who was "**brother, companion, fellow-soldier and a messenger**" who ministered to Paul's needs, until he wore himself out and was nigh unto death (Philippians 2:25-30). Then there were Jesus-called Justus, Epaphras, Aristarchus, Onesimus and Tychicus and others among the faithful and trained evangelists. But Demas fell for love of money and Archippus perhaps became lukewarm at Laodicea (Colossians 4:17; Revelation 3:14).

How these workers were chosen and trained and ordained to special tasks we may read between the lines in Luke's narrative and Paul's Epistles, especially those addressed to Timothy and Titus. But, as Roland Allen remarks:

"The question before us is, how he could so train his converts as to be able to leave them after so short a time with any security that they would be able to stand and grow. It seems at first sight almost incredible. In the space of time, which amongst us is generally passed in the class of hearers, men were prepared by Paul for the active ministry. How could he prepare men for Holy Orders in so brief a time? How could he even prepare them for Holy Baptism? What could he have taught them in five or six months?"

“If anyone today were to propose to ordain men within six months of their conversion from idolatry, he would be deemed rash to the verge of madness. Yet no one denies that Paul did it. The sense of stupefaction and amazement that comes over us when we think of it, is the measure of the distance which we have traveled from the apostolic method.” [4]

4. The financial methods of the apostles and of the early Christians also awaken our amazement.

In the early chapters of the Acts we witness how the Holy Spirit worked miracles through the apostles without money: **"Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk"** (Acts 3:6). We see also how the Holy Spirit through the apostles released money: Barnabas, a Levite of Cyprus, **"having land, sold it, and brought the money, and laid it at the apostle's feet."** Great grace was upon all those who possessed lands or houses for they sold them and gave the money to make distribution to the poor (Acts 4:33-37). But we also read how the Holy Spirit through the apostles refused money offered to them. Such was the case of Ananias and Sapphira as well as when Peter said to Simon of Samaria, **"Thy money perish with thee"** (Acts 8:18-24).

What the apostles thought of money, of silver and gold, of this world's goods and possessions is evident in their Epistles. They did not seek financial help. **"I have coveted no man's gold, silver, or apparel. Yea, ye yourselves know, that these hands have ministered unto my necessities"** (Acts 20:34). **"Remember, brethren, our labour and travail; for labouring night and day, because we would not be chargeable unto any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God"** (I Thessalonians 2:9). James warns the disciples not only against covetousness and despising the poor, but exclaims in wrath, **"Go to now, ye rich men, weep and howl . . . Your riches are corrupted and your garments are moth-eaten . . . ye have heaped treasures together for the last day"** (James 5:1-6). Peter speaks of the **"damnable heresy"** of those who deny the Lord through covetousness and Paul says, **"The love of money is the root of all evil."** (II Peter 2:1-3; I Timothy 6:10).

Harnack points out that the Gospel of unselfish love and charity was not only on the lips but in the lives of early Christians. He quotes Tertullian as saying, "It is our care for the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. **'Look,'** they say, **'how these Christians love one another.'**" Alms were collected on the first day of the week for the support of teachers, widows, orphans, the sick, prisoners, slaves and for the burial of the dead. [5]

But the churches and converts were taught self-support from the outset. The missionaries did not serve tables nor spend much time over accounts and budgets. Today, alas, many younger churches are financed from abroad and supported by foreign money. By the establishment of great institutions we tie our missionaries to one locality and pauperize the native church.

Paul inculcated the principle that every church should administer its own funds. When he carried offerings from the Church at Antioch to Jerusalem it was for famine-relief (II Corinthians 11:8-14; 12:14-18). The difference between our present emphasis on money and finance and the simple life of the apostolic church is not one of method but of principle.

In an imaginary letter from Paul, the late Dr. Mark Matthews uses sarcastic words in his severe indictment of a covetous ministry at home or abroad:

Dear Sir and Brother:

Doubtless you remember the invitation you extended me to come over to Macedonia and help the people of that section. You will pardon me for saying that I am somewhat surprised that you should expect a man of my standing in the Church to seriously consider a call on such meager information. There are several things I would like to learn before giving you my decision and I would appreciate your dropping me a line, addressing me at Troas.

First of all I would like to know if Macedonia is a station or a circuit. This is important as I have been told that once a man begins on a circuit it is well nigh impossible to secure employment in station work. If Macedonia embraces more than one preaching place I might as well tell you that I cannot think of accepting the call.

There is another important item that you overlooked in your brief and somewhat sudden invitation. No mention was made as to the salary I was to receive. While it is true I am not preaching for money, there are certain things that need to be taken into account. I have been through a long and expensive training; in fact I may say with pardonable pride that I am a Sanhedrin man - the only one in the ministry today.

The day is past when you may expect a man to rush into a new field without some idea as to the support he is to receive. I have worked myself up to a good position in the Asiatic field, and to take a drop and lose grade would be a serious matter.

Kindly get the Macedonian brethren together and see what you can do in the way of support. You have told me nothing beyond the implication that the place needs help. What are the social advantages? Is the church well organized?

I recently had a fine offer to return to Damascus at an increase of salary, and I am told that I made a very favorable impression on the church at Jerusalem. If it will help the Board at Macedonia you might mention these facts to them, and also that some of the brethren in Judea have been heard to say that if I kept on, in a few years I may have anything in the gift of the church. For recommendation write to Simon Peter, D.D., Jerusalem. I will say that I am a first-class mixer and especially strong on argumentative preaching.

**Solicitously yours,
Paul the Apostle**

[6]

5. The chief apostolic method and aim was the establishment of local churches in heathen cities. A picture of such a Pauline Church is given us in his own Epistle to the Corinthians. It carries us back two thousand years and allows us, as Stalker suggests, "to take the roof off the meeting-house and permit us to see what is going on within."

Corinth was the most wicked city of that ancient wicked world.

On a Sabbath evening in a city that knows no Sabbath a little company is gathered in an upper room of a large warehouse. Jews and Gentiles of various nationalities, slaves and free, are present; not many mighty or well-born or noble, but the base and despised of the world. On their faces are terrible traces of their past life. "**Such were some of you,**" writes Paul after the list of abominable vices of heathen Corinth. But they are redeemed, washed, sanctified.

Listen, they are singing, "**Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?**"

Some are prophesying, others speak with strange foreign languages. Here is one who enters from curiosity, an unbeliever is convicted of sin, falls on his face and confesses faith in CHRIST. There is a love feast also, followed by the breaking of the Bread and the drinking of the Cup. Faces are radiant and joy is contagious. What a church to shine as light in heathen darkness! This is earliest Christianity.

And yet the same Epistle startles us by revealing abuses and irregularities and divisions that are a disgrace to the Holy Name. Paul does not hesitate to draw a *chiaroscuro* picture of the church which, in spite of all its faults, he loved. "**Sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.**" He says in their praise that they "**came behind in no gift**" and that he thanked GOD always on their behalf (I Corinthians 1:1-7).

If ever a modern missionary grows discouraged because of the weakness and sins of new converts in China or India, let him study the church at Corinth. That will provoke to gratitude and faith and hope. It is not for a pattern of mere method or machinery we ought to go back to apostolic days but for a spectacle of fresh and transforming spiritual power for our own day. Lifeless order and propriety are poor compensations for the irregularities of abundant spiritual life and love in the young church at Corinth.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* pp. 7, 8.
2. Cf. Zwemer's *Dynamic Christianity and the World Today*. Chap. I.
3. An experienced worker in North Africa writes to his colleagues (April, 1949) advising them: "Take Paul's discourse at Athens as a model. It is an epitome of spiritual philosophy. It teaches biology, theology, sociology and international relationships. You could get from it a whole list of topics which would be of interest to the keen young men of today."
4. *Missionary Methods*, p. 117.
5. *Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. I, pp. 149-158.
- 6 Quoted in H. W. Ferrin's *Strengthen Thy Brethren*, p. 172.

~ end of chapter 10 ~

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