

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, March 18, 1990, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MARK 16:15

“Go into all the world, and preach
the Gospel to every creature.”

“I DON’T BELIEVE IN THE WORLD MISSION OF THE CHURCH!”

It is a tragic fact that Overseas Missions have taken an awful beating so far as the mainline Protestant denominations are concerned, with the exception of the Southern Baptists. To cite but one example of what I mean, let me tell you this—40 years ago the Presbyterian Church U.S.A. had more than 2,000 missionaries on the field; today they have less than 400. The reason for this is that the theological liberals, who dictate the policies of those denominations, have no enthusiasm whatever for the World Mission of the Church; indeed, they are antagonistic. Their attitude is: “What right have we to go into other countries interfering with their ancestral religion and culture?” They like to think that they are broad-minded and superior in entertaining such views. They really imply that missionary work is the occupation of bigots.

Now I want to challenge that view this morning. It is more widespread than we think, and it is utterly reprehensible. I believe that the ideal toward which every congregation of God’s people should strive would be to give one dollar for missions for every dollar it spends on the home front. Now, of course, a congregation would need to be firmly established before it could ever reach such a lofty goal. It would be unrealistic to imagine that a congregation such as ours could come anywhere near that standard, since we are struggling to build a bridgehead into the local mission field of Kingstowne.

However, let us see what is involved when someone says, “I don’t believe in the World Mission of the Church!” Break it down into its several components, and what are they really saying?

1. **“It is time enough to talk about World Missions when you have first converted the heathen at home.** Look at the vice, the misery, the need at our own doors. Would we not be better advised to set our own house in order, rather than to weaken the home front by our endeavor to evangelize other lands whose people we know little about?”

Now that argument may sound plausible, but the logic behind it is spurious. Let us test this objection by using an illustration from the world of business. Eastman Kodak is one of the most successful manufacturing companies in the world. George Eastman grew up in Rochester, New York, and in 1888, at the age of 34, he placed his newly-invented Kodak camera on the market. It was an instant success, and from Rochester, Eastman sent out his agents with advertising material until within a few years everyone in the U.S.A. and in most countries of the world knew that he could own a camera which was within his price range. Now supposing that in 1888 a friend had said to Eastman, “George, you had better be careful. Do not get carried away by this new-fangled invention of yours! Indeed, you would be well advised to confine your sales to the

Rochester area until every person in the city owns one of your cameras.” Do you think for one moment that the shrewd and ambitious inventor would have listened to such an argument? Of course not!

Now it is just the same specious argument when people say, “The Church should not undertake Overseas Mission work until we set our house in order here at home.” The manufacturer will push his goods to the ends of the earth. We have only to think of the millions of Japanese automobiles that have flooded our country, and the superb TV commercials that help to sell them. And the Church of Jesus Christ dare not be any less enthusiastic or efficient in endeavoring to achieve the world-wide sovereignty of Christ by reaching every man, woman, boy and girl with the Gospel. Remember — “No one has the right to hear the Gospel twice until everyone has heard it once!”

2. **“The non-Christian world has its own religions.** Why should we seek to convert them to ours? After all, there is good in every religion, and the religions of other lands perhaps suit their people best.” But the fallacy in that argument lies in this vital fact: If a person really believes in something, and knows in his heart that that belief will affect his ultimate destiny, he will feel compelled to communicate his belief to others.

It’s hard to imagine what Russian Communists are really thinking today, but in the heyday of their enthusiasm, some of them might conceivably have said to themselves, “The Western world believes in democracy. It seems to satisfy them as a political system. Why should we try to make Communists out of them?” But the Soviet Union did not say that. Because they believed passionately in their political and economic philosophy as the only truly viable system and way of life, they sent their agents and they infiltrated their propaganda into every nation upon the earth.

Indeed, you discover in every sphere of life that the people who really believe in something go “all out” to “spread the news,” and to communicate to others the truth that means everything to them. That is why the Church of Christ must evangelize the whole world. As Dr. D.T. Niles of Sri Lanka used to say, “Evangelism is simply one poor beggar telling another poor beggar where he can find bread!” Every true Christian knows that “there is salvation in no other Name” save in the Name of Jesus (Acts 4:12); and because men and women without Christ are lost and in danger of eternal death, we must communicate the faith and the Gospel we have to share, or else cease to be “the Church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15). A living Church must always be a missionary Church; and, I repeat, “No one has the right to hear the Gospel twice till everyone has heard it once.”

“The religions of other lands perhaps suit their people best.” How hollow that remark becomes in the light of the facts! People, generally speaking, have idyllic pictures of life overseas. In this land of their imagination, the sun is always shining, and yet there is always a cool breeze too. Work is unnecessary. The hut practically keeps itself clean. Everybody is kind and generous. There are no germs, no disease, plenty of servants, and nothing to do all day long but lie in the sun; and when you want a meal, you put up your hand and take the luscious fruit from the trees, and everything is perfect in this best of all possible worlds. But what are the facts?

Here is an extract from a letter received some time ago from an honest reporter in a village in Hyderabad, South India:

We arrived in a village at late afternoon. It was a jumbly mass of little mud huts. At each hut, a few children came out and tagged along behind us as we walked around. Most of the children were naked. All had sores, running noses and verminous heads. One child was covered with the most terrible oozing wounds, and his head was a mass of scabs. The missionary explained to me that it is common in Hinduism to brand a child at age three in order that the intense pain suffered will drive the evil spirit of pain away from the body forever. The smells, the diseases, the deformities, the filth made me so sick I didn't think I could prevent myself from vomiting. I made myself take the stump of an arm of one little child who had no hand, and I watched the insects in her hair as we walked along together.

In the end, we took about fifty children to a flat piece of muddy ground, and by the light of a single hurricane lamp organized games for them. There was no real gaiety, because children here are born old. But some interest crept into a few faces, and they danced round in a ring like old people playing at being young again.

When I think of all the books I have read about the glamor and mystery of the East, I want to jam them down their authors' throats. It is unrelieved hell, and (in a moment of weakness) I thought there was nowhere else on earth that I would not rather be.

Now that, I believe, is honest reporting from a country where they give more care to their cows than they do to themselves. Disease is prevalent among primitive peoples. It is an illusion that man, in what is called "the natural state," is healthy and happy. The first people from the West to reach New Zealand found the fine Maori race quite in the primitive state and decimated by tuberculosis. The pain, the suffering, the fear of the non-Christian world cries out for help, and only Christians can really give it.

Do you call it "interfering" to put a Christian hospital down in the midst of an ocean of need? Are you going to call the missionary doctor a "busybody" who gives his life to work like that, and gets only bread and cheese for doing it when he might be practicing his profession in comfort at home?

Here in America there is one doctor for every one thousand people, and we often see doctors overworked. But my wife's cousin, Dr. Tom Geddis, whom many of us have met, was a missionary doctor for twenty years, 2,000 miles up the Amazon in Brazil, where he and his wife were the only doctor and nurse team for 50,000 people!

But "don't let us interfere with them," say the well-fed, well-cared-for liberals. Is that broad-mindedness? It is downright selfishness, and we might as well call it by its right name.

3. "**Christianity spoils the natives.**" Travelers and business people returning from overseas have sometimes objected to Christian missions on the grounds that they have rarely met an "unspoiled" graduate of a Christian mission school. The complaint is that they are unreliable,

arrogant and troublesome. Quite frankly, that, in my estimation, is an assessment made more on the grounds of prejudice than literal fact.

Now presumably some native Christians may be untrustworthy and troublesome. After all, Peter and Judas, among the first twelve disciples, were no example of what a Christian ought to be. There must have been many unworthy Christians in the early Church, just as there are many poor samples of professing Christians here at home.

And let us never forget that those who charge the Christian convert in a Third World country with uppishness and arrogance are often the very people who would like to keep him down, in order to make fat profits through exploiting him. And the native Christian, when he begins to realize his true dignity in Jesus Christ, will not unnaturally rebel against those who would look upon him as a mere tool or vassal through whose labor they can achieve riches. Many a hard-boiled English planter in the days of the British Colonial Empire, called the Christian native troublesome and arrogant just because that human being rightly refused to submit to degrading treatment.

Surely no one can deny the untold blessing that Christian missions have brought to the world, and the way in which Christianity has changed the whole life of certain races of mankind.

I have always relished the story of the Westerner who once had dinner with the chief of a South Sea island whose people had formerly been cannibals. In the course of conversation the white man exclaimed with some fervor that he didn't believe in Christian missions, to which the old chief pointedly replied, "They have made a difference, my friend. If you had been here one hundred years ago, you would not have been at my table, you would have been on it!" Surely a Gospel that can transform the lives of cannibals is a Gospel worth proclaiming to everybody everywhere!

4. **"The money spent on the World Mission of the Church could be better spent at home where the Church is always in need of it.** The money sent out of the country to support missions is really wasted in the sense that we can't solidify our base here at home."

Now perhaps some of you harbor that thought in your heart, although I doubt if you would come right out and say so! Maybe you're thinking even as I speak, "Why is he emphasizing Overseas Missions at the very time we're being asked to give to the point of real sacrifice in our attempt to raise \$150,000 for our new property?" Now that is a valid question and I will answer it by saying this: "If we ever were to let up on our giving to World Missions, I believe God's hand of blessing would be lifted from us, and we would suffer untold spiritual and financial impoverishment." I say it for the third time, "No one has the right to hear the Gospel twice until everyone has heard it once."

"The money spent on Overseas Missions could be better spent at home." It is a rather hollow objection, really. We always find money to purchase the things we desperately want. Do you know that in the U.S.A. we spend each year on foreign missions one-fifth of what we spend on cosmetics, and less than one-fiftieth of what is consumed in tobacco?

Even if Christians spent one hundred times what they do to foster overseas missions, we still couldn't be blamed for wasting our money. Think of the billions of dollars spent on wars which destroy rather than enrich life; and yet we quibble and complain about "waste" when a paltry sum is expended on an enterprise which alone can save the souls of the lost.

It is simply not true to say that the money spent on missions would help the Church at home to make ends meet. No church can afford to disobey our Lord, and His command is: "Go into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature." The truth is that those congregations which are the best supporters of foreign missions are the most generous also in their support of the needs at home. The spirit of sacrificial giving has entered into their inmost soul. But those who begrudge the money for the extension of Christ's Kingdom abroad have the spirit of liberality quenched within them.

The objections to overseas missions work are thus seen to be unworthy of serious consideration. Those who make the objections are usually doing nothing else than making excuses for their own lukewarmness and lack of zeal. I suppose that, deep down, many of them believe that everyone at the last will get to heaven, no matter what he believes. But that is not what God's Word teaches. It was Jesus Himself Who exclaimed, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life; no one comes to the Father but by Me." Without Jesus people are lost and on their way to a Christ-less eternity. Surely it is our prime and paramount duty to take Christ to all the world!

If they discovered a cure for AIDS in Russia, and kept it to themselves, it would be a sin against humanity. If we discovered a cure for multiple sclerosis here in the U.S.A. and tried to keep it in the Western world, that would be a sin against humanity. If we, to whom it has pleased God to reveal Himself in Jesus Christ, were to keep that knowledge of Christ to ourselves, it would be the most terrible of all sins against humanity.

Jesus said, "Make disciples of all nations...preach the Gospel to every creature" And we endeavor to do that, not because we are shining examples ourselves of His way of life; not because we are personally superior to those who worship in other ways; but because He, and He alone, is the LIGHT of the world, and without Him, even the best of people walk in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Your Bulletin today contains the names of the splendid missionaries we support. Place this in your Bible, and pray for each of them every day. Once in a while send them a card with a word of encouragement; and let us continue to praise God for enabling us to give 11% of our annual budget to promote the World Mission of His Church.

AMEN.