

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY?

The nature of the missionary call

By the RT. REV. FRANK HOUGHTON, B.A.

*Vicar of St. Mark's Church, Leamington Spa, and President of the I.V.F.,
1959-60*

THE two questions to which I am going to attempt a necessarily brief and inadequate answer are: 'Whose business is it to spread the good news concerning Jesus Christ?' and 'What is, in essence, the good news?' Our source-book must obviously be the New Testament and, in particular, the Acts of the Apostles. But we shall be bound to consider also whether, in our day, the task of spreading the good news is being undertaken as our Lord intended it should be, and whether the content of the good news now being proclaimed is identical with that proclaimed in the first century of the Christian era.

WHO IS CALLED TO PREACH THE GOSPEL?

One answer to the first question, accepted either explicitly or implicitly by vast numbers of Christian people today, is that Christ committed the task of spreading the good news to His apostles. They in turn laid hands upon others, and set them apart for this ministry. Quite apart from any mechanical theory of apostolic succession (which evangelical Christians generally reject) this answer to the question assumes that it is the accredited ministers of the gospel and — as far as work overseas is concerned — missionaries sent forth by accredited agencies, whose business it is to spread the good news.

Now it is certain that the apostles were given a position of special prominence in the building of the Christian Church. The Ephesian Christians, for example, were told that they belonged to the family of God, 'and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets' (Eph. ii. 20). The apostles might be termed 'foundation-members' of the Church. But our Lord's prayer in John xvii, while it refers primarily to the apostles as 'the men which thou gavest me out of the world' (Jn. xvii. 6), must surely include all who had become truly His; and when He prays 'for them also which shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one' (Jn. xvii. 20, 21), He is obviously referring to the whole Christian Church, to all who had become believers through the word of any of His disciples. Even during His own ministry there were the Seventy whom He commissioned as well as the Twelve (Lk. x. 1, 2), and the 'disciples' to whom He said, 'As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you' (Jn. xx. 21), certainly included more than the remaining eleven apostles. In Luke xxiv. 33 they are spoken of as 'the eleven, . . . and them that were with them', and this whole group, women as well as men, was commissioned in Luke xxiv. 45-49, which is a parallel passage to the words of the same author (St. Luke) in Acts i. 8.

The statement (for it is more a statement than a command) in Acts i. 8, rsv, is: 'You shall be my witnesses', beginning from Jerusalem but in ever-extending circles to 'the end of the earth', and it is accompanied by a promise, 'You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you.' Now who in fact received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost?

From Acts i. 15 we learn that the company of disciples gathered in Jerusalem numbered 120, and the word 'all' in Acts ii. 4 ('They were *all* filled with the Holy Ghost') implies that the whole company received this endowment.

THE PREACHERS OF THE EARLY CHURCH

But someone will ask, 'Who in fact were the preachers of the good news?' Apart from the original proclamation by the whole group of 'the wonderful works of God' (Acts ii. 11), the actual sermon on the day of Pentecost was, of course, preached by Peter, and in chapters iii, iv and v it is Peter and John who are mentioned as bearing testimony, both to the Jewish council, and to the people generally. Yet even in those early days it was the whole group who gathered for prayer, and their petition (Acts iv. 29) was that *all* might have boldness to speak the word. What was the result? 'They were *all* filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness' (Acts iv. 31). It is true that in verse 33 the apostles are again singled out as witnesses of the resurrection, and it was 'by the hands of the apostles' that 'many signs and wonders' were wrought (Acts v. 12). But in chapter vi, which deals with the appointment of the seven so-called 'deacons' for administrative work, we find one of them, Stephen, breaking away from any narrow preoccupation with that assignment, and preaching with great power (Acts vi. 8ff.).

It may be argued that the disciples generally were too readily, and without divine sanction, accepting the apostles as the only men to preach the word. But after Stephen's death, when 'they were all scattered abroad throughout the regions of Judaea and Samaria' — unreached as yet, in spite of the terms of the commission of Acts i. 8 — 'they that were scattered abroad went every where preaching the word' (Acts viii. 1, 4), without any sort of ordination or commission. Only the apostles (verse 1) were left to continue the witness in Jerusalem!

How did these ordinary Christians fulfil their task? Philip, indeed, one of the seven, proved eminent as an evangelist, but we are not to suppose that all of them had his gift, or gave themselves to what is called 'whole-time service'. Yet as they travelled they preached the word wherever they went — first of all to Jews only, and then to Greeks as well, with amazing results (Acts xi. 19-21).

Thus the initial evangelization of Greeks as well as Jews in Antioch — after Rome and Alexandria the third largest city of the Roman world — was carried through by the rank and file, with no apostle or recognized leader among them. It was they who established the church. True, the coming of Barnabas, and later of Saul, added enormously, in depth and in impetus, to the work already done (Acts xi. 22-26), but it was they who laid the foundation.

How did they live? Certainly it was not the church in Jerusalem which supported this outreach. On the contrary, one of the first acts of the church at Antioch in its corporate capacity was to 'send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea'! (Acts xi. 29). Since every Jewish boy learned a trade, it would seem that it was not too difficult for them to earn a living, and that there was little redundancy in Antioch. Later, presumably, many of them returned to Cyprus, Cyrene, and elsewhere (Acts xi. 20), and preached the word in their home towns.

It will help to keep the balance where it should be to recall that a little later there were a number of 'prophets and teachers' in the church at Antioch (Acts xiii. 1), and God's call came to them to 'separate' the two most outstanding leaders, Barnabas and Saul, for evangelism in the regions beyond. Yes, they were 'professional' missionaries, sometimes self-supporting, sometimes receiving gifts from the churches, and it was they

who crossed to Asia Minor, and then to Europe, with the good news. Paul could claim ten or twelve years later that 'from Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum, I have fully preached the gospel of Christ' (Rom. xv. 19).

But when Paul eventually reached Rome, it was to find a Christian church already in existence there. There were Christians also at the port of Puteoli (Acts xxviii. 13, 14). If it was the professional missionaries who first evangelized Corinth and Ephesus and Philippi and Thessalonica and other cities, it seems to have been the 'non-professionals' who first brought the good news to Rome — possibly, indeed, the 'strangers of Rome' who were amongst the three thousand converted on the day of Pentecost (Acts ii. 10).

Moreover, by and large, Paul and his company spent a comparatively short time in the cities where they preached the word and established churches (Corinth and Ephesus may be regarded as exceptions). But the good news spread in all the surrounding areas after Paul had left. Thessalonica is, I believe, only an example (though a particularly striking one) of what must have happened throughout the Roman world. 1 Thessalonians chapter i, adds much to our knowledge of the results of the campaign described in Acts xvii. 1-9. First, we learn that the good news came to these people 'not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction' (1 Thes. i. 5, RSV). Secondly, they not only received the word, but their lives were transformed by it (1 Thes. i. 6, 7). Thirdly, the church in that region spread by spontaneous expansion, for from them 'sounded out the word of the Lord,' throughout the provinces of Macedonia and Achaia, and 'in every place' in that part of Greece (1 Thes. i. 8).

We are not to suppose that this remarkable piece of evangelization was accomplished mainly by teams sent out from Thessalonica for the purpose. No, wherever the Thessalonian Christians went in the course of their ordinary business, they bore their testimony to the change that had taken place in their lives. They had turned to God from idols to serve a God who is living and true, and to wait for His Son from heaven, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thes. i. 9, 10).

Thus, after Pentecost, the enemy was on the defensive, seeking every possible means of hindering the expansion of the Church. The words of the Jewish council, '*that it spread no further*' (Acts iv. 17), sum up the devil's strategy. Despite this, as we have seen, throughout the thirty years covered in the record of the Acts of the Apostles, the Church retained the offensive. It is arguable that the expansion ought to have begun earlier, that the thousands converted at Pentecost, or soon after, ought not to have enjoyed the apostles' ministry in Jerusalem for quite so long. It was not obedience to the commission of Acts i. 8 which scattered them, but the fierce persecution which followed the death of Stephen. On the other hand, as we have seen, these early disciples followed the instinct implanted in them by the Holy Spirit, and without pressure from the apostles or anyone else, preached the word wherever they went. The devil's attempt to stamp out the fire simply helped to scatter it throughout the world.

THE PRINCIPLE APPLIED TODAY

But how spasmodic, and often how feeble, have been the attempts to spread the good news in the centuries which followed! Only in the last 150 years has the Christian Church *as a whole* even begun to recognize its responsibility. 'Whose business is it, then, to spread the good news concerning Jesus Christ?' Are we ready to acknowledge that *not one Christian* is exempt from the responsibility? Why is the good news not spreading through our own localities as it did from Thessalonica, and as it has spread in some, at least, of the overseas mission fields? I remember an area on the

coast of Chekiang, China (would that it were more typical of the Church throughout that land!) where the Church which began in the conversion of one family spread in fifteen or twenty years until twenty churches were dotted about, at distances of a few miles, when I was privileged to visit the area in 1935. But a few years later, when I was relating the story of this spontaneous growth at a meeting in America, a lady missionary who had recently returned from the area rose in her seat and corrected me. 'There are forty churches there now', she said — and all this with only an occasional visit from missionaries, the work of God's Spirit through simple Chinese believers.

If we admit that, in the twentieth century as in the first, not every Christian is called to be a whole-time missionary, are we concerned that from every church in England there should at least be representatives overseas? Would a flourishing church in England (I dare not name any one of them!) be prepared to 'separate' its most eminent leaders for overseas work at the call of the Holy Spirit? Thank God for the witness of not a few Christian men in government and business circles who have commended the gospel and strengthened the hands of missionaries and national Christians overseas by their life and example. But the great majority of such men did not leave England because they felt called to witness overseas. Only, wherever they were, they did not forget that they were Christians. If your trade or profession takes you to a non-Christian country, obviously you ought to witness there as occasion offers (as occasion certainly will!).

But if, then, my first question is answered, and we are all in it, I suggest that if revival comes we ought to expect many more to offer for whole-time service, and still more — a very large number indeed — to consider whether they ought not to choose to use their training and their skills in non-Christian lands, wherever openings arise, and thus at least to encourage Christian nationals and foreign missionaries, or even (as at Antioch) to expect God to use them in the initial work of evangelization.

THE ESSENCE OF THE GOSPEL

As to the second question, 'What is, in essence, the good news?', there is, of course, a danger in seeking for an answer in the Acts of the Apostles in isolation from the rest of the New Testament. But this much at least is clear — that the early disciples regarded Jesus Christ Himself as the Essence of the good news. The gospel proclaimed by Peter on the day of Pentecost concerned Jesus of Nazareth, dying, risen, exalted at God's right hand, sending the Holy Spirit that very day to begin His work of conviction. The extraordinary happenings of that day were not not only a fulfilment of Old Testament prophecy, but of the promise which Jesus Himself had given. (Note especially Acts ii. 33: '*He* — i.e. Jesus of Nazareth — hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear'.) Salvation was to be found in Him alone (Acts iv. 12). An astonishing summary of the apostolic message is contained in Acts v. 30-32. There you find the Three Persons in the Trinity, the God of the Old Testament, the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ, exalted as Prince and Saviour, the free gift of repentance, and of the forgiveness of sins, and of the Holy Spirit. What did the apostles preach? 'They ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ' (Acts v. 42). When Philip went down to Samaria, he 'preached Christ unto them' (Acts viii. 5). To the Ethiopian eunuch he 'preached . . . Jesus' (Acts viii. 35). Immediately after his conversion, Saul 'preached Christ' at Damascus (Acts ix. 20). The 'word' preached to Cornelius and his company concerned the life, death, resurrection and coming again in judgment, of Jesus of Nazareth, and the promise of the forgiveness of sins by faith in Him (Acts x). The non-professional evangelists in Antioch preached 'the Lord Jesus' (Acts xi. 20). Of course they all proclaimed Him to be

the Messiah promised to Israel. Through Him men might receive the forgiveness of sins, being justified by faith in Him, as they could not be justified by the law of Moses (Acts xiii. 38, 39).

In fact, there is astonishing agreement between the message proclaimed by the heralds of the good news in the Acts of the Apostles, and the brief charge given to the first disciples by our Lord Himself when He commissioned them to go forth in His name, and preach 'among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem' (Lk. xxiv. 47). They were to preach a Christ who must suffer and rise from the dead before there would be any good news to proclaim. Both repentance and the forgiveness of sins were to be preached 'in his name'.

But at the same time, if we really want to know more fully what Paul preached in Galatia, the record in Acts xiii and xiv is not our only source of information. Paul wrote a letter to the Galatians soon after the churches had been established there, showing that while he was with them he had made clear to them the purpose of Christ's death, the miracle of Christ's risen life in the believer, and, above all, the fact that both justification and sanctification are given by faith alone. Or, if we ask what Paul preached at Corinth, apart from the meagre statements in Acts xviii, we know from I Corinthians that he concentrated all his teaching upon 'Jesus Christ, and him crucified' (1 Cor. ii. 2). Long before he reached Rome (as Acts xviii records), he had written the Epistle to the Romans, which contains the most systematic statement of the good news, which he had proved to be 'the power of God unto salvation' (Rom. i. 16). Festus, the proconsul in Judaea, though far from being convinced, was astute enough to recognize that the message was all about '*one Jesus, which was dead, whom Paul affirmed to be alive*' (Acts xxv. 19). The doctrines concerning Him emerge, with no unnatural forcing, from His Person and the facts of His life and death and resurrection, which are seen to be not only facts of history, but acts of God. The Letters which fill in the necessarily brief story of the Acts were written, most of them, during the actual period covered by St. Luke, and thus there is not the slightest doubt (at least to those who accept them as equally part of God's Word) that their teaching was in fact the teaching given to the first converts.

What is our message for today? In the words of our Lord Himself, 'This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent' (Jn. xvii. 3). Through Jesus Christ we make contact with the eternal God, and it is surprising how little knowledge is *essential* in order that that contact should be made. Every true Christian has made that contact, and is thereby able, and under obligation, to introduce the Saviour to others. But it must be his desire to be able to give 'a *reason* of the hope' that is in him (1 Pet. iii. 15), and to live worthily of such a Saviour. In other words, a deeper intellectual apprehension of the faith that we hold, and a life which reproduces, even ever so faintly, the likeness of the glorious Person whose we are, and whom we serve (Acts xxvii. 23), are vitally important assets for the Christian witness, whether professional or non-professional. All believers are witnesses, all should consider where God is calling them to spread the gospel.