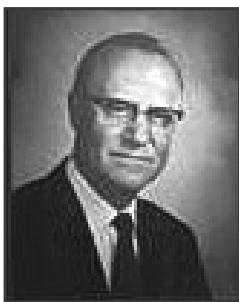


# 3 Missionary Theology and the New Testament<sup>1</sup>

George W. Peters

The missionary theology of the New Testament (outside of the gospels) is not difficult to establish. We need only remind ourselves of the fact that the book of Acts is the authentic missionary record of the apostles and the early church and that all epistles were written to churches established through missionary endeavors. Were Christianity not a missionary religion and had the apostles not been missionaries, we would have no book of Acts and no epistles. With the exception of Matthew, even the gospels were written to missionary churches. The New Testament is a missionary book in address, content, spirit and design. This is a simple fact but it also is a fact of reality and profound significance. The New Testament is theology in motion more than it is theology in reason and concept. It is “missionary theology.”



George W. Peters, 1907-1988 (Ph.D., Kennedy School of Missions), a Mennonite Brethren evangelist, educator and missiologist, was born in Ohrloff, Russia. With his widowed mother, he migrated to Canada (1926). Peters helped found the Western Children’s Mission, the first organized missionary outreach by MBs to non-Mennonite people in Canada. He was instrumental in beginning mission work in Colombia (1945). He provided visionary and academic leadership to at least three MB theological schools, and served on the MB Mission board for over 25 years. He taught missions at Dallas Theological Seminary for nearly 20 years.

Again, in keeping with the practice of their Master, the apostles upheld great principles of faith and conduct, implanting great ideals of missions into the life of the churches. They trusted that the Holy Spirit in his own time would transform these ideals into dynamic motivation. This had been their own experience. In this manner world evangelism would become a living and dynamic ideal of the churches rather than a “command” in letters to be legally obeyed or submitted to. Thus while the apostles did not command missions, the great ideals in the epistles imply it most emphatically.

This emphasis becomes most pronounced in the writings of the apostle Paul, as might be expected. Is not God the God of all nations? Did not Christ die for all mankind? Is it not stated that God is not willing that any should perish? Are not Christians exhorted to pray for the salvation of all men? Is Paul not definite on his call to be a missionary to the nations? Does he not accept this as a special grace from the Lord? Is not the church to be gathered from among the nations? Is Paul not specific that the ignorant and unbelieving shall perish from the presence of God? Does Paul not uphold certain missionary churches as special examples to other churches? Is Paul not raising a series of startling questions in Romans 10:14:15? Is the apostle not training a large core of faithful workers to carry on the missionary work which he had begun? Such are some of the great New Testament missionary ideals. It is amazing how much of missionary ideology there is in the epistles.

On the other hand, we need to keep in mind that the New Testament presents a twofold movement: the vertical and the horizontal. The latter dominates the Acts of the Apostles, the former the epistles. Together they constitute a divine unit which brings balance to Christianity and to the churches. We must always keep them together.

We must also remember that every church found itself in a mission setting in a very peculiar sense. Every church was surrounded by multitudes without God, without hope. Here was their first challenge, as Paul tells the church at Philippi (Phil. 2:12-16). Similar words are spoken to the churches at Corinth, Ephesus, Thessalonica and Colosse.

Again, Paul commends the churches at Rome and Thessalonica for their efforts in evangelizing their communities and beyond their borders (Rom. 1:8; 1 Thes. 1:8). The apostle admonishes the church of Corinth to abound in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58), that is, they are to excel, to go beyond their usual bounds, to spill over and do the unusual. The apostle also praises the Philippians for having an active part in his ministry (Phil. 4:10). It must be remembered that the Philippian church had a missionary out in the field (Phil. 2:25).

Finally, the writings of Paul present some of the greatest missionary texts and thoughts. We cannot read Romans 10:12-18 and not think missions. Second Corinthians 5:9-21 remains a standard missionary text, and no doubt these verses have inspired thousands to an active participation in missions. Ephesians 3:1-12 rings with a missionary challenge. This is true also of such passages as Romans 1:13-17; 1 Corinthians 9:16-18; Philippians 2:14-16; 1 Timothy 2:1-7. Many others could be listed. Paul says much about missions and evangelism. Supremely an exponent and propagator of the gospel, he expected the early churches to be of like kind.

Missions is not peripheral in the New Testament. The apostles knew the value of missions in their own experiences. They actively enlisted newly founded churches in the missionary enterprise, soliciting their prayers, accepting their contributions, and drawing their co-laborers almost exclusively from them. In order to present missionary theology of the New Testament, we shall briefly survey the basic missionary concepts which underlie the missionary activities of the twelve. We shall also look at the missionary theology of Paul.

## **The Twelve**

The gospels report very few of the sayings of the apostles. Here they were observers, followers, learners, disciples. To know their mind and learn their theology we must hear them speak and read their writings. Our main sources, therefore, are the book of Acts and those epistles written by apostles.

In the book of Acts we see the apostles at work, first as missionaries to their own people and later as ambassadors of Christ to the nations of the world, though we do not have the accounts of the various members of the apostolate. Retrospectively Mark writes, "Then the disciples went out and preached everywhere, and the Lord worked with them and confirmed his word by the signs that accompanied it" (Mark 16:20). The exact locations and geographical areas we are unable to establish with certainty. From the course of history of Christianity in apostolic times, we are justified to conclude that all of them were effective evangelists and missionaries. According to tradition, most of them laid down their lives as martyrs in the mission fields of the world. The rapid and far-flung spread of Christianity within a few decades is our best commentary on the zeal and labors of the apostles.

The great dividing line in the lives of the twelve is Pentecost, the watershed of evangelical missions. Here New Testament missions began a progressive course of realization. Therefore, the missionary significance of Pentecost is beyond human estimation. The presence of the Holy Spirit in the lives of the apostles made all the

difference, for it fashioned them into men of God and apostles. Boldly they confessed that they were witnesses of God's redemptive event in Christ, emphasizing particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. To the Jews at Jerusalem they witnessed supremely of the resurrection of Christ. Boldly they taught that in the resurrection God had vindicated all the claims of Christ, had consummated redemption, and had established Christ as Lord, Christ (Messiah), Saviour and Judge (Acts 2:32, 36; 3:15, 26; 4:10-11, 33; 5:31-32; 7:52, 56). Emphatically they declared that Christ alone is the Saviour of mankind and that there is no salvation in any other, "for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Courageously they told the high court about their inner compulsion to obey God rather than any court order. The inner glow of their experiences could not be contained; they had to speak the things they had seen and heard.

As we trace the missionary theology of the apostles, we come to the depth of their missionary motivation. Let us define several areas which relate to their missionary thrust.

### **Apostolic Missionary Motivation**

It is never easy to do justice in an analysis of motivations. They are not singular but become dynamic in constellations. Some are evident while others remain hidden and unrecognized. Some surface and become dominant at one occasion and others at another time. Thus even the best analysis is a penetration only in part.

We are assisted in our study of the apostles by some clear statements on their part as other men sought to probe their motivations. This puts us at least in the right path in our pursuit and should also enable us to understand and interpret the apostles correctly, even if not completely.

### **The Apostles Were Grippled by God's Great and Sovereign Redemptive Act Rooted in His Eternal Counsel**

This act which had taken place in Christ Jesus, the man of Nazareth, had been accomplished in history—in the here and now, in time and space. Taking place according to prophecy, it was completed for the benefit of all mankind. It must be appropriated by faith in Jesus Christ, and such faith is experientially related to repentance from sin.

*The apostles knew God had acted.* He had acted sovereignly, decisively and redemptively. Though not exonerating the Jews of their guilt in crucifying Christ, Peter unhesitatingly states that Christ was delivered up by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God (Acts 2:23; 4:28). The rejection and crucifixion of Christ

were not only due to the sin of Israel, for somehow God had acted in them according to his gracious purpose and plan of salvation. Thus the sending of Christ and the resurrection of Christ are consistently ascribed to God; they are the acts of God.

In a similar vein, John writes, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). The God of eternal love has acted in a very concrete, decisive, appropriate and effective manner. Though evil hands had crucified the Lord of glory, this was not contrary to the eternal purpose of God. Nor was it independent of his plan, for, in the ultimate sense, God had acted. He gave his Son; he sent his Son. He manifested his love.

***The apostles were convinced that the decisive, redemptive act of God had taken place in Christ Jesus the man of Nazareth.*** Although the act of God was sovereign, it was not without mediation. God’s redemptive act was indissolubly linked with Christ. He is the servant Jesus, the holy One and the Just, the Prince of life, the Lord of glory (Acts 3:13.15; James 2:1). He is Lord, Messiah and Saviour. In the words of Paul, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:19). The apostles know of no salvation apart from Christ. “Whoever has the Son has life” (1 John 5:12). They were borne along by the deep conviction of the sole saviorhood of Christ crucified and raised. They knew him and they declared him boldly as both Saviour and Lord to the Jew as well as to the nations (Acts 2:36; 4:12; 10:36).

Very similarly, the saviorhood of Christ is lifted up in Acts 3:20; 4:12; 5:31. When asked by what power or by what name the miracle of healing the lame man had been wrought, Peter knows of only one name. Thus “It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed.” And again: “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:10, 12). Emphatically Peter declared, “All the prophets testify about him [Christ, the historic person, slain and raised from the dead and ordained of God to be the judge of the quick and the dead] that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name” (Acts 10:43).

No other witness in the New Testament is more emphatic on the sole saviorhood of Christ than is John. Christ is “the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). Clearly John states: “No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23). The apostle informs us that “And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us”

(1 John 3:23). The harmony of the apostles in this fundamental truth is obvious throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is both Saviour and Lord. In him, God has acted once for all—conclusively, decisively and adequately for all mankind.

***The apostles were convinced that the act of God in procuring salvation was a historical event with consequent historical results.*** It was eternal and spiritual reality manifested in time and in space. It is not “faith belief” (illusion). It is not mythology or a dream of ecstasies. It is reality concrete and datable. It happened to a historical person—“Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know” (Acts 2:22; cf. 10:38). It took place in a geographical setting and in a historical city, Jerusalem (Acts 2:14). It occurred under a specific Roman procurator in Palestine, Pilate (Acts 3:13). These are historical facts and cannot be denied. God acted in history, in the here and now.

Therefore Christianity offers a historical salvation, a salvation which is personal and social. It is real “here and now” in personal experience, offering forgiveness of sin and cleansing from sins and bestowing eternal life which is a present possession. It upholds a transforming power in the Holy Spirit, inviting man to share peace, joy, assurance, hope, godliness and fellowship with God through Christ Jesus as present and abiding experiences. It is available to all now upon repentance of sin and faith in Christ Jesus. This is the gospel, the good news of God in Christ Jesus. It must be proclaimed now because it operates in the great and gracious now of God. This is the day of salvation. The present-day reality of the salvation of God in Christ Jesus is the central theme of the book of Hebrews. At the same time it presents the supremacy and the finality of Christianity.

***The apostles were convinced that all that had happened was in perfect harmony with the prediction of Old Testament prophecy.*** Pentecost had transformed their vision. They saw the chain of events not as tragic failures and disappointments of history but as fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament. Thrice Peter refers to Old Testament predictions in his great Pentecostal sermon (Acts 2:16, 25, 34). He also reminds his hearers that “The promise is for you and your children,” telling them that “this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Messiah would suffer” (Acts 2:39; 3:18). Peter knows of the prophecy of Moses and expresses a most comprehensive view of fulfilled prophecy in Acts 3:24. The apostle knows Jesus as “the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone” (Acts 4:11; cf. 1 Pet. 2:6; Isa. 28:16). No less convincing was the reasoning of Stephen in the synagogue (Acts 6:9) and the words of James at the

stormy Jerusalem council meeting when he freely quoted from the writings of Old Testament prophecy (Acts 15:15-18).

The full scope of the usage of the Old Testament by the early church is best illustrated by the gospel of Matthew, who himself was an apostle, the book of Hebrews, and the preaching of Paul in the synagogues as Luke records it in the second half of the book of Acts. The Old Testament was their Scripture. They found it fulfilled in Christ Jesus.

It was the settled conviction of the apostles that God had acted in perfect harmony with his predetermined counsel and his plan as unfolded in the writings of the Old Testament. This conviction gave steadiness to them in the midst of storm and stress, pressure and tensions, threats and persecution, suffering and martyrdom.

***The apostles were convinced that the redemptive act of God in Christ was for the benefit of all mankind.*** Peter explicitly states on the day of Pentecost, after having exhorted the people to repent and be baptized, “The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:39). And as Peter reported his experience to some contentious brethren in Jerusalem (11:4), Luke informs us, “When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, ‘So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life’” (11:18).

John joins in the universality of Peter and plainly declares that Christ “is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). And again he says, “the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). Nationalistic particularism may have lived in the sentiments of the disciples, but it had no place in the inspired theology of the apostles.

Jude knows of the “common salvation.” In his brief epistle he is most inclusive in his embrace of salvation and judgment in history. Certainly he is not a nationalistic particularist in his doctrine of salvation.

Thus the voices of the writers unite in the fact that God has acted decisively and graciously in Christ Jesus for the benefit of all mankind. The universality of salvation ideally held and proclaimed by Christ comes to practical and dynamic fruition in the apostles.

***The apostles were convinced that repentance and faith were the God-ordained way to enter into the salvation of God.*** The salvation of God in Christ Jesus is available to all people, but it must be consciously and voluntarily appropriated by faith in Jesus Christ. Such faith is essentially related to repentance from sin. It may

be noted that faith is the positive and repentance the negative aspect of that living and dynamic relationship which relates man savingly to Christ. Both aspects are emphasized by the apostles.

It is evident from the preaching of the apostles that they were not merely announcing the good news of God's salvation. They were prevailing upon men and women to repent of their sins and to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The call to repentance rings out distinctly, loudly and repeatedly (Acts 2:38; 3:19; 8:22; 11:18).

No less emphatic is the challenge to faith. Man must by faith receive what God has provided in Christ Jesus. Faith is all-important (Acts 2:44; 3:16; 4:4, 32; 6:5, 7-8; 8:12-13, 37; 9:42; 10:43; 11:17, 21, 24). Without faith it is impossible to please God and to experience his gracious provisions.

There is a clear line in apostolic teaching separating people into two distinct groups. On the one side are the believers who experience the salvation of God in Christ; they are the children of God. On the other side are the unbelievers and disobedient who do not possess the salvation of God. Thus apostolic preaching aims at persuasion as well as at dispensing information. The apostles sought to move men and women to repentance from sin and faith in Christ Jesus. The outlined cluster of theological convictions is reinforced by personal commitment in obedience to their Lord and the experience in their hearts.

### **The Apostles were Impelled in their Missionary Endeavor by the Commitment in Obedience to their Lord**

They were urged forward by the persuasion in their hearts that they must obey God and fulfill his blessed will regardless of difficulties and cost. Twice Peter set the will of God over against the authority and orders of the priestly court boldly telling the Jewish authorities that it behooved them to obey God rather than men. This was more than human audacity; this was divine persuasion. Logically the court may have agreed with Peter but was not the voice of the high priest the voice of God? Here is the fatality of the blindness and confusion of the natural man. The apostles had the spiritual discernment to distinguish human interpretation from divine inspiration and revelation.

Obedience is a key word to understand the operation of the apostles; it became prominent in their vocabulary. Emphatically Peter links obedience to the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:32). On several occasions the apostle uses the words *faith* and *obedience* interchangeably, thus indicating the experiential unity of these two basic Christian concepts (1 Pet. 1:2, 22; 2:71; 3:20; 4:17). Obedience is held up as a cardinal Christian virtue and a proof of belonging to God, keeping and doing the commandments of God (1 John 2:3-4; 2:29; 3:7, 24; 5:2-4). To the apostles,



obedience is not optional; it is occupational. It occupies all of their life and commits them in obedience and loyalty to their Lord and Master.

### **The Apostles Were Motivated by the Experience of the Living Christ**

The apostles were irresistibly inspired by the glow of their personal experience of the living Christ indwelling their lives through the Holy Spirit. The reality of Christ in human experience became their blessed portion; it was their sustaining and impelling power. They knew Christ had been raised from the dead. And even though they had seen Him ascend on high and disappear in the clouds, they were conscious of His presence in their lives. He was not a distant Christ to them. With Paul they could confess, “Christ lives in me” (Galatians 2:20). Christian experience was meaningful and dynamic to them.

Joyfully Peter exclaims, “As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard” (Acts 4:20). Repeatedly the apostles refer to the resurrection of Christ Jesus. He was an ever present reality to them (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 4:10, 33; 5:29-32). The experience of the risen Lord was indelible, transforming, overwhelming, constantly refreshing, abidingly inspiring, gloriously triumphing. Confidently John writes, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life ... We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ” (1 John 1:1-3).

The language of the apostles betrays the fact that they were unable to get away from the glory of the resurrected One. His glory was reflected in their experiences, which may be seen in their repeated usage of the word glory. It constitutes a prominent part in their vocabulary. Stephen speaks of “the God of glory” (Acts 7:2). James knows “our glorious Lord” (James 2:1). Peter refers to “the spirit of glory” (1 Pet. 4:14). We are informed that the Christians are called to glory (2 Pet. 1:3; 1 Pet. 5:10), are to receive a crown of glory (1 Pet. 5:4), are partakers “in the glory to be revealed” (1 Pet. 5:1), are filled with “an inexpressible and glorious joy” (1 Pet. 1:8). In his dying moments Stephen saw the glory of God (Acts 7:55). There was glory in the experience of the apostles. Here were glory, glow, and go.

### **The Apostles Lived and Labored in the Consciousness of Being Possessed by the Holy Spirit**

The experiences of the living and glorious Lord were mediated through the Holy Spirit. Thus there is a strong and consistent emphasis upon the Holy Spirit in apostolic teaching and experiences.

The Holy Spirit is the dynamic in their ministry, and to be filled by the Spirit is essential for effective and acceptable service (Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 6:3, 5, 10; 7:55; 8:29, 39; 10:19; 1 Pet. 1:12; 2 Pet. 1:21). The Holy Spirit is also the adequate source of power and comfort in suffering and martyrdom.

The apostles knew experientially the significance of the Holy Spirit. Without him their lives would have remained less than Christian, less than normal, for he mediated life, dynamic, meaning, direction and glory. It was because of his presence in their lives that the glory of the risen Lord radiated forth from the apostles and impelled them in their missionary endeavor.

## **Apostolic Missionary Vision**

### **Fullest Missionary Presentation**

The fullest missionary presentation is made by John in the book of Revelation where most dramatically God is presented as the God of the cosmos — the God of all the earth and of all the nations, no realm excluded. His majestic, radiant throne is high and lifted up above all, and from it the lines of rulership go out in every direction. God is in continuous governmental relationship with the world as progressively as well as catastrophically his rulership is extended over the whole earth. All people must stand before him in judgment. No other god is acknowledged or shares in his power and authority. He alone is the God of the universe, the God of the nations, the God in whom salvation and refuge are found, the God who is the sole, sovereign and righteous judge of mankind. His authority and power must and will prevail, and his standard of right and wrong will be acknowledged by all. Finally, he alone will be worshiped by redeemed mankind upon a new earth and in a new heaven. His victory is complete and his worship unrivaled. All other gods have been cast out, all rebellion has been overcome, and all power has submitted to him. God is all and in all.

Similarly John sees the Lamb of God in the book of Revelation. He portrays the Lamb not as bearing the sin of the world but as having triumphed over sin, hell, Satan and the grave. He does not behold the Lamb as operating among the Jews and in Palestine; instead, the Lamb is walking among the churches in Asia and in pagan cities. Jerusalem and Mount Zion are not in sight in the beginning of the book.

In his second major vision, John sees the Lamb at the right hand of God in glory preparing for world operations in judgment and gospel expansion. Certainly there is nothing limiting or particularistic about the visions of the Lamb in His relationships.

In the closing scenes John sees the Lamb triumphing over all systems of the world, the religious included. As the new heavens and the new earth appear, the

Lamb shares in the glory and worship of the Father while the nations enjoy the blessings that flow from the abounding throne of the Lamb. Such is the missionary vision of John, and we may well assume that John speaks representatively. The twelve are in accord with him. God is redemptively related to the world through Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit is operating in the name of the Father and the Son to make the good news of God's redemptive love and act in Christ known to the world by means of gospel communication. This he does by mobilizing and energizing the church as God's chosen instrument.

### **Conclusion**

These blessed realities, facts and truths in the consciousness of the twelve became the source of the missionary motivations and thrust of the apostles as well as the cornerstone of their missionary theology. Little is said of the example of Christ, although he went about doing good, healing all who were oppressed of the devil. No direct reference is made to his Great Commission, although we must not conclude that it played no role in the early church. The fact that in some form it is found in every gospel is sufficient evidence that it was part of the living tradition and teaching of the early church.

The missionary theology of the apostles, however, was rooted more deeply than in a command. It was anchored in the foundation which made the command of world evangelism an evangelical and spiritual imperative, an outflow of life rather than an imposition. Thus, they became missionaries not as slaves but as bondslaves. Missions became their life, their all-absorbing interest, their all-consuming passion to which their lives were joyfully dedicated.

### **The Apostle Paul**

Of all the apostles, Paul stands out as the central figure in the interpretation and propagation of Christianity. We can hardly imagine Christianity without him, but he is not a cofounder, an innovator or a rival to Christ. Christ remains the fountain, foundation, cornerstone and content of Christianity.

Paul is the fullest exponent, the foremost theological representative, the greatest evangelical apologist, and the most ardent advocate of Christianity. Therefore, we present his thought on universality and, where needed, correlate the teaching of the other apostles to that of Paul.

We need not project an elaborate apologetic for the universality of Paul in God's provision of salvation for all mankind (*ideal* universality) in God's purpose to have his gospel universally proclaimed (*practical* universality). Both are too obvious in the life

and teaching of Paul. He is the concrete incarnation of ideal and practical universality. In vain students search the New Testament for *realized* universality within the scope of history or post-history. There is no indication in the New Testament that all people will be saved. Clearly and emphatically the New Testament teaches that this is not the case and that people will actually be lost eternally from the presence of the Lord.

### **The Ideal Universality of Paul**

Paul has indelibly impressed many truths upon the world, foremost among which is the fact that “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:19). In other words, God has provided in Christ a salvation adequate to save man from his total and eternal lostness unto a glory unspeakable and indescribable. Paul stressed that God has provided a Saviour and salvation sufficient for all mankind. Again, Paul emphasized that God fervently desires that this gospel be made known to all men everywhere for the purpose that man might believe and subjectively possess what God has wrought objectively in Christ. The details of this glorious message we can only follow later in outline.

I am well acquainted with the so-called theory of limited atonement as implied in the teachings of Calvin and explicitly advanced by some schools of theology. I simply find no biblical basis for the theory of limited atonement. Paul’s comprehensive statement is sufficient proof against it: “Consequently, just as one trespass resulted in condemnation for all people, so also one righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people” (Rom. 5:18). And again, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time” (1 Tim. 2:3-6). John heartily endorses this position when he writes, “He [Jesus Christ the righteous] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins [the sins of the believers], and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). These were dynamic truths that lived in the mind of Paul. Like a mighty, onrushing torrent, they bore him on in his ambitious purpose to preach the gospel where Christ had not been named. There were no national or cultural bounds in the missionary thinking of Paul because he found no such bounds in the purpose of God and in the sufficiency of Calvary.

In a logical and convincing manner Paul presents a series of great missionary thoughts in his most doctrinal epistle, the epistle to the Romans. Perfectly fusing theology and missions, his logic is as follows:

1. The whole universe is the creation of God. It is manifesting God, is under his sovereign rule, and is therefore responsible to Him (Rom. 1:18 ff.).
2. The whole human race is an organismic unit created in Adam. The organic unity of the entire human race is never questioned in the Bible. Paul firmly holds to it (Rom. 5:12-21).
3. The whole human race fell in Adam and became sinful because of this (Rom. 5:12-21).
4. The whole human race followed a course of sin and therefore became guilty before God (Rom. 1:18.21).
5. The whole human race was represented in Christ, and in him salvation was provided for all mankind not only by substitution but by identification and representation (Rom. 5:12-21).
6. God has provided only one way of salvation—the way of justification by faith in Jesus Christ. This holds true for the Jew as well as for the Gentile (Rom. 3:21— 5:21).
7. God's way of salvation is not discovered by man. It comes to him by revelation, and it must be preached to him from the revealed Word of God. "Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ" (Rom. 10:8-17; cf. 16:25-26).
8. Paul knew himself called of God and separated unto the gospel of God to bring men and nations to obedience of faith. This was his apostleship; for this he labored, always pressing onward. For this he suffered, and in this he gloried (Rom. 1:1, 5, 14; 11:13, 25; 15:15-16, 18-23; 16:25-27).

There are no arguments anywhere by any of the apostles in the New Testament to conflict with the thinking of Paul.

### **Implications of Paul's Ideal Universality**

The implications of Paul's universality are far-reaching. They caused most serious disturbances even within the early church and brought to Paul much misunderstanding, difficult theological struggles, and bitter persecutions. However, Paul survived them all, as did his great and eternal ideals, the ideals of God's gracious purpose in Christ Jesus.

In this ideal universality Paul sees all mankind assuming equal position before God as sinners, whether they be Jew or Gentile (Rom. 1:18-3:20; Eph. 2:1-3); being

under equal condemnation and in need of salvation from the present and eternal wrath of God (Rom. 1:18-3:20); experiencing justification on equal terms, by faith in Christ as God's provision and propitiation (Rom. 3:21-5:21); receiving equal status in the church of Jesus Christ as members of the body of Christ (Eph. 2:11-3:12); enjoying equal relationship with God as Father in the household of God (Eph. 2:19; Rom. 8:15; Gal 3:26); sharing equal privileges and riches as heirs of God and joint-heirs of Jesus Christ (Eph. 3:6; Rom. 8:17).

The latter thoughts are most fully developed in the epistle to the Ephesians, a writing which is filled with the universality of the Christian gospel and equality of all believers.

The epistle allows for no Jew-Gentile division. A new dividing line is being emphasized. Paul divides all mankind into two classes: those "in Christ" and those "not in Christ." This becomes his wall of partition. Those in Christ constitute the body of Christ (1:23; 3:6; 4:4, 12, 16; 5:23, 30). They are the household and the family of God (2:19; 3:15); they are the temple and the habitation of God (2:21-22); they are the new man (2:15); they are fellow citizens and fellow heirs (2:19; 3:6). Together they share one Father (1:3, 17; 2:18; 3:14; 4:6; 5:20; 6:23); they are children of God (5:1). The concepts of unity and equality of all who are in Christ permeate the whole epistle. There is no privileged people in our dispensation as there was in the Old Testament, for all who are in Christ share equal experiences, relationships, rights, privileges and responsibilities (2:4.10, 13-22). At the same time Paul emphasizes that the privilege to be in Christ is extended on equal terms to all nations (3:6, 8-9), and all of this is according to the eternal purpose of God as he purposed it in Christ Jesus (3:11).

It was Paul's identification with God in his eternal purpose in behalf of the human race, his identification with Christ who had come to redeem the race, his identification with the Holy Spirit who operated on behalf of the salvation of the race, and his identification with the kingdom of God which is to embrace the total race that enabled him to rise above nationalistic particularism and Judaism and become the gospel champion in the interest of the race. Thus he became the world missionary, and his ideal universality, triumphed in practical universality.

His course as the world missionary took him on his several missionary journeys over land and sea, from city to city, and from one people to another people. Neither perils nor sufferings could halt him. Triumphantly he could write after some twenty-five years of hard labors and at the close of a very fruitful life, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on

that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:7-8). With this, his labors and his life were concluded.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This chapter is reprinted, with permission, from *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972).

### Study Questions

1. Compare the apostolic motivations presented by the author with missionary motivations that you hear about or experience in our day. What are the similarities and differences?
2. The exclusivity of Christ as the way to God is under debate today, even in evangelical circles. What insights does this chapter offer?
3. The author emphasizes the theme of the universality of the gospel. Explain the difference between universality and universalism. How does Christianity differ from other religions in regard to its universality?

