

Was Jesus Missions Minded?

by Gordon Olson

In His ministry to Gentiles

In the beginning of Christ's ministry, He visited Jerusalem and asserted His Messianic authority by cleansing the temple of the money-changers who had infested the outer 'Court of the Gentiles' (John 2:13-22). Mark records (11:17) how a second time at the end of His ministry Christ again cleansed the temple, quoting Isaiah 56:7 as an explanation of His actions: "'Is it not written, **my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations**'? But you have made it a robbers' den.'" The global purpose of the temple had been buried under the crooked commercialization of the outer court. George Peters states: "The indifference and callousness of Israel in relation to the religious plight of the nations, and her utter neglect and abandonment of any mission toward the nations of the world become consuming motives in the seeming violent reaction of Christ to religious ceremonialism and performances devoid of compassion for the spiritual well-being of others."

Although most of Christ's ministry for almost three years was devoted to His own people Israel, there are a number of significant incidents in His early ministry in which He showed compassion upon Gentiles. The fourth chapter of John describes his extraordinary trip through Samaria, the conversion of the woman at the well, and through her witness the conversion of many other Samaritans also. When we remember that the Samaritans were despised half-breed Jews whose religion was also 'half-breed', we can understand how radical this ministry was.

We also read about the Roman Centurion who sent prominent Jews to Christ to ask Him to heal his servant. The Lord's comment is devastating:

Truly I say to you, I have not found such great faith with anyone in Israel. And I say to you, that many shall come from east and west and recline at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven, but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 8:10-11).

Not only did Christ meet this Gentile's need, but He contrasted his great faith with the unbelief of Israel in most dramatic language. On a number of occasions Christ's ministry brought Him to the borders of Israel, where He ministered to Gentiles. Across the Sea of Galilee were the ten Greek cities called Decapolis. Christ exorcised a legion of demons from a man in the Gerasene area, who was probably a Gentile (Mark 5:1-20). He healed a deaf man in Decapolis, and He fed the multitude of 4000 men plus women and children in Decapolis. In the region of Tyre and Sidon in Phoenicia, He cast out a demon from a Gentile woman's daughter (Mark 7:24-37). There were probably many other similar unrecorded incidents.

In His teaching

Although we have noted that the focus of the first part of Christ's ministry was to the Jews, there are strong intimations of a universal thrust to His teaching. One hint comes in the favorite title that the Lord Jesus used of Himself. More than forty times in the Gospels Christ used the title, 'son of man'. Although it is a special Messianic

title drawn from Daniel 7:13-14, it also clearly indicates His identification with all humanity, not just the Jews. He could have used the title, 'son of David', and others used it of Him, but He preferred 'son of man'.

At the beginning of His ministry, Christ went back to His hometown of Nazareth and after reading from Isaiah 61 in the synagogue, He claimed to be the fulfillment of this Messianic prophecy (Luke 4:16-30). When they struggled to understand how this local carpenter's son could make such a claim, He rebuked them by stressing how Elijah went to the Gentile widow of Zarephath and how the only leper that Elisha healed was Namaan the Syrian. This 'put down' of the Jews and reference to God's blessing on two Gentiles so infuriated the local people that they tried to kill the Lord. Their problem was that they were too Jewish. Because of their prejudice, they had no use for Gentile 'dogs'. The Lord Jesus made His point almost too well, didn't He?

In the Sermon on the Mount, He reminded Israel that they were to be the "salt of the earth" and the light of the world." He then proceeded to show the Rabbinic misinterpretations and distortions of the Law which kept them from being such. In Mark 14:9 He made reference to the gospel being preached throughout the whole world. The parable of the good Samaritan praises the conduct of a non-Jew and put the Jewish religious leaders in a bad light (Luke 10:29-37). In Luke 13:28-29 He repeats similar words to that commendation of Gentiles he had uttered in connection with the Centurion's servant. In the parable of the great feast in Luke 14:10-24, He spoke about a universal invitation to be extended. In the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:36-43), the field in which the sowing takes place is neither Israel nor the church, but He declares it to be "the world."

The transition from Israel to the Church

It should be noted that the most universal language of Christ comes after His rejection by Israel as He begins speaking consistently in more universal terms only in the last few months of His ministry. There is not a precise turning point, but rather a fairly gradual shift of focus from presenting Himself to Israel as their King in the first years of His ministry, to predicting his passion at Jerusalem and speaking of the church in this connection. We must note several new things:

1. Matt.11:20 - "then He **began** to reproach the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent." He especially rebuked Capernaum, Chorazin and Bethsaida because the greatest abundance of miracles occurred there.
2. Matt. 11:28 - Come unto me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest." This is His first universal invitation extended to **all**.
3. Matt. 13:10-17,34-35 - Christ **began** using parables, which He explained as "mysteries of the kingdom,"- new things "hidden since the foundation of the world." This includes an age of the word of God in the field of the world, preceding the judgment of saved and lost.
4. Matt. 16:19 - "...upon this rock I will build my church." The first reference to the church in the Gospels.
5. Matt.16:21 - "From that time Jesus Christ began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and be raised up on the third day." This is the first of a dozen prophecies of His passion given in just the last six to nine months of His ministry. The astounding truth is that for almost three years of

His ministry, Christ never explicitly mentioned His impending death until Caesarea Philippi.

6. Matt. 20:28 - "just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." This is the first explanation of the meaning of His impending death: a ransom for many.

His last few months

In those last few months of His ministry after the Lord Jesus began to predict His death and resurrection and the church based upon it, His language turns more consistently universal and His global plans are more explicit. In the Good Shepherd discourse of John ten, for example, He makes reference to "other sheep, which are not of this fold." He goes on to state: "I must bring them also, and they shall hear My voice; and they shall become one flock with one shepherd" (John 10:16). The interpretation is straightforward. His Jewish disciples comprised "this fold." The other sheep which were not of "this fold" must be Samaritan and Gentile believers. Christ's plan was to unify both Jewish and Gentile sheep into one sheepfold. This was fulfilled potentially on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was given to baptize all believers into one body, the church (1 Cor. 12:13). The full historical fulfillment came a few years later with the incorporation of Samaritans (Acts 8) and Gentiles (Acts 10-11).

The apostle John also records an incident which took place at the beginning of passion week. Some Gentiles (Greeks), who had already become inquirers into Judaism to the extent that they had come to Jerusalem to worship at Passover, wanted to see the Lord. When Andrew and Philip told him about it, the Lord made extensive comments which are best understood in the light of this Gentile inquiry. In John 12:23-24 He spoke about His glorification by reference to a grain of wheat having to die and bear much fruit. Indeed, that fruit, over the centuries, has been predominantly Gentile. Then He went on to say: "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to Myself." (12:32) The phrase "all men" in the original Greek language can mean 'all kinds of men' or 'all mankind.' It also is an obvious reference to salvation going out to the Gentiles after His death since the context is the key to interpretation.

About that same time during passion week, the Lord had a heated discussion with the leaders of Israel. He gave them the parable of the landowner who leased a vineyard to some vinegrowers who mistreated and killed his slaves and finally killed his son (Matt. 21:33-46). As He applied this to His own situation, He said: "Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it" (21:43). Here the Lord is very explicit about this transition from Israel to the Gentiles in the plan of God. It was clearly caused by the rejection of the "chief cornerstone" by the leaders of Israel, which was a part of God's eternal plan.

A few days later, the disciples' awe at the beauty of the temple building occasioned the extended prophetic sermon called the Olivet Discourse. As Christ described the end-time events related to His second coming He stated: "And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come" (Matt. 24:14). Quite apart from the issue as to the exact time from of this prediction in reference to the rapture of the church, it is clear that Christ predicted global evangelization of all the nations (ethne = ethnic peoples). He

could not have been more explicit. In that same discourse He describes Himself as the King, who after His return to earth, will judge the living nations (ethne) by separating the sheep from the goats (Matt. 25:31-46). This scene presupposes the evangelization of the nations.

Thus it should be abundantly clear that the Lord Jesus did not drop the 'Great Commission' on the apostles like a bolt out of the blue. He gave them ample warning.

Problem passages

One difficult statement was given on the occasion when He sent out His twelve apostles as ambassadors to His own nation Israel. "Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of God is at hand'" (Matt. 10:5-6). It was because He had a responsibility to Israel first, that He so limited the ministry of the Twelve. Israel was to be first the channel of God's message to the world, but they had to be won first. He couldn't turn to the Gentiles until He had first given them opportunity to respond to the kingdom message.

The second difficult passage explained by this transition is the story of the Syrophenician woman recorded in Matt. 15:21-28. His answer to pleas for the healing of her daughter seems very narrow: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." We all recognize that He was testing her faith, and she passed with flying colors. However, His words were intrinsically true **at that point in time**. He was not free to devote Himself to the Gentiles until He had fulfilled His responsibility to Israel. And of course, He **did** heal her daughter.

Copyright by C. Gordon Olson 1988. Used by permission. All rights reserved.