

“THE MAGNIFICENT PURPOSE”

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Read Philippians 1:12–30

In a world where THEOLOGY must catch up with TECHNOLOGY and become its master, and at a time in human history when SURVIVAL makes sense only in terms of SALVATION, we are taking time to look at the life of a man who recognized God’s Moment when it came, who knew self-discipline as few have ever known it, who in early life—and throughout all of life—made the Saviorhood and Lordship of Christ the non-negotiable foundation and fact of his life, who as a very young man heard God’s call, “Whom shall I send to America, and who will go for us?” and responded, “Here am I, Lord. Send me.” On these premises he came to this young nation and literally covered it with the Gospel, and left a Methodist Church committed to that Gospel for its own world.

The life of Francis Asbury is fascinating. We owe much to his biographers, without whose tireless work we would be much the poorer. However, I am most fascinated by the magnificent purpose of his coming to America on the one hand, and the obvious outcroppings of numberless evidences of man’s cry for renewal in Christ and the thrilling relevance of the Asburian emphases to our day and need on the other hand. We labor under no illusions of Asbury’s infallibility—nor ours. We will not allow ourselves to be enslaved by methods that worked in his day but obviously cannot work in ours. We will not be disturbed about his pattern of celibacy for himself nor his requirement in like manner for his preachers.

What does fascinate me is his announced purpose for his coming to America. On September 4, 1771, he set sail for America. On

September 12, 1771, he wrote in his journal, on board ship—"Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honour? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No: *I am going to live to God.*" We will seek to examine that *purpose* in its depth and find for our day the changeless character of the mission and the missionary which, hopefully, will so enflame our spirits, strengthen our wills, and empower our dedication that the result will be a renewal of the Christian and the Church in the 70's unprecedented in our history. "AND TO BRING OTHERS SO TO DO." Asbury spent a long life doing precisely this. He would not knowingly waver from this purpose! It is in this *MAGNIFICENT PURPOSE*, and in man's present hunger for true renewal that I find both *HOPE* and *COMMITMENT*. What, for our day, are the reflections and hope in this purpose?

First of all, IT IS *CHRIST-CENTERED*. Asbury stood in the noble line of true Apostolic Succession when he joined Paul in affirming: "For to me life is Christ." Dr. James S. Stewart, that brilliant and dedicated Scottish preacher, has reminded us that, "What the apostles preached was neither a philosophy of life nor a theory of redemption. THEY PREACHED EVENTS. They anchored their Gospel in history They wasted no time exhorting their hearers with moral homilies, or cajoling them with novel ideologies, or trying to build a Church on the shifting foundations of a man-centered constitution. They confronted them with something which had been done and done by God for ever—one mighty act, decisive, final and complete." We call it "The Christ Event."

"On Christ, the solid rock I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand."

The greatest news that greeted grieving disciples after the resurrection of Jesus were the words: "Jesus Christ is alive!" This is still the greatest news. More than that, HE IS LORD OF LIFE. He is both the LIVING SAVIOR And the LIVING LORD! He forgives our sins, through the power of His living Spirit He cleanses us from within. He also reigns in our daily lives, if we are His followers indeed. He is King, now. We are not sent out into the world to "make Christ King." This would be sheer presumption, when God has already made Him King and given Him the Name which is above every name. We do not go out in Mission with the intent of helping Christ to become King. We go out in Mission because He IS King already, *and the King has sent us out!* We are not to conduct a world-wide propaganda campaign for Christ's enthronement. We go out with the Glad Good News that unto

everyone of us “is born a Savior,” and that Savior is Lord of History, Lord of Life, and Lord of Death.

Whatever Renewal the Church will know in our day—and I firmly believe the Church is IN renewal at this moment—MUST be—and indeed WILL be—Christ-centered. Whenever the Church at any point in History has had an experience to share it has been when the Church has recognized anew the Saviorhood and Lordship of Christ.

“His Kingdom cannot fail;
He rules o’er earth and heaven;
The keys of death and hell
Are to our Jesus given.”

Furthermore, renewal will come—or REVIVAL, if you prefer that word—whenever we who profess to know Christ personally desire to share this experience with others. If we have met the Lord in the secret places of our own souls; if we have the experience Charles Wesley tried so hard to describe when he sang out:

“O Thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart;”

If we believe we are “heirs of God, joint-heirs with Christ,” we can not rest until that living experience has become the experience of all mankind. Dr. James S. Stewart again speaks to us with incisive conviction: “Interest in the world crusade of Christianity thus stands in direct ratio to the vitality of personal religion.”

Hear again the words of Paul as he spoke to the Athenians, as the New English Bible renders that short, but powerful sermon: “Men of Athens, I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous. For as I was going round looking at the objects of your worship, I noticed among other things an altar bearing the inscription “To an Unknown God.” What you worship *BUT DO NOT KNOW*—this is what I now proclaim.”

There is absolutely no doubt about it. The Methodist Revival was Christ-centered. It MUST be so today. I believe it WILL be so today. I believe it is now so in many places around the world.

This “magnificent Purpose” of Asbury’s was not only Christ-centered. It was, without doubt, PERSON DIRECTED. “I am going to live to God, AND TO BRING OTHERS SO TO DO.” Let no one think that I am here advocating a “private pietism: which leaves untouched the great social problems which threaten to devastate our

world before we know what is happening. In fact, Methodism has never left this facet of the faith out of its belief or practice. From the days of Wesley to our own day, Methodism has believed strongly that the Gospel must be both proclaimed and demonstrated; it must be spoken to the heart of man and to his social consciousness as well.

This will require sincere personal repentance. I use the word "personal" again, not to separate it from social application, but actually to open the only door possible to social renewal through persons as individuals or in communities.

Dr. Douglas J. Hall, in an article in *Religion and Life* entitled, "The Theology of Hope in an Officially Optimistic Society," has said that technological progress is outrunning theological and moral progress, and quotes Martin Buber who said: "Technology has become leaderless, the unlimited Mastery of the Means that no longer have to answer to any ends." Then Hall adds his own comment: "The threat to the future is not the wrong use of machinery but the absence of criteria for distinguishing Right and Wrong uses."

In fact, it is precisely because Methodism makes its message person-directed that it then has social relevance. There are NO social problems or issues or opportunities except as these can be seen in and through persons. Hunger and illness and illiteracy are not "issues." They are words we use to describe HUMAN agony and HUMAN need and HUMAN hope. It is not that human problems make necessary social concerns. On the contrary, it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, directed to persons for whom Christ died, that makes necessary a Christian social concern for all the sons and daughters of earth.

We may argue with Asbury's method, as many of his contemporaries did with sometimes abrasive and judgmental language, but we cannot argue with his motive. That motive was to reach persons everywhere. This was Christ's motive. We must remind ourselves that Jesus Christ did not only die for principles—*HE DIED FOR PERSONS*. He did not establish His Church on issues. He built it, and continues to build it, on the solid rock of His own Personhood as the Revelation of God among men, laid it on the shoulders of the apostles and prophets, and calls upon us limited creatures to carry our crosses in this noble procession as loyal subjects of the King.

This will require a renewed sense of personal responsibility. It is "my cross" I am to take up, not yours. Christ does not require that we carry "His cross for Him," but only that we take up "our cross" and follow Him.

Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, in a recent syndicated article, affirmed: "When a man loses a sense of personal accountability, the three ultimate expressions of carnality, violence and insanity begin to clog the sewers of our nation . . . The way out is to be found through creative minorities: small groups of dedicated people who are resolved to reform themselves before reforming neighbors. The one argument that has not been used and which eventually always wins is holiness."

It is in the atmosphere of persons—and only in this context—that Love can become known. "God so loved the world of persons that He gave His only begotten Son" It is only through persons that His love can be transmitted. This is the one great lesson the Church has yet to learn in fuller measure before the Renewal we desire can really come in its fullness. This is the point at which our Blessed Lord brought two of the great Old Testament commandments together in one and called upon us to "love the Lord our God with *all* of the heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourself."

Recently a former prison warden who had witnessed 150 executions while a penologist in California told a college audience that LOVE, not punishment, is the main deterrent to crime. "A family that has love, direction, religion and discipline usually does not produce a criminal," Clifton Duffy told the students. "And a home where these essentials are lacking usually does," he added.

Yes, the Magnificent Purpose, the Renewal of the Church, the Revival for which we long and pray must be Person-Directed.

Finally, let me suggest this Magnificent Purpose was also SPIRIT-EMPOWERED! There should never be any mistake about that. And yet, this is one point at which contemporary ecclesiology so often becomes confused. We speak of "power struggles," and look to the Church to "empower" us. We speak of "empowering powerless nations" through economic and political means. However, as valuable as these references are, especially as they point to certain needs, we still miss the point. These are "authority centers" we are talking about. The Church does indeed "authorize" its ordained ministry to proclaim the Word, to perform the Sacraments of the Church, and to administer the work of the Church as Pastors. The Church does indeed "authorize" bishops to ordain deacons and elders, to appoint the ministers, to preside in the sessions of the conferences, and a few other duties which attempt to "oversee the temporal and spiritual" work of the Church. However, EMPOWER the ordained or the consecrated to the episcopal office THE CHURCH CANNOT. "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the

earth.” Acts 1:8. Renewal cannot possibly be without the empowering of the Holy Spirit. Dry bones CAN live only as the breath of God is breathed into them.

At this point it would seem important to suggest four words that can help us to see this great truth in clearer perspective. The first word is “Gift.” The Holy Spirit is a Gift. He was in the very center of the Pentecostal experience when Peter proclaimed: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the *Gift* of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you, and to your children, and to all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God may call. Acts 2:38–39. Note, please, the Holy Spirit is a GIFT. The command to “repent and be baptized, everyone of you, in the name of Jesus the Messiah,” was not a pre-condition for “earning” the Holy Spirit. It was a command to be observed “for the forgiveness of your sins.” THEN, “you will receive the GIFT of the Holy Spirit. For the PROMISE is to you . . .” Let us see clearly, there are no conditions underlying GIFTS or PROMISES. I have another word to suggest in a moment, but at this point let me state again, THE HOLY SPIRIT IS A PROMISE AND A GIFT, and there are no pre-conditions underlying a promise of a gift. Even the command to “wait in Jerusalem” was not a precondition to the coming of Holy Spirit. Whatever follows, and there is much that follows, let us see the Holy Spirit as God’s Gift of Himself. Jesus made it clear in His last discourse that the “*Father* would send the Comforter,” and at no point in this discourse did Jesus lay down conditions to be met BEFORE the Father would send the Comforter. The Holy Spirit is God’s *Gift* of Himself.

The second word which must fit into this mosaic is the word “Receive.” In that upper room where the disciples were huddled in fear, the risen Christ came and said, “RECEIVE the Holy Spirit.” Then He told them, “As the Father has sent me, even so send I you.” Again, let us look at Peter’s sermon: “Repent and be baptized . . . and you will RECEIVE the GIFT of the Holy Spirit.” A gift is given without condition, *but before we can benefit by it we MUST RECEIVE IT*. “Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man will open . . .” was the PROMISE to the lukewarm Church of Laodicea. It is still the PROMISE to the Church of the twentieth century. He stands at the door and knocks WITHOUT ANY PRECONDITIONS. But, it is still in my power to open the door, by His grace, and receive Him or leave it closed. God forbid that the Church should refuse to open that door.

The third word is FAITH. Of course we open the door to receive the Gift through FAITH. And even this faith is the gift of God. But it must be exercised by man. It is by FAITH that I open the door and by FAITH that I receive the Gift. It is by FAITH in Him who gives it, by FAITH in the purpose of the Gift, by FAITH in the GIFT Himself that I open the door. "Into my heart. Into my heart. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus. Come in today. Come in to stay. Come into my heart, Lord Jesus," my FAITH cries out in love. *AND THROUGH THIS FAITH HE COMES. YES, HE REALLY COMES, AS THE GIFT OF GOD.*

The fourth word is the word "Obedience." If by FAITH I open the door of my heart and life to RECEIVE the GIFT of the Holy Spirit PROMISED by the Father—if Christ is to be both my Savior from sin and my Lord of Life, then I WILL obey Him as He leads and empowers me. Obedience does not come as a pre-condition. How on earth could I obey Him without His help? Obedience comes after receiving the Gift. Then the FRUITS of the Spirit become real because the ROOTS are there.

We all seek this Renewal, do we not? Bernard Shaw gives a good illustration of the hope that still burns in the breast of so many people, in his play, "Too True to Be Good," written just before the Second World War. One of his characters says: "I stand midway between youth and age like a man who has missed his train; too late for the last and too early for the next. I have no Bible, no creed: the war has shot both out of my hands . . . I am ignorant: I have lost my nerve and am intimidated: all I know is that I must find the way of life, for myself or all of us, or we shall surely perish." That is the voice of a soul in despair but who is still groping in the darkness to find the light and the way. Could it be that Methodism in the 70's will rediscover the "Magnificent Purpose" which brought Francis Asbury to America two hundred years ago, and set him in the saddle to cover the land as no one else was willing to do, and will place this Purpose within the context of a space-age world with the content of the changeless Good News of God's Love for all mankind, and take this nation—and the world—for Christ. Could it be? I think it will be so.

This will require that we take Christ at His Word. It will require a giant leap of faith. John Keats in one of his letters uses a vivid, memorable expression about the literature of Shakespearean England. He speaks of "the indescribable gusto of the Elizabethan voice." Dr. James S. Stewart, that tremendous Scottish preacher, retired from New College, Edinburgh University, comments on this statement of

Keats and applies it to the Christian of the New Testament. He says: "They are possessed by an amazing consciousness of faith. You cannot fail to feel "the indescribable gusto" of the early Christian voice. It is important to notice their own explanation of this. They never attributed it to anything in themselves. You do not find them strutting about in ostentatious complacency, "We are able!" What you do find over and over again is "He is able."

"He is able to succor them that are tempted," Heb. 2:18.

"He is able to save them to the uttermost," Heb. 7:25.

"He is able to keep you from falling," Jude 24.

"He is able to subdue all things unto himself," Phil. 3:12.

"He is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day," 2 Timothy 1:12.

"He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think," Ephesians 3:20.

And He is: if we take Him at His Word, if we are committed in loving obedience to His leadership, if we are sincerely sensitive to the hungers and hopes of persons.

Dear God! What a chance!

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