

The Great Commission as Originally Intended and Subsequently Interpreted.

Paper read before the Carleton, Victoria and Madawaska Quarterly Meeting by Rev. E. P. Calder.

"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. Mark 16: 15-16.

When from the Mount of Olives, with hands outspread in loving benediction, the Christ of God started for the Throne. He gave His disciples this warrant for planting His Church and telling the world of Him. This gospel which they were to preach had been taught them in three ways.

1. By the Saviour's plain exposition and fulfilment of Old Testament Scriptures.
2. His Parables and Miracles illustrating the letter and spirit of the Kingdom.
3. The revelations which had come to them as eye witnesses of His death and resurrection.

The Commission is so definite and plain, that it would seem impossible for it to be misunderstood, yet in 19 centuries of preaching which have passed under the New Dispensation, much of it has come very far short of being the gospel. Doubtless, during these centuries, the simplest, purest gospel was preached by the Apostles. They were in most instances, men of no scholarly pretensions, who being intimately acquainted with Jesus had learned His doctrines and caught His spirit. They came before the people with heart and face glowing with Pentecostal fire. They had not only been hearers, but eye-witnesses of the truth. They felt the supreme importance and Divine authority of the message and hence delivered it with convincing and arousing force. The real strength of preaching is the preacher's inward realization of the truth. This was true of Jesus and also of His disciples. And this largely accounts for the great results of the early preaching. The truth was sounded in men's ears with the vehemence of active inspiration. It was brought before men's eyes in startling miracles. The field was new. Men and women had not so thoroughly learned as they now have to run from church to church seeking something to amuse them. The gospel was new in form at least and men and women listened for novelty sake until the burning truths caught and held them with a grip that could not be broken.

During the dark ages when Rome ruled, and pursued her usual policy of smothering the truth with superstition and monkish falsehood, the great commission was almost forgotten but as its great Author aforetime broke the tomb and came forth triumphant, in the Reformation truth reappeared in resurrection power and glory.

The progress of the ages, has developed Three Principal Interpretations of the great Commission.

I. The Calvinistic. This closely followed the great events of the Reformation and characterized the preaching and writings of the Fathers. It may be said to contain five important elements.

1. The Sovereignty of God. This includes all the doctrines of Election, Predestination and Grace. Some of these teachings are now being regarded as so extreme that steps are being taken to amend them. An example of this is found in the attitude of Dr. Hillis towards the Westminster catechism.

These doctrines may be extreme in some points, but they must ever form the groundwork of all true theology. The strength of the Old Teaching was that its central figure was God. The weakness of the New is that the central figure is man. The result is that as the new gains ground we hear less of the purely spiritual side of religion. Having voted hell and the devil out of theology, the next step must necessarily be to vote out God. Man in his wickedness is now the only recognized devil,—man in his goodness will soon be the only recognized God. The old teaching nourished a definite and steadfast Christianity which neither feared persecution nor compromised with evil. The martyrs were of this type. The men of the old Puritanic faith, believing in the Divine Purpose and then personal relation to the Divine Plan, were men who neither feared the battle nor the stake, but accepted the experiences of life like Him who said: "All things written of me must be fulfilled." These men who set God at the head of their theology, as Originator and Ruler of all things, naturally held as a second element in their faith:

2. The Direct Inspiration of the Bible. The Puritan was an intense Bible student, and he not only studied the book but believed it. And his implicit faith in the Bible rested on his belief in Divine Sovereignty. To him, viewing all things in this light, the seemingly unreasonable things of the Bible were perfectly reasonable. God was Sovereign, why should He not stay the sun and moon in their course to facilitate Joshua's victory? God was Sovereign, why could He not prepare a fish to swallow the disobedient prophet, or send His angel to shut the lions' mouths for Daniel's sake. As long as I believe in the purity of the spring, I will hardly take the trouble to analyze the water, so the Puritan believing in God as the fountain of all truth accepted without question His revelation. Are we any wiser in our higher criticism? We try to explain away the difficulties. We come to

cases where "Natural Laws" will not apply, and we make our escape by blaming it as a "mistake of the translator, or by laying it to the ignorance of the Bible author who "told the truth as far as he knew," but who was of course "a little astray in the light of modern research,"—and go on our way rejoicing,—half orthodox and half infidel, doctrinal Leviticians, "neither cold nor hot."

Would it not be better, as the Father did, to fall back upon the doctrine of Divine Sovereignty and simply believe God's Word? I must move among mysteries in nature. They will not explain themselves. And yet since God said to my ancestor Adam, "Have thou dominion," nature is a kingdom which by Divine command is placed under my feet as a man.

Yet while I submit to mysteries in the kingdom beneath me, shall I approach with proud annoyance, the realm of Revelation which is above me, since it is spiritual and I am carnal, and demand that its mysteries be explained, before I will accept them, that God must further reveal Himself before I will believe Him? An unlearned faith (using the word in the human sense) is better than a learned infidelity. As Mrs. Browning puts it:

"A pagan kissing for a step of Pan,
A wild goat's footprint on the sandy loam,
Exceeds our modern thinker, who turns back
The strata, granite limestone, coal and clay,
Concluding coldly with—Here's Law, where's God."

Better be a fool on the way to Heaven, than a philosopher on the way to Hell, because godly foolishness is wiser than devilish wisdom.

3. The third element in the Old Teaching was the doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement. The Fathers taught that the claims of Divine Law and Justice upon man were met in the person and work of Jesus. The atonement, which is really at-one-ment, according to this interpretation means three things:

(a.) The oneness of Jesus with the sinner in His sacrifice. Jesus in taking our nature came under the dominion of the law of sin and death. The law of sin made Him subject to besetments and temptations. The law of death brought Him under the penalty. As man's representative He must take man's nature with all its accompanying experiences. (Isa. 53)

(b.) The oneness of the Believer with the Risen Lord. Since Jesus took my nature, my sin was laid upon Him in His death. Since by His spirit in regeneration, His risen life has been born in my soul, His righteousness is laid to my credit in satisfying the law. He stood for me in His sacrifice under the law. The law took Him in my name. He stands for me in His resurrection work, hence His perfect character, His victory over sin and death, and His eternal right in the kingdom are all in my name for I am one with Him.

(c.) Oneness of the Believer with God through Christ. According to the old doctrine, Jesus in his humanity is one with the sinner. Jesus in his resurrection work is one with his people—since they have his life and are members of his person—standing in the same relation to him as branches to the vine, and since Jesus in the Trinity is one with the father, all the redeemed household are one with God in Him. (John 15-17.)

This view of the atonement presents man as a hopeless sinner with no native good or resources of help within himself. In his salvation he is moved by the Holy Spirit, to repent of his sins and accept the means of grace which have been predestinated to meet his needs in the infinite fore-knowledge of God—and this acceptance brings him into the possession of eternal life which puts him in vital and eternal union with God through Jesus Christ.

This view of the atonement necessitates a belief in the fourth element of the old creed—

4. The Eternal Perseverance of the Saints. Its reasoning is that the new birth brings the soul into the possession of eternal life, which, since it joins the saint with God through Christ, not only insures his eternal salvation but continues the motive power of godly conduct.

The last element in the old teaching is the belief in—

5. Eternal Rewards and Punishments. It teaches that character is determined by its relation to the atonement, hence those who believe in Jesus, being in vital union with him, must dwell eternally in his presence and fellowship, while those who reject him must live in endless separation from him and reap the consequences of personal sin.

This interpretation of the great commission, characterized the preaching of the Fathers and forms the groundwork of the more orthodox beliefs to-day. Compared with the Book of Romans, it is essentially the doctrine preached by the apostles and accepted by the early church.

II. The second interpretation of the great commission is known as the Armenian. Briefly reviewed it differs from the Calvinistic in two points. 1. The Doctrine of Sovereignty. 2. Its view of the Atonement. In dealing with the doctrine of sovereignty this theology as we understand it, admits the foreknowledge of God, but denies predestination of human affairs. This interpretation is open to one serious objection, in that it presents God as acting unworthy of himself.

To admit that God is infinite in wisdom is to establish his foreknowledge of all things. To claim that God foreknew and did not predestinate, is to charge God with not acting up to his intelligence. A man who does not do as well as he knows is acting unworthy of himself, so if God foreknew and did not forewill all things for his own glory, we must say in all reverence that he has violated his own character. Such a teaching is blasphemy, since God "cannot deny himself."

3. A misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God must necessarily mar the doctrine of the atonement. The boast of Armenianism that it has extended the atonement beyond the teaching of Calvinism is a false claim. True it has enlarged the doctrine of human free agency, but in so doing it has belittled the saving power of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit. The broadest possible view of the atonement is that it saves eternally all who receive it. When we teach salvation by subsequent human effort we rob the atonement of its glory and lay the real saving power upon the man himself.

Let me reverently say that I do not believe Jesus Christ ever commissioned men to go and preach salvation on the instalment plan—or ask men to get into the gospel lifeboat on condition that they must either work their passage or be thrown overboard—he did not so send them but told them to "go and preach the gospel," and that is not the gospel, because it lays salvation upon the creature instead of upon the Christ. Human free agency is exercised in using or rejecting the means of grace—beyond that it does not exist. In the spiritual as in the natural realm man acts in constant relation to a law. He can obey and prosper or disobey and suffer. An individual intelligence must have the right of choice and a corresponding responsibility, but the effects of that choice are predestinated by the great and changeless laws of the physical and spiritual universe. The over-estimation of man's part in the work of salvation has led to a third interpretation of the great commission, now extensively proclaimed:

III. The Doctrine of Unrestricted Universal Salvation. The extravagant views of the so called "free thinkers" of the age have produced a system of theology, differing as widely from the gospel, as a Chinese lantern differs from the sun in the firmament. Should these "thinkers" be called upon to formulate a great commission it would read something like this, "Go and tell men that their ancestors were ignoramuses and fools, that the Bible is only a history of the rambling, blind ring way in which the human race has gradually stumbled into the light, and that the history of this age will be the Bible of the next."

Well, the Lord help the generation that has no better Bible than the history of this present century! As well have the constitution and by-laws of Sodom and Gomorrah. If the record of the business rascalities, the political villainy, the social falsity of this age is to be the Bible of the next, the Lord deliver them!

That is not all. Ask one of these latter day gospel-makers what he thinks of Christ and mark the answer, "A perfect man, a wise teacher, a true philosopher, a beautiful poet, a good example; that is all." Ask him what he means by atonement. He will tell you that it is living right to-day to make up for the sins of yesterday, bracing up and being a man, carefully keeping oneself under good moral environment and submitting to proper training in order to overcome heredity,—a piece of philosophy about as sensible as telling a crow to keep clear of other crows, and stop eating carrion, and sit in the rain till he is bleached white enough to be a dove. Such men sneer at the doctrine of substitutionary atonement as belonging to the dark ages,—a creed of savages, yet they will tell you they accept the teachings of Jesus. Now it is impossible to accept the teachings of Jesus without believing in substitutionary atonement. Jesus pivoted all his teachings on his sacrificial work. The cross and the tomb are the revelations which explain the life and mission of Jesus. In its mere earthly side the life of Jesus would read like a supreme failure. In the exhibition of redeeming love and resurrection victory, it is a transcendent, an eternal success. As in the Revelator's vision it was only the slain Lamb that could open the seals of the Book, so it is only Christ crucified that can unlock the mysteries of the gospel. The atonement is the central doctrine in the recorded worship of the ages, since Abel lifted his acceptable altar and offered "a more excellent sacrifice than Cain," hence it must ever be the central truth in our preaching since it involves all the other truths. Granted that sovereignty is a fundamental doctrine in the gospel, it finds its chief expression in the atonement, since the cross of Jesus is only the revelation of God's free grace in providing a sacrifice for those whom his purpose had "before marked out, conformable to the image of his Son." Granting the inspiration of the Bible a necessary element in our creed, it must rest on the atonement of Jesus since "redemption through the blood" is the crimson thread on which the golden truths are strung. In short, all that makes the Bible more than any other book, is that it breathes the secret of how to make wrong character right, by showing us Jesus in his sacrifice as the remedy for sin, and his resurrection life, which coming to us by importation of the Spirit alone can be in us the motive-power of righteousness. To fulfil the great commission then, we must preach salvation through the atonement. This includes all the doctrines of sovereignty, sin, righteousness, and reward. They all meet in the cross. The cross of Jesus! Beautiful symbolism! One end resting on the earth as if to proclaim God's sovereign right to rule, to judge, to redeem, to love and glorify the world. One end pointing to heaven as a monument to the fact that all in the kingdom has been given into the hands of Jesus for the world's salvation. One arm pointing to one horizon the other to another horizon, as if to endorse the message that by that cross "as far as the east is from the west" God has put away the transgressions of his people; yea further as a general invitation to all men to come and test the efficacy of his redeeming work, further still to be the pledge that from all kindreds and lands shall be gathered those saved by its power. The text reveals:

1. The Extent of the Commission. "All the world." So we are to tell the story of the cross wherever man is found. This word of Jesus obligates us to send to all lands the good news of salvation through the blood.