

MISSION AND COMMISSION OF CHRIST

The Problem

Formerly¹ Christianity was supposed to be in opposition to other religions, as truth to falsehood, light to darkness² and so on. Even when 'good' and 'holy' elements were found in other religions, they were only to be 'rescued' from the native surroundings which were necessarily corruptive, and be brought into the Church in order that they be conserved in the Church and be consecrated to the Lord Jesus, the fulfiller of all the religious longings of men.³ Naturally, therefore, the great commission of Christ in Mt. 28, 19-20 was given the most straightforward interpretation. And organized efforts were made, in all possible ways, to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and implant the Church wherever possible. Recently, however, it has become a general practice among Christians to accept the non-Christian religions also as valid means of salvation.⁴ This seems to have

1. That is, when Western Christians were brought into contact with non-Christian religions - a process which may be said to have begun with the great voyages of exploration and culminated with the hectic colonial expansion of the 18th and 19th centuries.
2. William Wilberforce's argument may be taken as a typical illustration of this position; comparing the Indian Systems, both civil and religious, with those of the Britishers, he said: "Both their civil and religious systems are radically, essentially the opposites of our own. Our religion is sublime, pure and beneficent, theirs is mean, licentious and cruel." Cf. *Parliamentary Debates, First Series, Vol. XXVI*, T. C. Hansard, 1813, p. 865.
3. One may refer to J. N. Farquhar, Fr. Johannes and others as illustrations of this fulfilment-theory.
4. It is commonly admitted by theologians today, that the members of non-Christian religions are saved not only in their religion, that is, in spite of their religion, but also through their religion, that is, by virtue of their religion. Cf. the writings of R. Panikkar, K. Rahner, H. R. Schlette and others. To find exact references to these theologians, see, James Dupuis, s. j. *Jesus Christ and His Spirit*, TPI, Bangalore, 1977, p. 146. Also the Church documents lend support to this view. Cf. *Lumen Gentium* Art. 16, *Gaudium et Spes*, Art. 22, *Ad Gentes*, Art. 7c. *Declaration of the Nagpur Conference*, Arts. 14 & 16.

produced a crisis in the missionary activity of the Christian Churches, so much so that people seem to raise not such questions as "how to carry on the Missions?", but "whether to engage in missionary work at all."⁵

But more important than that, another question seems to vex the minds of many Christians: How do we understand the missionary texts of the NT, particularly, the great "commission of Christ" that is contained in Mt. 28, 19-20? Could we give the same, old, straight-forward interpretation to it? Could we take it as seriously and earnestly as it used to be taken in the past? It is this question that is considered here, at some length. The attempt, however, is not an exegetical study of the text in question, but just a clarification of certain problems arising out of some of the extreme positions with regard to understanding this text, and also to provide a proper perspective, in the light of which the great commission can be meaningfully accepted even today.

An Answer that entails "No Preaching"

Faced with the problem enunciated above, many solutions suggest themselves. Some are evidently unacceptable. One such is that which implies that we need not lay much emphasis on the oral proclamation of the Gospel. Recent Biblical research seems to lend support to this approach. According to some of the recent findings of certain Biblical scholars, the text of Mt. 28, 19-20 was a later addition.⁶ Worse still, it is said that the more emphatic passage of Mk. 16, 16 does not appear in any of the important manuscripts of the Gospel. The original form of the Gospel is said to end with verse 8, and so the "longer ending" of the present form is assumed to be an impersonal summary of the accounts in the other Gospels.⁷ Such discoveries, then, have given rise to questions that seem not only to undermine the authority as well as the authenticity of the great commission of Christ but even the necessity and the justification of missionary endeavour itself.

5. Adrianus de Groot, "The Missions after Vatican II," in *Concilium* Vol. 6, No. 4, June 1968, p. 82.

6. Cf. A. Von Harnack, *Die Mission Und Ausbreitung Des Christentums in den drei ersten Jahrhunderten*, (Leipzig, 1902); referred to by A. De Groot, *op. cit.* p. 83.

7. Cf. William Barclay, *The Daily Study Bible, The Gospel of Mark*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1971, p. 390.

However, this does not seem to be a correct approach for the following reasons: Even if it is granted that the texts of Mt. 28, 19 and Mk. 16, 16 were only later additions, they would only be exact constructions of the general trend of Jesus' ministry and that of the Apostolic College. For first, Jesus' ministry is clearly said to have consisted of "preaching" the Good News, besides of course giving the 'signs of the Kingdom of God' such as healing the sick, curing the blind, deaf, lame and so on.⁸ Moreover, Jesus stressed on many occasions, the necessity of preaching. Thus, for instance, when the people of a certain town tried to persuade him to stay with them, his answer was that he must go on to other towns also, preaching in them too, because that is what God had sent him to do.⁹ Again, even during his lifetime he sent his disciples "to preach the Kingdom of God and to heal."¹⁰ They too, in turn, "went out and preached that men must repent" besides, of course, performing other functions such as driving out devils, healing the sick and so on. Particularly after their experience of the Lord's Resurrection, they had such an irresistible urge to share the Good News with their fellowmen, that even when they were warned never again to speak to anyone, their retort was: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard."¹¹ Even as the new responsibilities of the infant Church began to weigh upon them, the Twelve did not hesitate to tell the body of the disciples: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the Word of God to serve tables."¹²

St. Paul in particular, who was such a passionate preacher, undertook three missionary tours amidst great hardships, travelling from place to place, returning to the same places, establishing new churches, and encouraging to old ones. The moving force behind all such endeavours was that the Gospel must be preached by all means, to all people, in all places, in season and out of season. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel",¹³ he shouted with grief and concern. And his expectations from his disciples was no less demanding: "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus . . . preach the

8. See Mt. 11, 2-6; Lk. 7, 18-35.

9. See Lk. 4, 42-44; Also, Mk. 1, 35-39.

10. Lk. 9, 2. All citations from the Bible are taken from RSV, Catholic Edition.

11. Acts 4, 20.

12. Acts 6, 2.

13. I Cor. 9, 16.

Word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince . . .”¹⁴ He also states the ground of his justification for this obligation: “How are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?”¹⁵

It is not necessary to cite more passages from the Scriptures. The NT, in particular, is abundantly filled with evidence¹⁶ to show beyond doubt, that the use of the term “proclamation” referring to “preaching” had been very much in vogue during the time of both Jesus Christ, and the Apostolic Church. Hence the duty of the Church, even today, to preach cannot be revoked. Even if the commission texts were later additions, they are by no means distortions of the general trend of Christ’s ministry and that of the Apostles. They fall within the proper framework of the NT. Hence we can safely conclude that the answers that tries to solve the problem by negating the need of preaching cannot be correct.

An Answer that goes in for “blind preaching”

The conclusion of the foregoing section is, that despite the latest discoveries about the specific texts of the great commission of Christ, the proclamation of the Gospel necessarily flows from the Mission of Christ and the Apostles, and therefore the duty of preaching the Gospel is incumbent on the Church today too. This might suggest the idea that we must therefore go ahead with preaching, boldly and even blindly, unmindful of what it may cost. In fact this has been the approach adopted by most of the Western missionaries in the past. And it has been in keeping with the manner in which they looked upon the general condition of mankind and the status of other religions.

According to one view,¹⁷ Man was said to have totally lost his capacity for finding God. But God loved the world so much that He

14. 2 Tim. 4, 1-5.

15. Rom. 10, 14.

16. Fr. Matthew Vellanickal observes that the word *kerussein* meaning “proclamation” occurs 14 times in Mk., 9 times in Lk., 12 times in Acts, and 17 times in Paul. See his paper, “The Biblical Theology of Evangelization” in Joseph Pathrapankal, Ed., *Service and Salvation*, TPI, Bangalore, 1973, p. 65.

17. Karl Barth’s position can be taken as a typical example of this view. It was also the traditional view of the Catholic Church, one might say.

sent His only Son, who through his life, death and resurrection has revealed the possibilities of renewal, fulfilment of human life and the universe. And he has established the Church to continue his very mission. If a man, therefore, wants to gain salvation, he must enter this "sanctuary", the "ship of salvation", the only place in which God's work for the renewal of human life could take place; all other religions were manifestations of sheer heathenism, superstition and error. Hence the Church was obliged to "announce" this good news of the possibility of salvation in the Church, for the benefit of the whole world. So, the Missions were the "life-boats" put out from the ship, in order to rescue people from the stormy and dangerously deadly ocean of the sinful world. Hence the need for conversion, as a change of religion was greatly emphasized and "baptism" was supposed to bring them on board the ship, viz., the Church, which would protect them from the dangers of the storms of the world, and provide them with sure means of salvation.¹⁸

A more moderate view⁹ did recognize a capacity for divine revelation in Man, so that men in all times and generations have been seeking God. And God, in His mercy and love, responded and revealed Himself to men in various ways, in their own religions. Yet it is only in Jesus Christ, His own Son, that He has revealed Himself totally, and definitely. Thus, while all other religions are "searches" and "quests" for God and possess in them some light from God, Jesus Christ was sent as the Light, the Fulfiller of all the yearnings of man, and the total Revealer of the Father. While all the other religions can be regarded as having their arms stretched out towards heaven and have gained some light, of course, they do not objectively place man in relation with the plan of God, with His living presence and His action — which Jesus Christ alone is able to do. And, insofar as the Church exists only to continue the mission of Christ, it has the unique capacity of fulfilling all men's aspirations. Insofar as this is so, the Church is bound to proclaim this great news and offer "baptism" as an opportunity for an ever closer union, through the Sacraments with her Head and the Saviour of the world.

18. Cf. Carl Hellberg, "The Global Mission Task of the Church Today," in *Debate on Mission*, edited by Herbert E. Hoefler, Gurukul Lutheran Theological College, Madras, 1979, p. 4.

19. Farquhar, Bruner, Johanns and others can be said to be illustrative of this attitude. Even *Evangelii Nuntiandi* holds the same view. Cf. Art. 53.

It follows from the above, that whatever be the view — extreme or moderate — about the question of general revelation of mankind, there was unanimity on one point, namely, that it was the duty of the Church to preach, and to preach Baptism with a view to increasing its members. And the Church was conceived to be a growing Church, an expanding Church, a converting Church, without necessarily being a conquering or “triumphant” or triumphalist Church.²⁰ In this approach, then, the emphasis is on the oral proclamation of the message, with an active interest in the numerical addition of the members of the Church. Nor does this sort of approach seem to be the right approach. The reason is that it lays a misplaced emphasis on oral proclamation. To substantiate this stand of ours, let us consider, in the following sections, the content of Christ’s message, and the manner of his as well as his Apostles’ preaching that message.

The Good News that Jesus preached

Jesus did lay emphasis on preaching. In fact he went to different places preaching the Good News of the Kingdom of God.²¹ That is why he had come.²² But what was the Good News that he preached? Evidently it was not a certain set of “truths” or doctrines about God or morality, to be defended in opposition to some other doctrines. Nor was he campaigning for any of the “values” of the Judaic religion in which he was born. As Fr. Legrand expresses it so beautifully: he was no Sadducee upholding the Temple as the navel of the world, no Zealot fighting for the sacred land, no Essene withdrawing to the desert. He did not even stand for the sacredness of the Law in which Judaism had found its identity and which the prophets had taught to be the way to God’s heart.²³

What Jesus preached was the Good News of the Kingdom of God. But what does that mean? The word “kingdom” in English refers to an “area” or territory where the king exercises his power, so much so that the “spreading of the kingdom of God”, in the missionary context, was taken to be the geographical expansion of the Church. But the Bible scholars are of the opinion that this hardly corresponds

20. Cf. R. H. Lesser, “Why we must preach Christ?” in *The Clergy Monthly*, Oct. 1968, Vol. 32, No. 10, pp. 447-453.

21. Lk. 4, 44; Mt. 9, 35.

22. Mk. 1, 38.

23. L. Legrand and others, *Good News & Witness*, TPI, Bangalore, 1973, p. 37.

to what is really meant by the Gospels in their original terminology. It is a "quality of existence rather than a territory that could be covered by a flag."²⁴ It means a new pattern of living, a life of transformation, a life of perfection, a life of liberation from Evil and the evil forces. This "new life" is first and foremost characterized by a sense of repentance.²⁵ Now, the original word for "repentance", as again pointed by the Bible scholars, means not only sorrow and regret, but implies an orientation of the whole being, a complete reversal of one's aspiration, judgments, scales of value, attitudes and actions, thinking and beliefs, and so on. In a word, it means a total change of one's whole life, a radical change of life, affecting one's whole being, one's relationship to God and others, as well as disciplining one's own self, thereby perfecting it. This is the Good News that Jesus preached.

This newness of life has to be concretely demonstrated in a life of great transformation such that one will be able to live a life of poverty and simplicity and be radiant with joy;²⁶ even while one is in the state of mourning and persecution one is able to retain perfect peace and equanimity and thereby show the reality of God's love even amidst suffering;²⁷ one will learn to be meek, merciful; be hungry for justice, and pure of heart for seeing God.²⁸ Again, the new quality of life is such that one will be the salt of the earth, giving meaning to life, and be the light of the world, showing the way to find the meaning of life.²⁹ One will adhere to all the commandments of the Law, and yet not in a ritualistic manner, like the scribes and Pharisees, but in such a manner as to achieve righteousness before God.³⁰ The life of the new order is such that one will be ready to take the first step to make peace with a brother who has done something wrong against him;³¹ one will not even look at a woman lustfully;³² one will control one's senses so as not to sin;³³ be straightforward in one's dealings, saying "yes" for yes, "no" for no, and never swearing by temples or one's head,³⁴ one will be ready to suffer injustice rather than cherish the idea of retaliation and revenge.³⁵ The new life will be a life of boundless love, such that one will be ready to love even one's

24. Ibid pp. 14-15.

25. Mk. 1, 15; Mt. 4, 17.

26. Mt. 5, 3.

27. Mt. 5, 4, 10-12.

28. Mt. 5, 5-9.

29. Mt. 5, 13-16.

30. Mt. 5, 17-20.

31. Mt. 5, 21-26.

32. Mt. 5, 27-28.

33. Mt. 5, 29-30.

34. Mt. 5, 33-37.

35. Mt. 5, 38-42.

enemies and pray for them,³⁶ a life of selfless and secret service,³⁷ a life of sincere and simple prayers offered in secret,³⁸ a life of honesty and austerity,³⁹ a life of greater detachment from the earthly riches,⁴⁰ together with a greater trust in the providence of God,⁴¹ a life of not judging others but rather being mindful of one's own faults, and careful to remove them.⁴² In short, it is a life of a denying self even to the point of losing oneself, and thereby gaining the new life.⁴³ It is at the individual and personal level, and described in negative terms. But in terms of positive connotation, and with reference to others, it is a life of self-less love and service.⁴⁴

The Manner of Jesus' Proclamation of the Message

This Good News of God's Revolution, of the new world-order proclaimed by Jesus, was perfectly and primarily expressed in his entire life-style. It was not uncommon among the prophets of Old to convey the message of God by their own life-style. The unhappy marriage of Hosea, the celibacy of Jeremiah were such examples which were still more eloquent than their words and symbolic actions.⁴⁵ But this applied in a supreme way to Jesus, the Word made flesh, the Message made life. His whole style of life proclaimed the Good News of man's liberation, epitomized in the Sermon on the Mount. In fact it can be said that freedom was the key-note of Jesus' life and activity. He was absolutely free from the standards set up by man e.g. from the restraining categorizations of Scribes and Pharisees in understanding and applying the Law, yet he was all the time concerned about doing only the will of the Father.⁴⁶ He put himself under the protection and providence of the Father so completely, that he did not have a place even to lay down his head.⁴⁷ And he expected his disciples to follow him free from any encumbrance of goods,⁴⁸ cattle, estate, properties and family⁴⁹ in a total availability to the cause and the course of the Kingdom. When he sent the Twelve on Mission, he charged them in clear terms not to take anything for

36. Mt. 5, 43-48.

37. Mt. 6, 1-4.

38. Mt. 6, 5-15.

39. Mt. 6, 16-18.

40. Mt. 6, 19-21.

41. Mt. 6, 24-34.

42. Mt. 7, 1-5.

43. Mt. 16, 24-25.

44. Jn. 13, 34.

45. L. Legrand and others *op. cit.* p. 36.

46. Jn. 6, 38. Also see Jn. 4, 34.

47. Lk. 9, 58.

48. Mt. 19, 21.

49. Mt. 19, 29.

their journey.⁵⁰ He lived a life of such absolute meekness and humility, that he could ask his disciples to learn from him to be humble and meek.⁵¹ And he set himself as the model of total love and humble service, and demanded the same of his disciples.⁵²

Above all it is in his salvific death on the Cross that Jesus proclaims the message of God's Kingdom very effectively, though silently.⁵³ Already he knew that for him, as for his disciples, committing oneself to God's Revolution means a readiness to face death. And he voluntarily submits himself to the ignominious death on the Cross. On it he bears indeed the "form of a slave", tossed about by the events and the power game between Herod and Pilate, the Sanhedrin and the Roman authorities. Yet he is the really free person. His freedom appears in his trial. For all practical purposes the glory and power of God seems to lie hidden in the distress and the weakness of that victim, all through the story of his execution. And yet, that victim is not helpless. Recognizing the will of the Father, the Son has submitted himself to all the atrocities of those men. Yet he is not overwhelmed by any of them. He dominates the circumstances, for example in maintaining silence before the irresponsible Priests and Pilate,⁵⁴ in consoling the lamenting women of Jerusalem,⁵⁵ in forgiving his own executioners and praying for them,⁵⁶ and in promising the good thief a place in Paradise,⁵⁷ and so on. He confronts that infamous death boldly, yet quietly and almost silently, because his faith in God's Kingdom is strong. So strong indeed that he is not only over awed by death, but he even changes death into life, and slavery into "the glorious freedom of the children of God."⁵⁸ This indeed is the most effective proclamation of the message about the Kingdom and its new values. There lies the Good News for mankind, that the freedom and the power of love have shone forth on the gibbet of slavery. And the hope of freedom has dawned on those who are ready to reproduce the image of the Son. The Cross indeed is the supreme act of preaching. That is why the learned NT scholar,

50. Mk. 6, 8-9.

51. Mt. 11, 29.

52. Jn. 13, 1-17.

53. Here my account is largely based on Fr. Legrand's account on "The Language of the Cross." Cf. L. Legrand and others, *op. cit.* pp. 43-45.

54. Mt. 26, 63 and Mt. 27, 14.

55. Lk. 23, 28-30.

57. Lk. 23, 43.

56. Lk. 23, 34.

58. Rom. 8, 21.

Joachim Jeremias observes: "Jesus did not make the world Christian but he died on a cross."⁵⁹

From the above it will have become clear that Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of the Kingdom was achieved more by realizing the principles of the Kingdom in his own life. If he has also resorted to oral proclamation, it was more to explicate what has already been implied in his own life, than to expound certain doctrinal or logical truths about the Kingdom. If, in fact, his preaching and activities were endowed with authority,⁶⁰ it was precisely because they were not just preaching and activities dissociated from his being. They were wholly genuine: there was no make-believe, no mask, no show in Jesus; it was the authenticity of one who carried the message in his very self. This is why "the passivity of the Cross was his most effective work and the silence of Calvary his most eloquent proclamation".⁶¹ The effectiveness of this silent proclamation was confirmed by the ratification which the Father made in his Resurrection: "In it God testified that his authority and power inhabit the words, deeds and the very person of Jesus and revealed him fully as the Christ, the Wisdom of God and the Power of God (1 Cor. 1, 30)."⁶²

The Source of the Great Commission of Christ

Hence it is this Resurrection-event that became the source of the formal commission given to the Apostles to preach the Good News to the whole world. It is significant that all the four Gospels conclude with a unique mission-appearance of the Risen Lord, sending the Eleven on a solemn and formal mission. This convergence, in the opinion of Bible scholars, is very impressive.⁶³ For, such a structural convergence implies that in all the traditions underlying the different accounts of the mission-appearances, it was understood that the ultimate significance of the Resurrection was to be found in the apostolic mission. It was in the Resurrection that the Apostles experienced the authenticity of Jesus' teachings, activities, way of life, and above all,

59. J. Jeremias, *Jesus' Promise to the Nations*, (SBT. 24) (London: 1958) p. 74, quoted by Fr. Legrand. See L. Legrand and others, *op. cit.* p. 45.

60. Lk. 4, 32.

61. L. Legrand and others, *op. cit.* pp. 59-60.

62. *Ibid* p. 60.

63. The account here also is largely based on Fr. Legrand's considerations. For more details and technical accuracies, please see L. Legrand and others, *op. cit.* pp. 47-60.

his manner of death. The Resurrection meant that Jesus' teaching and example were not just teaching and example. In fact, there would be no Good News if they were just teaching and example. The world has listened to many lofty teachings and witnessed many stirring examples in the past. So what the Resurrection meant was that the cause of Jesus, the Christ-message, the Christ-event, one might even say Christ-movement, namely, the liberation-movement that Christ has initiated in every word and action, now continues with all authentication. Those few fleeting years of a historical person, and the New way of living that he "revealed" by his own living and preaching are now authenticated by his Resurrection and would continue to be a living reality.

It is this living presence that gives force and value to the great commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations." No doubt it is only at the end of a long process of hesitations, reflections, tensions, attempts and withdrawals that the Church discovered all the implications of this "revelation" and the missionary mandate of Mt. 28,19 could take the explicit clarity it has assumed in the present form.⁶⁴ But this account, as also the parallel accounts on the mission-aparition, does express what the Resurrection meant. "The post-paschal encounter with Christ was experienced as a mission by the witnesses, because in it, they perceived that the message preached to the poor by the prophet of Nazareth was indeed the Good News of God's liberation for the world."⁶⁵ So, it was not that people saw the Risen Jesus first, and then reflecting on the consequences of what they had seen, concluded that they had to preach it. But their seeing and the missionary charge were one and the same from the very beginning. It was not that first there existed a Tradition on seeing Jesus to which was added later on the mission motif. But, seeing and mission were closely linked right from the start. The mission was not a theological conclusion added to faith in the Resurrection of Jesus. It was the Resurrection itself which was perceived as mission.⁶⁶ The Resurrection meant to the witnesses such a powerful authentication of the new way of living which Jesus preached in his deeds and words that they felt a compulsion and urge to realize the same way of living both in themselves and in others all over the world.

64. Cf. L. Legrand and others, *op. cit.* p. 57.

65. *Ibid.*

66. *Ibid* p. 51.

The Way the Apostles carried out the Commission

From the foregoing section it will have already become clear that the great commission meant to the Apostles not that they should engage in just a theoretical teaching about Christ, not even an argumentative apologetics about the fact of his Resurrection, but that they should continue the transformation-movement which God had set afoot in the world through their Liberated Master. Therefore their own life was in turn a reflection of the actual liberation, patterned after the principles of the new "kingdom". The net result was that the whole community of the Apostles and their followers could lead such a life of love and fellowship, with a total trust in God's providence, that they could sell their possessions and goods and distribute them among all those who were in need.⁶⁷ It was against this background and in the context of this kind of living an actual liberated life, that they gave out, in addition, their oral testimony. That is why their preaching bore abundant fruit and so many converted themselves to this new community of believers. It is not insignificant that St. Luke ends his account on the life-style of the very early Church with this concluding remark, summing up as it were the outcome of their living: "And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."⁶⁸ The implication is that the living witness of the believers was a compelling factor which brought so many into their fold.

Even for St. Paul, who is often taken to be a towering example of missionaries and a passionate preacher, to preach the Gospel meant not to propound a series of revealed propositions about Christ, but rather to bring about a new way of living both in himself and in others. It is true that he made it his ambition to preach the gospel of Christ from Jerusalem to as far as Illyricum.⁶⁹ Again it is true that he was deeply concerned that it would greatly sadden him if he did not preach the gospel.⁷⁰ But it must be noted that he was equally firm that the content of his preaching was not going to be something that can be passed on "with words", but it was "Christ crucified, a stumbling-block to the Jews and a folly to the Greeks."⁷¹ Further, the means and the manner of his preaching was "not with eloquent

67. Acts 2, 44-45.

68. Acts 2, 47.

69. Rom. 15, 20.

70. 1 Cor. 9, 16.

71. 1 Cor. 1, 23.

wisdom, lest it should be emptied of its power",⁷² but by living by the Cross and modelling his life after that of Christ crucified, and "pommeling his body, lest after preaching to others, he himself should be disqualified."⁷³ In fact he did succeed in this attempt of his and so he could, in all truth, write to his converts at Galatia: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God."⁷⁴

It is against this background of his living the message that his zeal for preaching must be understood. Unfortunately, this is not usually done. People seem to conveniently forget his emphasis on living the message, and only his zeal for preaching is often emphasized. But he clearly acknowledges that his preaching was only in the context of his own living and substantiated by it: "Our Gospel came to you *not only in word but also in power* and in the Holy Spirit and *with full conviction*. You know what kind of men *we proved to be* among you for your sake. And *you became imitators of us* and of the Lord."⁷⁵ The emphasis on living was laid not only with reference to himself. Even as he charges his closest disciple to preach and proclaim the message in season and out of season,⁷⁶ he also demands him *to set the believers an example* in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity etc.⁷⁷ So also his expectation from his converts was very high. He would entreat his Philippians: "Let your *manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ*."⁷⁸ He would question the Romans: "How can we who died to sin still live in it?"⁷⁹ And he was so proud of the Thessalonians who lived up to their faith that he boasted of them: "You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia."⁸⁰

Thus it is evident from the foregoing that the mission of all the Apostolic churches—just as it was in the case of Christ, their Head—was characterized by this note, that they all laid due emphasis in embodying the message that was proclaimed, and it was only

72. 1 Cor. 1, 17 b.

73. 1 Cor. 9, 27.

74. Gal. 2, 20.

75. 1 Thess. 1, 5-6b.

76. 2 Tim. 4, 2.

77. 1 Tim. 4, 12-16.

78. Phil. 1, 27.

79. Rom. 6, 1-4.

80. 1 Thess. 1, 8.

against the background of living that their preaching was carried out.

The Way the Church has carried out the Commission later and the rise of the problem

The missionary activity of the Church cannot assume a different role from the one assumed by Christ and followed by the early Church. Of course, at no time has the Church denied the importance of the living. But still, it will not be far from the truth, if we say that at least at some phases of its history, a dichotomy has been felt between "preaching" and "living", between the "externals" of the religion and the "interiority." Lest I should appear presumptuous, I may cite here the reflections of a deep contemplative, Swami Abhishiktananda :

It has not infrequently happened in history that the Church's ministers and leaders have been more concerned with the external aspects of her being or activities, in the social, political, intellectual or ritualistic spheres, than with the really spiritual aspects. That has led inevitably to dangerous deviations, to unhealthy and superstitious use of the sacraments and sacramentals and to a shameless collusion with worldly powers, either political or economical. It has also led to an improper rivalry with other religions, precisely on these external levels, at the cost of making the Church misunderstood in her very proclamation of the Gospel and at the cost of alienating the best of those who listened to her preaching.⁸¹

Thus, it was only when a misplaced emphasis was laid on preaching, dichotomized from the living, when one was interested in propagating certain "truths" to the neglect of living the Truth of Religion, when a particular formulation about Christ or God or Church was unduly stressed as against the central message of her Bridegroom, viz., the life of love, sharing and service, then the problem began to crop up : Which is true, this "truth" or that? Which is superior, this "religion" or that? Could we meaningfully preach to a man of another religion if he is already granted salvation

81. Abhishiktananda, *Towards the Renewal of the Indian Church*, Dharmaram College, Bangalore, 1970, pp. 1-2.

in his own religion? These and such other questions would arise, and do arise, only on the level of abstraction, i. e. only when the oral proclamation is done in isolation, divorced from the more basic issue of living the message.

However, these problems will disappear when due emphasis is laid on the more basic and central message of Christ, the renewal of life according to the principles of the "kingdom" that he wanted to introduce in the world. Those principles are clearly enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount, which may be said to be further epitomized in the great commandment of love. Now, if the Church applies those principles to her life and thought, and becomes so renewed that she becomes a living witness to the integrity of the message she preaches, then her oral proclamation will be meaningful in its content, and the inherent power of the Word will be able to effect the result it wants, without any inhibition, so that the Gospel preached will touch the hearts of the listeners and will do its own explosive work. As a result then, those that are "called" to re-mould their life according to this pattern will be spontaneously drawn by the Spirit. And those that are "destined" to live in their own religious boundaries, will be stimulated, by the living proclamation of the Gospel, to re-live their own religious convictions in such a way that the central message of their religion — which the Spirit has inspired and developed from time immemorial — will be renewed and freed from the imperfections that might have accrued in course of time. Thus, the message that is preached against the background of a really renewed life will be effective in its influence, (i. e. will effect the needed radical conversion in the real sense of the term) whether any actual conversions, in the sense of change of religious boundaries, will take place or not.

Further, when a Christian is committed to the living of the central message of Christ, and not merely to certain formulations of that message, he will also allow himself to be influenced by the deeply spiritual persons of other religions, for renewing his own commitment to Christ's central message. Thus a Christian in modern times cannot but be influenced by Gandhiji, for example. That Mahatma — though he decided to remain outside the outward boundaries of Christianity — has so scrupulously lived the faith which the Christians of his day professed very loudly, that when a sincere Christian saw him with an open

mind was necessarily compelled to examine his own commitment to his faith and re-live his faith in a more serious way.⁸²

From the above it is evident that once a Christian is committed to the central message of Christ, viz., the new living of the Spirit, then he would necessarily allow the Spirit to work effectively on others by his meaningful proclamation of that message; also he would allow himself to be influenced by the Spirit through an equally committed person of another religion. Thus there would never arise any question about the possibility of salvation in other religions—because it is there, as the same Spirit is working everywhere; or about his own proclamation—because his oral proclamation would be done in the context of his living and therefore be meaningfully carried out. If, on the contrary, he is only concerned with oral proclamation, even the most eloquent one,—and if he has not learned to live up to it—then his efforts will not only be useless, but also very often harmful to the message itself. In such a case he would create problems for himself, for others, and even for the message itself. It is bound to create a problem for him, because he lays a misplaced emphasis which would jeopardise his own salvation. It would be a problem for others, because he is preventing them from understanding the central message of Christ and from accepting it. It would be a problem for the message itself, because he is thereby distorting it, harming it and making it ineffective.

So, the real issue is not whether a Christian should or should not take the great commission seriously, but whether he has put the great commission in the proper context. In other words, it is not just a question of whether one can accept the great commission as earnestly

82. At a time when most of the Western Christians, perhaps even the Churches themselves, had given up the absolute claims of Christ as impractical and idealistic, Gandhiji demonstrated the applicability of the way of life that Christ proposed, even provided its efficacy in the political field also. Just to cite two specific demonstrations: i) Gandhiji rejected the way of bomb and sword to gain the freedom of India, not because it was expedient, but because he believed with all his soul in another type of power—the soul force or the power of suffering which Christ proclaimed by his word and much more by his life. (ii) All his movement of *Satyagraha* and non-resistance and non-retaliation, coupled with fasting, was inspired by the suffering love of the Sermon on the Mount. Even the idea of vicarious suffering was pronouncedly practised by Gandhi. For more details see E. Stanley Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road*, Lucknow Publishing House, Lucknow, 1977, pp. 55-85.

today as before. Insofar as this also constitutes the inspired word of God, it is as binding today as before. But, "has one put this great commission along with the specific command of Christ?" – This is the real question which a Christian must ponder first and foremost. It is only by obeying this commandment of "his" that one can be described as his disciple.⁸³ Again it is by following this precept that one can really show one's love to the Master.⁸⁴ And that is the only way one can also serve Him, and be considered worthy of eternal happiness.⁸⁵ Has the so-called Christian, that too a ministerial Christian, passed this test? Has he earned the right to be his disciple? If he has not first earned this right, how dare he go about proclaiming the message of his Master? Who is his master? Whose message is he going to proclaim, the Devil's or Christ's? It is for all these reasons that we say that adherence to the great commandment of Christ is much more basic and central to the Christian, in the context of which alone he can carry out the great commission of Christ, meaningfully and effectively. In this connection, it may be worthwhile to quote the significant observation of Bishop Etchegaray, which he made in the Synod of Bishops in 1974: "A Church which is being renewed in order more effectively to evangelize, is a church which is itself willing to be evangelized . . . We lack not so much the words to say to people as credible persons to say the Word."⁸⁶

The Indian Context

Now as the Indian understands it, religion is a matter of one's realization, and so transmission of religious truths means transferring one's living experience to others by evoking a similar experience in their hearts. "The guru is not a man who repeats what he has read in a book or heard from another. He is the man who knows through personal and intimate experience, the truth of what he teaches and is able to lead his disciples not to formulas, rites or new ways of life, but straight to the awareness of the divine Presence."⁸⁷ Naturally, therefore, when people go to the Hindu with a view to proclaiming

83. Jn. 13, 34-35.

84. Jn. 14, 15. Also see, 1 Jn. 4, 19-21.

85. Mt. 25, 40.

86. Cited by Philip A. Potter in his "Guest Speech to the Synod of Bishops." See D. S. Amalorpavadass, (Ed.) *Evangelization of the Modern World*, NBCLC, Bangalore, 1975, p. 153.

87. These are the remarks of a Hindu made to a Christian priest, which Swami Abhishiktananda quotes in his book, *The Church in India*, CLS, Madras, Reprinted, 1971, p. 19.

the Gospel, the first thing the Hindu expects from them is that they have the deepest experience of the Lord, whom they want to proclaim. He wants to see whether they are really spiritual leaders, people, who by their own life and teaching, are an inspiration to the people living around them, and so on. But alas, he is disappointed!

For, to him Christianity appears mostly to be concerned with schools, hospitals, and other institutions. No doubt he accepts that they are by all means among the best in India. And he appreciates the competence, the discipline, efficiency, that are found in these institutions. He also admires the extraordinary zeal, self-sacrifices, administrative capabilities of the Church leaders, who run these institutions. However, insofar as spirituality is concerned, they do not impress the real Hindu. For him religion has nothing to do with prestige, riches and human efficiency. That is why many a sincere Hindu, interested in the genuine cause of Religion, has come out with open criticism. Just to cite one example: Gandhiji, while speaking about the religious conditions of Europe - then the so-called Christian countries - remarked: "It is my firm opinion that Europe today represents not the spirit of God or Christianity, but the spirit of Satan. And Satan's successes are the greatest when he appears with the name of God on his lips. Europe is today only nominally Christian. In reality, it is worshipping Mammon. 'It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom.' Thus really spoke Jesus Christ. His so-called followers measure their moral progress by their material possessions."⁸⁸ The same words may be aptly directed against the condition of the Church itself.

Though a Hindu by birth, Gandhiji was well-acquainted with Christianity and the Bible, particularly the NT. He thought that the Sermon on the Mount was really the whole of Christianity for a person who wanted to live a Christian life.⁸⁹ However, as he looked at the state of Christianity, - interested in the Proclamation of the Gospel and spreading the faith in all possible ways - he was very

88. M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, Sep. 8, 1920. For easy reference, see Anand T. Hingorani, (Ed.), *All Religions are True*, Pearl Publications, Bombay, 1962, p. 78.

89. Gandhiji's Christmas message delivered in 1931. Cf. *Young India*, 31-12-1931, p. 429. For easy reference see V. B. Kher, (Ed.) *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol. III, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1962, p. 316.

much pained at the misplaced emphasis. So he said: "Reading, therefore, the whole story in that light, it seems to me that Christianity has yet to be lived, unless one says that where there is boundless love and no idea of retaliation whatsoever, it is Christianity that lives. But then, it surmounts all boundaries and book-teaching. Then it is something indefinable, not capable of being preached to men, not capable of being transmitted from mouth to mouth, but from heart to heart. But Christianity is not commonly understood in that way."⁹⁰

When the central message of Christ has not been lived by the evangelizers, and when the transmission still takes place — not from heart to heart, as it ought to happen — and even if conversions ensue in great numbers, the Hindu is right in construing that the appeal has been to something other than the heart, namely, to the stomach or intellect or both. But he is convinced that spiritual needs cannot be supplied through the intellect or through the stomach, even as the needs of the body cannot be supplied through the spirit. Such conversions then, according to him, cannot be a spiritual act in any sense of the term. They are bound to be conversions for convenience. Every such conversion leaves a sore behind it, and he feels that this can be avoided. Hence he asks the Christian in all sincerity: "May it not be that "Go ye unto all the world" message has been somewhat narrowly interpreted and the spirit of it missed?"⁹¹ He even comes out with a suggestion on the need and necessity of re-reading and re-interpreting such verses as those which imply missionary basis and orientation. It becomes perhaps necessary to re-read the message of the Bible in terms of what is happening around us. The word is the same, but the spirit ever broadens intensively and extensively, and it might be that many things in the Bible will have to be re-interpreted in the light of discoveries — not of modern science — in the spiritual world in the shape of direct experiences common to all faiths."⁹²

Thus it is clear that the great commission is required to be re-interpreted in the Indian context, in particular. But this re-interpretation consists not in minimizing the value of the great commission, but in

90. *Ibid.* V. B. Kher, *op. cit.* p. 317.

91. *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, G. A. Natesan, Madras, p. 336, reprinted by Anand T. Hingorani, *op. cit.* p. 77-78.

92. Gandhiji's talk with the missionaries of Bangalore, reported by Mahadev Desai, in *Young India*, 11-8-1927, p. 250. See also V. B. Kher, *op. cit.* p. 321.

putting it in the proper perspective, and in the total context of a renewed living which has to be patterned after the principles of "Kingdom" of God, enunciated in the Sermon on the Mount, and epitomised in the great commandment of love.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of the paper is to see how one can understand the great commission of Christ to go and make disciples of all nations, particularly today, when one recognizes the value of other religions also, as equally valid means of salvation.

The contention has been that this problem arises only at the level of abstraction, i. e. when this commission is taken in isolation from the total context. But if it is taken in the proper perspective, i. e. when it is put along with the central message of Christ, then it cannot present any problems.

In discussing this contention, first an extreme view was taken for consideration, namely, that which would totally reject the authenticity of the great commission itself. Our discussion revealed that the great commission is not a distortion, but only a proper construction of the general trend of Christ's as well as his Apostles' ministry. So, oral proclamation was necessary. But, on further investigation, it was found that it cannot be a "blind" preaching, with a misplaced emphasis. Rather, it has to be one, which has to be carried out in the context of the central message of Christ. That led us to the discussion of the content of Christ's message, and the manner of his proclaiming the message, the source of his commission to his Apostles and the way they carried out the commission. Our endeavour revealed that a radical conversion to a new pattern of living was the central message of Christ, which he himself proclaimed first and foremost by his own life. And it was in that context and substantiated by that concrete proclamation, that he carried out his oral proclamation. Again it was this which he put it in the form of commission to his disciples. The Apostles also, like their Master, realized that message in their lives, and it was only against the background of the concrete proclamation that they carried out the commission of oral proclamation. Then, we pointed out that this proper perspective was later lost sight of by people in the Church and that it was necessary to revive it in order to solve the problems, the great commission would otherwise, create today. Finally we took up an analysis of the Indian context, in the light of which the absolute necessity of reviving the proper perspective became more evident.