

The Work of the Lord in the World

Plan — Process — Power.

Acts 1: 6-8

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When these words were spoken the disciples stood upon the threshold of a new dispensation. Great events, the death and resurrection of Christ, had just taken place, and one great event, the coming of the Spirit, was impending. The old order of things was evidently breaking up and ready to vanish away. The new order was rising above the horizon into view. Thus between two dispensations the disciples stood.

Under such circumstances it was only natural that they should wonder what character the new dispensation was to bear, and that they should raise a question as to the divine plan for the period on which they were about to enter.

The question which they addressed to their risen Lord was, however shaped by two considerations:

Firstly, they were still largely swayed in their minds by their national aspirations, which made ISRAEL, its future and glory, the paramount idea; and secondly, they wished for something more definite, more satisfying to natural curiosity than promises of a general nature. Could not a definite time be stated when the apparently long-deferred predictions of the prophets should be fulfilled.

This being so, the Lord declines to gratify their curiosity. Time-setting is a matter which lies only in the Father's hands. He directs their attention rather to the process by which the divine programme for the dispensation — whatever it be — may be carried out through the instrumentality of the disciples, and also to the power which would enable them to carry out the process.

It would be, however, a mistake to infer from this that the divine plan is something not to be known by us. Already the Lord Jesus had hinted at it in parabolic language. He, the good Shepherd, had entered the Jewish fold, not to take up His abode there, but to call His own sheep by name, and lead them out, and into a new sphere of life and blessing. He added, "And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear My voice; and there shall be one flock, [R.V.] and one Shepherd" (John 10: 16). The whole of the early part of this chapter must be carefully read if the points of the Lord's words are to be seized. It will then be plainly seen that He indicated the divine plan to be the gathering of Jews by believing out of their Judaism, and of Gentiles by believing out of their heathenism, and forming them into one company around one centre — HIMSELF.

We find also that on an occasion subsequent to the Lord's ascension when the Holy Spirit had been given the same fact was plainly declared by the apostles, showing that they now fully realized the nature of the divine plan. When the first great conference was held at Jerusalem we find James saying, "Simeon [i.e. Peter] hath declared how God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His name" (Acts 15: 14), And he proceeded to show that this conception of the divine plan was in full harmony with the Old Testament Scriptures. From John 10 we have already seen it to be in harmony with the teachings of our Lord.

The divine plan for this dispensation may then be stated in few words. God is sending forth the

gospel amongst all nations, to gather out of all a people for the name of Christ, i.e. "the church."

But what about the process by which this end is to be reached? This is simplicity itself. Amongst all nations, said the Lord, "ye shall be witnesses unto Me." No elaborate arrangements were made. No cumbrous machinery was instituted. Christ and all that He stands for is to be the subject of testimony, and every disciple according to his or her measure is to be a witness-bearer. In thus way the plan will be put into execution.

But if so large a programme is to be accomplished by so simple a method, there must be, one would suppose, a great power behind the method. This is precisely what we find. "Ye shall receive power," said the Lord, "after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you." In the gift of the Holy Spirit lay their power, and nowhere else. He would endow them with the necessary ability to bear the witness, and would also make the witness effectual in gathering out from the nations a people for Christ's name.

The whole of the Acts of the Apostles may be read as a commentary upon, or illustration of, these words. We find recorded many an act of the Holy Ghost through the apostles, but also acts of the same Spirit through men of much less note, though equally devoted to the Lord. Each servant, whether small or great, looked up to the same Lord for leadership and direction, and relied upon the same Spirit for power and effect, with the result that without human organization or arrangement the men for every enterprise or emergency were to hand as needed, and the work proceeded with signal and supernatural success.

Do we see anything approaching this to-day? Only, it is to be feared, in comparatively rare instances. Why is this? Very largely because we — present-day disciples — are guilty of misunderstanding the divine plan, or departing from the divine process, or ignoring the divine power; or it may be we are guilty of all three things together.

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In current missionary literature no phrase is much more common than "the conquest of the world for Christ!" and yet no such phrase is found in Scripture. The kingdoms, of this world are indeed going to become "the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ" (Rev. 11: 15); but this as the result of woes and judgments, and not of the preaching of the gospel. There is a great difference between subduing the world to Christ and gathering people out of the world for Christ. The divine plan must be one or the other. It cannot embrace both at the same time.

It may be wondered perhaps whether any misunderstanding on this point is of any great moment. Some might urge that it is not, and that if a Christian be real and earnest in propagating the true gospel, his view on this matter is of little account. We venture, on the contrary, to affirm that it will have a serious effect, if upon nobody else, upon himself.

It will alter his whole standpoint in relation to the world, and all through the history of Christianity the most critical point in Satan's attacks upon the church and- individual believers has been just here.

"Now is the judgment of this world" were the Saviour's words anticipating the cross (John 12: 31). The world as a system is a condemned thing. Jews and Gentiles alike were implicated in the rejection of God's Son. Alike they have lost any kind of status they ever had before God. When three thousand Jews became anxious inquirers, Peter said nothing as to conquering the Jewish nation for Christ; he exhorted them in the contrary direction saying, "Save yourselves FROM this untoward generation" (Acts 2: 40).

The plain fact is that faithful adherence to the divine plan keeps the disciple of the Lord himself from the world in separation according to the spirit of the Lord's prayer for him in John 17: 16-19, and it leads to the converts that God may give him as the fruit of his labours being delivered from the world also; whereas "the conquering of the world for Christ" must mean the bringing of Christian light and blessing to subdue and adorn the world, leaving both worker and convert with their world-links uncut.

In this we see a deep-laid plot of Satan, for just as the one essential for charging a wire with electric power is that the wire be insulated from the earth, so one great requisite for spiritual power is that the saint who is to be the vehicle of that power be kept separate from the world.

There is also a tendency with many advocates of this faulty view to still further deflect from the divine plan and substitute "the Christianization of the world" for "the conversion of the world." The latter is, to every unprejudiced onlooker, a remote contingency; growing more remote each year as the rate of increase of converts falls far below the rate of natural increase of population all over the world. What then? Shall we call a halt, and reinvestigate our theory to see if, after all, it does accord with God's word? Alas! in many cases No. The theory is broadened out and adapted to suit these unpleasant facts by the substitution of Christianizing for converting.

Let us make no mistake. At the root of the defection and weakness deplored by all earnest believers in the lands which for long have been looked upon as "the home base of foreign missions," lies the increasing way in which the genuine, old-fashioned God-made converts are being overborne by the incubus of the great mass of merely Christianized professors. Shall we labour to produce the same deplorable conditions in new fields? May God forbid it!

There is but one remedy. Back — back with renewed fidelity and subjection — to the original plan of God for this dispensation.

It is not easy for any of us to be simple and pursue unswervingly the line of service to which the Lord has called us, looking to Him for the direction and leading which we need. Yet such is the disciple's path as Scripture shows it, both by precept (Acts 20: 32; Rom. 14: 4; 2 Tim. 2: 15) and also example (Acts 8. 26; 11: 19-21; 16. 6-9).

For the Christianizing or converting of the world much may be needed in the way of arrangement. For the taking out of the nations a people for Christ's name, the divine process indicated, though most simple, is most efficacious. Souls are drawn out of the world to Christ by the faithful presentation of Christ Himself in the way of testimony. Granted that such faithful witness unto Christ is maintained, it is only further necessary that immediate and personal dependence upon Christ as Leader and Lord be found with each servant for the service to achieve its object.

From this simple acknowledgment of the leadership of the Lord Jesus we are very apt to stray. Read such words as these:

"A sound missionary strategy is essential if the missions . . . are to accomplish the best results. Small, independent missions, working without a statesmanlike plan, and without adequate knowledge of the field, should be discouraged."

"In such a difficult field only societies possessing a wide experience are able to meet the situation."

"How many missionaries are necessary to evangelise the country in our generation? The answer to this question has been given by the . . . conference . . . The question was considered scientifically. They made this calculation that one missionary for every 25,000 would be necessary."

These sentences were penned by men whom we have every reason to consider earnest Christians. The sentiments they express would doubtless commend themselves to most as being framed upon sound business lines, and being marked by eminent common sense. Yet they plainly reveal a view of the Lord's work out of harmony with that of Scripture.

What has the servant of Christ, be he a first-century apostle or a twentieth-century believer, to do with "sound strategy," "statesmanlike plans," or "scientific calculations"? We venture to say, Nothing — absolutely nothing!

The apostles returned to Jerusalem with those words ringing in their ears, "Ye shall be witnesses unto Me." How did they set about it? Did they appoint a committee to gain "adequate knowledge of the field" of operations, so that "scientific calculations" might be made, and "sound strategy" and "statesmanlike plans" decided upon? No, they simply betook themselves to their knees in the spirit of little children, and when they found themselves endued with power from on high they at once commenced their witness to Christ, boldly utilising each opening for testimony as it presented itself to them. Though they had been called by the Lord to positions of authority in the church of God, analogous to the position of an army officer when compared with a common soldier, yet they recognized that it was not theirs to plan the campaign, but to do what they were told. They had supreme confidence in their great Commander; His "adequate knowledge," His "strategy," His "plans" they accepted as sufficient; and they were content to proceed under His direction whether directly or providentially conveyed to them.

The Acts of the Apostles, supplemented by occasional glimpses of Paul's ministry, afforded by his epistles, show us with what astonishing success the great "Prince [or Leader] and Saviour" (Acts 5: 31) conducted His campaign from His seat in the heavens. Within thirty years the gospel had been fully preached "from Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum," and that through the instrumentality of one man, the apostle Paul, aided by a few helpers; and if any failure is apparent in the story, it was when that same eminent servant of God in well-meaning zeal for His own nation, insisted upon forming his own "statesmanlike plan" of going up to Jerusalem, feeling that he indeed of all people had an "adequate knowledge" of that field. From that point his liberty was curtailed, and he went a prisoner to Rome.

In Acts 11: 19-21 we read how a few men of no particular note — their names are not even mentioned — travelled from Jerusalem into the region of Antioch. Had they lived in the twentieth century they would have been described, we fear, as a small, independent mission, "working without a statesmanlike plan, and without adequate knowledge of the field," and as such, according to the authority quoted, they should have been discouraged. Their great Master, the Lord Jesus, however, thought otherwise. His hand was with them and there were wonderful results leading to the formation of one of the greatest churches of primitive times.

But though these men of Cyprus and Cyrene worked in independence of even the apostles, they were evidently thoroughly in dependence upon God. They did not concern themselves about "strategy," since, far from being commanders, they were only common soldiers. Neither did they form plans, statesmanlike or otherwise, and expect God to fall in with their arrangements. They rather sought to discover God's plans, and to exercise that humility of mind which would enable them to fit in to His arrangements. Between these two lines of conduct there is all the difference in the world.

At that moment, Stephen having been martyred, God was definitely passing by the perverse Jewish nation, and sending the gospel to the Gentiles, as witnessed in the case of Cornelius (Acts 10). These men, acting in concert with this divine move, "spake unto the Grecians, preaching the Lord

Jesus." They did not indulge in sentimental talk about "Jesus," as do many nowadays; they preached Jesus as LORD. "The hand of the LORD was with them." In result "a great number believed and turned to the LORD."

These humble individuals, belonging to no missionary society and without any of these supposed requirements, did indeed "accomplish the best results." They won many converts, and those converts were attached not merely to the preachers but to the LORD.

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Probably all Christians would agree that the Holy Spirit of God is the power for Christian service but let us inquire as to the way in which He exercises His power. Does He come to help us in our projects for the Lord, or does He condescend to use us as instruments in carrying out the Lord's own projects? In other words, Do we wield Him, or does He wield us?

The former idea obviously fits in with the ideas which we have ventured to challenge in the preceding section. But then — mark it well! — if, having founded large and influential societies and formed statesmanlike plans, and having learned how to bend and use the Spirit to our arrangements, we conduct a successful campaign, how all will redound to the credit and glory of — OURSELVES!

If, on the other hand, any servant of Christ is content to keep in his own little place, to seek in communion with the Lord to recognize His plans, and to be thoroughly subject to and usable by His Spirit, then the success which certainly will follow — though not perhaps in quite the way of our thinking — will redound to the glory of God!

When, having led Israel over Jordan, Joshua saw the Man with drawn sword in His hand, he assumed that He appeared to act as . helper either for Israel or for Israel's enemies. The mysterious Stranger corrected his thoughts. He had come, not as helper, but as Leader. "And He said, Nay; but as Captain of the host of the Lord am I now come" (Joshua 5: 14). The Spirit's place today amidst the hosts of the Lord is analogous to this.

Do we really believe in the presence and power of the Spirit of God? One wonders! Read, for instance, these extracts:

"The most urgent need . . . is financial support. Without it, no matter what doors are open, no matter what suitable candidates are offering, no matter how loud and urgent the call from those who are perishing in the darkness, we are helpless."

"Nothing is of greater importance than to learn how to loose, by persistent, mighty, aggressive prayer, the money power of the world. Satan knows that if he can only hold the gold in his grip, all such work as we are interested in will languish, and all new victories for our King will become impossible."

"There is nothing to hinder us but finance."

Are these things really so? The Spirit of God has come to earth as THE SERVANT of God s purposes (see Luke 14: 17). He it is who is compelling men to come in to the gospel feast. Will HIS operations come to a standstill if Satan succeeds in engineering a "corner" in gold?

In the apostolic days there was plenty of power, but it most emphatically was not money power. Peter had to say directly after the great triumph of Pentecost, "Silver and gold have I none" (Acts 3: 6). Paul, reviewing much of his life, had to speak of "hunger and thirst," of "cold and nakedness" (2 Cor. 11: 27).

To give of one's worldly goods or money to the work of the Lord is a great privilege from which but few Christians are so poor as to be altogether debarred. Would to God that we were all far more alive to our responsibility as well as privilege in this matter, but let us not unduly magnify the money question. It really is one of the least important.

The fact is that, speaking generally, the hindrances to God's work lie in nearly every quarter except finance. British missionary and evangelistic societies alone handle a million or two sterling every year, and yet astonishingly little is done in the way of results for all this expenditure. Why? Our diagnosis would be:

1. The inroads caused by false doctrine in the professing church at home. These inroads are so great in all directions as to almost amount to apostasy.

2. The invasion of the church by the world, leading to the adoption of worldly methods in the work of the Lord as well as sapping away its spiritual power. The Nazariteship of the church has been lost, hence its former Samson-like power has departed.

3 The state of division and subdivision into which the church has been plunged as the result of the foregoing.

These are the things which lead to "grieving" or "quenching" the Spirit and the decay of power.

If a fourth reason might be added to the above, it would be the large measure in which the Spirit of God Himself is ignored or relegated to the background in this matter. In 1 Corinthians 2, Paul reviews and explains his ministry, and seven times over does he lay stress upon the Spirit of God. The brain-power of the "natural man" he rules completely out of court (ver. 9). The natural "excellency of speech" or "wisdom" of a spiritual man like himself he discards (ver. 1). Whilst stirring up the liberality of the saints of God in a later chapter, here he does not even mention money, certainly not the money of the world.

The servant of God runs to the world and begs to be allowed to share in its money-power! A sorrowful spectacle truly! Well might the world scornfully reply, "What! Has not your God the skill and foresight which our captains of commerce possess? Can He not provide for His own work? Or is it that you have run astray from His leadings, and therefore, failing support from Him, you turn to us?"

Let us, brethren, ask ourselves these questions, and allow their force to come home to our souls. Then by His grace we may avoid such mistakes, and with them the humiliation of being asked such questions by the world.

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Does that which has been stated carry your conscience with it, commending itself as being in accord with the Scriptures of truth? Then see that it fails not of practical result.

Do not be beguiled into treating it as merely religious idealism, something lovely in theory, but unworkable in practice.

Such were the divine instructions and such was primitive Christian practice. "Back to the divine plan, the divine process and the divine power," should be our watchword. Let us not wait for others to adopt it. That is not our responsibility. It is our responsibility to adopt it for ourselves.

Let us ask grace from God so to do.