

# First Attempts at Evangelism

## *Section 1 - The Mission*

***Matt. 10; Mark 6:7-13, 30-32; Luke 9:1-11***

The Twelve are now presented to us as active participants in advancing the kingdom of God. They have been in Christ's company for some time. They have witnessed His miraculous works, listened to His teaching concerning the kingdom, and learned how to pray and how to live. Now they were sent out to evangelize the towns and villages of their native province (Galilee) and to heal the sick in their Master's name and by His power. Without a doubt, this mission was partly an educational experiment for their own benefit. They were still young evangelists and Apostles. But the primary design of the mission was to meet the spiritual needs of the people whose neglected condition was heavy on Christ's heart. In His travels, the compassionate Son of Man had observed how the masses were like a shepherdless flock of sheep, scattered and torn (Matt. 9:36). It was His desire that everyone would know that a good Shepherd had come to care for the lost sheep of the house of Israel. The multitudes were ready to receive the Good News; the difficulty was in meeting the pressing demand of enough workers to bring the Gospel to them. The harvest, which was ready for reaping, was plentiful, but the laborers were few (Matt. 9:37).

In connection with this mission, four things call for special attention: (1) the sphere assigned for the work; (2) the nature of the work; (3) the instructions for carrying it out; and (4) the results of the mission and the return of the missionaries. We will consider these points in order, except for Christ's instructions to His disciples (point 3). That will be reserved for last and dealt with in another section.

## ***The Sphere Assigned for the Work***

The sphere of the mission, as described in general terms, was the whole land of Israel. "Go," Jesus said to the Twelve, "to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Later on in Matthew's narrative, He speaks to them as if the plan of the mission involved a visit to all the cities of Israel (Matt. 10:6,23). Practically, however, the disciples' work seems to have been restricted to Galilee. And even there, the mission seems to have been carried out among the villages and hamlets, rather than in the larger towns or cities like Tiberias. That the ministry was confined to Galilee is supported by the fact that the work of the disciples attracted the attention of Herod, the tetrarch of Galilee (Mk. 6:14; Lk. 9:7). They were working in his neighborhood. That the ministry took

place in the smaller villages is proved by the words of Luke who gives a summary of the mission: "And departing, they began going about among the villages, preaching the Gospel, and healing everywhere" (Lk 9:6).

While the amateur missionaries were permitted to go to any of the lost sheep of Israel, they were expressly forbidden to extend their labors beyond these limits. They were not to go to the Gentiles nor enter into any Samaritan city or town (Matt. 10:5). This prohibition arose in part out of the general plan which Christ had formed for founding the kingdom of God on the earth. His ultimate goal was the conquest of the world. In order to do that, He first found it necessary to secure a strong base of operations in the Holy Land among His chosen people. Therefore, Jesus always regarded Himself as a Messenger of God to the Jewish nation and seriously gave that as a reason why He should not work among the Gentiles (Matt. 15:24). Occasionally, He departed from this rule, but only in order to give prophetic hints of an approaching time when Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles would be united on equal terms in one divine commonwealth (John 4:7-24). But the primary reason of the prohibition lay in the present spiritual condition of the disciples themselves. The time would come when Jesus would say to His chosen ones, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation" (Mk. 16:15); but that time was not now. During their first trial mission, the Twelve were not fit to preach the gospel nor to do good works, either among Samaritans or Gentiles. Their hearts were too narrow, their prejudices too strong. There was too much of the Jew, too little of the Christian, in their character. For the universal work of the apostleship, they needed a new divine illumination and an abundant baptism with the gracious spirit of love. Suppose these raw evangelists had gone into a Samaritan village. What would have happened? In all probability, they would have been drawn into arguments on the religious differences between Samaritans and Jews. And, of course, they would have lost their tempers. Then, instead of seeking the salvation of the people among whom they had come, they would probably have wanted to call down fire from heaven to consume them (Lk. 9:54; they actually proposed this action at a later time).

### *The Nature of the Work*

The work entrusted to the Twelve was very extensive in one department and very limited in the other. They were endowed with unlimited powers of healing, but they were very restricted as far as preaching was concerned. In regard to healing, their instructions were, "Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons; freely you received, freely give." In regard to preaching: "And as you go, preach saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 10:7-8). The commission in the first case seems too wide; in the latter, too narrow. But in both, the wisdom of Jesus is apparent in a deeper way. As far as miraculous works were concerned, there was no need for restriction, unless they became prideful and vain by having such wonderful power. This could have happened, but it could also be corrected when it became evident in any of them.

All the miracles performed by the Twelve were really done by Jesus Himself. The disciples' sole function consisted in making use of His name by faith. This seems to have been perfectly understood by everyone. For the works done by the Apostles did not lead the people of Galilee to wonder who they were, but only who and what *He* was in whose name all these things were done (Mk. 6:14). Therefore, since it was Christ's will for these miracles to be done through the disciples, it was just as easy for them to do the greatest works as to do the smaller (there is no reason to mention the degrees of difficulty in connection with miracles).

On the other hand, in regard to preaching, there was not only reason, but necessity, for restriction. The disciples could do no more than proclaim the fact that the kingdom was at hand and exhort the people to repent. This was all they really knew themselves. They did not yet understand, in the least degree, the doctrine of the cross. They did not even know the nature of the kingdom. They had, indeed, heard their Master give discourses on the kingdom, but they did not comprehend His words. Their ideas concerning the coming kingdom were nearly as crude and worldly as were those of other Jews who were looking for the restoration of Israel's political independence and temporal prosperity as in the glorious days of old. In one point only were they ahead of the current thinking. They had learned from John and from Jesus that repentance was necessary in order to have citizenship in heaven. In all other respects, they and those who heard them were pretty much on the same level. So we should not be surprised that the preaching of the disciples was limited; rather, we ought to wonder how Christ could trust them to open their mouths at all, even on the topic of the kingdom. Was there not a danger that men with such crude ideas might foster deluding hopes and cause political excitement? Yes. We can even discover actual traces of such excitement as we notice their actions in Herod's court and in the proposal that the multitude made shortly thereafter to take Jesus by force to make Him a king (John 6:15). So, doubtless, there was danger in this direction. But Jesus could not leave the poor, perishing people without care. Therefore, He took all possible precautions to avoid potential problems with their message by prohibiting them from going into detail on the subject of the kingdom and by telling them exactly what to say. They were to announce the kingdom as a kingdom of heaven. Some might consider this an admirable vision, but worldly people would consider it to be the opposite of what they wanted. A kingdom of heaven! That was only for those who had no earthly hope; a refuge from despair, a gloomy consolation in the absence of any better comfort. That's right, you worldlings! The message was only meant for those that you think are miserable. The kingdom was to be preached to the poor. The invitation, "Come to Me," was addressed to the laboring and heavy laden, with the promise that they would receive rest; rest from ambition and discontent, and scheming, troublesome care. Their blessed hope would be in the divine and the eternal.

### *The Results of the Mission*

The impression produced by the labors of the Twelve seems to have been significant. As we have already noted, the fame of their works reached the ears of Herod, and great crowds accompanied them as they moved from place to place. On their return from the mission, they rejoined the company of their Master and were surrounded by an eager, admiring multitude who had witnessed or experienced the benefits of their work. It then became necessary for them to withdraw to a desert place in order to get some quiet rest. Mark informs us that, "...there were many people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. And they went away in the boat to a lonely place by themselves" (Mk. 6:31-32). But even in the solitude of the desert on the eastern shore of the Sea of Galilee, they could not have their privacy. "And the people saw them going, and many recognized them, and they ran there together on foot from all the cities, and got there ahead of them" (Mark 6:33).

In quality, the results of the mission appear to have been much less satisfactory than in their extent. The religious impressions that were produced seem to have been, to a great degree, superficial and fleeting. There were many blossoms, so to speak, on the apple tree in the spring of this Galilean "revival." But only a comparatively small number of them became fruit, while an even smaller number of these reached the stage of ripe fruit. We learn this from what took place shortly after, when Christ gave His discourse on the Bread of Life in the synagogue of Capernaum. The same people who wanted to make Christ a king after the miraculous feeding in the desert abandoned Him, being offended by His mysterious teaching. The ones who did this were, for the most part, the same people who had listened to the Twelve preach repentance (cf. Mk. 6:30-35 with John 6:22-25).

This must have been deeply disappointing to the heart of Jesus. It had been such a benevolent undertaking. So it is all the more remarkable that the comparative failure of the first evangelistic movement did not prevent Him from repeating the experiment on a broader scale later. Luke writes, "Now after this the Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them two and two ahead of Him to every city and place where He Himself was going to come" (Luke 10:1). The motive of this second mission was the same as the first. The instructions to the missionaries were also the same. Jesus still felt deep compassion for the perishing multitude and, hoping against hope, made a new attempt to save the lost sheep. He wanted all people at least called to the fellowship of the kingdom, even though few would be chosen for it. When the immediate results were promising, He was gratified, even though He knew from past experience and by divine insight, that the faith and repentance of many were likely to evaporate like the morning dew. When the Seventy returned from their mission and reported their great success, Jesus proclaimed it as an

omen of the downfall of Satan's kingdom. Then, rejoicing in spirit, He gave thanks to the Supreme Ruler in heaven and earth, His Father, that while the things of the kingdom were hidden from the wise and prudent, the people of intelligence and discretion, they were revealed to babes, the unrefined, the poor, the ignorant (Lk. 10:17-21).

The reference in Jesus' thanksgiving prayer to the "wise and prudent" suggests the thought that these evangelistic efforts were regarded with disfavor by the refined, hypercritical classes of Jewish religious society. This is probably true. There are always people in the church who are intelligent, wise, and good, to whom popular religious movements are distasteful. The noise, the excitement, the extravagance, the delusions, the misdirection of zeal, the coarseness of the agents, the instability of the converts - all these things offend them. These same minds would have taken offense at the evangelistic work of the Twelve and the Seventy, for it was undoubtedly accompanied with the same drawbacks. The agents were ignorant and had very few ideas. They understood very little of divine truth. Their sole qualification was that they were earnest and could preach repentance well. Doubtless, also, there was plenty of noise and excitement among the multitudes who heard them preach. And we certainly know that their zeal was both ill-informed and short-lived. These things, in fact, are regular features of all popular movements. Jonathan Edwards, speaking with reference to the revival of religion which took place in America in his day, said, "A great deal of noise and tumult, confusion and uproar, darkness mixed with light, and evil with good, is always to be expected in the beginning of something very glorious in the state of things in human society or the church of God. After nature has long been shut up in a cold, dead state, when the sun returns in the spring, there is, together with the increase of the light and heat of the sun, very tempestuous weather before all is settled, calm, and serene, and all nature rejoices in its bloom and beauty" (*Thoughts on Revival*, Part 1, sec. iii).

None of the "wise and prudent" knew half as well as Jesus what evil would be mixed with the good in the work of the kingdom. But He was not as easily offended as they were. The Friend of sinners was ever like Himself. He sympathized with the multitude and could not, like the Pharisees, contentedly give them over to a permanent condition of ignorance and depravity. He greatly rejoiced over even one lost sheep who was restored. And He was overjoyed when not just one, but a whole flock, even *began* to return to the fold. It pleased Him to see people repenting, even if only for a short while. And it pleased Him to see people pressing into the kingdom, even if it was rudely and violently. For His love was strong. And where strong love exists, even wisdom and refinement will not be particular (Matt. 11:12).

Before we go to another topic, let's take note of the fact that there is another class of Christians. These are quite distinct from the wise and prudent. The evangelistic labors of the Twelve do not need to be vindicated in their eyes. On the contrary, their tendency is to regard these labors as

the whole work of the kingdom. Revival of religion among the neglected masses is for them the sum of all good works. They do not take into account the work of instruction going on in the church because it is less observable. In their way of thinking, when there is no obvious excitement, the church is dead and her ministry inefficient. These people need to be reminded that there were two religious movements going on in the days of the Lord Jesus. One consisted in awakening the masses out of the stupor of indifference. The other consisted in the careful, exact training of men already committed to the principles and truths of the divine kingdom. In the first movement, the disciples - both the Twelve and the Seventy - were agents. In the later movement, they were the subjects. This movement, even though it was less noticeable and much more limited in extent, was by far the more important of the two. It was destined to bring forth fruit that would remain. It would not only affect the immediate present, but the whole history of the world. The great Teacher was now quietly and unobservedly instilling deep truths into the minds of His selected men. Before long, these men would speak His confidential teaching in the broad daylight. And the sound of their voices would not stop until they had gone throughout the whole earth. If Christ had neglected this work and given Himself completely to the work of evangelism among the masses, there would have been very little hope for the kingdom of heaven.

### *Jesus' Instructions*

When the Twelve had finished their mission, they returned and told their Master all that they had done and taught. We do not have any details of their report or of His remarks. We do, however, find such details in connection with the later mission of the Seventy. "And the Seventy returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in Your name'" (Lk. 10:17). Luke also informs us that after Jesus congratulated the disciples on their success and expressed His own satisfaction with the reported facts, He spoke a word of warning, "Nevertheless do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven" (Lk. 10:20). It was a timely caution against pride and vanity. It is very probable that a similar word of caution was also addressed to the Twelve after their return. It certainly would have been appropriate. They had been involved in the same exciting work, had wielded the same miraculous powers, had been equally successful, and were equally immature in character; therefore, it was equally difficult for them to bear success. It is most likely that when Jesus said to them on their return, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while" (Mk. 6:31), He was not taking care of their bodies only, but was wisely seeking to provide rest for their heated minds as well as for their jaded frames of reference.

The advice to the Seventy ought to be heeded by everyone who is zealous for the work of evangelism, especially those who are young in knowledge and grace. It warns them that there is a possibility of their own spiritual health being injured when they are zealous in seeking the salva-

tion of others. This may happen in many ways. Success may make the evangelists vain, and they may begin to make sacrifices for the Gospel but fall into a trap of their own making. They may fall under the dominion of the devil when they begin to have joy over the fact that he is subject to them. They may despise those who have been less successful or denounce them as being deficient in zeal. Jonathan Edwards, once again, gives a sad account of the pride, presumption, arrogance, conceit, and censoriousness which characterized many of the more active promoters of religious revival in his day (*Thoughts on Revival*, Part iv). Some others may fall into a false security about their own spiritual state, thinking that it is impossible for anything to go wrong with those who are so committed and whom God has so greatly owned. This is an obvious, as well as a dangerous mistake. Doubtless, Judas took part in this Galilean mission, and for all we know, was as successful as his fellow-disciples in casting out devils. Graceless people may, for a period of time, be used as agents in promoting the work of grace in the hearts of others. Usefulness does not necessarily imply goodness, according to Christ's teaching. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declares, "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'" Notice the answer He says He will give to them. It is not, "I question the correctness of your statement." That is implied. Rather, the answer is, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness." (Matt. 7:22).

These solemn words suggest the need for watchfulness and self-examination. But they are not designed to discourage or to hurt one's zeal. We must not interpret them as if they meant, "Never mind *doing* good, only *be* good." Nor should we read it, "Do not care for the salvation of others; look out for your own salvation." Jesus Christ did not teach a listless or a selfish religion. He impressed on His disciples a large-hearted, generous concern for the spiritual well-being of people. And to foster such a spirit, He sent the Twelve on this trial mission, even when they were comparatively unprepared for the work and at risk of spiritual harm. Even with the risks involved, He wanted His Apostles to be filled with enthusiasm for the advancement of the kingdom. And when the disciples' weaknesses began to appear, He made sure to check them by a word of warning and a timely retreat into solitude.