

THE MANDATE TO PREACH THE GOSPEL OF CHRIST'S GREAT VICTORY

“And He said to them: go into the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned”.

(Mark 16: 15, 16)

I wrote about the fact that it took time for the disciples to come to the full understanding and the firm faith that Jesus Christ had risen from the dead. Here in Mark 16 we read again about their persistent unbelief. It says that Christ even upbraided them “for their unbelief and hardness of heart” (verse 14). It was difficult to convince them that He had indeed risen in glory from the bonds of hell and death.

Can the Lord still use such unfaithful men in His service? Can these wavering men ever be stalwart apostles? Should the Lord not say, “I had better find some others who will go out and preach with more conviction than you”? Well, it is remarkable that in all four accounts of the Gospel there is mention of the missionary mandate immediately after Christ’s appearance to His disciples.

Let us take a look at the other instances. Matthew 28: 19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.” Mark 16: 15, “Go into all the world. . .” Luke 24: 47, “. . .that repentance and forgiveness should be preached in His Name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” John 20:28, “As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you.” It is clear and convincing: the risen Lord maintains the disciples’ initial appointment, despite their fear and unbelief. Which means: the Church is not absolved of her missionary task but confirmed in it. The work of mission is not dependent on the faith and ability of the workers in the harvest but on the truth and power of the Master of the harvest.

CHRIST’S DETERMINATION

It often is difficult for a church to place a missionary on the field. There are human factors which play a role; there is also the sovereign and wise providence of God. But lest our commitment waver and our zeal fail, let us look once again at the command which the Lord gave to His disciples and in them to His Church. Our theme is: Easter means for the Church an expressly renewed missionary mandate to preach the Gospel of Christ’s great victory. We will give special attention to the catholic extent and the serious intent of this preaching.

We must see in this passage first of all the determination of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is the determination of love, which does not give up. Christ’s appearances to His disciples after His resurrection have this main purpose: to prepare and equip them for their missionary task, for this will be their actual work. For forty days they get an intensive course in missiology, so to speak.

They must go out! Yes, if ever there was reason to go, it is now. Now they have the complete picture, the whole story about the death and the resurrection of the Lord. Now they can tell about the great and true victory of Christ: how He went from the cross to the tomb and from the tomb to the throne. During these days Christ teaches them the true depth of the Scriptures and shows how the facts accord with the Word of God. He gives them a solid and clear message to proclaim.

CATHOLIC AND ECUMENICAL

The first thing which we notice about this renewed missionary mandate is that it is from the very beginning emphatically catholic and truly ecumenical. It says: go into all the world and preach to the whole creation. This means that in an ever-expanding circle the apostles and those who come after them will have to preach the Gospel. “Catholic” means: all over the world. Ecumenical means: containing the entire (known) world.

We may look at these words a bit more closely. It says literally: go through the whole world (=kosmos, the totality and unity of the created world) and preach the Gospel to every creature (= all people, every human being on earth). That is, go everywhere and speak to everyone. There are no limits, there are no boundaries. This is a far-reaching mandate. It is also a very tall order for a little church. It does not mean that all persons head for head must be reached, but it does imply that in all regions and places the Gospel must be proclaimed so that as many as possible may hear.

HIT THE ROAD

The word that is translated by “go” actually means to travel or to *trek*. It implies that one hits the road and goes to faraway places. And this, of course, means that one is subject to danger and must make sacrifices. You cannot travel without exposing yourself to the dangers of the road. You come to live in distant lands and in an unknown culture, and this brings with it specific problems. It is obvious that not everyone is able to do this work and that personal and family circumstances play a role.

But travel into the whole world they must. Missionaries are the real globetrotters, not from Harlem but from Jerusalem. They must go from Jerusalem, to Judea, to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, the Lord said in Acts 1.

In this connection I want to make a few remarks about the distinction between mission and evangelism. They are the same activity: making the Gospel known. But they take place in a different setting and are performed by different people. We see evangelism as the testimony of the church in its immediate vicinity, in its own community. And there is obviously a calling here for us as individual members and for the congregation as a whole. The Lord Jesus told us to be a light on a candlestick and a city on a hill, to which people around us can and will come.

But we see *mission* as the preaching of the Gospel by ordained missionaries in places where there is no church of Christ, where people have never heard of His glory. Mission implies going out, far and wide, to distant lands and isles, moving on whenever a church has been established, so that the Word of Christ may come to the ends (the farthest corners) of the earth.

I do not want to make it sound romantic, but typical mission work takes place on the frontiers where the pioneers are, where new trails are blazed. Wherever people are found and cultures are discovered, there the Gospel must be preached.

Mission seeks the outlying areas, and focuses on nations where the Gospel is not really known.

IN THE WHOLE WORLD

We must have an eye for the catholic nature of the mission mandate. Preaching the Gospel throughout the world is a prime calling of the church. It was, of course, a command first directed to the apostles. They had to struggle with the fact that the Gospel was not only for the Jew but also for the Greek. When they realized this, they went out far and wide indeed.

“The whole world” was for them the then known world of the Roman empire. Paul went from Jerusalem to Rome, to the heart of the empire. So he can write at a certain moment (to the Colossians): in the whole world [the Gospel] is bearing fruit and growing (1:6). Indeed, how quickly, how far did the Gospel spread in those early apostolic years.

But this command was given also to the entire New Testament Church. The apostles covered a lot of territory, but they couldn't cover the whole earth. Whenever new territories are discovered and new peoples found, the Gospel must go to them. It is not without divine providence that the Gospel was first preached in Europe, for it was from this continent that the discovery of and the voyages to the new world were made, and in the wake of the explorers came the preachers.

We must understand that we do not have things in our hands. In the Canons of Dort we confess that God sends preachers to whom He will and when He will. It is God who opens doors and who determines times and opportunities. We must be diligent and patient. We must do what He commands and wait for His blessing, also when we are disappointed. We must adapt and change when necessary, but we may never surrender the task. For it is not our Gospel, but His; not our glory but Christ's.

Christ says to His disciples: now it is the time to go out. In an ever-expanding circle, covering more ground all the time, so that my salvation reaches the ends of the earth. Now that I have risen from the dead the Gospel must go from Israel to the Gentiles, from Jerusalem to the farthest land. And although the disciples had to get used to this catholicity they did go, often despite themselves, and the church still today sees it as a prime task to equip and send missionaries abroad. We have a part in that task, and we must see it as both a great privilege and a serious calling, one that may not be neglected, despite the costs and the sacrifices. The Gospel must be preached everywhere with serious intent.

A CRISIS

This preaching brings about a great crisis, a great decision. The Lord Jesus makes no bones about the intent of the preaching: “He who believes and is baptized, will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (verse 16).

The preaching is first of all a bringing of “glad tidings.” The mandate is:

preach the Gospel, and Gospel means: the good message. Missionaries are not prophets of gloom and doom who come to tell the natives that the sky is falling in. It is a message of joy and therefore the content and tone must be jubilant. Let this be very clear. On the home front and on the mission field preaching is always a bringing of glad tidings.

At the same time, the preaching places people before a decision with eternal consequences: believe and be saved; do not believe and be condemned! There is no in-between stage, no neutral area; it is always one or the other. The preaching separates grain from chaff, sifts tares from wheat. Wherever the Word is heard, the great decision falls: heaven or hell, eternal life or eternal death.

WITH EARNEST INTENT

We must understand that whenever the Gospel is preached, it is preached with earnest intent. That is, God really means it. Christ is really “offered by the Gospel,” the Canons of Dort say. In the preaching the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ is truly offered. Those who believe, will be saved. This is without any doubt. Those who do not believe, will be condemned, as sure as day is light and night is dark.

Those who believe will be saved. That is the first intent of the preaching of the Gospel. The missionaries are to make known that God does not desire the death of the sinner, but rather that he repents and lives. God desires that those who hear be saved by faith in Christ. This is His express command to all who hear: repent, believe, and be saved. It is the authoritative declaration of the risen Christ. Therefore it is also the express responsibility of all who hear: they must respond in faith! God does not give people a free choice, but He says (Psalm 2): Now kiss the Son, lest He in fury scorn you, lest in His wrath the LORD cause you to perish!

A GENERAL OFFER OF GRACE?

May we therefore say that in the preaching of the Gospel there is a general offer of grace? Perhaps some readers remember that this was a point of dispute with the Protestant Reformed Churches in the fifties, and continues to be a point of dispute today. They said: we cannot speak of a general offer of grace; that is Arminian. And they did not hesitate to call us crypto-Arminians. They said: if you speak of a general offer of grace, you make salvation subject to the free choice of man.

We are aware of that danger. A “general offer” does not mean that all people come to faith. Still we must maintain that when God causes the Gospel to be preached, it comes with a earnest promise and a command to all who hear. There is a real promise and a real command. This is how we confess it in the Canons of Dort, “But as many as are called by the Gospel are earnestly called, for God earnestly and most sincerely reveals in His Word what is most pleasing to Him, namely that those who are called should come to Him. He also promises rest of soul and eternal life to all who come to Him and believe” (Chapter III/IV, Article 8).

The preaching of the Gospel is earnest and sincere. People who hear the Word,

who believe it, and apply it to their lives, will have peace with God. In this sense the Gospel applies in the same way to all who hear it. The reactions to the preaching, however, differ greatly. Some believe, some do not believe. Indeed, the natural reaction is to reject the Gospel. And many will reject it from the start. Were it not for God's sovereign grace, no one would come to faith. And whoever does come to faith will confess this as an act of God's great and unmerited mercy.

We do not know how people will respond and who will believe or not. But that is God's business. Our business is to preach indiscriminately to all wherever and whenever we can and so put forward the earnest intent of the Gospel.

FAITH AND BAPTISM

Believe and be baptized. It says: all who believe and are baptized will be saved. Wherever the Gospel is preached and people come to faith, baptism follows as sign and seal of God's promises. Baptism is the special mark and distinguishing feature by which God confirms that we are His children. By baptism we are separated from the world and ingrafted into the Christian Church. Therefore the Church must preach and baptize. And in Matthew the Lord adds: teaching them to observe all that I have commanded. This refers to church discipline. Preaching, sacraments and discipline, the marks of the true Church apply, as we saw earlier, also on the mission field.

Now here we must be careful. Christ does not say here that only adults may be baptized. Perhaps you know that some people insist, on the basis of this text, that faith always comes before baptism, and that since infants cannot believe, they may not be baptized, see Mark 16: 16. It doesn't say this here, however.

Indeed, faith precedes baptism. There is no adult who is baptized without showing repentance of sin and making profession of faith. There is a connection between faith and baptism. For we are justified by faith, and that is signed and sealed by Holy Baptism.

AND TO YOUR CHILDREN

But the Scriptures also teach that the promise of salvation is given to believers and their children. To you is the promise, said Peter on Pentecost, and to your children. Therefore the children, as members of Christ's Church and as belonging to the covenant in Christ's blood, shall be baptized. That too is clear in the teaching of Christ. The children of the true people of Israel are heirs of the covenant, heirs of the Kingdom.

Therefore believers are baptized with their household, as we read in the Bible. This is done also today, on the mission field and on the home front. And when those who are baptized grow up – being nurtured in the Christian faith – they have to duty to confess their Lord and Saviour.

THE SERIOUS WARNING

So people everywhere are set apart from this world and grafted into the body of Christ. But the warning remains: whoever does not believe, will be condemned. And the word means: utterly condemned. Elsewhere the Bible says: those who do not believe, are condemned already. The Canons of Dort state very clearly that the wrath of God remains upon those who do not believe the Gospel. We are all by nature children of wrath, subject to all kinds of misery, yes condemnation itself. But God lifts His wrath from those who believe in Christ, and He will definitely acquit them on the day of judgment.

The hearts of people, their deepest motives and intentions, will be made known. And so, in the gathering of the Church out of all places and lands, Christ's glory will become manifest. The power of His resurrection will be apparent: small church, few workers, eleven apostles and those who come after them, but a great harvest, a mighty multitude.

We today are still called to work with Christ in presenting the earnest call of the Gospel wherever we can, at home and abroad, so that it may be true of us what was already confessed in Israel: declare His glory to the nations, make known to all their populations His marvellous works! (Psalm 96:2).

Now is the time to call the world to repentance and faith. Now is the time for mission, far and near. Soon it will be the time for judgment. Now is the time for sowing. Soon it will be time for harvest. If the church loses its evangelical zeal and forgets its missionary calling, it destroys its reason for being, cuts out the heart of its mandate, and becomes a dead body. But the church that lives by the Gospel, under the blessing of the risen Christ, will always seek to pass that Gospel on to others.