

48. The Mission Entrusted to the Disciples

After his resurrection, according to Acts 3:1, Jesus showed himself alive to his disciples during a period of forty days. In reading the four accounts in the Gospel of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, it is not always easy to determine the chronology of the events which took place in those days. One thing, however, is very clear: Jesus wanted to entrust his disciples with a very important mission. This is emphasized in every narrative of the Gospel.

“I ALSO SEND YOU” (JOHN)

According to John 20:19-23, Jesus spoke to them about it already the very day he was resurrected:

“Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, ‘Peace be with you.’ When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.’ And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’”

We don’t have many details here concerning this mission, but Jesus said clearly that he would “send” the disciples. It seems clear that to accomplish this mission they would also have the aid of the Holy Spirit. At first, it seems that Jesus was already conferring the Spirit he spoke of on them at this moment. However, taking into account other passages, we see that the apostles would not receive the Holy Spirit until after the ascension of Jesus (John 16:7; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4, 2:33). By breathing on them and saying “Receive the Holy Spirit,” Jesus was surely indicating to them what would happen afterward.

In this passage, Jesus did not directly tell them the nature of the mission, but it concerned the forgiveness of sins. Jesus said, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.” Again, we need a word of explanation. Some take from this passage the idea that the apostles would have the right in themselves to determine who would have God’s forgiveness and who would not have it. Others have gone even further in imagining successors to the apostles whom they

call bishops and priests and who would also have the power to forgive or to refuse God’s forgiveness to people.

Before going too far in this direction, it would be good to consider how the apostles, according to the book of Acts, exercised the power that Jesus speaks of here. In every case they simply declared to people, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the conditions under which God would remove their sins. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter told the crowd to do exactly what Jesus himself had said that people would have to do to be saved—to repent and be baptized. Peter told them, “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins...” (Acts 2:38).

Later, Peter found himself faced with a Christian who had sinned after his conversion, Simon, the former sorcerer of Samaria. Instead of teaching that he himself had the power to forgive or “to absolve” Simon’s sin, Peter tells him, “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you” (Acts 8:22). The mission of the apostles truly concerned the forgiveness of sins but it did not consist of deciding who to forgive and who not to forgive; it consisted of making known the conditions according to which God, because of the sacrifice of Jesus, would forgive people.

“PREACH THE GOOD NEWS TO ALL CREATION” (MARK)

The gospel according to Mark, also, tells us of an occasion when the resurrected Christ gave his disciples the same mission. It doesn’t seem that Mark is speaking of the same occasion as John, because he specifies that the eleven disciples were present, whereas in John, there were only ten. Perhaps it was the following Sunday when Jesus had returned to find Thomas with the others. Here is what is said in Mark 16:14-18:

“Later He appeared to the eleven as they sat at the table; and He rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He had risen. And He said to them, ‘Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned. And these signs will

follow those who believe: In My name they will cast out demons; they will speak with new tongues; they will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover.”

This time, the mission is much more explicit. It was a worldwide mission—a mission which would concern everyone in the world. It would also clearly be a mission of evangelism. It would require preaching the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, the gospel of salvation from sin offered by God to all men and women. At the same time, Jesus specifies two conditions which every person must meet in order to benefit from God’s grace: one has to believe in this good news—believe in Jesus the Son of God, and one has to be baptized. Without doing these two things, a person cannot be saved.

It is true that many people preach today that in order to be saved it is enough to just believe and that baptism comes after salvation. That does not change the fact that Jesus himself cited baptism as well faith as a condition of salvation. We are often told that Jesus did not say: the one who does not believe and who is not baptized will be condemned; he said simply that one who does not believe will be condemned. But let’s think about this a little. From the beginning of Christianity, those who were converted were persecuted, often put to death, for the name of Christ. In being baptized, a person identified himself clearly as a supporter of Christ. He openly displayed his faith in Jesus and exposed himself to all sorts of bad treatment from unbelievers. If a person did not believe in Jesus, why would he be willing to bring persecution on himself by being baptized? Besides, why would we obey a command given by someone whose authority we do not recognize?

Logically, only believers would ask for baptism, so it would not have been necessary for Jesus to say, “The one who does not believe AND is not baptized will be condemned.” Finally, even if an unbeliever received baptism, he would not be saved since Jesus said he must believe AND be baptized.

According to this text in Mark 16, Jesus, in charging the apostles with their mission, also promised them the help of the Holy Spirit. He said, “And these signs will follow those who believe...” and then he lists several of them. Many people in our time claim that every believer should expect to receive the

powers that are listed in this text. It is important to notice, however, that between verse 16 and verse 17 there was a change in the subject of the verbs.

After having spoken of “he who believes,” Jesus now speaks of miracles which will accompany “those who believe.” He is no longer referring to individuals but to a group. For this promise concerning the miracles to be accomplished, it would not be necessary for every believer to perform the miracles, but only that the miracles would be observed in the group of those who would have believed. This is important, because when we come to the book of Acts which tells the history of the church in its beginnings, we discover that miracles certainly accompanied the church but they were never attributed to all the believers.

On the contrary, from the day of Pentecost, the church counted more than 3,000 members, but Acts 2:43 says clearly, “Then fear came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles.” Later, in chapter 5, the same situation prevails: “And through the hands of the apostles many signs and wonders were done among the people” (Acts 5:12). It is true that even later, by the laying on of the hands of the apostles, certain other people received miraculous powers, but these gifts were never given to all who believed. The apostle Paul confirms this idea in 1 Corinthians 12:29,30: “Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Are all workers of miracles? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret?”

The miracles Jesus spoke of have a purpose—to confirm the Gospel, this new revelation that came from God. Hebrews 2:3,4 says, “[This] salvation... at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will.” The message of salvation having been confirmed, there is no need for this type of miracle to continue.

“GO THEREFORE AND MAKE DISCIPLES OF ALL THE NATIONS” (MATTHEW)

In Matthew 28:16-20, we have yet another occasion where Jesus insists on the solemn mission that he was entrusting to his disciples:

“Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had

appointed for them... And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.'"

The mission that Jesus gives here does not concern Jews only or Europeans only. Salvation is offered to all—all are on an equal footing. We also learn in this passage that it is not necessary to learn everything before being baptized. The apostles had to teach enough so that listeners could believe in Christ, that is, make the decision to become his disciples. They then were to baptize these people so they might be saved, and then continue to teach them, after baptism, the things that Jesus had commanded. (So obviously, the apostles were to teach the new disciples the duty with which Jesus had just charged them, that of making disciples of all nations. This is a mission that becomes the job of every person who is converted.)

"REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS OF SIN MUST BE PREACHED TO ALL NATIONS" (LUKE)

Finally, the Gospel according to Luke, like all the others, also contains a passage where the resurrected Christ speaks to the apostles of the mission he was giving to them. Just before his ascension, "He said to them, 'Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.'"

The great mission entrusted to the apostles and to all Christians, the mission that consists of preaching the gospel to all nations, is a part of God's eternal plan just as much as the sufferings, death and resurrection of Christ.

Each of us has a duty regarding this great mission. I have either the duty of accepting and obeying the gospel, or, if I have already done that, the duty of sharing it with others. What is your duty in regard to the Gospel? Will you assume it today?