



HOLY TRINITY PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

First Principles, Week #7

What Does the Church Exist to Do?

Bio and introduction to be distributed at a later date.

The Christian View of Missions

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1. Some nineteen hundred years ago a remarkable movement emerged from the obscurity of Palestine into the cosmopolitan life of the Roman Empire. That movement was the Christian church. What were its characteristics in those first glorious days?
2. This question is important for at least two reasons. In the first place, the church in those first days had everything that it so signally lacks today. It had joy, it had power, it had life. Perhaps that life and that power may be regained if we return to what the church was then. In the second place, by considering what the church was then, we can answer the question what can rightly bear the name “Christian” today. If we have a new thing, let us use a new name; but if we claim to be Christian, we must show some conformity to that to which the name “Christian” was first applied.
3. But what was it to which the name was first applied; what was the Christian movement when it first appeared?
4. With regard to that question, there may be a certain amount of agreement even between historians who are themselves Christians and historians who are not Christians, even between historians of widely diverse views. Difference of opinion prevails about the question whether Christianity is true, but about the question what Christianity is and what it was in those first days a certain amount of agreement may be attained.
5. One thing, at least, is clear, on the basis of all our sources of historical information. The earliest Christian church was a missionary church. If Christianity ever settles down to be the religion merely of one nation or of one group of nations, it will have become entirely untrue to the tradition which was established for it at the beginning. There was evidently a tremendous urge among those early Christians to carry their message to the ends of the earth.
6. What, then, was the mission of that missionary church? What was the Christianity that it propagated in that ancient Roman world?

7. In the first place, the Christianity that it propagated did not present itself as a new religion. On the contrary, it appealed to an ancient revelation, and it claimed to stand in the full continuity of an age-long plan of God. It should never be forgotten – though it often is forgotten- that the Christian church at the very beginning had a Bible. Its Bible was the Old Testament, and it regarded that Bible as the Word of God, just as Bible-believing Christians regard the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments today.
8. In so regarding the Old Testament, it was in exact accord with the person whom it presented as the foundation of its life-namely Jesus Christ. One thing is clear to the historian. Jesus of Nazareth, whether we like it or not, did hold the view of the Old Testament which generally was accepted in the Israel of his day: he did hold the Old Testament to be true throughout; he did hold it to be authoritative and divine. When he said that some of its commands were temporary, and were to be superseded or modified in the new era which his sovereign coming ushered in, he did not at all mean that those commands were not commands of God, absolutely valid in the sphere and in which they were intended by God to prevail. It is a fact of history that Jesus as well as his first disciples held the loftiest view of the divine authority and full truthfulness of the Old Testament Scriptures. From the beginning, Christianity was a religion founded upon a book.
9. That book proclaimed, and the early church proclaimed on the basis of it, in the first place, the one living and true God, Maker of heaven and earth; and that proclamation was the basis of everything else that the church proclaimed. “Ye turned to God,” says Paul, in describing his missionary preaching, his preaching to unconverted people at Thessalonica - “ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.”
10. I know that some men have represented that as though it were a mere piece of metaphysics that the church could and can do without. The doctrine of “fiat creation,” they tell us, has nothing to do with vital religion; and even in those early days, they tell us, Jesus could be accepted as Savior-God without any settlement of the question regarding his connection with the Creator and Ruler of the world. But men who tell us that are entirely wrong. Certainly Jesus was God , but calling Jesus God has no meaning unless one first tells what one means by “God”; and calling Jesus God while one is indifferent to the existence of a God who is Creator and Ruler of the world runs directly counter to the teaching of Jesus himself. No, both Jesus and his earliest disciples were first of all monotheists; they believed that before the world was God was, that this universe came into being by the fiat of his will, and that he is eternally free as over against the things he has made. That is what the Bible means by the living and holy God, and it was that living and holy God whom those first Christian missionaries proclaimed.
11. In the second place, again on the basis of the Old Testament Scriptures, the early church proclaimed the universal sinfulness of mankind - a mankind lost under the guilt and power of sin, and subject to the wrath of God.
12. Men do not like that doctrine of the wrath of God today. But it is not the historian’s business, when he deals with past ages, to find what he likes; it is his business to find what was. And every historian must admit that the doctrine of the wrath of God was at the very

foundation of the message of the earliest Christian church. Every historian must also admit, what is more, that that same doctrine was at the very heart of the teaching of Jesus. If you want the really terrible descriptions of the wrath of God and of the divine retribution for sin in the other world, do not turn to the theologians of the church or even the apostle Paul. But turn to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth - his teaching not only as it is recorded in the New Testament, but even as it has been reconstructed and reduced by modern negative criticism.

13. I know that people tell us it is an unworthy thing to appeal to the motive of fear. In missionary endeavor particularly, they tell us, that motive is out date. But it is strange that those who tell us that should appeal to Jesus as their authority in religion. For if there ever was a religious teacher who appealed to the motive of fear, it was Jesus." Be not afraid of them that kill the body," he said, "and after that have no more that they can do. But I will forewarn you whom you shall fear: Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power to cast into Hell" yea, I say unto you, Fear him." These words are no mere excrescence in the teaching of Jesus. No, they are at the very heart of it; they give to the ethical teaching of Jesus its stupendous earnestness. And they are also at the very heart of the missionary message of the earliest Christian church.
14. One thing is perfectly clear - no missionary work that consists merely in presenting to the people in foreign lands a thing that has proved to be mildly valuable in the experience of the missionary himself, which he thinks may perhaps prove helpful in foreign lands in building up a better life upon this earth, can possibly be regarded as real Christian missions. At the very heart of the real Christian missionary message is the conviction that every individual hearer to whom the missionary goes is in deadly peril, and that unless the message is heeded he is without hope in this world and in the dreadful world that is to come.
15. Then, on the basis of those two great presuppositions - the awful holiness of God and a mankind lost under the guilt and power of sin-the first Christian missionaries preached Jesus Christ.
16. But how did they preach him? Did they preach him as a great teacher and example, as a great inspirer of a new religious life? Did they go about the world saying: "We have come under the spell of a great person, Jesus of Nazareth; contact with that person has changed our lives; we proclaim him to you as he lives in our lives; and we beg you to let him change your lives too"?
17. Well, that is what modern men might have expected those first Christian missionaries to say, but every historian must admit that as a matter of fact they said nothing of the kind. Every historian must admit that as a matter of fact they proclaimed Jesus not [primarily as an example or as an inspirer, but as a Savior from divine wrath and from the awful bondage of sin.
18. In so proclaiming him, they appealed to their holy book. The case is not as though they appealed to the Old Testament merely for the presuppositions of the gospel and then turned away from it when they preached the gospel itself. No even in preaching Jesus they turned to

God's written Word. They did not preach Jesus as one whose coming was a sort of afterthought of God, one who had no connection with what God had done before. No, they preached him as the fulfillment of a glorious divine promise, as the culmination of a mighty divine plan.

19. But then they proclaimed him in the great wealth of fresh information handed on by those who had seen and heard him when he was on earth. In particular, they proclaimed his death and his resurrection from the dead. "You are justly subject to God's wrath and curse," they said, "but Christ took that curse upon himself, he died there on the cross in your stead. That just and holy God, Creator and Ruler of the world is also God of an infinite love; he sent his eternal Son to die for you. That one who died is risen from the dead. He lives, and he is waiting for you to trust him and have life."
20. At the basis of the Christian message, in other words, was not an exhortation, but a gospel; not a program, but a piece of news.
21. So much must be admitted by modern historians of all shades of opinion. The early Christian church was radically doctrinal. It proclaimed facts; the facts about God the Father, the facts about mankind lost in sin, the facts about Jesus Christ. That is true not merely of Paul but of the very earliest church in Jerusalem, whose message Paul reproduces for us when he tells us at the beginning of the fifteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians what he had "received".
22. So much, at least, must be admitted. The early church, even the very earliest church in Jerusalem, did more than proclaim Jesus as an example; it proclaimed him as a Savior. It made him not merely the author, but also the substance, of the gospel. It did more than proclaim what he proclaimed about God; no, it proclaimed him.
23. But, men tell us, although that is what the early church preached, that is not what Jesus preached, and we can now return from the early church to Jesus himself. The early church proclaimed him as Savior by his atoning death, but he himself we are told, kept himself out of his gospel and preached a simple and universal gospel of the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man-and we ought now, rejecting all doctrinal accretions, to return to that simple gospel which Jesus preached.
24. But is it not a strange thing that those first disciples of Jesus should so completely have misunderstood their teacher's words and work? And is it not strange that that misunderstanding of the teaching of Jesus should have been so much more powerful in the world than the teaching which it misunderstood? Is it not a strange thing that this supposed gospel of Jesus himself should have been so powerless, and that only when it was perverted into becoming a gospel about Jesus, a gospel which set Jesus forth, it conquered the world? Yes, it is strange; and not lonely is it strange but it is untrue. Even the most radical criticism is enabling us to see that. All our sources of information-including not only the gospels, but the earliest sources supposed, rightly or wrongly, to underlie the gospels-are dominated by the view that Jesus was no mere proclaimer of a supposed universal fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man, but a divine Redeemer. What is the conclusion? Why, says radical

criticism, the conclusion is that we cannot tell what sort of person Jesus was, because all of our sources of information are vitiated by this false Christian notion that he was the Savior of mankind.

25. A strange conclusion that is, and a conclusion that is contradicted by the self-evidencing quality of the wonderful picture of Jesus which the gospels contain. Our conclusion is different from that of these radical critics. It is that the picture is from the life – that God did walk upon this earth, that the whole Bible that sets forth that divine Christ is true, and that we are in his holy presence today.
26. I have set forth what Christian missions were in those first glorious days. I have tried to make you understand and sympathize with the joy of those slaves and humble tradesmen in Corinth and in other places who faced the awful wrath of God and then found Jesus to be their Savior from that wrath.
27. But is that all? Must we be historians merely? Must we look wistfully at the joys of those first glorious days of the church without ever having them for ourselves?
28. No, my friends, those same joys may be ours, and in exactly the same way.
29. That is known full well by some of you who are my hearers at this hour. You are listening to my voice that you may receive comfort from one – be he never so humble and never so unworthy – who has resisted the current of the times and has a faith like unto yours. Others of you, I suppose, have listened in out of curiosity – that you may hear for yourselves one of those strange persons, not often heard, whom their opponents call “Fundamentalists.” But for whatever reason you have listened, there is one thing that I desire to say to you. God may speak to your soul. He may use even my poor words to touch some forgotten chord in your heart and to bring again to your mind the great and precious promises of the holy book. There may even now be one of you who will say: “All my wisdom, all my goodness, all my striving are vain; oh, Lord Jesus, be my Savior now!”