

**AN INTRODUCTION
TO THE
STUDY OF CHRISTIAN MISSIONS**

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**CHAPTER TWO -
THE NEW TESTAMENT AND MISSIONS**

HOW DID foreign missions get started? Was it a part of Christianity at the beginning? Or did it come later? Did CHRIST himself have anything to say about it? Is it a necessary part of the faith?

The only way we can answer these questions is to turn to the New Testament itself. In its pages the Christian finds his rule of faith and practice. It is GOD's final revelation through our Lord and Saviour JESUS CHRIST. And in it we find the earliest records of Christian missionary work. So we must see what the New Testament has to say.

But in looking at the New Testament there is one error we want to avoid. We don't want to choose just a few scattered texts to prove our point. This "proof text" method has its values. But it is also open to serious objections. It is all too easy to take a text out of its setting and make it teach something it was never meant to teach.

So we are going to consider the broad sweep of New Testament teaching. And when we refer to one passage or another, it will be simply to illustrate the general truth we present. In most cases you won't need the proof of chapter and verse. Instead you will find that a clear view of New Testament Christianity itself will give you the answers you want. You will see that missions doesn't really need justifying. It is taken for granted. In the New Testament missions is the normal expression of vital Christianity.

Of course we don't expect to cover all that the New Testament teaches about missions. The field is too broad. For our purpose it will be enough to show the place of missions in New Testament Christianity.

CHRISTIANITY IS BY NATURE MISSIONARY

The New Testament pictures for us a faith which is by its very nature missionary. In other words Christianity to be Christianity has to be missionary. It is strange that so many fail to see this. That is, it is strange until we realize that many people's ideas of Christianity have only a remote connection with the New Testament.

Many have a false idea about all religion. They think that religion is a purely private concern. It is something like a taste in literature. Some people like serious books, some prefer novels, while others prefer mystery stories and the daily paper. Each one is free to read what he wants, but not to tell others what to read. It is a purely personal matter.

But the truth is that religion can seldom be a purely personal matter, and Christianity even less than most other religions. We grant that faith in CHRIST has to be personal. It is true, too, that some religious exercises, such as prayer and Bible reading, can be carried on privately. But these are not the whole of religion nor of the Christian faith.

Some countries, such as Spain, have pretended to believe that they are. They have professed to grant religious liberty to minority groups like the Protestants. They have said that everyone is free to believe as he chooses and, in the privacy of his own home, to worship as he pleases. But he may not make any public or even semipublic show of his faith. Neither may he speak of his faith to others. This they call religious freedom. But of course that is only when they are talking of other religions than their own.

Actually there are very few religions that one can profess and practice privately. Such a religion would have to be mostly a matter of ritual, like some lodge ceremonies. It could not change the daily conduct of the worshiper. If it did, it would affect others. Besides, if his religion changed a thief into an honest man, he would have to explain how it happened. Nor could a private religion aim at any changes in society, good or bad. It would have to be a religion content with things as they are. As a religion it would be a sham.

But this is far from true of Christianity. It has a great deal to do with personal conduct. It aims to transform lives. And through changed lives it tries to work changes in society, sometimes revolutionary changes. That is why CHRIST said that He came "**not to send peace, but a sword**" (Matthew 10:34).

There are many people, too, who have the false notion that religion is a matter of country or race or temperament. The idea is not a new one. The Syrians expressed it in Old Testament times in I Kings 20:23. They said about the Israelites, "**Their gods are gods of the hills; therefore they were stronger than we; but let us fight against them in the plain, and surely we shall be stronger than they.**"

We don't express it quite so crudely today. But we do often say about those in other lands, "Their religion fits them." And some go even farther. Several writers on Latin America in recent years have solemnly affirmed that Protestantism can never take root there because, as they say, it is not congenial to their culture! (Strangely enough, a recent census reveals well over a million Protestants in the one Latin American country of Brazil.)

Now it is perfectly true that some religions by their very nature are limited to one country or people. But this is far from true of all. Buddhism is a small minority movement in India, the land of its origin. Its greatest successes have been in other lands. Mohammedism has fewer followers in Arabia than in lands which Mohammed never saw. It is sometimes called a desert religion; but Indonesia, one of the two largest Mohammedan nations, is as far from desert as it is possible to

be.

And when it comes to Christianity, we have a strange phenomenon. It began among the Jews, but most of the Jews have never accepted it. It began in the Orient, but its strongest centers today are in the West. Its Scriptures are very little read in the original languages, but they are read around the world in more than a thousand other tongues.

No, Christianity cannot be simply a matter of private concern. Neither can it be limited to one country, one race, one type of culture. At least not the Christianity of the New Testament.

"There are at least two major things that make Christianity missionary by nature: its exclusive claims, and its view of mankind.

First, the exclusive claims of Christianity make it missionary.

The Romans of early centuries and the unbelievers of today both have resented Christianity's claim to be the one true religion. The Romans would have been willing to give it a place among the many religions of the empire. In the same way the unbelievers of today will usually admit that it is, on the whole, a good religion. But they both object to the exclusiveness of the Christian faith. They resent its saying that all other religions are false.

Now there can be no doubt that the New Testament claims exclusiveness for the Christian message. It doesn't picture GOD as a God; He is the only GOD Paul says, "**We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one**" (I Corinthians 8:4). Further, it doesn't present JESUS CHRIST as a savior; He is the only Saviour of men. For as Peter said, "**There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved**" (Acts 4:12). This is the witness of the whole New Testament.

How does this make Christianity missionary? In just this way: If Christianity is a religion and CHRIST is a savior, then my obligation to tell people about CHRIST and his salvation is relatively small. After all, there are other ways of salvation open to them.

But if Christianity is *the only* true religion; if CHRIST is *the only* Saviour; if the gospel is *the only* message that can offer men eternal life - then how can I keep quiet? Can I rejoice in my own salvation, knowing that others are dying without that salvation? Must I not feel as Paul did when he wrote to the Romans, "**I am a debtor. . . to preach the gospel to you**" (Romans 1:14, 15)?

Also, Christianity's view of mankind makes it missionary.

When we talk about salvation we mean salvation from sin and from the results of sin. Here is the second reason why Christianity must be missionary. According to the New Testament, mankind is lost, condemned by GOD because of its sin. "**All have sinned**" (Romans 3:23).

Now sin is not a very popular or meaningful word among most people today. To many the New Testament idea of sin is completely foreign. The pagan or the Mohammedan may indeed be familiar with the word, and he may not hesitate to confess that he is a sinner. Because to him, as

likely as not, sin is just a matter of ceremonial impurity. He has violated one of the arbitrary rules of his god. So he will have to pay some sort of forfeit to get back into good standing.

But he is likely to view the matter rather lightly. After all, who could possibly keep all the rules of the game without a mistake? Especially when you are not always sure what they are. I am a sinner. So what? Aren't we all?

The idea of sin as moral iniquity, as something that defiles, and degrades the soul of the sinner, is not common outside of Christianity. That sin is something that ought not to be, entirely apart from a divine command, is a new idea to most unbelievers. Even where they confess that they are sinners, the sense of "the sinfulness of sin" is lacking.

Our civilized pagans are not much better. They are acquainted with the words "crime," "delinquency," and "error." But to them "sin" is only a theological term used by old-fashioned preachers and straight-laced killjoys.

Yet unquestionably sin is a major theme of the New Testament - sin and salvation from sin. Sin has alienated the whole world from GOD, has corrupted the nature of man, has brought condemnation and death. No one is free from it; no one can save himself from it. Only in CHRIST is there salvation, a salvation provided by GOD Himself. This is the New Testament message.

If we deny the New Testament view of man and his sin, we do not need to be missionary. If men, after all, are fundamentally good, though they do make some mistakes; if sin is not the desperate thing the New Testament makes it out to be; if its results are not so disastrous; or even if we can plead that ignorance of the Gospel relieves people from guilt and condemnation; then missions are not imperative.

But no man can fully believe the New Testament picture of mankind apart from CHRIST and remain indifferent. If he really believes it he cannot help feeling constrained to make the message of salvation known - known to lost men everywhere.

JESUS CHRIST AND MISSIONS

JESUS CHRIST taught missions. It was not only at the beginning, when He called His first disciples and said, "**Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men**" (Matthew 4:19). Nor at the end of His earthly ministry, when He urged, "**Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature**" (Mark 16:15). The whole tenor of His life and ministry was missionary. Look at the purpose of CHRIST's coming.

Sometimes we hear it said that Paul was "the greatest missionary of all time." Among those who have followed CHRIST that is probably true. But greater yet as a missionary was the Lord JESUS CHRIST Himself.

The New Testament leaves us in no doubt about the missionary purpose of His coming into the world. In fact, this is one thing that makes it different from the birth of any other man. His coming was voluntary, and it had a definite, clear-cut purpose.

The Lord himself told of that purpose when He said, "**The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost**" (Luke 19:10). Again He said, "**I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me**" (John 6:38). And John wrote much later that "**God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him**" (I John 4:9).

JESUS CHRIST, then, was a missionary, a "sent one." He was sent with a purpose. And that purpose was the same as that of His missionaries today. It was to save those who were lost, those who were "**dead in trespasses and sins.**"

Look, too, at the character of CHRIST's life.

The character of the life of CHRIST was missionary in a very real sense. You see, a missionary, like an ambassador, is sent to represent someone else. He has an individuality, but he is expected to suppress it as much as possible. He is not allowed to have a private life. His every act is viewed as the act of the One who sent him. His speeches are not private expressions of opinion but official statements. He is expected to stand in the place of the One who sent him.

Of course missionaries, like ambassadors, forget this once in a while. But JESUS CHRIST never forgot it. One of the most outstanding characteristics of His life was its utter selflessness. He told His followers that He came "**not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life . . .**" (Matthew 20:28). And when Paul wanted to back up his exhortation for each believer to "**please his neighbor for his good to edification,**" he reminded them that "**Even Christ pleased not himself**" (Romans 15:3).

Even when CHRIST says, "**I am the way, the truth, and the life,**" He says it without boasting or egotism. In fact He is exalting the Father, for He adds, "**No man cometh unto the Father, but by me**" (John 14:6). The same is true when He says, "**He that hath seen me hath seen the Father**" (John 14:9). Actually this last is a clear statement of His missionary character - He stood before them in the place of the Father.

And consider the objective of CHRIST's ministry.

Some might think that CHRIST's ministry was anything but missionary. That is, He limited it almost exclusively to those of His own nation, the Jews. On one occasion He told a foreign woman that He was "**not sent but unto the lost sheep of the house of Israel**" (Matthew 15:24). Yet in answer to her humble faith He granted her request. Also, when He first sent out the Twelve He told them not to go to Gentiles or Samaritans (Matthew 10:5). Yet He Himself ministered to the Samaritans (John 4:5-42).

We need to understand such passages in the light of the whole Gospel. Then we can see how they fit. Without entering into disputed matters of interpretation, we can see two things clearly.

First, CHRIST dedicated His earthly ministry to His own people, the Jews. On rare occasions He might minister to Samaritans or Gentiles, but these were exceptions.

But, second, even while He was ministering to the Jews He envisioned a world-wide ministry for His Gospel. We see this on numerous occasions, not just at the end of His life.

For instance, in the early part of Matthew (8:5-13), considered to be the most Jewish of the Gospels, we have the story of the Roman centurion's servant. In that case CHRIST granted the request and praised the faith of the Gentile soldier. Then He added, in a prophetic vein, "**Many shall come from the east and west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven.**" Also toward the end of His life, in the prophecy of Matthew 24 He said, "**This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in all the world for a witness unto all nations**" (verse 14).

Whatever the reason, CHRIST's earthly ministry was to the Jews, but He taught and prepared His disciples for the day when they would take His Gospel to all nations.

And the "great commission" deserves careful attention.

We have purposely waited until now to consider the so-called "great commission." We have done it because so many think of it as the one basis for missions in the New Testament. As a result, if critics cast doubt on its authenticity, the whole foundation for missions seems to be seriously weakened. But we have already seen that missions is a part of the very nature of New Testament Christianity and is taught by CHRIST Himself, even apart from the "great commission."

CHRIST gave the "great commission" to His followers after His resurrection and before His ascension. It was the one great charge He gave to His Church. There are several accounts of the commission, and it may well be that CHRIST repeated it more than once. In view of its importance, it would be strange if He didn't. All four Gospels and the Acts give it in one form or another.

The most often quoted of the Gospel accounts are those in Matthew and Mark. Matthew 28:18-20 says,

"And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen."

Mark 16:15-16 is shorter and somewhat different:

"And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned."

We don't need to go into the discussion here, for we are not limited to Matthew and Mark. John also has something to say on the subject. He tells us that when CHRIST first appeared among His disciples after His resurrection He said, "**As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you**" (John 20:21).

Luke also is not silent. He tells us that after His resurrection CHRIST joined two disciples as they walked along the way to Emmaus. They did not recognize Him until He sat down to eat with them. Then they rushed back to Jerusalem to tell the others that they had seen the Lord. But in the midst of their report, JESUS Himself appeared and spoke to them. In His talk He said, **"Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And ye are witnesses of these things. And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high"** (Luke 24:46-49).

Again, in the Acts (1:8) we have another often quoted expression of the same "Great Commission." **"But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth."**

Obviously we cannot deny that JESUS CHRIST taught missions, that He wanted His followers to be missionary, that He wanted His Gospel to be preached throughout the world.

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