

WHEN THE "GREAT COMMISSION" WENT OUT OF COMMISSION

BY RICHARD JORDAN

It is difficult to understand how anyone can question the unique character of the ministry and message of the Apostle Paul. He devotes almost two whole chapters in Galatians to the fact that he did not receive his message from the Twelve—or anyone else on the scene before him—but that he *communicated* his message to the Jerusalem saints and apostles, even privately to their leaders to make sure they heard it from him directly. (Gal. 1:11-2:21).

The response of these Pentecostal saints was clear: Those who had been sent to "all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" now agreed to turn over their ministry to the nations to Paul. This is a momentous event of great proportion. Unfortunately, it is too often overlooked or misunderstood.

THE GOSPEL OF THE CIRCUMCISION

In recounting the meeting, Paul records:

"But contrariwise, when they saw that the gospel of the uncircumcision was committed unto me, as the gospel of the circumcision was unto Peter" (Gal. 2:7).

Modern translators and teachers have mistakenly rendered "the gospel *of* the circumcision" as "the gospel *to* the circumcision." While it is perhaps technically possible to so translate the genitive here (although it would be highly unusual), it is patently and scripturally *wrong* to do so. Consider the facts:

Peter, along with the Twelve and the Pentecostal church at large, was commissioned to go to "all nations" (Matt. 28:19), "every creature" (Mark 16:15), "all nations" (Luke 24:47), "whosoever" (John 20:23) and "the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8).

To claim that in Gal. 2:7 Peter had been entrusted with the gospel only to the circumcision is simple *not true to the facts* of the commission given to him by Christ Himself during His post-resurrection ministry.

What makes the term *the gospel of the circumcision* so difficult for many is the agreement in Verse 9:

"And when James, Cephas, and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me, they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship, that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision."

Here those who had clearly been commissioned by Christ to go to *all nations* just as clearly turn over their ministry to the nations to Paul. The significance of this must not be overlooked: With the agreement of Gal. 2:9, the so-called "Great Commission" *went out of commission*.

But how could this be? By what authority did these Jerusalem leaders do such a thing? Let's see.

THE APOSTOLIC AUTHORITY OF THE TWELVE

During our Lord's earthly ministry He gathered together disciples to whom He gave authority to act in His behalf, especially with a view to His rejection and exile to the Father's right hand in early Acts. These verses may be controversial, but they are also clear:

"Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18).

"And I give unto thee [Peter] the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19).

"Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).

These verses, especially the latter two, are generally used by Rome to claim authority both for its Popes (as Peter's supposed successors) and priests (to forgive sins). Protestants do little more than ignore these clear statements, preferring to water them down with meaningless reservations and apologies. The real answer, however, is a dispensational one.

Since the commission recorded in John's gospel is as consistently ignored by Protestants as it is claimed by Romanists, we will use it as a basis for considering the apostolic authority of the Twelve and how they used it. The whole commission reads:

" Then said Jesus to them again, Peace *be* unto you: as *my* Father hath sent me, even so send I you.

"And when he had said this, he breathed on *them*, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost:

"Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; *and* whose soever *sins* ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:21-23).

Let's take a verse at the time: "As my Father hath sent me, so send I you." A comparison with Luke 22:28-30 will help here:

" Ye are they which have continued with me in my temptations.

"And I appoint unto you a kingdom, as my Father hath appointed unto me;

"That ye may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

In other words, the Twelve were to be the *official rulers* of Israel in Christ's kingdom--and what is an official without authority!

Matt. 21:43 makes it clear that the kingdom was to be *taken from* those then ruling over Israel. To the chief priests and elders Christ declared:

"Therefore say I unto you, the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

In Luke 12:32, our Lord made it equally clear *to whom* the kingdom was to be given:

"Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

In Matt. 19:28, we learn that authority in the kingdom was to be *centralized* in the twelve apostles:

"And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, that ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."

In Matt. 16:19, Christ singles out Peter as the chief of the Twelve and *personalizes* this authority in him:

"And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

That is why early Acts records:

"And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples..." (1:15).

"But Peter, standing up with the eleven, lifted up his voice..." (2:14).

"Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles..." (2:37).

While Peter could take official action personally, the "little flock", represented by the twelve apostles had been given divine authority, too. Matt. 18:18-20 is not a prayer promise, as so many seem to suppose; rather, it identifies what would constitute a quorum for official action.

"Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them: and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained" (John 20:23).

That this apostolic authority should extend to the remission of sins should not seem so strange. Did not our Lord Himself have such authority? (Matt. 9:6, John 5:22, 27) Now He gives His authority to His official representatives.

What makes John 20:23 so difficult for us is the idea of such authority being placed into the hands of failing men. But wait, we haven't yet looked at John 20:22.

"And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and saith unto them, receive ye the Holy Ghost."

This authority was thus obviously not simply placed into the hands of failing men. Rather, these very men were soon to be "filled with the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:4). Ezek 36:27 declares about this:

"And I will put my spirit within you, and *cause* you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them."

So, rather than being unequipped for such a position, the apostles were "endued with power from on high" and thus fully capable of executing the authority our Lord placed in their hands.

HOW THE TWELVE USED THEIR AUTHORITY

While beyond the space available for our present study, it should not be overlooked that the apostles did indeed often use their authority to take official action in the absence of their King. They, for example, chose a successor for Judas (Acts 1), proclaimed in no uncertain way Israel's failure and terms for her salvation (Acts 2 and 3), withstood attempts at deceit (Acts 5) and division (Acts 6), while working many "signs and wonders and divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost" (Heb. 2:4).

Early Acts clearly demonstrates that the Little Flock carried on the program Christ had committed to them and again and again shows the apostles exercising their authority as they led the way.

THE TWELVE AND PAUL

Thus it is by the very authority vested in them by their Messiah that the apostles (along with the Jerusalem church as a whole) turned over their ministry to the nations to that other apostle, the Apostle Paul.

Frankly, Paul did not need them to *appoint* him "the apostle of the Gentiles." He clearly states that his apostleship was "not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ." (Gal. 1:1) It was Christ Himself who had appointed Paul to the office of "the apostle of the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13).

But the circumcision saints needed to recognize this change in program. They needed to *recognize* Paul's apostleship--and this they did in an official, public way.

BINDING AND LOOSING

Recognizing that Israel's long-prophesied program had been interrupted by "the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery," the leaders of the Little Flock gave Paul and Barnabas "the right hands of fellowship," agreeing that "we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision."

By this public, official action they were not only *binding* the heathen¹ over to Paul, they were also *loosing* themselves from their former commission.

The so-called "Great Commission," followed by so many in our day, actually *went out of commission* by the official action of the apostles and brethren to whom it was given.

Failure to see that the post-resurrection commissions of Christ did not survive the meeting in Gal. 2:9 has caused untold confusion and havoc among sincere believers through the centuries. How much better to recognize what Peter and his brethren understood and rejoice in

the new message Christ sent forth through that other apostle--and thus join him in seeking "to make all men see."

"Whereof I was made a minister, according to the gift of the grace of God given unto me by the effectual working of his power.

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;

"And to make all men see what is the fellowship of the mystery, which from the beginning of the world hath been hid in God, who created all things by Jesus Christ" (Eph. 3:7-9).

This is truly *our great commission*, and Peter and the apostles would agree.

i.e., all the unsaved, whether Jew or Gentile. See the author's pamphlet, *Did Paul Break His Word?*