

Communication and Missions

by John M. L. Young

When a missionary goes to a foreign land his immediate objective is to so present the gospel of Christ that the people will understand his message diligently praying that they will believe and be saved. He diligently applies himself to learning the language and to discovering all he can about the native religions and culture.

As he begins his witnessing, however, he is immediately faced with a serious problem. The Christian religion and terminology are either unknown to them, or so little known as to be completely misinterpreted by them. Their minds have been so long steeped in their own religious concepts and vocabulary, that even when he uses their terminology for such basic ideas as God, sin, holiness, repentance and salvation, they are interpreting these terms in the context of their own religious usage and thus making quite different concepts of them. Thus when the missionary speaks of God or sin, even when he uses their language for these terms, the words are heard by them not with his meaning, but with theirs. Here then is the problem: How shall the missionary communicate his message so the pagan mind can understand it? Let us consider the problem first, and then the answer to it, the presentation.

The problem then is occasioned by the prior concepts of the pagan mind. What, however, is our responsibility as we witness to them? We know it is not to bring regeneration. That is not our responsibility. It is not within our power. Regeneration is the work of God and rests solely within His sovereignty.

What is it then? In Romans 10:13-15, 17 we have it laid out before us. The chronological order, if the heathen are to call upon the Lord and be saved, tracing it backwards in verse 14, is, first, they must hear, then believe, then call on the Lord.

“How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?”

This is repeated in verse 17: “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.” Of the three, hearing, believing, and calling on the Lord, we cannot cause the latter two. We can only cause them to hear audibly and this is the immediate goal of the preacher—to bring the gospel message within sound of their ears.

Is this the hearing referred to in verse 17? The Bible speaks of two kinds of hearing, or possibly three. “Hearing they hear not, neither do they understand” (Matthew 13:13b). Does it mean, “Hearing they comprehend not nor understand spiritually?” Those who “hear not,” then, hear with neither natural comprehension nor spiritual understanding. They hear the words but do not understand them. It is likely, however, that verse 17 refers to the last type of hearing mentioned above, the hearing of spiritual understanding, evangelical obedience. But in any case the sequence must be (1) hearing the audible words of the Word of God; (2) understanding them with some comprehension; then, (3) with the eyes of the understanding (the heart) being opened by the regeneration of the Holy Spirit, believing what is heard, spiritual understanding.

Now in this sequence surely the responsibility of the missionary preacher is not only to cause the heathen to hear the Word of God audibly but also to hear it with some comprehension. Surely it is his responsibility so to study the religion, the customs, the usage and the

concepts of the religious vocabulary he uses, that he will know how to present his message so they will know what he is talking about. This “hearing” at least, it is his responsibility to strive for. The “hearing” of faith must be the gift of God. We are not called upon to give just a superficial presentation but our task is to bring as much understanding of our message as is possible. It may take some

time. When it is understood it will be followed by either rejection or faith.

This “natural comprehension” will mean only that the claims of the gospel have been sufficiently made clear so that the hearers know to believe involves a confession of sin before a holy God, a renunciation of self and sin, and a yielding to the supreme and sole Lordship of Jesus Christ. This requires a making clear of the antithesis between identification with Christ or continuation with the world. This kind of “natural comprehension” can only be followed by rejection of the gospel by the natural man. Rejection, that is, unless the Holy Spirit moves with regenerating power to open the eyes of discernment from an inadequate natural comprehension to spiritual understanding and faith. It is the initial task of the missionary to bring the first “hearing,” the audible hearing of the gospel, seeking to bring a maximum of comprehension. Only the power of the Holy Spirit can change this into the latter “hearing,” the hearing of faith.



One reason for “easy believism,” (the quick, easy response of claimed belief later repudiated), is that they do not understand the message but are interpreting it according to their own pagan concepts. What they “believe” is not the gospel but their own idea of it. They later fall away when they learn the truth about it.

The task is not as formidable, however as it may at first seem to be. The reason lies not with men but with God. He has prepared the way for their hearing with some understanding. That way we have previously referred to, the fact that He has created man in His own image and left within fallen man the seed of religion (*semen religiones*), particularly the imprint on the human heart of God-consciousness. Further, He has revealed Himself in the rest of creation for “the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork” (Psalm 19:1), Still further, He has not left Himself without a witness of His common graciousness to all men in that He sends them rain and sunshine, and, although He has given some of them up to practice the great moral debauchery they desired, His Spirit still strives with them to restrain them from falling into the full evil potential of which they are otherwise capable. It is our God who has been thus speaking to the heathen down through the centuries, preserving them as His rational, moral and religious creatures, and thus preserving a point of contact so that the missionary can communicate the heavenly message to their earthy senses.

The argument of Paul in Romans 10, following verse 17, is in striking support of the fact that God has always been speaking to the pagan Gentile world. “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. But I say, Have they not heard? Yes verily, their sound went into all the earth, and their words unto the ends of the world” (Romans 10:17-18). Paul here wants to show that God’s present offering of His gospel to the Gentiles, through Paul’s preaching, is not an absolutely new interest of God’s in the Gentiles but just a fulfilling of it. To do this he quotes from Psalm 19:4, in verse 18, and says the “sound” and “words” of God went out to all the world! When did this take place? When did, or when do, the heathen hear the Word of God, the speech of God?

Calvin, in commenting of this verse in his commentary on Romans, say that the heavens and the earth “have a sort of tongue of their own to declare the perfections of God... God has already from the beginning manifested his divinity to the Gentiles, though not by the preaching of men, yet by the testimony of His creatures; for though the gospel was

then silent among them, yet the whole workmanship of heaven and earth did speak and make known its author by its preaching. It hence appears, that the Lord ... did not yet (heretofore) so withdraw from the Gentiles the knowledge of himself, but that he even kept alive some sparks of it among them ... he showed by this prelude that he designed to make himself known at length to them also.”

Our God has thus not only never withdrawn His intention someday of revealing Himself to them with far more clarity, said Calvin. When we as missionaries go to them with the gospel we can rejoice to know that that day has arrived for them, that God has sent us to them, and that He has His elect among them. Because He has maintained His testimony both within them and without them in nature, we are able to communicate His message to them.

But what have the heathen done with the truth God has been witnessing to them? In the first chapter of Romans Paul made this clear, in verse 18. They have suppressed it, held it down, distorted and perverted it. (21), and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator(25). This is the basis for the great barrier as we seek to get them to understand the gospel. Just as barnacle can cluster on an oyster until the original creature is almost unrecognizable, so men have so suppressed the sense of God within them by substituting false deities and perverting the religious and moral ideas to which their consciences testify that the original is scarcely recognizable. As in Japan, the word for God, Kami, comes to have only a polytheistic significance; and sin, taumi, means crime, or actually, only being caught in it, and is held by a Shinto sect to be like



dust on the hands which can be washed off. Purity has to do only with avoiding ceremonial defilement; and salvation is deliverance from the Buddhist idea of unending reincarnation. In our next discussion we will go into such things further. Suffice it to say here that behind these perverted concepts lies a conscience much closer to the truth. The barnacle barriers to understanding what the Christian means by such terms can be knocked off, by those who understand their origin and structure, and who carefully labor at it. The heathen are still in the image of God. God has been speaking to them through the ages. This is our hope of successfully communicating to them as we witness to them. That which is called “easy believism” is based on a false understanding, and is followed by a dropping out of the church. There is a big turn-over among Japan’s churches for this reason - a belief based on an unreal hearing! When they do understand what is being taught, there is one of two reactions; either they reject it or delight in it and seek to learn more.

But now let us go on to consider the presentation. What then should be our presentation as we strive to communicate God's message of redemption to the lost? We must approach them as those with whom God has already been dealing but those who have terribly distorted and misrepresented His revelation, striving to be used as messengers of God's Son and His Word to them. Is this not the way Paul approached the heathen Gentiles?

Let us look at his confrontation with the heathen at Lystra after he had worked a miracle and they interpreted it to mean that their god, Jupiter and Mercurius, had returned to them, Acts 14:15-17. "... We... preach unto you that ye should turn from these vanities unto the living God, which made heaven, and earth, and the sea, and all things that are therein: Who in times past suffered all nations to walk in their own ways. Nevertheless He left not himself without witness, in that He did good, and gave us rain from heaven, and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness." In verse 15 he points out their worship is in vain and should be rejected. Also that the missionaries have come to tell them of the Creator, "the living God" who made all things. In verses 16-17 he states that although God has thus far suffered their rebellious ways He has been witnessing to them through His good blessings bestowed through nature. Now God wants them to turn to Him in truth and this is His theme, stated in verse 15. Although they had been rejecting Him, He was still seeking them.

Paul clearly rejected, and called on them to reject, their erroneous concepts of God. Equally clearly he told them that it was the God of the skies over their heads and the earth they stood upon, who had never ceased to witness to them nor be good to them, not some foreign god (even though they had tried to make Him a foreigner by banishing Him from their minds) that he had come to tell them about, the only true, living, Creator God.

In his recorded sermon to the Athenian intellectuals he used the same approach, Acts 17:16ff. Verse 16 tells us that Paul was greatly agitated by the sight of all the idolatry of Athens, the symbols of their polytheistic beliefs being everywhere. He therefore did not limit his preaching to the synagogues, where the Jews would hear him, but went out into the market place and preached Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead. It was a new message for Athens and apparently presented in such a way that it raised the curiosity of the sophisticated city men. They arranged to have him speak before the council of the Areopagus, for

this seems to be the meaning here, the most venerable Athenian court, which met at the time in the Agora. It had great respect because of its ancient origin and even under the Romans had supreme authority in religious matters and the power to appoint public lecturers, even to exercising some control over them in the interests of maintaining public order.

How should Paul being before this illustrious and learned gathering? He began as he did in Lystra by introducing them to the God who was not foreign to the land but who was the sovereign over it, "the Lord of heaven and earth," even though they acknowledged that they did not know Him. Paul cleverly starts by referring to the altar addressed "To the Unknown God" as evidence that their ignorance was not concerning His existence, and awareness of which Paul knew was stamped on their hearts as God's image bearers, but ignorance of the true facts about Him. Their worship was thus in ignorance and error. Paul had come to tell them the truth about Him.

Paul goes on then to point out that the true God is God of all the universe, by implication of Athens also then, and therefore He, the maker of the earth, could not be tied down to any Athenian temple made with men's hands! What would He do with temple food offerings, who was the Giver of life to all things that grew? As to the people of Lystra, he also called their attention to God's common grace in giving them all that they possessed, and he says that God has done all this for them that they might seek Him as their Lord. The heathen almost always have special stories attributing to themselves divine origin and the Athenians prided

themselves that they were not immigrants but sprang from the soil of their native Attica, and were far superior to non-Greeks whom they called barbarians. But Paul with one thrust undercuts

this idea of racial superiority and at the same time drives home again the fact that the true God is the God of all men, the one universal God. "He has made of one blood all nations of men," he declares. The unity of the human race as descended from the one man Adam is fundamental to the salvation of men through the one Saviour, the God-man Jesus Christ.

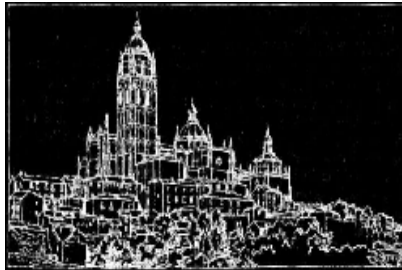
Paul then again impresses them with the fact that he is not introducing to them a foreign God who lives far away, but One who has always been near to them. To make this important point even more striking, he uses language from one of their own writer (verse 28). The words used are from an address to Zeus by his son Minos, one which must have been well-known to Paul because we see him quoting from it again in Titus. It runs, "They fashioned a tomb for thee, O holy and high - the Cretans, always liars, evil beasts, slow bellies! But thou art not dead; thou art risen and alive for ever, for in thee we live



and move and have our being.” And then he makes a direct quote from another source, one of their poets, “For we are also his offspring.”

From these things which they acknowledge they know themselves about God, which they must have derived from God’s witness to Himself in general revelation, Paul wants to show them how they have suppressed and distorted the truth. They have made images of metal with which to worship God and thus have worshipped the creature more than the Creator! This shows great ignorance but God is willing to overlook it now if they will repent of it as a great sin against God, and turn from idols to serve the living and true God. There is no other way to escape the judgment of God, who is going to judge the whole world by One whom He has appointed. This One He has proved to be entirely adequate for this solemn task, for God raised Him from the dead.

Such was the gist of Paul’s sermon and his manner of presentation to these pagan, intellectual Greeks, He knows of their inner knowledge of God, stemming from their creation in God’s image and God’s revelation of Himself in nature. He even quoted from their religious altars and writers to prove that they acknowledged some smattering of this knowledge. But he immediately went on to show how they had suppressed and distorted it, in creature worship. He warned them of God’s wrath and judgment if they did not repent of this and told of God’s mercy to overlook it if they would repent. Then he introduced the Judge God had provided and had demonstrated to be One of His own appointment by raising Him from the dead.



That was as far as he got. To sophisticated men, many of whom had no place for even the immortality of the soul, the idea of the resurrection of a dead body was beyond belief. Many a missionary has found an almost identical reaction when he reached this great truth. Belief in the mighty works of the true God are unacceptable to the natural man until the mighty work of the Holy Spirit intervenes and regeneration takes place. Paul, no doubt, had they allowed him, would have gone on to present the saving work of the true God whom he was introducing to them, whose salvation was through the Judge who was also the Savior. It was because of this Savior’s work that God could overlook their past idolatry if they repented and believed on Him.

What was the result of this kind of gentlemanly but completely forthright presentation of the Christian Message? There were at first two different reactions. There usually are if the missionary has

done his work well. And Paul had done his work well. His task was to make the message just as intelligible to his heathen audience as he could. He wanted them to hear it with as full a hearing as it was possible for the natural man to attain and he had done all he could to make the unknown known in terms of the known. We may be sure his heart was full of the prayer that God would bless the effort with the work of the Spirit in bringing regeneration and spiritual understanding.

The two reactions were these: some mocked his presentation of the Christian message; others, however, felt an inner voice telling them that this deserving of the most careful consideration. It was too close to their real, inner God-consciousness to resist so easily. They must want to hear more, and they said so. From those who went with him some came to enlightenment and faith in Jesus Christ. These results are still the results a missionary can expect if he makes the message clear to the unsaved. If he has not made its distinctiveness clear and has left a vagueness in people’s minds so that they think of it merely as generally a good thing and similar to the best ideas in their own religions, he may get a ready response of acceptance from many when he gives the invitation to accept his Lord. But when the time goes on, and they receive further instruction and enlightenment, and discover the exclusiveness and real meaning of the Christian message, they may well say, “This is not what I thought it was! I don’t want this!” Then they will leave the church causing much grief and damage to its testimony. The “easy believism” was based on an false belief.

But if the message has been made clear so that they have a real hearing of it, with a comprehension of its exclusiveness, of its distinction from their pagan religious ideas, and of its real truth, then a desire to continue to learn more will probably reflect an inner hunger that is finding satisfaction in the truth and the working of the Holy Spirit. From such enlightened followers it will be only a matter of time until the Spirit who has begun His work among them will complete it and some will come to saving faith.

How great is our privilege to be ambassadors of the living God and to communicate His precious message! May it ever be our aim to make it clear and plain that men may truly hear it from us, and that God the Holy Spirit may use our presentation to bring life everlasting to the lost.

The Motive and Aims of Missions: Part II:,
Chapter IV Communication and Missions,
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