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THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

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No question should appeal more directly to the heart of the true believer than this. While the cause claims his love and zeal, the end sought must react on his spiritual nature, and greatly affect the volitional result. If one's ideal and aim determine the character of his activity in other affairs, they certainly do so in the work of the Church. Neither the Church nor the individual will show the best type of service under a mistaken view of the Divine calling. The goal will affect all the incentives to conduct.

There is but one method of ascertaining this goal, so far as the Church is concerned, and placing in clear light her supreme obligation; and that is, searching the Scriptures with a spirit divested of every thought and desire, but to know the thought and desire of God, and to hear His voice speaking therein, causing them to blend in harmonious testimony to the truth. Such a method will establish, I think, certain negative propositions and make clear a positive one.

The first proposition is, that the Mission of the Church *is not the Conversion of the World*. This may seem strange to those who have been accustomed to regard the present dispensation as the final one, and to assert that existing agencies have been ordained to bring in the Millennium. "Is not this the dispensation of the Holy Spirit?" they ask, "and was He not given to convert the world?"

The idea of universal salvation implied by such a question not only contradicts the teaching of Scripture, but sets aside the free moral agency of man, whose power to resist the truth is as evident as that of the Holy Spirit to

renew those who yield to His operations. We naturally suppose that our Lord would plainly state the mission of the Holy Spirit, in the messages He gave the disciples concerning Him. The supposition is fact. Understanding by the world its inhabitants, who are without God and without hope, we are taught that the mission of the Holy Spirit with respect to the world is to convict it "of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" (John xvi. 8-11). As to the penitent and believing, He has another office to perform,—to work in them that spiritual change which constitutes them the children of God, and then to comfort them, sanctify them, and endue them for the service of Christ (John i. 10-13; iii. 3-6; xiv. 16-17; xvi. 13-15; Acts i. 8; Matt. iii. 11). So, the Saviour's prayer (John xvii.) is that His disciples, kept from the evil one, and sent into the world, may be sanctified, and unified, "that the world may believe that thou hast sent me"—not that the world may be converted. The object of this unification, which is the work of the Spirit (Eph. iv. 3), is to present to the world such ocular proof of the power of the Gospel to transform selfish human hearts, that people may believe it is supernatural and divine. This is not saving faith, but a preparation for it. This makes the issue with the world. Whether any who belong to the world will meet the issue and accept the Saviour thus revealed, is another matter.

Of the same import is the sermon of Peter on the Day of Pentecost, in which the prophecy of Joel (then partially fulfilled) is referred to that inaugural day of our dispensation. The purpose of the Spirit's descent, and of the ministration of the Gospel, is explicitly stated to be that "whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

Under the illumination of the Holy Spirit the apostles understood, as never before, the Divine plan for the age so auspiciously begun. In one of His last interviews with them Jesus had "opened their mind, that they might understand the scriptures," saying to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the

dead the third day; and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem. Ye are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send forth the promise of my Father upon you; but tarry ye in the city, until ye be clothed with power from on high" (Luke xxiv. 45-49).

Here, then, were the Gospel, and the agency for its proclamation throughout the earth. The Holy Spirit was given to qualify the Church *to bring Christ to the world, and not to bring the world to Christ*. The world's evangelization is not its conversion, but its having the Gospel preached to it with the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven, that "whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved," or, as expressed by James, "to take out of the Gentiles a people for his name," with the ultimate view of a dispensation to be inaugurated by His personal advent for the destruction of Anti-Christ, the overthrow of Gentile dominion, and the establishment of a Kingdom so long foretold, prayed for, and expected (Acts xv. 14-18).

The language of the great Commission cannot be turned into disproof of this proposition. The Commission was to "make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you" (Matt. xxviii. 19-20). That this command can mean no more than making disciples *in* all nations, is evident from the fact that no nation as a whole has ever been converted since the Church began her career, and this work is still going on in nominally Christian lands, though they are evangelized in the Scriptural sense of that term. Only those who become disciples among the nations to which the Gospel is carried, are baptized, and instructed in the duties of discipleship.

Moreover, the implication that *all men* in these nations are intended by the statement contradicts the above inference, in which the residue of men, and all the Gentiles (the nations) are said to seek the Lord, *after His return*.

With this reference agrees Paul's argument in regard to the rejection of Israel and the offer of Salvation unto the Gentiles (nations) during the present dispensation, and the conversion of Israel, and the fullness of life to the nations at the coming of the Deliverer to turn away ungodliness from Jacob (Rom. xi. 11-29). By no sort of exegetical legerdemain can these Scriptures be confined to our Lord's first coming. They are inextricably bound up with numerous passages which forecast a more wonderful era at His second coming.

The assurance with which the Commission closes intimates as much: "I am with you all the days, even to the end of the age" (*Gr.* and margin, *Rev. Ver.*). The assurance is touching His spiritual presence which continues with His disciples during this age of gathering out of the nations the Church, at the consummation of which His visible presence will signalize the beginning of another age.

So, in His answer to the question concerning the sign of His coming, and of the end of the age. He declares that "this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matt. xxiv. 3-14 *Gr.* and margin, *Rev. Ver.*); and this testimony includes the making of disciples, teaching His commandments, and all the varied ministries of the Gospel until He come.

The second proposition to be considered is, *that the Mission of the Church is not the establishment of a kingdom by the Church.*

If that were the business of the Church the Master would have said so. On the contrary, when inquiry was made about the kingdom, he informed the apostles their work was something very different. "They therefore, when they were come together, asked him, saying, Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know times or seasons, which the Father hath set within his own authority. But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you, and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and

in all Judæa and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts i. 6-8).

Our Lord does not deny that the hope which every pious Jew cherished would be realized, but intimates that the Father hath set the time for this in His own authority, while He directs their attention to a special mission which came first in the Divine program, for the performance of which they were to receive the power of the Holy Spirit coming upon them.

A little later one of the apostles, presiding over the Council at Jerusalem, inspired by the Spirit, explained the prophecy concerning the restoration about which inquiry had been made, and gave the other features of that program. Note well his announcement, following Peter's statement concerning his call to open the door of evangelization to the Gentiles, and the account by Barnabas and Paul of signs and wonders God had wrought among the Gentiles by them.

"And after they had held their peace, James answered, saying, Brethren, hearken unto me. Symeon hath rehearsed how first God did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for his name. And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written, After these things I will return, and I will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen, and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up. That the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who maketh these things known from the beginning of the world" (Acts xv. 13-18).

Here are three distinct things covering the present age and the age to come:—

1. The evangelization of the world, and the formation of the Church, "one new man," Jew and Gentile.
2. The restoration of the Jewish nationality at the Lord's personal return (compare Matt. xxiii. 38-39) and the setting up of the throne of His father David, which He is to occupy with the Church, then glorified (compare Luke i. 31-33; Matt. xix. 28; Luke xxii. 29-30; Rev. iii. 21; Zech. xii. 9-10; xiv. 1-9).

It is not possible to read James' quotation from the Prophet Amos without connecting it with the Lord's final utterance of doom to the Jewish nation: "Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, He shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Surely the "tabernacle of David," which is to be rebuilt "after his return," is none other than the house left unto them desolate during His absence. And this house is still desolate; it was not restored at Pentecost, and the destruction of Jerusalem (A.D. 70) was the completion of that desolation, which remains to this day. Its restoration will take place *after His return*, when the nation will recognize in Him their Messiah, and say, "Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord"!

3. National as well as individual salvation throughout the world — a Divine manifestation to the nations, comparable only to "life from the dead," through God's blessing upon Israel (compare Rom. xi. 12-29). Only when "the fullness of the Gentiles be come in," and Israel is "grafted into their own olive tree," will that nation "blossom and bud" and "fill the face of the world with fruit" (Isa. xxvii. 6).

To jumble into one these three parts of God's plan of the ages, and make them synonymous with the first part, is to make an end of sound sense in the exegesis of Scripture. The apostle's expression, "to this agree the words of the prophets," shows that He who inspired their prophecies had arranged for the Church period made certain by Israel's unfaithfulness, and that only by this plan can the Scriptures be harmonized. The words "after these things I will return" are the Spirit's interpretation of the prophet's expression, "in that day"; meaning the day when Israel's long dispersion shall be ended by Messiah's coming, which James places after the Church dispensation, and their national rehabilitation shall take place in the land out of which "they shall no more be plucked up, . . . saith the Lord thy God" (Amos ix. 11-15).

This, as before stated, was and is the hope of the pious Jew. It was voiced in the prayer of the penitent robber on the cross, who was probably a Jew, acquainted with the beliefs of his nation. Convicted of sin by the majesty and grace of the Saviour in that hour of anguish and death, he confesses his sins, and prays, "Jesus, remember me when thou comest in thy kingdom." The penitent looked forward to a place in the Messiah's kingdom at His coming in glory, after a long interval in the intermediate state. Jesus promised him immediate blessedness, which of course included his hope.

This coming in His kingdom was precisely what the disciples understood by His personal coming to set up that kingdom. They never made the mistake of supposing the kingdom predicted by their prophets and made the object of prayer by their Master, could come without the King Himself. Least of all did they identify the advent of the Holy Spirit and institution of the Church with that coming. Their writings, long after the Day of Pentecost, teem with references to a kingdom in connection with the Lord's personal advent. Paul and Barnabas exhorted their converts to continue in the faith, and that through many tribulations they must enter into the kingdom of God (Acts xiv. 22). These converts were in the Church, spiritually united to Christ, but they were not in the kingdom for which the apostles were told to look, when the Divine Nobleman would return from the "far country" with the Kingdom, the time of whose inauguration the Father has set in His own authority. Meantime they are to "occupy" with the investment He has made in them, "till he comes" to determine their rewards in that Kingdom (Luke xix. 11-15).

True, believers are in the Kingdom of God's Son in the sense of union with the Son, and the Kingdom, as to its spirituality, is in them (Col. i. 13; Rom. xiv. 17), for thereby are they fitted for participation in the visible, concrete form it assumes at His coming; and this fact of participation is emphasized in the New Testament. The

Church, "which is his body," will reign with the Head, at the appointed time.

But the spiritual sovereignty of Jesus in the Church, during this dispensation of cross-bearing and tribulation, cannot be made to synchronize with what was set before the Church as her hope. The realization of the principles of the kingdom in the heart and life of true believers is an illustration in miniature of the literal fact as prevailing on earth during the Millennium. The principles are the same; the sphere and magnitude of their application make the difference.

There can be no kingdom, literally speaking, until the King returns to imprison Satan, abolish Gentile misrule, and set up a real theocracy under which governments as well as individuals shall reflect the will of God.

That return, be it observed, is to be "in the glory of his Father," when He shall reward those who have denied themselves, taken up their cross, and followed Him in His rejection by the world. This is identified with His coming in His Kingdom: "Verily I say unto you, There be some of them that stand here, which shall in no wise taste of death, till they see the Son of man coming in his kingdom" (Matt. xvi. 28; compare ver. 24-27). Mark says, "Till they see the kingdom of God come with power." Luke abbreviates, "Till they see the kingdom of God."

This, we are told, was a spiritual coming, at Pentecost. But such a coming is witnessed on every great spiritual awakening, and this was to be a peculiar manifestation, seen only by "some of them" who stood then before Him. The next verse shows that the manifestation was *personal*, and that it was Peter and James and John who saw it (Matt. xvii. 1-6). Peter identifies this scene on the Mount with the coming spoken of (2 Pet. i. 16-18); sufficient accompaniments are mentioned to make the identification clear. It was a sample of the manner of His personal coming. There were "the cloud," "the glory," and "the power" and "majesty" of His appearing. Surely power was evident—such power as will be manifested in the

appearing of the saints in His likeness at their resurrection, which is "the first resurrection" (Rev. xx. 4-6). There were also represented at that scene the three classes of persons that will be present when He comes at the end of this age: the saints who died, as Moses; the saints who will be changed without death, as Elijah; and those on earth who will be "sore afraid."

I now come to the last proposition, which is *that the goal of the Church is the visible manifestation of the Lord Jesus Christ with His saints to assume the temporal sovereignty of the world, to actualize on earth, in glory and power, the principles which now find expression only in spiritual believers.* Then will the Kingdom prevail in all lands nationally as well as individually, in government and society as well as in the hearts of saved people. Then will be fulfilled the sublime predictions: "All the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord" (Num. xiv. 21), and "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (Hab. ii. 14). "Then nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more." It is the thousand years of universal righteousness and peace, during which the risen and glorified saints shall judge the world, and execute the law of the Lord, for whom they have suffered in a Christ-rejecting age. "The rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished." Satan is the god of this age (2 Cor. iv. 4 literal), characterized as "this present evil age" (Gal. i. 4; Tit. ii. 12), but he will not be of the age to come.

How can the Millennial Age begin while Satan is free to create trouble? But his age will end with his removal from the earth and his confinement in "the bottomless pit," at the glorious visible appearing of Christ, who will then start the new age whose glory He will share with His bride (Rev. xix. 1-xx. 6). Thus the two ages are clearly distinguished from each other.

I would almost be willing to stake the settlement of this question upon one passage which contains the whole issue

in a single brief suggestion: "To him that overcometh, will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne" (Rev. iii. 21, A. V.). Here are two thrones, as plain as language can be. What could be His throne but that which He heirs in the dynasty of David, and which He takes when He restores the Kingdom to Israel, as previously set forth in this discussion? According to the post-millennial view, He must now be on His throne, since this is the last dispensation, and the kingdom has already been set up, or is being set up, by the Church. But he declares He is in His Father's throne, which is undoubtedly the throne of mediation *for* His Church, the throne of His advocacy *with* the Father (Heb. vii. 25; 1 John ii. 1). When He comes to take His own throne, the Church — the overcomers — will sit *with* Him there, reigning with Him "a thousand years" on the earth, "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father," having reigned till all enemies were put under His feet, including those of the post-millennial revolt; till the wicked dead were judged, death itself destroyed, and the new heaven and new earth appeared, wherein law and grace shall blend in the eternal reign of God and the redeemed. With this interpretation agree all the Scriptures bearing on the subject.

This is the goal of missions and the mission of the Church. The aim of the Church should be to "bring back the king" who is exiled from the world (2 Sam. xix. 10). Her mission resembles, in one respect, that of John the Baptist, at His first advent. As His witness in the world, her ministry should ever declare, like that great forerunner, "There cometh one after me"; "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." While this thought has a spiritual application, we cannot doubt its literal suggestiveness. When He succeeded John, one of His first acts was to scourge from the temple the traffickers and money-changers. Once again He did so, at His triumphal entry into Jerusalem, which typifies His triumphal return to earth (Matt. xxi. 9 with

xxiii. 38-39). Who doubts that this return will be signalized by purging Christendom in like manner?

The coming of Christ in His kingdom is a coming in *conquest* like David (Dan. vii. 13-27; Rev. xix. 11-21; xx. 1-3), and in glory and *peace* like Solomon, to reign over the whole earth thus subdued (Ps. lxxii.; Rev. xx. 4-6). Passages could be multiplied, but Isa. lxx. 18-25 and lxxvi. 8-24 contain striking declarations of that era of righteousness, peace, plenty, and longevity introduced by His return, the birth-pangs of Israel, and the report of His glory among the nations. "And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; in that day shall the Lord be one, and his name one" (Zech. xiv. 9).

Such a goal invests the work of missions with transcendent interest. No unscriptural fancy, like that of converting the world, under present conditions, can gird the Church with hope, engross her energies, and command her resources. But with eyes fixed on this goal, there is a prospect that intensifies the sense of responsibility, loosens the hold on worldly possessions, and leads to a consecration to the cause of missions that pulsates with satisfaction. Its practical force is constantly mentioned in the New Testament. If Christians are taught "to live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age," the motive is presented, "looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ." In the work of missions, how it deepens the conviction that the King's business requires haste! Under its influence, the task of evangelizing the world in a single generation seems practicable, and missionaries labor with an assurance of imminent triumph.