

1023

CHRISTIAN MISSIONS AND OTHER RELIGIONS

INTRODUCTION: Half a million Americans came back from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and the Persian Gulf region about a year ago with a new understanding of the Muslim religion. These days we don't have to go around the world to hear people of other world religions speaking in foreign languages and trying to practice their faith in a totally different style of life. We see them at the super markets, the shopping malls, and in our restaurants; our children go to school with them; and we have them for neighbors.

Many in our churches wonder about our traditional teaching about missions, and are asking questions about how we as Christians should relate to these non-american, non-european, non-white, non-christian folks who are all around us. We don't have to go to the mission fields; the mission fields have come to us. They may even visit our churches, too, and we hope they do, and we want to welcome them in the proper way. But we'll never make them feel comfortable with us, and we'll never move any of them toward faith in Jesus Christ, if we have nonchristian prejudices and attitudes toward them. Just what SHOULD be our attitudes toward these new neighbors, and how should we treat them?

I. First, I suggest we reinterpret our strong missionary motivation as our normal obligation as witnesses for Christ.

A. We need not surrender any of our biblical imperatives for missions.

1. Scriptures such as the Great Commission, Romans 10:14 & 15, Acts 14:27; 16:10; 18:6; 22:21; Eph. 3:3, 6, and many other verses still apply.

2. I am so confident in your familiarity with these and other similar scriptures on missions, that I don't feel it necessary even to read them again here and now.

B. We need a new understanding of what is really meant by being a good witness for Christ.

1. Doctrine has never united Christians or Baptists. We have always insisted on freedom or

diversity in the fellowship, and freedom of interpretation of the scriptures.

2. But missions and evangelism have always united Christians and especially Baptists. Whenever Baptists emphasized missions there was great unity and growth. Whenever we emphasized doctrine there was usually division and stagnation. In the next millennium, if the Lord tarries his coming, we will have to rethink our relationship to the whole spectrum of other Christian bodies and other world religions. If we don't do this we shall surely lose the sharp edge of our witness and influence.

3. To be a good witness for Christ we must be involved in Proclamation, not Propaganda.

Propaganda is preaching so that the person to whom we preach must become the same as the preacher. In other words, the preacher tries to make the other person into the preacher's mentality or image.

True evangelism, on the other hand, must so proclaim the Good News of Christ that the individual in the freedom of Christ can become what God would have him become.

4. Noel Vose, past president of the BWA, said: "Diversity is one expression of the key Baptist doctrine of 'Liberty of conscience.' As to unity: no one part of the membership has the spiritual authority to impose its views arbitrarily on the whole—freedom to HOLD its views, YES; freedom to EXPRESS them, YES; but freedom to IMPOSE them, NO; NOT WHILE BEARING THE NAME BAPTIST."

II. We need to recognize the good and the truth in other religions.

A. It is not necessary or correct to think of Christianity as the only good and true religion, and all other world religions and faiths as bad and false.

B. It is helpful to admit that some bad things have been done in the name of religion, including Christianity.

1. In the name of the Christ who blessed the peacemakers and called us to love our enemies, some terrible wars have been fought.

2. In the name of the Savior who proclaimed release to the captives and liberation of the

oppressed, colonization has been justified and pursued.

3. In the name of the Redeemer who blessed the poor and preached good news to them, economic and political imperialism has been extended.

4. In the name of Him who invested his life to free people from religious and dogmatic bondage of the temple, sabbath, and the ceremonial law, a militant fundamentalism is being promoted.

III. We Christians and Baptists need to face up to our share of responsibility for world peace.

A. It is an obvious fact that there can be no peace in the world until there is peace between the great world religions.

And there can be no peace in the great world religions until we agree to have genuine respect for each other and open dialog with each other.

Most Baptists and evangelical Christians are not ready for this.

Moreover, there cannot be peace between the mainline Christian churches and denominations until people like Southern Baptists and other evangelicals begin to recognize each other's freedom in Christ to be different, to love and serve the Lord in their own way, and to read, study, and interpret the Bible as their enlightened conscience leads them.

We have a large portion of Southern Baptists today who are unwilling to grant this freedom to those of our own fellowship and to long-time Baptists in other bodies of the European and Baptist World Alliance, MUCH LESS to other Christian churches and denominations in the world today!

No wonder that they are not ready to accept the fact of religious pluralism, or to dialog with representatives of the other great world religions.

B. Our missionaries should go into all the world—not to preach religious dogma, or even Christianity, and certainly not to export our own doctrinal controversies.

~~After all, none of these things are absolute.~~

~~Only GOD is ABSOLUTE.~~

~~One of our great contemporary European theologians~~

~~has written, "The only absolute in world history is the Absolute itself," (Kung, Theol. for the Third~~

Mil., p. 251).

Many great Christian leaders and Bible scholars have rightly said that "Christians don't BELIEVE in CHRISTIANITY; we BELIEVE (or put our faith) in the one God who sent His Son Jesus, as his anointed messenger to be our savior, redeemer, master, and teacher, who is for us Christians the way, the truth, and the life. He, and HE ALONE, is the only ABSOLUTE, INERRANT, infallible, and decisive rule of our faith and life. He is HIMSELF the message of missions, and Christology—the doctrine of the person and work of Christ—is the fundamental doctrine of the church.

C. Our missionaries should go out into the world to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, not our distinctive understanding of that gospel or our own understanding of the Bible or of Christianity.

1. For some it is hard to make this distinction between Jesus Christ HIMSELF as the ground and content of our faith, and, on the other hand, our UNDERSTANDING of him and our UNDERSTANDING of the gospel and the scriptures. But this distinction is critically important.

~~You see, Jesus Christ Himself is the ABSOLUTE; our UNDERSTANDING of him is NOT ABSOLUTE.~~

Christians need to distinguish between their confession to Jesus Christ as the truth, and a claim that Christianity is the only true religion.

The TRUTH, the whole TRUTH, THE ESSENTIAL TRUTH, cannot be captured by any religion, including the Christian religion, and certainly not by any single denomination or church.

When we claim that the Christian religion is the only true religion, that it alone has the whole truth, we deeply offend people of other religions, and we have no further basis for dialog with them, as far as they are concerned. How would you feel if someone else told you that about YOUR religious faith? As a correction to this sort of religious superiority and haughty presumption, we should

remember what Paul wrote in I Cor. 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully, even as I have been fully understood." To hear the way some Christians and missionaries try to witness, one would think they suppose they see in the mirror quite clearly, and that they pretend to understand fully and perfectly even now.

2. There can never be peace in the religious world, or on the international scene, as long as religious believers keep up such a pretense.

IV. We need to examine what the Bible really teaches about the other religions.

A. The biblical message does not limit God's activity to the historical revelation in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Let me help you to understand this.

B. In the O.T. God does not only make a covenant with ISRAEL, but also with ALL the people of the world (Gen. 8-9).

God uses heathen kings and nations to carry out his providential will and judgment, even against his own elect (Isa. 10:5f; 44:28; 45:1; Jer 27:6-15; and many other passages).

C. The Book of Ruth is a corrective against Israel's claim to exclusiveness with regard to marriage and participation in the covenant, and the book of Jonah provides an understanding of God which includes the gentile Ninevites in his love, and at the same time it is critical of Jonah, the Israelite man of God.

D. In Mal. 1:11f, we read "...from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you (Israelites) profane it."

E. Jesus praises the faith of a pagan gentile: "not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Matt. 8:10 = Luke 7:9).

F. The Apostle Paul recognizes that knowledge of God is inherent to human nature (Rom. 2:14-16), and that it could have been kept alive "ever since the creation" (Rom. 1:19f.) through divine revelation, for "God has shown it to them." One cannot seriously study this passage without

concluding that Paul admits the possibility of religious knowledge BEFORE and OUTSIDE the historical revelation in Judaism and Christianity.

G. Time does not permit further illustration, but there are many other passages in the N.T. that could be cited to show that all religions carry the promise and possibility of truth and value. For sure, they can be corrupted and deformed and become instruments of superstition, suffering, and oppression, but so can Christianity.

V. Some Basic Principles of Christian Relations with People of Other Religions (or of no religion).

A. While we obey the Christian call to missions in the Bible, especially in the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20; John 20:21; Luke 24:47f; Acts 1:8) we must recognize, first, that all persons have the right to tell their story of faith and to hear the story of others, and second, that genuine religious faith cannot be coerced or manipulated by any kind of pressure or technique; it must be a free and voluntary choice. We must always respect everyone's dignity and inherent right to freely follow the voice of conscience. We must always meet people of other religions with such respect and openness. We as Christians have the right, even the duty, in obedience to Christ's command, to witness and to tell the good news; and let those who will listen, let them willingly listen (and, we trust some will GLADLY listen) as the gospel of Christ is presented in love and compassion by a genuine Christian believer, who has a personal testimony to share; and let those who will make their free and personal decision to follow Jesus Christ as their way, and truth, and life.

B. This is the way ANYONE becomes a Christian, whether American, European, Arab, Jew, Asian, or believer of any religion or of no religion whatever. It is a personal, intelligent decision, not an accident of birth.

C. Sultan Saladin said in Lessing's famous "dramatic poem" Nathan the Wise, "A man like you does not remain standing where the accident of birth has flung him; or if he remains, he remains because of discernment, reasons, the choice of what is better" (act 3, scene 5). And he was right.

An intelligent person does not simply accept whatever faith he happened to be born in. He thinks about it, and asks whether it is reasonable, good, and true, and either embraces it and makes it his own, or throws it aside or ignores it.

That illustrates one reason we do not baptize babies and make them members of Baptist churches. People have to grow up at least to older childhood or adolescence or adulthood, when he or she can make a personal and intelligent and voluntary choice to accept and follow Jesus Christ, understanding clearly what repentance and faith and discipleship mean.

CONCLUSION: This then is the challenge to each one of you today. If you are a committed Christian, then witness in this spirit to those of your acquaintances as God gives you opportunity, and as his Spirit prompts you.

If you are not a professing Christian, we gently and respectfully recommend to you Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. We respect your faith, or lack of it, up to this point in your life; but perhaps you are at a turning point right now.

You feel that something is missing in your life, that you have lost the sense of meaning and purpose in life.

Perhaps you are ready to put your personal faith in Jesus Christ and trust him to forgive you of your sins and come into your life and be your Guide and Teacher and, indeed, Lord of all.

Will you do it now as we sing? Come forward publicly and make your profession of faith as we stand and sing.

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