

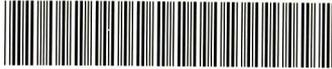
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THE
PROTESTANT
FAITH

SOUTH AMERICA

by
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Colossae was a small town in Asia Minor. One of St. Paul's friends, Epaphroditus, preached the gospel there and St. Paul wrote a letter to these early converts. He began his letter to the Colossians by telling them how constantly he had been thanking God from the time that he first heard of their faith in Jesus and of the love that this faith brought into their lives. He mentioned that the reason for his thanksgiving was the fact that they had entered into the Christian hope for the future. Through their believing the Gospel the horizon of eternity had opened up before them. They were no longer without God and without hope beyond this life, but through their believing the gospel, they had received the hope of everlasting life and of that heavenly crown and reward that is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It is interesting that St. Paul should have been moved to continual thanksgiving as a result of hearing that some of the pagans at Colossae had been converted and so had become sharers of Christian hope and salvation. We are reminded of what our Lord said about the joy in God's presence over one sinner that repents. St. Paul had never met the Colossians; but he was full of joy and thankfulness that the Christian hope had entered their lives. He goes on to tell them how he was continually praying for them. What he said he was praying for is interesting. It was that they should grow in the knowledge of God's will and in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. This reminds us that Christian knowledge is the basis of the Christian life, and so St. Paul was praying daily for the Colossians' growth in knowledge, in understanding in wisdom. These three terms mean much the same thing and their threefold repetition reflects the importance of Christian knowledge for the

Christian life. One of the weaknesses of our Christian church to-day is the very low level of Christian knowledge - that is, knowledge of God's will and knowledge of His Word and knowledge of His intentions - that the average church member possesses. We might even add, the average church minister possesses. How little time is given to the study of God's word and of the aids available to understand it. In view of the level of the knowledge of God's will it is not surprising that the level of Christianity in the community is not higher than it is. For it is as we increase in knowledge through reading the Bible ourselves and through our ministers faithfully expounding it in the pulpit and Bible class that we grow in Christian character; for the Holy Spirit takes God's Word, received through our minds, and applies it to our heart, will and conscience. Naturally, therefore, St. Paul prayed that these new converts should grow in knowledge, for he wished them to grow as Christians.

We have to-day a parallel situation to St. Paul's relation with the Colossians, namely ourselves with the Christians in South America. Like St. Paul and the Colossians, most of us have never been to South America or met South American Christians, but the reports of the spread of the gospel in that country are most encouraging. Figures and statistics, of course, are dry bones; we have to clothe with our imagination the human situations they reflect, but nevertheless statistics do give us an indication of what is going on in South America. Thus in the great country of Brazil ten years ago there were only 800,000 protestant Christians. To-day there are more than 5,000,000. A similar growth is to be found in most of the South American republics. During this generation the protestant community in South America has increased more than 12 times. For example, in

1925 there were only 800,000 protestants in the whole of South America but to-day there are over 10,000,000. Perhaps the most remarkable growth amongst protestant Christians is to be found in the Pentecostal groups. The Pentecostals had their origin amongst the Methodists about 50 years ago but are now separated into denominations of their own. Their growth in South America has been phenomenal. For example, in Colombia ten years ago there were only 400 Pentecostalist adherents, to-day there are 8,000, and the same sort of figures can be matched throughout the sub-continent.

We should give God thanks that the gospel is finding free course in this great sub-continent. These figures reveal that innumerable men and women are coming into the joy of the knowledge of Christ's Lordship and of the forgiveness of their sins and sharing with us in the hope that is laid up for them throughout eternity. Our thankfulness should be grounded as with St. Paul on the fact that these millions of people are being brought from hopelessness into this sure hope of eternal life. God has dealt very graciously with them. For that we should be rejoicing. The temptation is that we are merely happy because we see our own denominational figures swelling. Such feelings of complacency belong to a this-world outlook and a sense of rivalry which has little in common with the joy that there is in the presence of the angels of God when men and women turn from sin and ignorance of Him and embrace the hope of the gospel and show that faith and love which the Holy Spirit brings into their lives.

We may also learn from St. Paul's example the need of praying for these new converts, unknown by name and face to us, for they are surrounded by many adversaries. There is first of all the deep poverty of the country. For example, two out of three members of the Republic of Bolivia have never so much as touched money

and more than 65% of all the 200,000,000 inhabitants of Latin America live at present in what we would call extreme poverty. More than half the adult population cannot read or write. In this poverty and ignorance it is not surprising that Christian standards of morality have little place. For example in the republic of El Salvador nearly 80% of the births are outside wedlock. In South America the land is held by wealthy feudal landlords. Thus 2% of the population possess more than 50% of the land and wealth of the entire sub-continent. This is the background against which the gospel is being preached in these countries and it is a challenge to us to be earnest in prayer for the new converts. Plainly St. Paul believed in the power of intercessory prayer otherwise he would not have engaged in such constant prayer for the Colossians as he tells them he was doing. Prayer unlocks spiritual resources and as we hear of the conversion of these South Americans, we should be stirred up not only to thank God but to pray earnestly that they might increase in knowledge of His will and in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

The growing evangelical churches in Latin America are not finding it easy. There is, of course, opposition from the Roman Catholic church which has been in possession of the field ever since the Spanish Conquest 400 years ago. The Roman Catholic church claims 88% of the population as members, though less than 20% have any active relationship to the church. In some republics persecution of the evangelical churches by the local Roman Catholic church is still active. For example in Colombia 117 believers have been killed, more than 200 protestant schools closed and about 50 churches destroyed or attacked since 1948. But in spite of this the evangelical church in Colombia has increased very rapidly, trebling its numbers in the last ten years in spite of the active persecution. In recent years the Roman Catholic church itself has awakened to the danger of the very low level of religious life and knowledge amongst the mass of

South American Roman Catholics. Thus in a pastoral letter of February this year the Bishop of Abankay in Peru wrote "We find that religion, even among the most pious, consists of vulgar external manifestations, completely unspiritual and valueless and divorced from the practice of the simplest virtues and obedience to the law of God. We can only lament the proven existence of superstition in such worship." As a result of awakening to this situation, there now are a great number of Roman Catholic missionaries in South America. For example there are 18,000 from Spain alone; and 40% of the foreign mission effort of the powerful Roman Catholic church of the United States is in South America amongst its own adherents. Communism is also active in South America as might well be expected in a country where poverty and illiteracy is so widespread, and where the wealth is held in the hands of such a small minority. However, the evangelical Anti-Communist Crusade led by the Australian Dr. Fred Schwarz is doing yeoman service in South America, as elsewhere, and needs our support and prayers. In addition, sects such as B'hai, Christian Science, Jehovah's Witness and Mormons are active in South America, as elsewhere.

A recent writer on South America in the magazine "Christianity To-day" points out that the rapid increase of the evangelical churches in that country is due on the one hand to the freedom of their worship, for all the members of the congregation participate in the service and there is no dead formality. The writer goes on to say that the denominations that are proving most successful are those where there is a strong emphasis on the teaching ministry, on the building up of the converts in the Word of God through Bible classes, and also through the circulation of evangelical literature. We are reminded of St. Paul's prayer that his converts

might increase in the knowledge of God's will. This should also be our prayer for these new Christians in South America, that as we rejoice to hear that they have entered into the same hope in Christ in which we stand. like St. Paul praying continually that they might increase in the knowledge of God's will and all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

We Australian Christians also need to grow in the knowledge of God. Now the only source of such knowledge is God's Word. Thus preaching should aim to explain and apply the Bible, that is, the whole Bible and not merely selected topics. And each individual Christian has a corresponding obligation to be a learner, to read and study God's Word ourselves.

The Bible Societies have plans to increase the circulation of the Bible three times over in the next five years. It would be a practical way to assist in the answering of our prayers for the increase in Christian knowledge, were we to support these plans to increase the availability of the Bible.

1 September 1963

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