

THE

MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A THEORY



Wm. F. Bekgaard

A PRESERVED EDITION

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God always has a purpose. From all the evidence we have of His revelation of Himself, He does nothing frivolous, without cause or rationale. From this it can be reasoned that He has determined some global accomplishment for his church to fulfill. Certainly, the church was made and sent into the world to prepare men for eternity, but is there more? Salvation was achieved for men apart from the Church. The Gospel was furnished to the church for its mission. The combination of these two was for the benefit of all nations, both Jew and Gentile. The nature of salvation grants men a higher plane of existence on a spiritual level. But we see in the early history of the church that her work went beyond that of merely bringing men to redemption. Through the church, God attacked the strongholds of paganism and human philosophy. This affected the secular nature of men, their religions and governments. Until the time of Constantine the very early persecutions of the church were by the instigation of pagan zealots and an element of Judaism. Later, persecutions in greater number were carried out by mad, despotic Caesars.

The rapid growth of Christianity drew off many of the worshipers of the pagan temples in the Roman Empire. This caused a panic among the priests of these false gods; they saw their subsistence and prestige threatened. One such example of this happened with the conflict between Paul and the silversmiths who made a lucrative living through images of the goddess Diana in Ephesus. Consequently, they convinced the secular government that this new movement was treasonous. The rationality was that since they were the state religion, to abandon the temples was to rebel against the Empire.

Paul takes note of this ungodliness of the nations in his writings to the Ephesians:

"This I say therefore, and testify in the Lord, that ye henceforth walk not as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, Having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them, because of the blindness of their heart."
[\(Ephesians 4:17-18\)](#)

Paul on Mars Hill of Athens reveals the condition of the Gentiles at that time with their multiple altars to pagan gods. Many of these pagan religions catered to the lusts and debauchery of the flesh of men. Others were heinous and brutal demanding human sacrifices, and of them not a

few compelled children and newborns to be sacrificed. These killings were of the worst kind, such as burning, roasting or scalding to death. One example of this should be sufficient—

"In North Africa. When Agathocles was upon the point of besieging Carthage, the inhabitants imputed their misfortune to the anger of Saturn, because instead of children of the first quality, which they used to sacrifice to him, they had fraudulently substituted the children of slaves and strangers in their stead. To make amends for this pretended crime, they sacrificed two hundred children of the best families of Carthage to that god; besides which, more than three hundred citizens offered themselves voluntarily as victims. A brazen statue of Saturn was set up, his two arms, brought almost together, were extended downward over a fierce fire.* The mothers kissed and decoyed their children into mirth lest the god should be offended with the ungracefulness (sic) of his worshippers. The priests were habited in scarlet, and the victims in a bright purple vest. The infants were laid upon the arms of the statue, and rolled into the fire; and a rough music drowned their shrieks lest mothers should hear and repent. Plutarch says, they who had no children, used to purchase those of the poor for this horrid purpose.¹

**(This idol and the sacrifice is very reminiscence of the pagan god Moloch which Israel had once worshiped. Jer. 32: 35)*

¹Robinson, History of Baptism, Pg 181

"Historical scepticism (sic) is a virtue in a great many cases: but there is no room for it in this, for evidences both sacred and profane, put it beyond all reasonable doubt, that the Phoenicians, the Druids, the Gauls, the Carthaginians, and even the Greeks and the Romans, offered human sacrifices to their gods. The Greeks and Romans reformed the abuse; and as the Romans subdued barbarous nations they obliged them to reform it.²

² ibid pg 181

"As Christianity extended itself into the chief towns of any kingdom, heathenism retired into the remote, interior and back parts; and thus it was that induced Christians to give idolatry the name of Paganism, and to call idolaters Pagans, because while Christianity was professed in the cities, idolatry continued to be practised (sic) in what they called the pagos, which are now called villages.³

³ ibid pg 182

God had cleansed the world once before in the days of Noah when he destroyed the world for the sake of men. They had grown so wicked that

only eight souls were saved to rebuild and begin anew the course of the human race. In effect God wiped the slate clean and gave men a new beginning, another chance to exist more nobly by removing all the evil influence that had existed, and which they had succumbed (except of course their own fallen nature). God gave an oath that He would never repeat this process of destruction. With the gospel of the church it is not men who are destroyed, as in the flood, but their wicked system of ungodliness is assailed.

The identity of the church is not just in doctrine and policy. The larger picture has to do with the mission of the church and the work which God intended for her to do among men. Certainly salvation is the key to the message of the church, but it goes beyond that of just saving the souls of men. The message of the gospel entrusted to His beloved was to lead men out of darkness and barbarianism. Through the church God offered hope of a better existence; a freedom from slavish service to cruel false gods and religions which had a strangle-hold on men. This horrible worship of gods demanding human sacrifices was not to be found in just a few isolated countries in the then known world, it ran rampant throughout what was called the Roman Empire. The Norsemen were horribly cruel and vicious.

The god Moloch in the Old Testament was a pagan god which the Israelites once endorsed and worshiped. Moloch demanded in its worship the sacrifice of infants. The Jews complied by constructing for this pagan god an altar and then sacrificing their children upon it. They made a large hollow image of brass of Moloch and placed it in the valley of Hinnom. This idol faced the southern outer city wall with its arms outstretched in reach of the wall. A fire was made in the hollow base of this statue and it became as a furnace. The brass was heated to such a degree that it glowed. When the heat was sufficient the Jewish worshipers threw babies on the blazing hot arms and their living bodies were burned, roasted and consumed in the terrible heat. Jer. 32: 35

It should not be thought that only the Jews, in that short period of their history, observed such decadence and cruelty of a false religion. This sort of worship was common throughout all countries and peoples in that age.

But these things were not going unnoticed by God. His judgment was not that of the days of Noah to bring destructive judgment but to enlighten. His mercy is evidenced in His words of the prophet. Rather than to destroy, His will was to bring them out of their ignorance. We see in the following scriptures the promise and fulfillment of God's benevolence for the sake of man.

KJV Isaiah 42: 4 He [the Messiah] shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth: and the isles shall wait for his law.

5 Thus saith God the LORD, he that created the heavens, and stretched them out; he that spread forth the earth, and that which cometh out of it; he that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein:

6 I the LORD have called thee in righteousness, and will hold thine hand, and will keep thee, and give thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles;

7 To open the blind eyes, to bring out the prisoners from the prison, *and* them that sit in darkness out of the prison house.

KJV Luke 4:18 The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised,

19 To preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

21 And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

KJV Acts 13: 47 For so hath the Lord commanded us, *saying*, I have set thee to be a light of the Gentiles, that thou shouldest be for salvation unto the ends of the earth.

The church was given as God's gift to bring men out of these debased, brutal and pitiless pagan rituals. God was interceding on behalf of goodness and gave a light in the world to redeem them from darkness and lead them into truth. It was a nobler way of worship, a higher plane of decency and morality being brought to them. And in this work the church was successful. So successful that the histories of these barbaric practices appear beyond belief, that such things could have ever existed on such a monumental scale as to shock the senses of decency. Nevertheless, the stories are true. The account of Paul in Athens on Mars Hill and the plethora of idols dedicated to the known and even the unknown gods of their times, reveals just how extensive pagan worship was. Think not that there existed in these gods any goodness or redemptive values. They were of the imaginations of corrupt and malignant men. It seemed the more outrageous the god and its demands of worship, the greater the number who were entrapped to its service. Men left to themselves without the influence of a gracious God revert to the basest lusts and carnality. Can there be found any society, which at some point in their existence did not kill, murder or torture the innocent?

But religion was not the only setting of wickedness and debauchery. The most basic morals were lacking with the people at this time. They had their gods and goddesses of sex and strong drink. It was seen within their homes and courtyards, they had murals and mosaics depicting lewd, perverted, and degenerate sexual scenes. Statues and images were made of male genitals and put in public and private display. Homosexuality and child abuse were openly practiced and all without any shame or embarrassment or sense of wrong. Young boys and girls were sexually violated as a matter of course. It seems that they were not so much immoral but amoral, for the greater number of people had no sense of morality at all or of right or wrong.

By God's purpose His church brought to men a path from paganism and all its horror to life and righteousness. For centuries the church stood alone in this mission. Even cruel scoffers and opponents of true Christianity received a measure of blessings from this new religion spreading among them. For the first three centuries the church had great success with evidence that it existed in large numbers in every country of the then known world. Men and women of intelligence and reason embraced the good news coming to them and forsook their pagan gods. This brought the wrath of the Roman Empire upon them in those very early centuries. The Empire eventually failed, but paganism was not totally conquered. Corrupt men in the church brought in, slowly at first, pagan rituals and worship into the church. Large portions of the church began to fall away and condemn the very virtues which they had once so joyfully received and applauded. "Christians" began to murder Christians. The Catholic Church with its hierarchy, traditions and ceremonies taken from antiquity, caused the downfall of many churches and the true church began to bleed and lose ground among the masses. But the power behind the church cannot be overcome, and she continued to give her testimony and the light of the gospel unto the world.

Throughout the dark ages the church survived through countless inquisitions and persecutions of the pagan-infested false church. She continued to fulfill her mission of bringing men to repentance, to salvation, and to a morality above all that the world had to offer. The world's offering of its secular blessing was through the means of either ecclesiastical rewards or the deliverance of recanting. The mystery of iniquity which was already at work in the days of Paul now had a new vigor as a fast-spreading virus infecting many in these centuries, and yet God's truth remained in His churches. In those days none but the church offered the world any real hope. The possessions of the church were a superior God, a superior worship, a superior morality, a superior system of justice, a superior human intercourse within society, and finally freedom and liberty of conscience. The work of the church among men has not run its course, and it still has its place in the world.

The reformation was the attempt of men to reform a corrupt system of worship and the immorality of the "men of God,"—the clergy. Yet this task of reforming proved impossible. Various as these modes of reformation are, they are all nothing but reforms, that is, the old papal service amended. A true restoration of the lost part of the worship of God is a very different affair, and does not allow old errors to be cast into new forms. To the Baptists this honor of restoring belongs; they did not reform but rather reinstated into the hearts of men the purity of Christianity.

Reform was not the answer, for the very material itself to be reformed is decayed. The whole must be discarded. Every reformed church brought with it the essence of Catholicism, and in places exceeded it in their persecutions of heretics. What was once received with openness now became an object of suspicion as the epitaph of heretic was branded on true Christianity, the true church. State Churches made peace with one another, but turned their vile rage on dissenters and the hated Anabaptists.* But still the church had its superior message which all other "denominations" had either abandoned or polluted with the commandments of men.

*Re. The Scottish Confession of Faith Chapter 23 on Baptism. "we damn the error of the Anabaptist, who deny baptism to children before that they have faith and understanding."

Gradually governments innovated new policies which separated the law and courts from religious affairs. This led to the new freedom of creating churches without fear or favor. Men who are honored and praised arose and took from the apostolic church those values of human goodness and virtue and formed their own societies of worship, reinventing the church after their own system of beliefs. This work has continued from the sixteenth century to the present day. When we survey the religious world today we ask what has the church of God to offer that cannot be found in churches of men. What essentials of the church have not been counterfeited? Salvation is preached, repentance is heard, love is lauded, many elevate Christ in his holiness, the ordinances are performed in some manner or another, goodness and righteousness is placed before all, and the list goes on. But, are these things preached and taught in purity? No, the essence of these doctrines are tainted in some degree with the cause of carnality. So now, what is unique with the church which Christ began and is never to die? Worldly churches may copy the church of Jesus Christ, but they cannot capture the heart and soul of the church which Jesus built. Certainly, *purity* and *unity* is the fundamental nature of the apostolic church, but only God has achieved it in men. Men cannot bring purity into the church or into the souls of men. And when they try they even fail to falsify it. What is left for the church to offer which men cannot find elsewhere? There are two answers. First is the fact that the

church is the pillar and ground of the truth. There is no divergence of core doctrine, belief, and practice within her. Second, she is the Bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the pillar and ground of the truth, the house of God! None can take that from her, although she is under attack both within and without in the attempt to deny this to be hers exclusively. Even the very existence of the church is denied. Where once the church was called heretical she is now regarded as non-existent. Frankly, it would appear that the world has run full circle. The world was brought out of darkness and delivered from paganism, self veneration and power of men. Now the world says it has no need of the church, it has its religions and regards them to be every bit as holy as the work of Christ on that day when He established His church. Men are no longer interested or care to hear of what it takes to be a disciple of Christ. Their conscience is seared over. They close their ears and mind at any mention of the demands of Christ and the sacrifices which followers of God are to make. Social gospel is the norm, the elevation of men and entertainment of the flesh and carnality is the accepted approved message of today. The liberal preaching today puts God into the position that His only purpose is to make people happy, nothing is said of the responsibility of men to worship God, to serve God, and to elevate Him above all else, including our own selfish individualism. Compromise and tolerance is the trend, and to stand faithful to commands of Christ is regarded as being radical and is regarded as “Un-Christian.”

Has the dog returned to its own vomit; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire? This is not meant to insult the individual but to be applied to the world in general. Recall what Jesus said about the last days; *but as the days of Noe were, so shall also the coming of the Son of man be.* God destroyed the whole earth because of the wickedness of men in the days of Noah, but promised that He would never do so again. As mentioned, in effect God wiped the slate clean and gave men another chance at doing the right thing. But Jesus says that in the end they will be back to the same condition they had been with Noah, only worse. This time God Himself will take control. (Matthew 24:37-39) God took a horrible situation, cleansed it and set it on the right path. Then He gave it a second chance through the church, but if it goes back (and it is) to its former estate no further repentance or grace is given, only judgment awaits. This is the age in which we now live. And this, God has foreseen in the epitaph “The Great Tribulation.” Whatever grace is extended it will reach its conclusion when all effort has failed. It would appear that this is the course of the church and her mission, not her *commission* but mission, to the world. She alone offers the complete purity of God’s goodness.

When the great apostasy happens is it because the church has failed? No, it is because the world has failed its opportunity. Some believe the church will fail, but more to the truth is that the church has run its

course. At this time she is ready to be taken out of the world. History tells us of astonishing success the church had in the number of converts she made. In the struggle of the church against staggering odds during the Dark Ages she still had great success in winning over men and women to Christ. However, today it appears she only has the gleanings of the world to bring in. The great harvest has seemingly passed. Folks are outwardly still saved now in as great a number as they have been in the past, but the numbers of disciples are fast falling. Rarely is it to be seen men and women who have forsaken all to follow Christ. Others only honor Him in words without deeds. When confronted with their failings to keep the commands of Jesus a usual reply is, "God understands." Understands what? Understands that they are exempt and have some special indulgence for their rebellion and sin? No longer do people surrender to the demands of their Lord but will run to those things which please them. God has not failed them, but they will not have Him rule over them. The words, *Lord* and *Master* are not idle titles of God; they are literal and are meant to be taken literally. This is a dangerous trend in Christianity today. The token worship of God will lead to the state of the world as Christ said there never was a time like it before or will be after.

The church is fast losing its influence in the world, if it has not already lost it. The completion of its mission seems to be at hand. In no way is this epitaph of the world meant to offer any excuse for the failures of churches and saints to be about the Master's business. It would be terribly wrong to throw up hands and say it is no use to go on. As long as the church exists she has a work to do, and God will give success as He sees it. Our part is to continue to be faithful and leave the rest to God. But we need to beware of the false notion that success, as the world sees it, is to be a measurement of the results achieved. God's churches are not weak, no matter their numbers; they have a powerful heritage and King over them.

"Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations;" (Deut. 7:9 KJV)

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An after note. In just two years after writing this study our country and the world in general has fallen back into the many ungodly sins and lusts of the ancient past. These are too numerous to list but are very much in the same manner of the vile deeds of the worst times of the age of men. Unbelievable sexual deviance, immorality, corruption, the breakdown of laws and justice and the list goes on have all happened. Moreover, it appears the worst is yet to come, such as persecution of

Christianity and all religions. Much of the world mocks God. But He will not be mocked. Gal. 6:7. All must answer to God.—

⁷ But the LORD shall endure for ever: he hath prepared his throne for judgment.

⁸ And he shall judge the world in righteousness, he shall minister judgment to the people in uprightness (Ps. 9:7-8 KJV)

THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

In this thoughtful article, Wm. F. Bekgaard considers the church's mission in the world—not only the proclamation of salvation, but also the transforming light of the gospel in the face of paganism, cruelty, and moral darkness.

Drawing upon Scripture and history, the author traces the church's witness through persecution, corruption, reform, and the continuing struggle to preserve apostolic truth.

The study concludes with a sober call to faithfulness: the church must continue the Master's work, trusting God rather than worldly measures of success.

This preserved edition presents the original article without alteration.

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ARTICLE EDITION