



ZEAL FOR MISSION¹

Popular British preacher of his day, Rowland Hill (1744–1833) summed up both the spirit and content of our subject with the lament, “Oh, that I was all heart and soul and spirit to tell the glorious gospel of Christ to perishing multitudes.” Likewise, when Robert Murray McCheyne (1813–1843) read in a letter from his friend Andrew Bonar that Bonar had preached on Psalm 9:17, “The wicked shall be turned into hell, and all nations that forget God,” McCheyne replied, “Yes, but did you preach it with tears?” Now that is zeal for mission!

Evidently, the subject before us is not a mere intellectual interest. It raises the question as to the yearning of our hearts to see God’s glory displayed in the exaltation of Christ and the ingathering of his people on the one hand, and the tenderness of our hearts for the lost on the other. These men of the nineteenth century had it, but it would appear that this spirit is something we need to regain today. In this light, it is encouraging that here in Bolivia, from the outset of a burgeoning interest in the Reformed faith, there is concern for a zeal for mission.

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF MISSIONAL ZEAL

While the subject is important in itself, there are specific theological, practical, and spiritual reasons for taking up the subject.

First: A theological reason.

While we stress God’s sovereignty in salvation, the Bible is unembarrassed to speak of our human responsibility. These two truths lie side by side in Scripture. While salvation is all of the LORD, the LORD has nevertheless given the church a responsibility to make the gospel known. God has ordained that his people should share the gospel. Recall, that it was in light of Paul’s and Barnabas’ ministry to the Gentiles in Antioch in Pisidia that Luke records that, “as many as were appointed [or ordained] to eternal life believed” (Acts 13:48). In other words, the God who ordains

the end, namely the salvation of his elect, also ordains the means by which they are saved.

Second: A practical reason.

We must be honest and confess that the Reformed are not always known for their outreach. There have been great Reformed evangelists (e.g., George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, and Martyn Lloyd-Jones of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, respectively), but, rightly or wrongly we have a reputation of leaving outreach to God or to others. We may not wear the label “Hyper-Calvinist,” but that is what we are, theologically or practically, when we fail in our responsibility to God and to the lost.

Theological hyper-Calvinism: Consider the pushback William Carey (1761–1834) received in England in his day. He was the son of a shoemaker, who became a Baptist pastor. He became concerned that the heathen, lost in idolatry were not being reached, and that there were no missionary societies in his day. In 1792 he published *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*. For his passion he was publicly rebuked. “Young man, sit down! You are an enthusiast. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he’ll do it without consulting you or me.”

Practical hyper-Calvinism: This phenomenon occurs where we affirm both God’s sovereignty and our human responsibility but are half-hearted or apathetic as regards our responsibilities. You ask, “What is apathy?” to which I reply, “I don’t know and I don’t care!” Now that is apathy, and it is what we demonstrate where there is a want of zeal for the lost. The problem is real. It was said in the twentieth century that “The disgrace of the church . . . is that more zeal is evident among Communists and cultists than among Christians.” The same may now be said in this twenty-first century in contrast to the zeal of many Muslims.

Third: A spiritual reason.

I am mindful that we could respond to this address by going to the opposite extreme—gaining great zeal but of the wrong sort. I refer to the

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zeal that comes from the flesh rather than from the spirit—a wildfire, leading to harshness and a spirit of condemnation. I have witnessed it in an open-air meeting where a brother harangued passers-by with the doctrine of hell. Doubtless, the man meant well, but it was embarrassing and shameful. What is more, that approach has given apparent credence to the likes of Rob Bell to depart from the gospel in his mantra and then his book, *Love Wins*.

The goal of this address, then, is that we may adorn the beauty of the gospel with a passion arising from the ministry of the Spirit in our lives. By it, we can become more effective in reaching the lost, and in showing the true balance of the Reformed faith.

II. THE NATURE OF MISSIONAL ZEAL

What exactly are we speaking of when discussing zeal for mission? There are two elements to consider.

First element: Understand zeal.

The New Testament word for zeal (*zelos*) is interesting. It can be used both negatively (such as in the cases of jealousy, envy, malice [Acts 13:45; Rom. 13:13, Acts 5:17]) or positively (referring to ardor in belief, and ardency in affection). Obviously, these two uses correlate to two very different types of zeal:

Negatively: A zeal without knowledge. This is what Paul laments in his observations of his countrymen. He writes in Romans 10:1-2: “Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them [the Jews] is that they may be saved. For I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but not according to knowledge.” In other words, their zeal was misdirected. They possessed zeal but it was not wedded to correct doctrine.

Positively: A zeal with knowledge. Recall Jesus’ expulsion of the moneychangers from the temple. The disciples recalled Ps. 69:9, “The zeal

for thine house has eaten me up.” Christ was jealous for his Father’s glory (i.e., for what belonged rightfully to him).

Now although the Bible does not speak specifically of zeal for mission (although we see plenty of evidence of it), it is the concern for God’s glory which lies at the heart of it. Wrote John Calvin: “God has created the entire world that it should be the theatre of His glory by the spread of His gospel.”² Since, states the Westminster Shorter Catechism Answer one, our chief end or purpose in life is to glorify God, then, we may say, that zeal for mission is an essential fulfilment of the Christian’s purpose in life.

Second element: Understand mission.

Mission can be understood in a couple of ways. We may, first, distinguish the spreading of the gospel abroad (global mission) from the sharing of the gospel at home (evangelism). Then again, “mission” can be used to distinguish the method at home (the preaching the gospel) from the method abroad (diaconal work with a view to the preaching of the gospel). Whichever the precise meaning of “mission” in any given context, we are, to cut to the chase, speaking of the activity of Christ through his church, bringing the gospel to the lost, and the lost through the gospel to maturity in Christ.

III. THE SUBSTANCE OF MISSIONAL ZEAL:

Biblical zeal in its positive understanding is not hot air. There is reason for the zeal, and that reason is the gospel. The good news of Jesus Christ is the substance which feeds the external energy and excitement of God’s people. Note the four core promises of the gospel encouraging our zeal:

First promise: A great people.

In eternity past God chose an innumerable company of people for salvation in Christ. Then, in space, time, and history, God began to work out his purpose through the family of Abraham. To him he gave a promise that his posterity would be as innumerable as the sand on the seashore and the stars of heaven (Gen. 12:1-3). Later, God established Israel to be a light to the nations, and during Israel’s days promised a future ingathering

² R. B. Kuiper, *The Glorious Body of Christ* (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust,), 74.



of the nations. Thus, when Christ's own rejected him, the gospel went out to us Gentiles. This was made possible by the powerful gift given at Pentecost of the missionary Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles traces the progress of the gospel under his influence from Jerusalem to Rome, the capital of the known world. And today? In the last century, the church, while not keeping pace with the increase of world population, has nevertheless quadrupled in size.

Second promise: A great salvation.

The promised Messiah did not come to make salvation possible for all without exception, but to make it certain for all without distinction. As the righteous one he would "make *many* to be accounted righteous and [would] bear their iniquities" (Is. 53:11). Recall the angel's directive to Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he *shall save his people* from their sins" (Matt. 1:21). Note Jesus' self-understanding of his work: "For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." His words are an echo of the song of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Then there is Jesus' high priestly prayer: "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him" (Jn. 17:1b-2).

Among the reasons the Bible tell us that salvation is great (Heb. 2:3), are—

- The electing grace of the Father. He chose us in love to come off death row, and for no other reason than his will to do so.
- The cost Christ paid for our salvation. The Father's foreordaining of a great people was complemented by the Son's voluntary self-sacrifice for them even unto the death of the cross. On the one hand, Christ propitiated the Father's wrath against his people. On the other, he expiated (covered) their sins with his shed blood.
- The power exerted by the Holy Spirit to bring us to Christ. More on this in a moment.
- The amount of grace needed for our salvation. We deserve to remain in our sins and under condemnation. Left to ourselves we would remain desirous and impotent to do nothing other than sin, in

thought, word, and deed, by acts of omission and commission, and through each of our faculties—the mind, the heart, and the will.

- The innumerable number who shall be saved, consistent with the promise given to Abram.

Third promise: A great turning.

From Old Testament times we are promised that each of God's elect will come to Christ. Although by nature we are dead—yes, dead, not unconscious or asleep—every last one of God's elect experience at some point in their lives the day of God's power (Ps. 110:3). On that day, they are brought from death to life, and are therefore made willing and able to turn to God in repentance and to trust in Christ for their salvation. That is how those ordained to eternal life can believe (Acts 13:48). They are called effectually by the Father and are made alive and willing through the Holy Spirit's regeneration of their souls (Tit. 3:5). John and Peter call this the new birth.

Fourth promise: A great future.

So much could be said of this, too. Recall, though, the marvellous words of Jesus toward the end of his high priestly prayer. "Father, I desire [KJV, I will] that they . . . whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, that you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world" (Jn 17:24). Clearly, every last one of God's elect will be brought home to God. Between now and then, there is nothing in life or death which can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:39). We are called to endure to the end, but those who do are promised a place in heaven, first in its intermediate state, then in its final state (the new earth).

IV. THE EXPRESSION OF MISSIONAL ZEAL

Godly zeal for the nations finds expression in five outlets:

First outlet: Prayer.

We cannot lose when we pray to God that he would draw his elect out of the world. We are praying in line with the revealed will of God. Remember Jesus's words, that when he returns, "he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matt. 24:31). Jesus spoke of an



ingathering of the elect to the new earth, yet when we pray we seek the preliminary ingathering of the elect unto salvation. This prayer helps balance the church's prayer ministry, in two ways.

First, we balance the type of praying: So many of our prayers, at least in the United States, are maintenance prayers (focused on the health of the church family). These are legitimate but can become lopsided and self-centred, and, at their most extreme, seek to bring heaven into the present. We also need frontline prayer. Recall the pattern prayer. The petition, "Your kingdom come," comes before those of our daily needs. While we may pray for our needs, the providences of God in our lives are ordained and designed to further the kingdom, either by the quality of our witness amid our trials or by our witness to the King.

Second, we balance the subjects of prayer. We naturally think of praying for the lost, but the New Testament also stresses praying for those who proclaim the message to them. Jesus directed us to pray earnestly that the Lord of the harvest will send out laborers (Lk. 10:2). One of those whom the Lord has used greatly was the apostle Paul. Yet, he felt his weakness and asked the Ephesian Christians to pray for him, "that words may be given to [him] in opening his mouth boldly to proclaim the mystery of the gospel . . . that [he] may declare it boldly, as [he] ought to speak" (Eph. 6:19).

Second outlet: Outreach:

Interestingly, when the gospel first spread out from Jerusalem, it was not the apostles who took the lead but the people. They headed north, gossiping the gospel as they went (Acts 8:4). Later, Peter encouraged his readers to be prepared to give a reason [*apologia*] for the hope within them (1 Pet. 3:18-20). God could gather in his elect in a moment, but he has chosen to use his people. Our reaching out, while commanded by Christ, finds an "Amen" in our hearts, whether our mission is an everyday part of life or a distinct call to head to a global mission field.

Third outlet: Good works.

While we do not play down the fact that in Scripture the gospel is spread verbally, we acknowledge that it needs to be backed up by good deeds. As the saying goes, "They don't care how much we know until they know how

much we care." So, we demonstrate the gospel by acts of service and kindness to the lost, remembering Jesus' words that we *are* witnesses, whether or not we have opportunity to open our mouths for Christ (Acts 1:8; cf., Is. 43:10).

Fourth outlet: Grace.

Mission is not, though, exclusively a matter of doing: prayer, outreach, and works. It is also about being. The lost are watching to see how the gospel impacts us in the rough and tumble of life. They are not looking for our perfection but for our growth, for where there is growth there is life. When faced with trials and afflictions, we are conscious not only of the need to grow spiritually, but that we are being observed and the Christian faith is being weighed. Our lives are, says the apostle Paul, epistles to be known and read by all (2 Cor. 3:2). In this age wherein the busy are glorified, we need to remember that God is interested as much in our being. We are to be salt preserving a decaying world and light brightening up a world that is darkened (Matt. 5:13-16).

Fifth outlet: Discipling.

We are concerned not simply with making converts but disciples (Matt. 28:18-20). Zeal, then, is not simply a rush of enthusiasm, but an ongoing commitment to walk with new converts into fully-fledged discipleship to Christ. Mission involves, says Jesus, teaching the nations all that Christ commanded. The gospel we proclaim offers sinners not only a Savior to forgive their sins, but a Lord to break them free of them.

V. THE OBTAINING OF MISSIONAL ZEAL

How does a person come by this ardent desire to see God glorified in the ingathering of the elect. Through the ministry of the Holy Spirit! He is significant for four reasons:

First: The Holy Spirit grants us new birth.

A zeal arising from the Spirit is impossible unless we are born again. Said Jesus, "Unless we are born again we cannot see the kingdom of God" (In. 3:3). We cannot, then, have true, godly zeal for that which we cannot see. A carnal zeal certainly, but not a spiritual zeal. Is not this what John Wesley found out in America. Returning to the British Isles depressed by his failure in ministry, it was only once he was born again, and felt his



heart “strangely warmed” that he gleaned a godly zeal in the cause of the gospel.

Second: The Holy Spirit fills us with Christ.

Baptized with the Spirit in conversion, we are repeatedly filled with the Spirit throughout the course of our Christian lives. Christ was filled with the Spirit without measure, but the more we are filled, the more we exhibit his urgency and his boldness.

The urgency of Christ. Recall how Jesus, seeing the crowds, was moved with compassion, for he saw them as harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36). He compelled the weary to come to him for rest (Matt. 11:28-30). How touching it is to read of Jesus weeping over Jerusalem—yes, the very Jerusalem whose inhabitants were about to crucify him. (Lk 13:31-34 and 19:41-44). The apostle Paul reflected this same urgency: “Now, then, we are ambassadors of Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20).

The boldness of Christ. Not only did Christ leave the portals of heaven for the lost on earth, he set his face to go to Jerusalem to die for them (Lk. 9:51; Is. 50:7). *En route* to the cross, he urged the mourners not to weep for him but to weep for themselves. How bold is that! Within weeks of his crucifixion, in the hostile atmosphere of Jerusalem, with Peter and John having already been arrested for preaching Jesus, the disciples gathered together to pray. Their burden was not their own safety, but the boldness to do what Christ had commanded them to do. Note, that it was as they prayed for boldness that the Holy Spirit filled them all with himself (Acts 4:23-31). Later, Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that although he, Silvanus, and Timothy, had been shamefully treated at Philippi, “they had boldness in God to declare to the Thessalonians the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict” (1 Thess. 2:2). Elsewhere, Paul explains his boldness: “God,” he told Timothy, “has not given us a spirit of fear but of love, of power, and a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7).

Could it be our worldliness which robs us of the urgency of Christ and our refusal to leave our comfort zones which precludes us from the filling of the Spirit necessary for boldness in mission? We go in faith, says the hymn,

“our own great weakness feeling,” yet it is the powerful filling of the Spirit who enables us to do just that.

Third: The Holy Spirit sets apart:

While every believer is to be filled and refilled with the Holy Spirit (Eph. 5:18), and is to exhibit urgency concerning the lost and boldness in speaking to them, there are some the Holy Spirit sets apart for the specific work of winning souls to Christ. Recall the first missionary journey: “While they were worshipping the LORD and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I called them” (Acts 13:2). That setting apart was recognized by the church, but it came through the ministry of the Spirit.

Fourth: The Holy Spirit empowers us.

The Holy Spirit not only empowers us to be urgent and to be bold (which is to say, to be faithful), he empowers us to be fruitful. The power is not found in a carnal authoritarianism, or in gifts of physical presence, but in the Holy Spirit. Paul, recalling his visit to Thessalonica, says, “our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thess. 1:5). Whether, however, we be formally set apart or not for the work of mission, there is nothing better to encourage mission than a sense of the movement of God through one’s life. Speaking personally for a moment, nothing has done more for my yearning to see souls saved than seeing souls saved, whether through personal conversations or through sermons blessed of God. Pray to this end, that you, too, if you have not already experienced this, may see souls brought to Christ through your witness. He is able, doubt no more!

6. THE QUENCHING OF MISSIONAL ZEAL

How may we explain, though, the absence of this zeal in those of us who are truly the Lord’s? The answer in one word is worldliness! Worldliness impacts us in four ways.

The first way: Worldliness robs us of passion for God’s glory.

Worldliness is, quite simply, the spirit of the world standing in opposition to the Spirit of God. We are called to be in the world but we are not of the world. When we become so, it is because: (i) We have never truly been converted; (ii) We are young Christians yet to be consistently surrendered to God and crucified to the world; (iii) We are significantly backslidden



from our first love and are living like worldlings. Whichever the cause, worldliness means that our concern for God's glory is significantly deficient. We cannot lose our salvation, but we can lose a sight of God's glory and a passion to see it displayed in this world.

The second way: Worldliness causes us to be embarrassed by Christ.

We cannot be for Christ and for the world at the same time. We are either on the Lord's side and proud of him, or on the world's side and embarrassed by him. Recall Jesus's words: "whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of him will the Son of man be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with his holy angels" (Mk. 8:38; cf., Lk. 9:26). Not only do the words of Jesus challenge us in this regard, so does the hymn of J. Grigg (1728-1768):

Asham'd of Jesus! that dear friend
 On whom my hopes of heav'n depend,
 No! when I blush--be this my shame,
 That I no more revere his name.

Asham'd of Jesus! Yes I may
 When I've no guilt to wash away;
 No tear to wipe, no good to crave,
 No fears to quell, no soul to save.

'Till then--nor is my boasting vain--
 'Till then I boast a Savior slain!
 And O, may this my glory be,
 That Christ is not asham'd of me.

His institutions would I prize,
 Take up my cross--the shame despise,
 Dare to defend his noble cause,
 And yield obedience to his laws.

The third way: Worldliness obscures our view of the transformative power of the gospel

When worldly, we neither see in ourselves nor reflect to others the radical difference the gospel makes to our lives. Yet, sadly, our spiritual

lives are capable of degenerating far. Calvin makes this point in one place in regard to John 3:16. He asks why the emphasis on the idea of believing, and quips that sometimes the only perceivable difference between the believer and the unbeliever is that we believe and they don't. This ought not so to be. To speak of the transformative power of the gospel without demonstrating something of it, is to speak without authority. We must either walk the talk, or forgo the talking unless or until our words are backed up by lives conforming to Christ. In a state of backsliding, the more we speak the greater the slur on our Savior.

The fourth way: Worldliness dims our awareness of the age to come.

A man preoccupied with this world, has very little sense of the next. He or she likely says in his or her defense that the most heavenly minded are of least earthly use. Yet, when it comes to spiritual matters, the most heavenly minded are of the most earthly use. They realize the purposes of God in and through their lives and the value of the eternal souls around them. Thus, when, as professing Christians we continue to live in a state of worldliness, there comes a point at which we must ask whether, in fact, we are the Lord's. The spirit of the Christian at his or her most sensitive to God, is conscious of eternity and resonates the urgency put so well by Frank Houghton (1894-1972):

Facing a task unfinished,
 That drives us to our knees,
 A need that, undiminished,
 Rebukes our slothful ease.
 We who rejoice to know thee,
 Renew before thy throne
 The solemn pledge we owe thee,
 To go and make known.

CONCLUSION

May God recover afresh this urgency among his people, and the boldness to go with it. In short, may he fill us to overflowing with his Spirit, so that we know once more this zeal for mission. It is none other than a yearning to see God display his glory and his greatness in the salvation and maturing of souls, in the upbuilding of the church and the spread of the kingdom of heaven. I end, then, with this: Amen, or, so let it be.