

The General Spread of the Gospel

By John Wesley

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Sermon Number Sermon 63

Sermon Title The General Spread of the Gospel

Sermon Footnote (text of the 1872 edition)

Sermon Scripture "The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters covers the sea." Isa. 11:9.

I 1. In what a condition is the world at present! How does darkness, intellectual darkness, ignorance, with vice and misery attendant upon it, cover the face of the earth! From the accurate inquiry made with indefatigable pains by our ingenious countryman, Mr. Brerewood; (who travelled himself over a great part of the known world, in order to form the more exact judgment;) supposing the world to be divided into thirty parts, nineteen of them are professed Heathens, altogether as ignorant of Christ, as if he had never come into the world: Six of the remaining parts are professed Mahometans: So that only five in thirty are so much as nominally Christians!

2. And let it be remembered, that since this computation was made, many new nations have been discovered; numberless islands, particularly in the South Sea, large and well inhabited: But by whom? By Heathens of the basest sort; many of them inferior to the beasts of the field. Whether they eat men or no, (which indeed I cannot find any sufficient ground to believe,) they certainly kill all that fall into their hands. They are, therefore, more savage than lions; who kill no more creatures than are necessary to satisfy their present hunger. See the real dignity of human nature! Here it appears in its genuine purity, not polluted either by those "general corrupters, kings," or by the least tincture of religion! What will Abbe Raynal (that determined enemy to monarchy and revelation) say to this?

3. A little, and but a little, above the Heathens in religion, are the Mahometans. But how far and wide has this miserable delusion spread over the face of the earth! Insomuch that the Mahometans are considerably more in number (as six to five) than Christians. And by all the accounts which have any pretence to authenticity, these are also, in general, as utter strangers to all true religion as their four-footed brethren; as void of mercy as lions and tigers; as much given up to brutal lusts as bulls or goats. So that they are in truth a disgrace to human nature, and a plague to all that are under their iron yoke.

4. It is true, a celebrated writer (Lady Mary Wortley Montague) gives a very different character of them. With the finest flow of words, in the most elegant language, she labours to wash the Aethiop white. She represents them as many degrees above the Christians; as some of the most amiable people in the world; as possessed of all the social virtues; as some of the most accomplished of men. But I can in no wise receive her report: I cannot rely upon her authority. I believe those round about her had just as much religion as their admirer had when she was admitted into the interior parts of the Grand Seignior's seraglio. Notwithstanding, therefore, all that such a witness does or can say in their favour, I believe the Turks in general are little, if at all, better than the generality of the Heathens.

5. And little, if at all, better than the Turks, are the Christians in the Turkish dominions; even the best of them; those that live in the Morea, or are scattered up and down in Asia. The more numerous bodies of Georgian, Circassian, Mengrelian Christians, are a proverb of reproach to the Turks themselves; not only for their deplorable ignorance, but for their total, stupid, barbarous irreligion.

6. From the most authentic accounts we can obtain of the Southern Christians, those in Abyssinia, and of the Northern Churches, under the jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Moscow, we have reason to fear they are much in the same condition, both with regard to knowledge and religion, as those in Turkey. Or if those in Abyssinia are more civilized, and have a larger share of knowledge, yet they do not appear to have any more religion than either the Mahometans or Pagans.

7. The Western Churches seem to have the pre-eminence over all these in many respects. They have abundantly more knowledge: They have more scriptural and more rational modes of worship. Yet two thirds of them are still involved in the corruptions of the Church of Rome; and most of these are entirely unacquainted with either the theory or practice of religion. And as to those who are called Protestants, or Reformed, what acquaintance with it have they? Put Papists and Protestants, French and English together, the bulk of one and of the other nation; and what manner of Christians are they? Are they "holy as He that hath called them is holy?" Are they filled with "righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost?" Is there "that mind in them which was also in Christ Jesus?" And do they "walk as Christ also walked?" Nay, they are as far from it as hell is from heaven!

8. Such is the present state of mankind in all parts of the world! But how astonishing is this, if there is a God in heaven, and if his eyes are over all the earth! Can he despise the work of his own hand? Surely this is one of the greatest mysteries under heaven! How is it possible to reconcile this with either the wisdom or goodness of God? And what can give ease to a thoughtful mind under so melancholy a prospect? What but the consideration, that things will not always be so; that another scene will soon be opened? God will be jealous of his honour: He will arise and maintain his own cause. He will judge the prince of this world, and spoil him of his usurped dominion. He will give his Son "the Heathen for his inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for his possession." "The earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." The loving knowledge of God, producing uniform, uninterrupted holiness and happiness, shall cover the earth; shall fill every soul of man.

9. "Impossible," will some men say, "yea, the greatest of all impossibilities, that we should see a Christian world; yea, a Christian nation, or city! How can these things be?" On one supposition, indeed, not only all impossibility, but all difficulty vanishes away. Only suppose the Almighty to act irresistibly, and the thing is done; yea, with just the same ease as when "God said, Let there be light; and there was light." But then, man would be man no longer: His inmost nature would be

changed. He would no longer be a moral agent, any more than the sun or the wind; as he would no longer be endowed with liberty, -- a power of choosing, or self-determination: Consequently, he would no longer be capable of virtue or vice, of reward or punishment.

10. But setting aside this clumsy way of cutting the knot which we are not able to untie, how can all men be made holy and happy, while they continue men? While they still enjoy both the understanding, the affections, and the liberty which are essential to a moral agent? There seems to be a plain, simple way of removing this difficulty, without entangling ourselves in any subtle, metaphysical disquisitions. As God is One, so the work of God is uniform in all ages. May we not then conceive how he will work on the souls of men in times to come, by considering how he does work now, and how he has wrought in times past?

11. Take one instance of this, and such an instance as you cannot easily be deceived in. You know how God wrought in your own soul, when he first enabled you to say, "The life I now live, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me." He did not take away your understanding; but enlightened and strengthened it. He did not destroy any of your affections; rather they were more vigorous than before. Least of all did he take away your liberty; your power of choosing good or evil: He did not force you; but, being assisted by his grace, you, like Mary, chose the better part. Just so has he assisted five in one house to make that happy choice; fifty or five hundred in one city; and many thousands in a nation; -- without depriving any of them of that liberty which is essential to a moral agent.

12. Not that I deny, that there are exempt cases, wherein The "o'erwhelming power of saving grace does, for a time, work as irresistibly as lightning falling from heaven. But I speak of God's general manner of working, of which I have known innumerable instances; perhaps more within fifty years last past, than any one in England or in Europe. And with regard even to these exempt cases; although God does work irresistibly for the time, yet I do not believe there is any human soul in which God works irresistibly at all times. Nay, I am fully persuaded there is not. I am persuaded, there are no men living that

have not many times "resisted the Holy Ghost," and made void "the counsel of God against themselves." Yea, I am persuaded every child of God has had, at some time, "life and death set before him," eternal life and eternal death; and has in himself the casting voice. So true is that well-known saying of St. Austin, (one of the noblest he ever uttered,) Qui fecit nos sine nobis, non salvabit nos sine nobis: "He that made us without ourselves, will not save us without ourselves." Now in the same manner as God has converted so many to himself without destroying their liberty, he can undoubtedly convert whole nations, or the whole world; and it is as easy to him to convert a world, as one individual soul.

13. Let us observe what God has done already. Between fifty and sixty years ago, God raised up a few young men, in the University of Oxford, to testify those grand truths, which were then little attended to: -- That without holiness no man shall see the Lord; -- that this holiness is the work of God, who worketh in us both to will and to do; -- that he doeth it of his own good pleasure, merely for the merits of Christ; -- that this holiness is the mind that was in Christ; enabling us to walk as he also walked; -- that no man can be thus sanctified till he is justified; -- and, that we are justified by faith alone. These great truths they declared on all occasions, in private and in public; having no design but to promote the glory of God, and no desire but to save souls from death.

14. From Oxford, where it first appeared, the little leaven spread wider and wider. More and more saw the truth as it is in Jesus, and received it in the love thereof. More and more found "redemption through the blood of Jesus, even the forgiveness of sins." They were born again of his Spirit, and filled with righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost. It afterwards spread to every part of the land, and a little one became a thousand. It then spread into North Britain and Ireland; and, a few years after into New-York, Pennsylvania, and many other provinces in America, even as high as Newfoundland and Nova-Scotia. So that, although at first this "grain of mustard- seed" was "the least of all the seeds;" yet, in a few years, it grew into a "large tree, and put forth great branches."

15. Generally, when these truths, justification by faith in particular, were declared in any large town, after a few days or weeks, there came

suddenly on the great congregation, -- not in a corner, at London, Bristol, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in particular, -- a violent and impetuous power, which, Like mighty wind or torrent fierce, Did then opposers all o'er-run. And this frequently continued, with shorter or longer intervals, for several weeks or months. But it gradually subsided, and then the work of God was carried on by gentle degrees; while that Spirit, in watering the seed that had been sown, in confirming and strengthening them that had believed, Deign'd his influence to infuse, Secret, refreshing as the silent dews. And this difference in his usual manner of working was observable not only in Great Britain and Ireland, but in every part of America, from South to North, wherever the word of God came with power.

16. Is it not then highly probable, that God will carry on his work in the same manner as he has begun? That he will carry it on, I cannot doubt; however Luther may affirm, that a revival of religion never lasts above a generation, -- that is, thirty years; (whereas the present revival has already continued above fifty;) or however prophets of evil may say, "All will be at an end when the first instruments are removed." There will then, very probably, be a great shaking; but I cannot induce myself to think that God has wrought so glorious a work, to let it sink and die away in a few years. No: I trust, this is only the beginning of a far greater work; the dawn of "the latter day glory."

17. And is it not probable, I say, that he will carry it on in the same manner as he has begun? At the first breaking out of this work in this or that place, there may be a shower, a torrent of grace; and so at some other particular seasons, which "the Father has reserved in his own power:" But in general, it seems, the kingdom of God will not "come with observation;" but will silently increase, wherever it is set up, and spread from heart to heart, from house to house, from town to town, from one kingdom to another. May it not spread, first, through the remaining provinces; then, through the isles of North America; and, at the same time, from England to Holland, where there is already a blessed work in Utrecht, Haerlem, and many other cities? Probably it will spread from these to the Protestants in France, to those in Germany, and those in Switzerland; then to Sweden, Denmark, Russia, and all the other Protestant nations in Europe.

18. May we not suppose that the same leaven of pure and undefiled religion, of experimental knowledge and love of God, of inward and outward holiness, will afterwards spread to the Roman Catholics in Great Britain, Ireland, Holland; in Germany, France, Switzerland; and in all other countries where Romanists and Protestants live intermixed and familiarly converse with each other? Will it not then be easy for the wisdom of God to make a way for religion, in the life and power thereof, into those countries that are merely Popish; as Italy, Spain, Portugal? And may it not be gradually diffused from thence to all that name the name of Christ, in the various provinces of Turkey, in Abyssinia, yea, and in the remotest parts, not only of Europe, but of Asia, Africa, and America?

19. And in every nation under heaven, we may reasonably believe, God will observe the same order which he hath done from the beginning of Christianity. "They shall all know me, saith the Lord;" not from the greatest to the least (this is that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God;) but "from the least to the greatest;" that the praise may not be of men, but of God. Before the end, even the rich shall enter into the kingdom of God. Together with them will enter in the great, the noble, the honourable; yea, the rulers, the princes, the kings of the earth. Last of all, the wise and learned, the men of genius, the philosophers, will be convinced that they are fools; will be "converted, and become as little children," and "enter into the kingdom of God."

20. Then shall be fully accomplished to the house of Israel, the spiritual Israel, of whatever people or nation, that gracious promise, "I will put my laws in their minds, and write them in their hearts: And I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. And they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: For they shall all know me, from the least to the greatest. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more." Then shall "the times of" universal "refreshment come from the presence of the Lord." The grand "Pentecost" shall "fully come," and "devout men in every nation under heaven," however distant in place from each other, shall "all be filled with the Holy Ghost;" and they will "continue steadfast in the Apostles"

doctrine, and in the fellowship, and in the breaking of bread, and in prayers;" they will "eat their meat," and do all that they have to do, "with gladness and singleness of heart. Great grace will be upon them all;" and they will be "all of one heart and of one soul." The natural, necessary consequence of this will be the same as it was in the beginning of the Christian Church: "None of them will say, that aught of the things which he possesses is his own; but they will have all things common. Neither will there be any among them that want: For as many as are possessed of lands or houses will sell them; and distribution will be made to every man, according as he has need." All their desires, meantime, and passions, and tempers will be cast in one mould; while all are doing the will of God on earth, as it is done in heaven. All their "conversation will be seasoned with salt," and will "minister grace to the hearers;" seeing it will not be so much they that speak, "as the Spirit of their Father that speaketh in them." And there will be no "root of bitterness springing up," either to defile or trouble them: There will be no Ananias or Sapphira, to bring back the cursed love of money among them: There will be no partiality; no "widows neglected in the daily ministration:" Consequently, there will be no temptation to any murmuring thought, or unkind word, of one against another; while, They all are of one heart and soul, And only love informs the whole.

21. The grand stumbling-block being thus happily removed out of the way, namely, the lives of the Christians, the Mahometans will look upon them with other eyes, and begin to give attention to their words. And as their words will be clothed with divine energy, attended with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power, those of them that fear God will soon take knowledge of the Spirit whereby the Christians speak. They will "receive with meekness the engrafted word," and will bring forth fruit with patience. From them the leaven will soon spread to those who till then, had no fear of God before their eyes. Observing the Christian dogs, as they used to term them, to have changed their nature; to be sober, temperate, just, benevolent; and that, in spite of all provocations to the contrary; from admiring their lives, they will surely be led to consider and embrace their doctrine. And then the Saviour of sinners will say, "The hour is come; I will glorify my Father: I will seek and save the sheep that were wandering on the dark mountains. Now will I avenge myself of my enemy, and pluck the prey out of the lion's

teeth. I will resume my own, for ages lost: I will claim the purchase of my blood." So he will go forth in the greatness of his strength, and all his enemies shall flee before him. All the prophets of lies shall vanish away, and all the nations that had followed them shall acknowledge the great Prophet of the Lord, "mighty in word and deed;" and "shall honour the Son, even as they honour the Father."

22. And then, the grand stumbling-block being removed from the heathen nations also, the same Spirit will be poured out upon them; even those that remain in the uttermost parts of the sea. The poor American savage will no more ask, "What are the Christians better than us?" -- when they see their steady practice of universal temperance, and of justice, mercy, and truth. The Malabarian Heathen will have no more room to say, "Christian man take my wife: Christian man much drunk: Christian man kill man! Devil-Christian! me no Christian." Rather, seeing how far the Christians exceed their own countrymen in whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, they will adopt a very different language, and say, Angel-Christian! The holy lives of the Christians will be an argument they will not know how to resist: Seeing the Christians steadily and uniformly practise what is agreeable to the law written in their own hearts, their prejudices will quickly die away, and they will gladly receive "the truth as it is in Jesus."

23. We may reasonably believe, that the heathen nations which are mingled with the Christians, and those that, bordering upon Christian nations, have constant and familiar intercourse with them, will be some of the first who learn to worship God in spirit and in truth; those, for instance, that live on the continent of America, or in the islands that have received colonies from Europe. Such are likewise all those inhabitants of the East Indies that adjoin to any of the Christian settlements. To these may be added, numerous tribes of Tartars, the heathen parts of the Russias, and the inhabitants of Norway, Finland, and Lapland. Probably these will be followed by those more distant nations with whom the Christians trade; to whom they will impart what is of infinitely more value than earthly pearls, or gold and silver. The God of love will then prepare his messengers, and make a way into the polar regions; into the deepest recesses of America, and into the interior parts of Africa; yea, into the heart of China and Japan, with the

countries adjoining to them. And "their sound" will then "go forth into all lands, and their voice to the ends of the earth!"

24. But one considerable difficulty still remains: There are very many heathen nations in the world that have no intercourse, either by trade or any other means, with Christians of any kind. Such are the inhabitants of the numerous islands in the South Sea, and probably in all large branches of the ocean. Now, what shall be done for these poor outcasts of men? "How shall they believe," saith the Apostle, "in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?" You may add, "And how shall they preach, unless they be sent?" Yea, but is not God able to send them? Cannot he raise them up, as it were, out of the stones? And can he ever want means of sending them? No: Were there no other means, he can "take them by his Spirit," as he did Ezekiel. (Ezek. 3:12,) or by his angel, as he did Philip, (Acts 8,) and set them down wheresoever it pleaseth him. Yea, he can find out a thousand ways to foolish man unknown. And he surely will: For heaven and earth may pass away; but his word shall not pass away: He will give his Son "the uttermost part of the earth for his possession."

25. And so all Israel too shall be saved. For "blindness has happened to Israel," as the great Apostle observes, (Rom. 11:25.) till the fullness of the "Gentiles be come in." Then "the Deliverer that cometh out of Sion shall turn away iniquity from Jacob." "God hath now concluded them all in unbelief, that he may have mercy upon all." Yea, and he will so have mercy upon all Israel, as to give them all temporal with all spiritual blessings. For this is the promise: "For the Lord thy God will gather thee from all nations, whither the Lord thy God hath scattered thee. And the Lord thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it. And the Lord thy God will circumcise thine heart, and the heart of thy seed, to love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul." (Deut. 30:3.) Again: "I will gather them out of all countries, whither I have driven them: And I will bring them again to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely: And I will give them one heart, and one way, that they may fear me for ever. I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me. And I will plant them in this land assuredly, with my whole heart and with my whole soul." (Jer. 32:37.) Yet again: "I will take you from among the Heathen,

and gather you out of all countries, and will bring you into your own land. Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: From all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. And ye shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; and ye shall be my people, and I will be your God." (Ezek. 36:24.)

26. At that time will be accomplished all those glorious promises made to the Christian Church, which will not then be confined to this or that nation, but will include all the inhabitants of the earth. "They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain." (Isaiah 11:9) "Violence shall no more be heard in thy land, wasting nor destruction within thy borders; but thou shalt call thy walls, Salvation, and thy gates Praise." Thou shalt be encompassed on every side with salvation, and all that go through thy gates shall praise God. "The sun shall be no more thy light by day; neither for brightness shall the moon give light unto thee: But the Lord shall be unto thee an everlasting light, and thy God thy glory." The light of the sun and moon shall be swallowed up in the light of His countenance, shining upon thee. "Thy people also shall be all righteousthe work of my hands, that I may be glorified." "As the earth bringeth forth her bud, and the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations." (Isaiah 60:18; and 61:11.)

27. This I apprehend to be the answer, yea, the only full and satisfactory answer that can be given, to the objection against the wisdom and goodness of God, taken from the present state of the world. It will not always be thus: These things are only permitted for a season by the great Governor of the world, that he may draw immense, eternal good out of this temporary evil. This is the very key which the Apostle himself gives us in the words above recited: "God hath concluded them all in unbelief, that he might have mercy upon all." In view of this glorious event, how well may we cry out, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" although for a season "his judgments were unsearchable, and his ways past finding out." (Rom. 11:32, 33.) It is enough, that we are assured of this one point, that all these transient evils will issue well; will have a happy conclusion; and that "mercy first and last will reign." All unprejudiced persons may see with their eyes, that He is already renewing the face of the earth: And

we have strong reason to hope that the work he hath begun, he will carry on unto the day of the Lord Jesus; that he will never intermit this blessed work of his Spirit, until he has fulfilled all his promises, until he hath put a period to sin, and misery, and infirmity, and death; and re-established universal holiness and happiness, and caused all the inhabitants of the earth to sing together, "Hallelujah, the Lord God omnipotent reigneth!" "Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever!" (Rev. 7:12.)

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