

'Go Ye Therefore Into All The World...'

by Staff

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So starts one of our favorite hymns. Are we hypocrites if we still sing, "Go ye therefore into all the world; preach the gospel unto everyone"? We do not seem to be doing those things now.

Jesus commanded these words recorded in Matthew 28:19 and Mark 16:15. Religious people generally assume that this is an all-encompassing command to all Christians for all time. After all, did He not promise, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20)?

To understand Jesus' command, we need to examine some other things that He said to the same people. We should also determine just whom He commissioned to preach the gospel in all the world. Many today believe that God divinely commissioned everyone who has ever heard or read this command to "witness for Christ" and make converts for his religion.

To whom did Jesus issue this command? Only to the eleven disciples (Matthew 28:16-19; Mark 16:14-15)! "And **they** went out and preached everywhere. . ." (Mark 16:20). These eleven disciples became Jesus' apostles, just as Jesus Himself was His Father's apostle (Hebrews 3:1-2). An "apostle" is one personally commissioned to deliver a message to someone else. Christ was sent with a message from His Father, and He, in turn, sent these eleven to convey the same message to yet other people! The message is the good news of the Kingdom of God (Mark 1:14-15).

Preaching was indeed required to build the church. From the early chapters of Acts, we learn that God added many members to His church through the message of His apostles. After Peter preached his crucial Pentecost sermon, God added "about 3000 souls" in one day alone (Acts 2:41). Thereafter, God added members to the church daily (verse 47), so that "the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem" (Acts 6:7). All this occurred *before* the apostles even began to go into all the world! God KNOWS how to reach people when He chooses to do so! And He does it through the preaching of His gospel.

Apostles Sent to Israel

In this century Herbert W. Armstrong taught that the true gospel of God's Kingdom—the one taught by Christ and His apostles—was not preached in all the world for very long. From secular sources, he showed that soon after the original apostles died, a terrible falling away from the truth set in. Even while the apostle Paul still lived, "all those in Asia . . . turned away" (II Timothy 1:15), and the "foolish Galatians" allowed themselves to be seduced by different beliefs (Galatians 1:6; 3:1). The true church, small and persecuted, went underground, faithfully guarding the truth they had learned. As the years passed, they continued to teach the true gospel among themselves.

But where did the apostles go? Did they set out to convert the world? Did they "teach all nations"? Certainly, they obeyed their Master's command. But what did He say? Contrary to what is assumed, He did *not* send them to every person on earth. "These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: '**DO NOT GO** into the way of the Gentiles. . . . But **GO RATHER** to the lost sheep of the

house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matthew 10:5-7). In Matthew 15:24, He says of His own commission, "I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Christ sent His apostles only to the scattered Israelites, most of whom had migrated into Europe centuries before. Acts 2:39 shows that they were not sent even to every last one of "the lost sheep" of Israel! Peter says, "For the promise [of the gift of the Holy Spirit] is to you and to your children, and to all that are afar off [geographically and in time], as many as the Lord our God will call." Thus, the Father limits the preaching of the gospel to those He calls! The apostle urges them to save themselves from this "perverse generation," that is, those who were not offered God's Spirit (verse 40).

As we saw, Christ said that He was not sent to the Gentiles. So why did He send Paul to the Gentiles? (Romans 11:13). Is that not a contradiction? No, Christ does not contradict Himself. It was prophesied. Paul's commission was *in addition to* the other apostles' work; it did not negate or replace their going to Israel, for even Paul's commission included preaching to Israel (Acts 9:15).

The main thrust of the gospel is the work among the descendants of Israel, not the Gentiles! The world would have us believe that God stopped working with the "Jews," and the Gentiles became His chosen people. Nothing could be further from the truth! He sent only *one* apostle to the Gentiles but all the others to the people of Israel!

In Romans 9-11, Paul clearly explains why Christ sent him to preach among Gentiles. Because His own nation, the Jews (as well as the other tribes of Israel), rejected Jesus their Savior, He called a new people as the "Israel of God" (Romans 9:1-8; Galatians 6:16). God is very resourceful!

Paul quotes Moses, who prophesied of the Israelites' failure to keep faith with God. "I will provoke you to jealousy by those who are not a nation, I will anger you by a foolish nation" (Romans 10:19). Paul concludes: "I say then, have they stumbled that they should fall? Certainly not! But through their fall, *to provoke them to jealousy*, salvation has come to the Gentiles" (Romans 11:11).

That is why Paul was sent to preach to Gentiles. Romans 11:17-26 shows that God broke Israelite branches off the Abrahamic family tree because they did not believe Him. In their place He grafted in believing Gentiles, making them children of Abraham (see Galatians 3:29). In the future, God will graft back in the broken-off Israelites (Romans 11:23)!

The time of Israel's regrafting begins when God adds the "fullness of the Gentiles" to the church. This "fullness of the Gentiles" must be a very small number in comparison to all those called into the church. God tells Ezekiel, "For you are not sent to a people of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, but to the house of Israel, NOT TO MANY PEOPLE of unfamiliar speech and of hard language, whose words you cannot understand. Surely had I sent you to them, they would have listened to you" (Ezekiel 3:5-6). The church has always been a "little flock" and the Gentiles in it even fewer.

Recent Preaching

This explains why God adds Gentiles to God's church. This in no way contradicts Jesus' command to go to Israel and not to the Gentiles. Even in this century, God opened the door for preaching the gospel *primarily* among the descendants of the original lost sheep of the house of Israel.

For five decades, 1937-1987, the true gospel went out in dynamic power to the Israelitish nations of Manasseh (U.S.) and Ephraim (Britain, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa). However, God opened a much, much smaller door to the Gentile world! Only a few thousand Gentiles ever attended the Feasts of Tabernacles, compared to the many tens of thousands of Israelitish people. Thus Jesus' command to his apostles was still being carried out in the 20th century.

Before he died, Herbert Armstrong said he believed the true gospel had been published among all nations (Mark 13:10, KJV), Israelitish as well as Gentile. How extensive this publishing had to be, only God knows. He reveals, however, that it is done "for a witness to all nations" (Matthew 24:14), not necessarily to convert. Herbert Armstrong's preaching, though, is not the last of it. Soon, the Two Witnesses will testify in power before this world (Revelation 11:3, 7), as will the angel who has "the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth—to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people" (Revelation 14:6).

But did not Christ command his apostles to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19-20)? This world's Christianity sends its missionaries to the far-flung corners of the globe to recruit members. The context defines the limits of this: Christ told them to baptize and teach those who would respond to the message, and only those whom the Father calls will respond and be baptized (John 6:44). Only then could the apostles teach them "to observe all things that I have commanded you." No uncalled person would listen to the truth, let alone remain long enough to learn the depths of God's way!

Christ did not mean for His church to embark on a worldwide soul-saving crusade. God's plan provides for offering salvation to this world's people later—when they will have a better opportunity to accept it. The members of God's church today, called out from the nations, are still learning to observe everything Christ commanded the original apostles. We will continue to fulfill this verse to the end of this age.

Herbert Armstrong viewed Matthew 24:14 as a prophecy and a God-given commission. He could not find anyone else preaching the gospel that Christ and the original apostles had preached. He concluded that the end of the age was approaching fast, yet the most significant sign Jesus gave was nowhere to be seen. Even while God was revealing the truth to him one doctrine at a time, he found himself instrumental in fulfilling this very prophecy! After 50 years of preaching the "gospel of the kingdom . . . in all the world as a witness to all the nations," there still was no one else doing it.

Then false ministers arose from inside the church. They reasoned that if it were true that Christ used Herbert Armstrong to fulfill Matthew 24:14, then his successors would be out of a job! They also disliked how exclusive he and the church appeared. So they spawned the lie that the true gospel had been continuously preached to the world since the first century and that Herbert Armstrong was just one in a long line of preachers who had proclaimed it. Thus within God's church, history was officially rewritten, just as it was in Russia after Stalin's death.

Nevertheless, Herbert Armstrong's commission was truly a unique and exclusive one. It was exclusive because no one in "Christianity" wanted to have anything to do with the gospel that he proclaimed, yet it was the same one that the original apostles proclaimed! Those whom God called followed his advice, "Don't believe me—see it for yourself in the Bible," and consequently, began to agree with his message. We understood that Jesus Christ had called this man to be a real apostle, sent to proclaim the gospel.

Preparing the Firstfruits

Because the world hates the preaching of the true gospel so terribly, it can only be preached when God opens a door and holds it open long enough to get the job done (Revelation 3:8). But in the church, believers learn the true gospel even when the door, which **NO MAN** can open or shut, is closed.

It is not difficult to see why the church of God, confronted with such great spiritual opposition, has always been a little flock, blossoming in membership only when God requires a larger number of coworkers carry out a specific job. Members of the true church of God constitute a very small, unique fellowship. It is so different from all other churches that it appears exclusive to the core. And it is, for only this small body of firstfruits, together with the saints of past ages, is prophesied to rule with Christ a thousand years (Revelation 20:4)! The vast masses of mankind will not rule with Him.

These firstfruits, a small first harvest of individuals, will consist of the prophets, the apostles and the members of the true church of God who overcame and endured to the end during this church age. This includes those today who endure in overcoming until the end. They will probably number 144,000 (Revelation 14:1-4)—a tiny group compared to the world's population. This minuscule fellowship will precede the vastly larger *second* harvest that will begin when Christ sets His hand to save all humanity in the wonderful World Tomorrow!

Only the firstfruits, having come under His grace, has God informed of their destination, the Kingdom of God. Only they have been granted the saving knowledge of how to work toward this goal; only to them has the blueprint of God's spiritual creation been revealed. God does not reveal this knowledge of Christ to anyone until He determines a person is ready to "go for it." It would be cruel to preach such understanding to the world when the people are not ready to make it work in their lives.

Only the firstfruits can believe and cooperate with their Creator in molding and fashioning them in the image of the "new man," Jesus Christ. The rest of mankind God has "committed . . . to disobedience" (Romans 11:32) until their time of salvation when He will show them all these things. What a pleasant surprise it will be for them!

A Special People

No matter how unpopular the concept, the firstfruits are by definition exclusive. "First" indicates that there will be at least a second. Only the first can be pioneers. None of those who follow can ever be pioneers. God is placing some of that responsibility on the firstfruits' shoulders. All men are *not equal* before God in the responsibility He gives them or when He calls them. In this sense, those called now are called to a greater responsibility than those called in the next age.

The Devil wants us to forget that our calling at this time is special and different from that of all the others—dead or alive, Israelite or Gentile—whom God will call in the age to come. When one begins to forget, loss of discernment accompanies a loss of love for the true gospel, the message of a divine call to become a holy priest-king. To such deluded brethren, the world's counterfeit gospel increasingly looks like Christ's gospel, and soon worldly Christians seem like true brethren. Yet it is through correct doctrine, not good works, that we discern where and how God is working. This illustrates just how vital the love of the truth is to understanding and following the true gospel (II Thessalonians 2:10).

But when we truly believe and obey the gospel of God, we know we are a "special" people (I Peter 2:9), recruited to become prepared and equipped to perform a special task! Even as the military sometimes hand picks and trains a very few members above and beyond the others to become a special-purpose task force, God has set us apart from all the people in the world. However, to think that God chose us to "witness" to this world to convert it is to misunderstand our calling. A soldier in an army (especially in a task force) cannot afford to become side-tracked and entangled with the business of this world (II Timothy 2:4).

The true church of God will not make common cause with this world's counterfeit Christianity, whose adherents do not desire to "speak the same thing" as the apostles, nor believe in the truth of the Kingdom of God. Look at the fruits of a half-century of preaching the wonderful truth and warning to millions in this world! If we preached to them today, would there be any more evidence of repentance?

Surely, God has commissioned us, but not to save or reform this present evil world so that the people can flee from the wrath to come (Matthew 3:7). God says that He will destroy this society. Will we then be more kind than God in trying to save it now? Our commission is to become holy and separate from Satan's society (II Corinthians 6:17; 7:1; Revelation 18:4), preparing for our demanding assignment awaiting us in God's Kingdom (Revelation 19:7; 20:6).

We must not become entangled in this world's reform efforts, no matter how well-intentioned they appear. We need to grasp and believe what we are: a small, special-purpose task force, being equipped to do a large-scale rescue operation. Our task is not for the present, but when He has fully prepared and assembled *the whole team*, the Head of this church may yet dispatch us into all the world—even as He did His apostles.

To summarize, the true church of God, represented by the twelve apostles, went into all the world and preached the true gospel of the Kingdom of God to those whom the Father called. In our day this same gospel of the Kingdom was again preached in all the world for a witness through the work of Herbert Armstrong. We now wait for God to begin working through the Two Witnesses, and in the meantime, we prepare for His Kingdom by "work[ing] out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).

Thus the church of God has obeyed its Master and is still teaching all the things that He commanded His apostles. We do not have to be ashamed when we sing about the apostles' commission, for many of us personally had a part to play as helpers. We can make a joyful noise when we sing, "Go ye therefore into all the world!"