

THE PRESUPPOSITIONS OF MISSIONS

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In considering the subject of the presupposition of Missions we are going on beyond the theme of its basis, motivated by the love of God and aiming at His glory, to a consideration of the necessity for, and possibility of, a missionary enterprise. What is the nature of man that we presuppose when we speak of his need to be saved? Is man capable of being reached?

This question is asked sometimes concerning particular classes of men, such as the dedicated Communists or life-long idolaters. Are they capable of being reached? It would be foolish to send missionaries to them if they were incapable of even being contacted with the gospel? But is there a remedy powerful enough to penetrate their dark hearts and translate them into God's marvelous Kingdom of light? With what presuppositions concerning these things do we face the Missionary task? Basically they are two: The condition of man as lost; and the power of Christ to save. We will begin with a consideration of the condition of man as lost.

To face the missionary task realistically is of the utmost importance. Aware of what lies before us, we must be neither overly optimistic as to what we can expect, nor become pessimistic because of the hardness of the pagan heart. We need to have a clear realization of the nature of man before we go forth.

Men, whether stone age savages in the jungles of New Guinea, or uneducated primitives in the mountains of Peru, or atheistic Communists in the universities of Japan, are all created in the image of God. This is the great fact of anthropology, that all men are human beings, however primitive or savage they may seem; that all have souls as well as bodies; that all are created in God's image.

But another great fact of anthropology, a tragic fact, is that man has fallen, and in the fall the divine image was

seriously marred. In some aspects it was lost. Man lost moral excellence - righteousness and holiness, and true knowledge as well. He needs to be supernaturally renewed in these aspects of the image of God if he is to be restored to the family of God. But having lost these he is at enmity with God (Rom. 5:9), spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1) so that he has no inclination to worship the true God, and morally depraved so that he lives for the creaturely self and not for God's standards (Rom. 1:28)

Because of his sinful condition he is under the wrath and curse of God, condemned to die physically in this life and eternally in hell in the world to come (Jn 3:3; Matt. 25:41). This is the perishing condition of lost men as the Bible portrays it to us.

But not all aspects of the image of God were lost in the fall. Man is the creature who is the image-bearer of God. If he had completely lost that image in the fall he would no longer be man. The fall, however, did not make him "not-a-man." The natural man is still God's image-bearer in three aspects:

First, he is a rational being with self-consciousness, having a reasonable soul which attests to him that he is more than his body; that there is an ego, and inner self, within him which can control his mind and is really he. His age-old and universal hope of immortality is not that his body will escape death but that this soul will.

Second, he is also a religious being with God-consciousness, having within himself ineradicably a sense of God, and *sensus deitatus*. It is to this Paul is referring in Romans 1:19-20. "Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God has showed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse."



In verse 19 we read “known.” In what sense is it known? It is not a content of knowledge about God natural to all men, but an awareness that God exists. It is this basic sense, rooted into his being at his creation, that enables him to see that general revelation of God in the works of nature, including himself, for he does see it, Paul says in verse 20. He sees both that there exists deity and His eternal power above this created world; and then, as we shall observe shortly, he sinfully suppresses this truth. This is the basis of his inexcusableness before God.

Third, man is also a responsible being with moral-consciousness. Paul is referring to this in Romans 2:14-15. “For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law are a law unto themselves; which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the meanwhile accusing or else excusing one another.” What is man’s conscience? Is it not his consciousness that he ought to do right and ought not to do wrong? This is implanted in all men making them moral creatures and distinguishing them from the animals. It is not that the heathen innately know correctly what is right and wrong. They even acknowledge that gross evil is deserving of punishment, Paul says in Romans 1:32, but they suppress this voice and go on in sin.

In this we see also the nature of unbelief. It is the nature of man’s unbelieving condition to suppress all truth that would point him to God. In Romans 1:18 the Greek verb for “hold” has a prefix giving the meaning of “hold down”, or to restrain. Men suppress the knowledge of God within them; they do not want to respond to His revelation of Himself in nature. This revelation will never lead the heathen to God because of this sinful reaction of unbelief causing them to suppress truth pointing to God.

Yet the revelation is there and the God-consciousness is universally in man. Paul took advantage of this in Athens when he began his sermon with a reference to their altar to the “Unknown God.” There is no known instance where it has been established, that men have had no knowledge of God. In Manchuria in 1940 as a missionary the writer once made a trip back into the northeastern mountains where conditions were very primitive. We had taken our bicycles on the train, had gotten off about 100 miles to the east of Harbin and had ridden north. The Japanese who occupied the country then did not go into that area but stayed along the railway, fearing guerrilla attacks. I recall on one occasion a Chinese farmer asking if I were a Japanese. They had seen either Japanese nor white men back there. We sold

gospel portions, gave out tracts and witnessed of God and His salvation through Christ. Sometimes I would ask whom they worshipped and usually they would point to some pagan temple where nature gods were worshipped. When I asked if they did not believe there was some God who was far above and superior to all these, inevitably they would reply that there was such a one *Lao Tien Yeh*, the Venerable Heavenly One. But when I asked if they worshipped Him, the reply was usually a looking from one to the other, a shaking of the head, and an admission that they did not. The consciousness of a supreme deity was not foreign to them, but this they set aside, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator.

The moral-consciousness is there in men also. Quite vivid in my memory are the many Sunday nights I sat down with a group of young Japanese university students in Tokyo with an open Bible. They were youths of keen intelligence but all of them espoused the Marxist ideology. On a number of occasions we studied what Paul had to say in Romans 1 and on one such night the question came up as to who set the standards of right and wrong. Their consensus was that these were made by human convention but that basically that which speeded the cause of socialism was good and that which impeded its progress was evil. Endeavoring to make them take a more personal view of it, I asked them if they cheated in their exams. Looking somewhat sheepish they all admitted they did, but all defended it on the basis that everyone did, and that it hastened them on their way into the world and the struggle for the conquest of socialism!

Coming home that night my thought were not happy ones. Could it be possible that these godless youths had succeeded in eradication the image of God from them? Was it really gone? Yet in my heart I knew this was not possible. And then one of the young women of the class who was riding the train part way with me turned and said, “You were right, teacher, when we know we should do; and again we do what we feel in our hearts is not right. We have no good, unchanging standards to follow. I want to believe in god and accept His standards you have been teaching us from the Bible.” No, the image was not effaced. Indeed, on the whole I have found it easier to deal with these young minds who glibly deny all God-consciousness and moral-consciousness, than with those who for five, six, or seven decades responded to this inner testimony but perverted it by worshipping idols for gods.

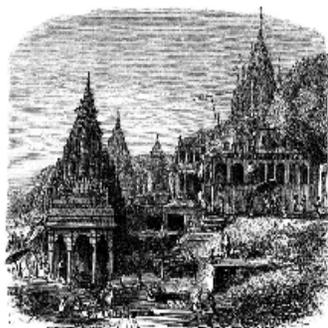


Due to the operation of God's common grace, however, man's work of suppressing the truth is in turn counteracted by God. Common grace is an attitude of favor of God upon men as men, not upon them specifically as saved or unsaved. It has a two-fold work. In part, it is God's grace in restraining the heathen from realizing their full potential for evil. It is being as wicked as they are capable of being. But it also has another function. It is God's common grace that "makes his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (Matt.5:45). He thus gives men the opportunity to realize that God is good and long-suffering to sinful men. He sends His good gifts to them all that they might turn to Him. But they won't. Common grace also enables them to do acts of civil righteousness, such as love their families and nations. Their reaction, however, due to the nature of unbelief, is always to suppress the truth of this witness of God to them. Therefore they are without excuse! The heathen are not yearning for God and for His Christ but are rather resisting the witness of general revelation and common grace.

But we do have a point of contact in our witness to them. They are still men, in the image of God, in these important, unchanging aspects. No matter how low they may fall into bestiality they are still men; still conscious, at least to some small extent, of their need and with some yearning to rise above their plight. If they were not men in the image of God we could not communicate to them. The very presupposition of Missions is that they have a God-consciousness and so we can speak to them of God. We do not begin our witness to them in a void, but with the knowledge God has already spoken to them and is speaking to them.

It is not that we can simply build on their sense of God and bring them to God merely by giving them more information! No. It will only be rejected unless our witness is accompanied by the sovereign act of God's Holy Spirit in regenerating them. Not common grace but special supernatural grace is needed to bring men into His Kingdom.

Since we have a point of contact, or perhaps a point of attack, we can talk to them. We can witness and we can reason. We can tell them of the God of creation and providence and know that these are not meaningless concepts to them. We can go on to show them the traditional arguments for the existence of God, that the God we postulated from the Bible exists, and know that this will strike a responsive cord in their hearts even if they proceed to suppress it.



This method of witness is useful to teach them more of God, man and the universe, and their true relationship, and to drive the one opposing the truth further into the corner of illogic and contradiction. But we must remember that the door to the Kingdom of God is not opened by the power and persuasion of human reasoning alone, nor by any other human effort alone. Admissions forced against the will, leave the mind of the same opinion still. Nominal head assent is still heart rejection. The kicking against the pricks of the reasoning which is goading them into a corner soon begins again in some other direction. Why? Because men are not argued into the Kingdom of God. They have to be born into it.

Yet such reasoning is of great value when done in a spirit of love for the unbeliever. If he has set his mind and ideas on a throne of rebellion against God he must be humbled by having those ideas defeated if he is to yield to God. The yielding will not follow without the gracious work of the Holy Spirit, however, which we must pray for as we witness. Paul effectively used a reasoning approach in his Athens sermon, which we will deal with on another occasion. But Paul in 1 Corinthians 1 shows the presuppositions behind his preaching in verses 22-24. "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumbling block, and unto the Greeks foolishness; but unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God." The Greeks wanted wisdom, and Paul was willing to reason with them, but it is only Christ who is the power of God who changes men's lives. This brings us then to the other basic presupposition of Missions we must consider, that is, the power of Christ to save through His gospel.

In 1 Corinthians 1:24 we see that this was the presupposition of Paul's preaching—that the gospel of Christ was completely adequate to save sinful men and would save all that God would call. He had witnessed that power in operation from the beginning of His preaching. When he and Barnabas turned to preach to the Gentiles we read in Acts 13:47-48, "For so has the Lord commanded us, saying, I have set you to be a light of the Gentiles, that you should be for Salvation unto the ends of the earth. And when the Gentiles heard this, they were glad, and glorified the word of the Lord: and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed." God had His own elect, chosen before the foundation of the world, and when Paul preached the gospel to them, God called them into faith.

This must be the hope and expectation of every missionary preacher. With men dead in trespasses and sins, in rebellion against God's truth, preaching would be futile if it were not for the power of God's calling, the supernatural internal call which God gives, in His own time to His elect, when the external call of the gospel goes out. In Ephesians 1 Paul is talking about the subject of election, predestination and calling. He says, in verses 18-19, he prays that they might know the hope of God's calling and "the exceeding greatness of His power to usward, who believe according to the working of His mighty power that called ones believe. Without the operation of the Holy Spirit in regeneration none could enter the Kingdom.

The presupposition of God's election is behind our preaching to spiritually dead men. The doctrine of election thus if properly understood is not a handicap to evangelistic zeal but its stimulus. We preach because we know it is not hopeless. God's elect must hear and He will save them. They are many and in all places, and their salvation awaits our coming with the gospel. It is our responsibility to reach them with it.

The doctrine of election ought not to be preached to Christians only to comfort and reassure them. When it is presented it should be followed with an equal emphasis on the Christian's responsibility which springs from his election. We are elected and save to serve (Eph. 2:8-10). Paul, after emphasizing to these Ephesian Christians the matter of their salvation by God's sovereign grace in 2:8-9, immediately reminds them of this in verse 10. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God has before ordained that we should walk in them." The doctrine of election should be a stimulus to good works and especially to that of witnessing.

The power of Christ working through His gospel is adequate to save any man of any nation. Paul is so saying in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek."

Negatively stated, it is not education nor modern science which can transform men's lives from sinners to saints. Nor western civilization and culture. These not infrequently have a worse effect, increasing crime and juvenile delinquency in heathen lands. Nor can the principles of democratic government and the moral and legal codes of western democracies deliver men from spiritual darkness.

Putting it positively, there is only salvation in the name of Christ and the gospel which bears His name. Only He can break the bondage of sin. It is the faithful preaching of His Word which is needed on the mission field today. The power is in the gospel as the Holy Spirit uses it. It does not need to be accompanied by any show of miracles or unintelligible babble of tongues.

I recall a few years ago in Japan a small group of discouraged missionaries leaving their work, and some their Missions, and going to the mountains to pray for some manifestation of supernatural power to make them more effective preachers. Others followed until about thirty-five were gathered. They did not preaching—only continuing in prayer and waiting. The weeks passed into months and the months to years without witnessing. Wasted opportunities! Finally, after two years, they dwindled down, some taking up secular work teaching English in colleges and others returning to the United States. They gave up, defeated! Others turned to spiritual pride. One claimed he was so advance he did not need to read the Bible any more!

They made shipwrecks of their missionary ministries because they did not trust the adequacy of the power of the gospel, nor the way the Lord was using it! We must preach the gospel and leave the results to Him. That is His responsibility. If the heathen will not hear the gospel they will not believe though one went back to them from the dead, our Lord declared. It is not miracles but faithful preaching of the gospel, the power of God, which is needed. Then the invisible miracle of regeneration will take place and visible fruit will follow. Let us understand the basis and presupposition of Missions that we may not be deceived by unlearned men nor discouraged by difficulties and slow growth. Men's hearts are hard but God's Word is powerful and "in due season we shall reap if we faint not."



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