

## **Angels and Missions. Number Nine**

Although the missionary mandate has been given to the church (Matt. 28:19-20), in the providence of God angels take an active part in the spread of the Gospel. Their assistance in the service of missions is powerfully indicated in the call of the prophet Isaiah; as one of the seraphim touched his Lips with a burning coal taken from the altar he "heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And Isaiah said, ' Here am I. Send me!" (Isa. 6:8) John Owen notes that God employs angels . . . for the good of them that are heirs of salvation, to manifest unto them the greatness and the glory of the work of the gathering, preserving, and redemption of his church.

If we accept the definition of evangelism "as proclaiming the Good News," then angels are indeed involved as the very first declaration in history that the Saviour of the world had been born came from angels. The Gospels refer to angels 42 times. God does send angels on specific assignments to do His will, especially regarding evangelization beyond the boundaries of the church. Angels cooperated with the church in its mission outreach.

They saw to it that unbelievers could hear the Gospel despite the opposition the church experienced. In Acts, the great missionary record of the early church, angels are mentioned 21 times. The Jerusalem church was eager to proclaim the Good News but the local authorities opposed its outreach. The apostles were arrested and jailed, but "during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. ' Go, stand in the temple courts', he said,' and tell the people the full message of this new life.'" (Acts 5:17ff. ) .

An angel spoke to Philip and instructed him to meet up with an Ethiopian eunuch and to explain to him the Gospel. "Go south to the road-the desert road- that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza."(Acts 8:26) Philip obeyed the angel, explained the Messianic references in Isaiah to the eunuch, and led him to the Lord. A reference is also made to a visit of an angel to Cornelius the Roman Centurion in Ceasarea. (Acts 10:30-32)

Why should Christians acknowledge the opposition of Satan to the work of missions but neglect the work of angels on our behalf? Why are we so silent about angels? Why do they play such a minimal role in our spiritual life? But our covenant God has not changed. He still sends His angels to work on behalf of those who spread the Gospel. The history of missions contains many dependable records of heavenly assistance received in critical times. Missionaries have told amazing stories about the mysterious intervention of angels when their lives were threatened. Van Asselt, a 19th century missionary in Sumatra, the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia),

recalled that one of the Bataks had seen a double row of guards surrounding his house. They stood hand in hand and had shining faces. The Batak suspected that the missionary had hidden soldiers in his home during the day, but after he was allowed to search Van Asselt's house, he had to admit that he was wrong. When Van Asselt was asked by the Batak why he had not seen the guard of angels, Van Asselt replied that this was not necessary for those who trust in God's Word.

### **Angels and the Reformation.**

In reaction to the excesses of the Roman Catholic church, the churches of the Reformation began to neglect angelology. In the liturgy of the church the presence of angels received scant attention. Even the historic confessions of the Reformation have few references to angels. The Belgic Confession Article 12 " The Creation of all Things, especially the angels" and Heidelberg Catechism q. a. 124, which speaks of angels as willingly and faithfully carrying out the will of the heavenly Father, are the main confessional affirmations on angels. The Confession of Faith of the Huria Kristen Batak (Sumatra, Indonesia), drawn up without the help of Western theologians in 1951, states in Article XVII.

With regard to the Angels: We believe and confess: God created the angels to serve him. They are ministering spirits sent by God to help those who are heirs of salvation.

For the Batak Christians the spiritual world is very real: hence the specific statement on the positive role of angels in the life of faith.

In twentieth century Reformed religious practice worshippers get an awareness of angels only through Christmas and Easter hymns. Angels may serve as ornaments in Christmas trees but as heavenly messengers their role seems to suffer from benign neglect. I am convinced that angelology should have its rightful place in theology and in our spirituality. Dr. H. Bavinck observes in a discussion of angels in the second volume of his dogmatics that Reformed Christians sin more by neglect than by excess. He finds this regrettable. He points out that although the angels are not an object of our religious devotion, they still are of great importance in the history of revelation and derive from it their value for our spirituality.

John Calvin, the careful exponent of Scripture, developed a thorough angelology in his Institutes, which is still valuable reading for today. He wrote extensively about the ministry of angels in church and world and made references to them in his commentaries and sermons. Dr. Abraham Kuyper, the neo- Calvinist, also wrote extensively about the ministry of angels. In his first volume of Van de Voleinding (Eschatology), he devotes

many pages to angelology. One of the finest books on angels I have read is his De Engelen Gods (The Angels of God).

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