

The Heathen and Foreign Missions

“Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Matt 28: 19

There is abundant evidence that God designed that the Gospel should be preached. To this end the Apostles were chosen by Christ – “Fishers of men.” But does the salvation of the heathen depend upon the audibly preached word? Is it binding upon the church to send missionaries to foreign lands to preach the Gospel to the heathen? Or was the command given more particularly to the Apostles because they were loathe to teach a doctrine which would not only nullify the law of Moses but would require them to go and teach the Gentiles contrary to the law?

Although this subject today engages wide-spread attention, our belief that this command applied more particularly to Apostolic times is strengthened by Scripture testimony. When Christ was here the Jews had nothing in common with the Gentiles. This separation was of long standing, having existed for centuries. Paul, in his epistle to the Ephesians, calls it a “wall of partition” that stood between them. The Apostles were not prepared to accept a doctrine that would abolish the whole Old Testament system of religion. They were not yet fully enlightened by the power of the Holy Ghost. They had the erroneous view that salvation depended on obedience to the letter of the law, they naturally concluded that it was the will of God that the Gentile converts be barred from their assemblies. To convince them that He had the power and authority to establish

and teach this new doctrine of peace and unity, Christ performed many miracles and did many wonderful works in their presence. This may have been the design of the Savior in calling the eleven together on the occasion when the command was given.

Prior to this time Christ recognized the law of Moses as authority, but now having fulfilled every jot and tittle of the law and all Old Testament prophecies He became the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. Earlier, on one occasion He said to the disciples, “Go not into the way of the Gentiles, and into any city of the Samaritans enter ye not.” Matt. 10:5 . He could not then have taught otherwise because they were yet under the law of Moses. But now that the day of Pentecost was nigh and Christ was about to establish His Church which according to His prayer recorded in the 17th chapter of St. John must ever be identified by its characteristics of unity and peace, the wall of partition that stood between Jew and Gentile had to be broken down. There was a necessity for the new command, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations.” Not only the Jews but also the Gentiles were now to be fellow-heirs, and of the same body, and partakers of God’s promise in Christ by the Gospel. Eph. 3: 6

The Apostles knew that if they would go among the Gentiles, contrary to the law of Moses they would be brought under ridicule and persecution by their own people, the Jews. As a means to convince Peter that God was no respecter of persons, and that Christ was the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth, he was shown by God in a vision that he was to go

to Cornelius, the first Gentile convert, “nothing doubting.” Acts 10: 1 - 44, Acts 11: 12. When they were brought together, Peter said to Cornelius, “Ye know how that it is an unlawful thing for a man that is a Jew to keep company or come unto one of another nation, but God has showed me that I should not call any man common or unclean.” Peter’s words here clearly testify that he questioned whether the Gentiles could consistently be admitted into the church of Christ on a parity with the Jews. It is clearly shown by this circumstance that the Apostles and the early church had to meet a situation which does not now exist.

Although the Apostles from the beginning were not inclined to obey the Savior’s command, we have Scripture testimony that their prejudices were overcome, and thus we understand the Divine will concerning the Gentile converts was accomplished in the Apostolic age, which is testified by Peter’s words to Cornelius, “Thy prayer is heard, of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons: But in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him.” Acts 10: 35.

It is said, “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.” Titus 2: 11. That this grace appeared unto Cornelius and that he stood in favor with God before being taught by man is evident, for he said to Peter, “Four days ago I was fasting until this hour; and at the ninth hour I prayed in my house, and behold a man stood before me in bright clothing and said, “Cornelius, thy prayer is heard.” As God revealed Himself to this heathen man, will He not

now reveal Himself to every heathen who gives place in his heart to the grace of God which appears to all men? Paul also reasons in accordance with the position here taken, saying: "For when the Gentiles which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves; which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another." Romans 2: 14 - 15.

History informs us that after the destruction of Jerusalem the Jews were scattered throughout Asia Minor or the greater part of the then known world. On the day of Pentecost there were Jews at Jerusalem out of every nation under heaven. Acts 2: 5. It is evident that from that time there were believing Jews and Gentiles living in the same communities. In reading carefully the Acts of the Apostles, we notice that in some communities Gentile converts had been received into the church without being circumcised. This caused contention among the Apostles, and to show them that God is no respecter of persons, the command was necessary. Peter's vision evidently was designed to show him that all Gentiles who repented and became converted to the Christian faith were to be received into the church though they had not been circumcised, nor had they obeyed the law of Moses. "There rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying that it was needful to circumcise them and to command them to keep the law of Moses. And the Apostles and the Elders came together to consider this matter, and when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up and said unto them, "Men and

brethren, ye know how that a good while ago God made choice among us that the Gentiles by my mouth should hear the word of the Gospel and believe," Acts 15: 5 - 7. Following this notable council meeting of the Apostles and the Elders at Jerusalem, it is said, "They wrote letters by them after this manner; The Apostles and Elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch, and Syris and Cilicia." Acts 15: 23.

From these Scriptures we learn that the command, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations," was not given the Apostles because the souls of the heathen were in greater jeopardy than the Jews, nor because their salvation depended on being taught by man, but that a long standing prejudice be removed; that Jew and Gentile become one in Christ; "That he (Christ) might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby." Eph. 2: 16.

Another scripture cited as evidence that the salvation of the heathen depends upon being taught by man, and that it is the duty of the church to send missionaries to foreign lands to teach them is found in the epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans. "How then shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed?" How shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach except they be sent?"

The church of Rome consisted partly of heathens converted to Christianity and partly of Jews, among whom there had arisen serious contentions about keeping the law of Moses. The Jewish party held that unless the Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the law they could not be saved. Others who

comprehended that Christ was the end of the law for righteousness and that no man could be justified by the works of the law, maintained that the Gentile converts should have equal privileges in the church with the Jewish Christians. Paul's epistle to the Romans evidently was written to reconcile both parties in the controversy. His object, no doubt, was the same as that of the Savior when He gave the command, "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations."

By keeping in mind the contention between circumcised and the uncircumcised much that would otherwise be hard to understand in Paul's epistles is made clear, for this had become an issue of vital importance, not only in the church at Rome but also in other congregations. Paul was miraculously chosen by God and was specially endowed with divine wisdom and spiritual understanding which fitted him to cope with this perplexing situation. To reconcile the Jew and Gentile He shows that they all had gone out of the way and were all under sin and condemnation. "For God hath concluded them all in unbelief that He might have mercy upon all." Romans 11: 32. Paul then proceeds to show that the Gentiles were guilty before God because they had transgressed the law of God written on their hearts, and had indulged in many sins which they knew to be wrong. He next shows how the Jews were equally if not more guilty, inasmuch as they had sinned against better light and knowledge. He then explains that as all were under sin, they all must, by faith, seek redemption through Christ, to whom the one had equal access with the other; also in the Church the Gentile converts were now to have equal privileges with the Jewish Christians. With all prejudices

removed and the “wall of partition” which stood between them broken down, a truly great miracle was performed, not by man’s efforts but by the power of God.

That Christ came to establish a spiritually united Church composed of Jews and Gentiles who for centuries stood so decidedly apart and separate, was hard for either party to understand. In Paul’s effort to make this point clear, and that both parties might be reconciled, he at one time addresses the one and then the other. In the seventh chapter of the epistle he addresses the Jews, saying, “I speak to them that know the law”; in the tenth and eleventh chapters of the Gentiles saying, “For I speak to you Gentiles.” When he asks, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed,” it is obvious that he speaks of Israel, for in the beginning of the same chapter he says, “My heart’s desire and prayer to God for Israel is that they might be saved.” Also in the eleventh chapter, “Israel has not obtained that which he seeketh, for God hath given them the spirit of slumber, eyes that they should not see and ears that they should not hear.” Paul in this epistle enumerates many of Israel’s errors and tells how they had a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge, evidently to show the despised Gentiles that the Jews were no better than they.

We therefore understand that this scripture cannot justly be cited as an evidence of duty to go to foreign lands to teach the heathen, not that the salvation of the heathen depends on being taught by man. Were we to assume this position would we not underestimate God’s ability and power to reveal Himself to all mankind and to save? Should we accept this view we virtually

would acknowledge that the millions of heathen who lived before the sending of missionaries and those who are not reached now, are lost. Did not the Lord say, “Is my hand shortened at all that it cannot redeem? Or have I no power to deliver?” Isaiah 50:2

If God has created and endowed the heathen with sufficient knowledge to provide for his natural well-being, would any one venture to say that He will not impart such light and knowledge that will prompt him to prepare for his spiritual well-being? The visible creation preaches to the whole human race, “The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament showeth His handiwork, day unto day uttereth speech and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth and their words to the end of the world.” Psalm 19. “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men.” Titus 2: 11. John the Baptist testified that Christ was the true Light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” Paul was addressing the Gentiles in the church at Rome when he said, “The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart.” See Romans 10:8. According to the Scriptures here mentioned all rational souls have a revelation by which God communicates to them a sense of their guilt of sin and also sufficient light and knowledge to be saved.

Many persons have the idea that the heathen cannot be saved without having knowledge of a personal Christ. On this ground they claim it becomes obligatory upon the Church to send missionaries to foreign lands to teach them. We quote from an article of an able writer, “Christ died for all mankind. Children

who die in their innocence are saved through the death of Christ without a knowledge of His mission upon earth. Persons of mature age whose mental faculties are not sufficiently strong to comprehend and embrace by faith the meritorious righteousness of Christ, are saved through His death since they will not be held responsible for that of which they are not capable; yet they were sinners, persons of like passions as other men. May we not safely conclude that the faithful obedient heathen will make such discovery of his duty toward his God as will secure his salvation? It is true that salvation is only through Christ, yet if persons have no opportunity of learning of Christ, and yet obey the light they have, we believe God in mercy through Christ will save them.” If we accept that through Adam’s transgression the heathen are lost without knowledge of a personal Adam, must we not also accept that they can be saved through Christ’s atonement without the knowledge of a personal Christ? “Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life.” Romans 5: 18.

Conditions in the world today are similar to the time of Christ. “He came to His own (the Jews) and they received Him not.” They had their learned teachers – the Scribes and Pharisees. Paul said to them, “What advantage then hath the Jew? Much every way because unto them were the oracles of God committed.” Through the prophets they had opportunity to learn of Christ and of His peace doctrines long before His advent into the world. Having this advantage they should have been prepared to receive Him and to

accept His teachings before the Gentiles, yet they were the first to reject Him and at their hands was He crucified. They boasted of their good works; they paid tithes and gave alms; they fasted often and offered many prayers; they were a religious people; they were known as a highly civilized people. Notwithstanding, the scriptures testify that these learned and religious people were under greater condemnation when Christ came, than the heathen whose knowledge of the law and the prophets was very limited.

We ask, may not the souls of the civilized be in greater jeopardy today than the heathen? Should Christ appear would He agree with those who say, "all is well, Christianity is progressing?" Would He not direct His followers to teach the civilized nations where many who know to do good flagrantly violate, with a guilty conscience, the plain gospel truths? Are they not under greater condemnation than the heathen who through ignorance may not know? "For to him that knoweth to do good and doeth it not, to him it is sin." James 4: 17. Would not divine love and wisdom actuate every sincere teacher to first labor among those who are under the greater condemnation? History witnesses that the most devastating and merciless wars are now directed and fought by professed Christians with a vengeance which was not so in the early days of the Church. The question is frequently asked, "How can the unchristian liberties and unscriptural practices of those engaged in sending missionaries have a spiritually enlightening influence upon the heathen?" The turbulent and confused state of the professed Christian nations of the world is a solemn reminder that true Christian living and the teaching of sound doctrine is

neglected. We cannot over-emphasize the truth that actions speak louder than words. Obedience is love in action. When true Christian living is not the outstanding evidence of our sincerity the great zeal and untiring effort to teach and preach will not avail but will hinder the work of grace and embolden the conscience of those who look to us as their teachers and instructors.

History informs us that for many centuries the civilized nations were not active in compassing land and sea to reach and teach the heathen. Only in recent years have people become more deeply interested in a command which we believe comprehended more than going abroad to teach the heathen. The supreme thought of the Savior evidently was to prepare the apostles to meet a situation which He knew would threaten the unity of the apostolic Church because of the strong prejudices and antagonizing influence which tended to divide rather than unite the Jews and Gentiles.

As the contention about circumcision and the eating of meats was finally settled in apostolic times so the question of teaching and receiving heathen converts into the Church was also concluded at that time. The partition wall which stood for centuries between Jew and Gentile was broken down; Christ's prayer for unity was answered; His authority was established; His peace doctrines were accepted by the Apostles; they obeyed His command, teaching and submitting to the reception of the converted heathen into the Church of Christ, thus no longer showing partiality to the Jews. The point at issue has passed its climax. Both Jew and Gentile were now reconciled unto God in one body by Jesus Christ.

The long-standing distinction between Jew and Gentile was removed by the power of the Holy Spirit. "But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For He is our peace who hath made both one and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us. For through Him we both have access by one spirit unto the Father." Eph. 2: 13 - 19.

That we may not be misunderstood, we agree that it is our Christian duty to teach and receive into the Church converts of every nationality, as God is no respecter of persons and we are to know no man after the flesh. Our ministers are willing to go and preach the word of truth wherever opportunity offers. We believe, however, that the passages in the New Testament which refer to the teaching of the heathen, to the circumcision and to the eating of meats offered to idols, were written, more particularly, to overcome the contention which tended to endanger the unity of the Church in the days of the apostles. We nevertheless maintain that the command, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations," is equally important to present day believers as it was to those of the early Church because it emphasizes unity - a fundamental characteristic of the visible Church. If the Church were to lose this position it would cease to be the true Church of Christ. See John 17, and Paul's epistle to the Romans.

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