

BOASTERS IN CHRIST (Continued)

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MISSION PRACTICE



CHRISTIANITY as a whole responded admirably to the general obligation to support, foster, or perform missionary work. The early Christians regarded such activity as a family affair; and so they avoided both the later Protestant error of reducing the missions to a strictly personal matter, and the misconception of many present-day Catholics, who view the missions as the exclusive task of the hierarchy, a work which concerns the laity little or not at all. That the individual Christians regarded themselves as apostles of Christ is indicated by Origen: "It is clear, that Christians do not neglect, as far as in them lies, to take measures to disseminate their doctrine throughout the world. Some of them, accordingly, have made it their business to itinerate not only through cities, but even through small villages . . . that they might make converts for God."²² It may well have been one of these zealous itinerant missionaries, the "venerable old man," who directed the truth-seeking Justin Martyr to a study of the Bible and the teachings of Christ.

Preaching Christ crucified was by no means limited to an hour on Sunday. In an heroic attempt to win souls for God, the Christians incorporated into their daily life tasks the holy work of promoting Christ's Kingdom on earth. Merchants became travelling missionaries; peddlers hid Christ among their wares; soldiers preached Him in the fortresses, camps, and barracks; slaves carried Him to the hearths and hearts of private families. The pagan Celsus, in frantic passages of complaint which Origen has preserved, depicted graphically the unceasing mission labors in all walks of life:

Nay we see, indeed, that even those individuals, who in the market places perform the most disgraceful tasks, and who gather crowds around them, would never approach an assembly of wise men, nor dare to exhibit their arts among them; but whenever they see young men, and a mob of slaves, and a gathering of unintelligent persons, thither they thrust themselves and show themselves off.²³

²² Origen, *Against Celsus*, III, 9.

²³ Origen, *Against Celsus*, III, 50.

We see, indeed, in private houses workers in wool and leather, and fullers, and persons of the most uninstructed and rustic character, not venturing to utter a word in the presence of their elders and wise masters; but when they get hold of the children privately, and certain women as ignorant as themselves, they pour forth wonderful statements to the effect that they should not give heed to their fathers and teachers, but should obey them; that they alone know how men ought to live and that, if the children obey them, they will both be happy themselves and will make their home happy also.²⁴

This phase of early mission activity has been termed Christianity in the market place. A more appropriate designation is found in Christ's own words, Christianity, the leaven of society. Every level of social life, from the household of a slave to the royal court, was impregnated with boasters of Christ winning for God their social milieu.

There was another influence at work on the masses of the ancient world, the direct intervention of God in the daily affairs of men. Christ had promised His Apostles that miracles would be performed by those who embraced His Faith: "And these signs shall attend those who believe: in My name they shall cast out devils; they shall speak in new tongues; they shall pick up serpents; and if they drink any deadly thing, it shall not hurt them; they shall lay hands upon the sick and they shall get well" (John 16, 17-19). Miracles were a common occurrence in the early days of the infant Church. "Miracles," says Origen, "are not known among the Jews, while among the Christians they have not yet ceased to be wrought; nay more, the miracles at present are more striking than formerly, and if I may be thought a credible witness, I will affirm that I myself have seen them performed."²⁵ Justin commented on the power of Christians over demons: "Many of our Christian men exorcising them in the name of Jesus Christ, have healed and do heal, rendering helpless and driving the possessing devils out of men."²⁶

The testimony of Marcus Aurelius, ascribing one of his victories during the German campaign to a miracle worked by God in answer to the prayers of Christians, indicates that the pagans of the day were aware of the power of Christians and even somewhat afraid of it. The enemy 977,000 strong, were beseiging Carnuntum where Marcus Aurelius had been trapped with a single battalion. Marcus reports:

²⁴ *ibid.* III, 55.

²⁵ Origen, *John* 14, 12; see also Origen, *Against Celsus* I, 10 and II, 21; Justin, *Apol.* II, 8; Tertullian, *Apologetics* ch. 23.

²⁶ Justin, *Apology*, II, 6.

Having then examined my own position . . . I quickly betook myself to prayer to the gods of my country. But being disregarded by them, I summoned those among us who go by the name of Christians. And having made inquiry, I discovered a great number of them, and raged against them, which was by no means becoming; for afterwards I learned their power. Wherefore they began the battle, not by preparing weapons; for such preparation is hateful to them, on account of the God they bear in their conscience. Having cast themselves on the ground, they prayed not only for me, but also for the whole army as it stood, that they might be delivered from the present thirst and famine. And simultaneously with their casting themselves on the ground and praying to God . . . water poured from heaven upon us most refreshingly cool, but upon the enemy of Rome a fiery hail. And immediately we recognized the presence of God following on the prayer—a God unconquerable and indestructible. Founding upon this, then, let us pardon such as are Christians, lest they pray for and obtain such a weapon against us.

These were the extraordinary manifestations of God's protecting power. If miracles may be called ordinary, there was an ordinary one that must be considered, the life of the Church. The daily activities of Christians were an effective means of advancing the Cross of Christ through the pagan world. The purity of their morals, their heroic charity, kindness, and magnanimity were sermons to the heathen surrounding them. Justin ascribes many conversions to the good example of the Christians; in fact, it was the holiness of their lives that brought him to recognize the fallacy of the charges brought against them by their enemies. "While I was yet a follower of the Platonic philosophy, and I heard the Christians pursued by calumny, and saw them stand intrepid before death and all formidable things, I thought to myself that such persons could not be given to vice and voluptuousness."²⁷ Tertullian tells us that the enemies of the Cross were forced to exclaim: "Behold how they love one another, and how they are ready to die for one another." Julian the Apostate and the pagan Caecilius have given the outsider's view of the lives of Christ's followers. Caecilius says of them that they love one another even before they have become acquainted. For Julian, the charity of the faithful, their sanctity, and their care for the dead are the causes for the success of Christian propaganda.

"But if there was one thing alone above another that drew the attention of all upon the Christians and inspired feelings of admiration for them in the breasts of others, it was the heroic fortitude and

²⁷ *ibid.* I, 26.

joy which so many evinced in laying down their lives for the faith."²⁸

The sight of martyrs beaten and broken, yet blissfully happy, inspired others to embrace the Cross. The Romans admired courage and self-sacrifice, and the Apologetes capitalized on this admiration. They pointed out the peerless courage of the martyrs: "Behold, the weak sex and fragile age endure to be lacerated in the whole body, and to be burned; not necessarily, for it is permitted them to escape if they wish to do so; but willingly, because they put their trust in God. . . . Robbers and strong men are unable to endure lacerations of this kind; they utter exclamations and send forth groans; for they are destitute of patience infused into them. But in our case . . . boys and delicate women in silence overpower their torturers, and even the fire is unable to extort from them a groan."²⁹ What was the effect of this courage on the Pagan mind? They think that neither the agreement of so many nor the constancy of the dying is without meaning, and that patience itself could not surmount such tortures without the aid of God."³⁰

Against this interpretation of the Apologetes, some of the Pagans objected that no god would allow his chosen people to undergo such cruel tortures as were inflicted on the Christians. Lactantius answered that objection: "There is another cause why God permits persecutions to be carried on against us, that the people of God may be increased."³¹ Origen replied to Celsus's resurrection of the same objection: "But since it was the purpose of God that the nations should receive the benefits of Christ's teachings, all the decrees of men against Christians have been brought to naught; for the more the kings and rulers have persecuted them everywhere, the more they have increased in number and grown in strength."³² Finally, Tertullian was to clothe this proportion of death and new life in the familiar, radiant adage: "Your ingenious cruelty serves no other purpose than to increase our numbers; we multiply under your harvest of slaughter, for the blood of Christians is their seed."³³

St. Paul had commanded: "Let him who boasteth, boast in the Lord" (I Corinthians, 1, 26). The early Christians fulfilled that command literally. Paul had said: "With Christ I am nailed to the

²⁸ Alzog, *Manual of Universal Church History*, translated by Pabisch and Byrne, Robert Clarke & Co., Cincinnati, Ohio. 1874. Vol. I, p. 255.

²⁹ Lactantius, *Divine Institutes*, V, c. 13.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.* V, c. 23.

³² Origen, *Against Celsus*, VIII, c. 26.

³³ Tertullian, *Apologetics*, c. 50.

Cross" (Galatians 2, 19). The infant Church made the saying of Paul its own. How could it be otherwise? For being one with Him, she takes her place with Him on the Cross.

ITINERANT MISSIONARIES

All Christians were interested in missionary work, and most of them were enrolled under the banner of Christ to win souls for God. Within the ranks, however, certain groups had a special calling to engage in the missions. To them was assigned the task of establishing Christ's Church in isolated regions where the Cross had not penetrated. These missionaries did not confine themselves to winning individual souls; rather they extended their activities to whole peoples that nations might be impregnated with Christianity and that the Cross might extend its arms over the whole world. In the early missions the formation of entire communities, through mass conversions, into Christian congregations was not uncommon. Like a leaven, such a community gradually assimilated the masses. Members of the hierarchy established the churches, formed the members in the spirit of Christ; and they, in turn, carried on mission activity in the immediate environ in order to christianize their social milieu. To those who were instrumental in founding the churches and in conducting the social mission of the Church properly belongs the title of missionary. In Post-Apostolic times these vocational missionaries were members either of the Charismatical or Hierarchical orders of the Church or of both. When Christ instituted His Church, He gave to the Apostles two kinds of sacred powers to serve in different ways as supernatural aids to the attainment of the end of the Church. He gave them the power to rule the faithful and to act as ministers of Divine worship; these are the powers which belong to the hierarchy of the Church by reason of office. Besides these, He gave them certain supernatural gifts, for example, the powers of prophecy, interpretation, healing, tongues, that through their exercise men might be converted and Christians might be strengthened in their faith. These gifts are called *charismata*; they are ordained to help the hierarchy in the performance of its duties and are subordinate to the directions of the hierarchy.

From the very beginning Christ taught His Disciples to respect and cherish the charismatic gifts even when others possessed them: "John said to Him, 'Master we saw a man who was not one of our followers casting out devils in Thy name, and we forbade him.' But Jesus said, 'Do not forbid him, because there is no one who shall work a miracle in My name, and forthwith be able to speak ill of Me. For

he who is not against you is for you. For whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name, because you are Christ's, amen I say to you, he shall not lose his reward" (*Mark*, 9, 37-40). The Apostles were to learn from bitter experience the necessity of regulating the use of these gifts by the faithful to ensure that their true end, the edification of the Church, might be attained (*I Corinthians*, c. 12-14). Likewise, they learned the need of caution, for the enemies of the Cross, even the devil himself, produced effects similar to those effected by the charismata. These same notes of reverence and caution reserve characterized the early hierarchy's attitude towards these supernatural gifts.

The Doctrine of the Apostles (Didache) distinguishes itinerant missionaries from the hierarchy, and the texts indicate that the former possessed charismata. St. Paul had stated: "God indeed has set some in the Church, first Apostles, secondly, prophets, thirdly doctors" (*I Cor.* 12, 28). This same classification and gradation is repeated in the *Didache*. The doctors or teachers are treated briefly. They are to be received "as the Lord," if they teach, "so as to increase righteousness and the knowledge of the Lord. . . . But if the teacher himself turn and teach another doctrine to the destruction of this teaching (of the *Didache*), hear him not."³⁴ These doctors had a missionary value, inasmuch as they wandered about teaching the Word of God to Christians and to Pagans. Included among them are the teachers of the Alexandrian school of Catechesis, the early Apologues, Clement, and Origen. The latter records that on his journeys he engaged in missionary work among the Pagans, that he instructed Christians in the Faith, and that his teaching office had lost its charismatic gifts.

The *Didache* demands that the Apostles, or itinerant missionaries be received by Christians "as the Lord." One test of an Apostle is that he stay in a community no longer than three days, for his office, the preaching of the Gospel, was to be employed in the interests of the universal Church. An Apostle who neither preached nor journeyed would be a contradiction. Christians would recognize a false Apostle, if he were solicitous of himself. "And when the Apostle goeth away, let him take nothing but bread until he lodgeth; but if he ask money, he is a false prophet."³⁵ *The Pastor of Hermas* characterizes the Apostles as those "who preached to the whole world, and who taught solemnly and purely the Word of the Lord, and did not

³⁴ *Didache*, ch. XI.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. XI.

at all fall into evil desires, but walked always in righteousness and truth as they had received the Holy Spirit. Such persons therefore shall enter in with the angels."³⁶

The name "Apostle" was to be taken away from these missionaries early in Christian antiquity, and out of respect, reserved for the twelve picked by Christ. There is evidence, however, that the office of travelling preacher continued during the whole of the Post-Apostolic period until the time of Constantine. Writing of the preaching evangelists at the time of Ignatius (about 100-125 A.D.), Eusebius reports:

Of those who flourished in these times, Quadratus is said to have been distinguished for his prophetic gifts. . . . Most of the disciples at the time, animated with a more ardent love of the divine word had first fulfilled the Saviour's precept by distributing their substance to the needy. Afterwards, leaving their country, they performed the office of evangelist to those who had not heard the faith, whilst with a noble ambition to proclaim Christ, they also delivered to them the books of the Holy Gospels. . . . The Holy Ghost also wrought many wonders through them, so that, as soon as the Gospel was heard, men voluntarily and in crowds, eagerly embraced the true faith with their whole minds."³⁷

The name of one of these missionaries and a brief account of his labors have been preserved by Eusebius:

Pantaenus of Alexandria is said to have displayed such ardor and so zealous a disposition respecting the divine word that he was constituted a herald of the Gospel of Christ to the nations of the East, and advanced even as far as India. There were even then many evangelists of the word, who were ardently striving to employ their inspired zeal after the Apostolic example to increase and build up the divine word."³⁸

Origen tells us that the itinerant missionaries exercised their office in his day: "And no one would maintain that they did this for the sake of gain, when sometimes they would not accept even necessary sustenance." Continuing, he denies Celsus's objection that they had acted out of desire for glory.

It is impossible rationally to entertain such a suspicion with respect to Christianity in its beginnings, when the danger incurred, especially by its teachers, was great; whilst in the present day, the discredit attaching to it among the rest of mankind is greater than any supposed honor

³⁶ *The Pastor of Hermans*, Similitude 9, c. 25.

³⁷ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, c. 37.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, V, c. 10.

enjoyed among those who hold the same belief, especially when such honor is not shared by all.³⁹

The prophets, too, exercised a mission function. As itinerant missionaries, however, they were not bound to continuous travel as were the Apostles; they were permitted to attach themselves to particular churches. The *Didache* indicates that the early Christians esteemed their prophets highly. To them were to go every first fruit of the products of the wine press and threshing floor, of oxen and of sheep, of oil, silver clothing, and every possession. No one was to dare judge a prophet speaking in the spirit. Nevertheless, several tests were to be applied to determine a true prophet; he must hold the ways of the Lord, he must not eat of a meal ordered while he was in the spirit, nor request money, and finally, he had to practice what he preached. The prophets had some ministry to perform in the sacramental life of the Church, for, according to the *Didache*, they were high-priests and were permitted to make as long a personal Eucharist Thanksgiving as they wanted. Some Patrologists regard them as having received the fullness of the priesthood, and, consequently, of having belonged to the hierarchy. At any rate, it is known that some of the prophets were selected to rule particular churches.

THE MISSIONARY ACTIVITY OF THE HIERARCHY

Such a procedure, however, was not usual. The *Didache* commands the faithful to base their selection of priests and deacons upon moral qualities; the possession of charismata was not the determinant of candidates. "Appoint, therefore, for yourselves, bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord; men meek and not lovers of money; and trustful and proved." These bishops and deacons were chosen for local service, and not for the universal ministry. That they were expected to perform missionary functions, however, is clear from the text. Besides being ministers of the Eucharist, "they also render to you the service of prophets and teachers."⁴⁰

This, then, was the organization of the communities commanded by the Apostles. The hierarchy is established and performs its liturgical and missionary duties; to it are subordinated the itinerant missionaries and the laity. This element of unity through subordination must be kept in mind to properly evaluate the mission activity of the infant Church.

³⁹ Origen, *Against Celsus*, III, c. 9.

⁴⁰ *Didache*, ch. XV.

The picture of an unlettered Christian propounding the sublime doctrines of the Faith with unfaltering confidence is inspiring. It has about it a certain air of romance and mystery which captivates the mind. Yet, every Christian boasting of Christ in the market place represents hours of patient instruction and guidance under the direction of a parish priest. We may marvel at the miracles performed by the prophets and apostles; but every itinerant preacher presented a problem calling for immediate solution. Is this prophet from God? Is his doctrine sound? Are his converts properly grounded in the Faith? The task of making these judgments fell upon the hierarchy. If the bishops, priests, and deacons never budged from their proper territory, still, they were preëminently missionaries.

There is very little of romance, mystery, and ceremony attached to the performance of ordinary duties, and men tend to take it for granted. The early Christians were no exception in this regard; they have left us a bare outline of the hierarchy's mission activities. Eusebius has done the work of organizing what little information can be sifted from primary sources. In his account of preaching evangelists, he tells us:

There were many others . . . who held the first rank in the Apostolic succession. These, as the holy disciples of such men, also built up churches where foundations had been previously laid in every place by the Apostles. They augmented the means of promulgating the gospel more and more, and spread the seeds of the heavenly kingdom throughout the world far and wide. . . . After laying the foundation of the faith in foreign parts as the particular object of their missions, and after appointing others as shepherds of the flocks . . . they went again to other regions and nations, with the grace and coöperation of God.⁴¹

⁴¹ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III, c. 37.