



The Duty of American Christians to Send the Gospel to the Heathen

John Codman (1836)

John Codman was a white Congregational minister from Massachusetts. He preached this sermon—subsequently published as a tract—at an annual meeting of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, a joint Congregational-Presbyterian initiative which sponsored missions to indigenous American nations as well as overseas. Codman propounds a form of American exceptionalism that paints the United States as superior to all other nations, politically, educationally, economically, and religiously. He links Christian missions to colonialism, civil religion, international trade, and the worldwide dissemination of US political ideals.

The American church occupies a vantage ground in the missionary enterprise which is not possessed by any other portion of Christendom, and it is the special duty of its members to improve the advantages they enjoy in bringing back this revolted world to the allegiance of its rightful Sovereign. That we may be convinced of the truth of this declaration and act under the weight of its influence, let us consider:

I. *Our early history and our political and religious institutions.* With our early history we are all familiar. Two centuries have scarcely elapsed since this fair land was the abode of the savage man. The native Indian reared his wigwam on the spot where stands this Christian temple, and the sound of the war-whoop was heard instead of the hymn of praise. “We have heard with our ears, and our fathers have told us, what work God did in their days, in the times of old—how he drove out the heathen with his hand and planted them; how he did afflict the people and cast them out. For they got not the land in possession by their own sword, neither did their own arm save them, but his right hand, and his arm, and the light of his countenance, because he had a favor unto them.” [...]

The hand of God is not only to be viewed in conducting our fathers from their native shores and in giving them an inheritance on this western continent, but his providential agency is to be traced in their subsequent history. In their memorable struggle for independence, the devout mind will readily recognize the interpositions of an all-wise and gracious providence, not only in delivering them from oppression and in giving them a rank among the nations of the earth, but in inspiring their counselors with heavenly wisdom to frame a constitution of civil government admirably adapted to secure the rights and liberties of the people and to afford them all the facilities they might reasonably desire to maintain religion at home and to propagate it abroad. [...W]e consider it to be the glory of our country that we have no religious establishment; and in our opinion, this fact alone gives us a prodigious advantage in the facilities of propagating the gospel. [...] The gospel will be attended with greater power, and received with greater readiness, when it comes from a nation distinguished for its political and religious freedom than when it proceeds from those parts of the world where the unnatural alliance of church and state has long existed, and the purity of the former been affected by the withering and blasting influence of the latter. [...]

II. The duty of American Christians to send the gospel to the heathen will appear if we consider

the advantages of education enjoyed in this land and the general diffusion of knowledge throughout the community. In no country on this globe are the advantages of education enjoyed to such an extent as in our highly favored land. [...] To the reflecting mind, it is obvious that the peculiar advantages of education in this country afford great facilities for engaging in the missionary enterprise. The mass of people, having received themselves a good general education, are in a favorable situation to be approached on the subject of missions from the pulpit and through the medium of the press. A missionary spirit is much more easily awakened among an educated community than among the ignorant and illiterate. The liberty of the press, too, is a most favorable circumstance in the situation of American Christians. The wide diffusion of religious intelligence by the weekly and daily presses, through the length and breadth of the land, gives an immense advantage to this country, over any other in the world, in awakening and increasing a missionary spirit. [...] Taken in connection with this, the facility with which [the American church] can send forth numbers of liberally educated and thoroughly qualified young men as missionaries to the heathen renders her situation unrivalled in this respect by any nation on the globe. [...]

III. The duty of American Christians to send the gospel to the heathen will still further appear if we consider *the unexampled prosperity which the country enjoys*. I say unexampled, for I am persuaded it has no parallel in the history of the world, either in ancient or modern times. Freely indeed has this country received of the blessings of heaven. "The lines have fallen to us in pleasant places, and we have a goodly heritage." In addition to our many local advantages of soil and climate, of civil and religious liberty, the most surprising and unprecedented success has attended the efforts of our citizens in the acquisition of wealth. Fortunes have been accumulated in a day which, in the ordinary course of circumstances and in other countries, if obtained at all, would have required a long life of industrious and persevering effort. The horn of plenty is filled to overflowing and is pouring out its rich treasures upon every part of our extended land. New sources of wealth are continually opening. The spirit of enterprise, which is the spirit of the age, finds a wide and extensive field for operation in this new world. Improvements in mechanics almost annihilate distance and bring remote parts of the land into close and friendly vicinage. The common laborer, instead of earning a scanty pittance which will scarcely feed and clothe himself, much less his family, as in most of the countries of Europe, here finds a ready and pressing demand for his services; and in a little while, with common diligence and perseverance, [he] may become as independent in circumstances as he is in sentiment and feeling. The farmer supports himself and his family in comfortable independence and finds a ready market for his surplus produce in the wants of an increasing population. The mechanic, instead of sustaining, as in most foreign countries, an inferior grade in society, is justly appreciated and honored in this land, where usefulness, and not birth, is the acknowledged criterion of rank. The merchant, under the protection of his country's flag, honored and respected among all the nations of the earth, finds a ready admission for his ships into foreign ports and hails their return laden with the riches of the east and the treasures of other lands.

In connection with the consideration of our unexampled prosperity, we may urge as another reason why American Christians should send the gospel to the heathen, the facilities for this object afforded by their *commercial relations*. These relations are increasing every day in magnitude and importance. The American flag finds access to every part of the navigable globe; and the produce of our country, and the specie to procure the products of other countries, may

not only be safely wafted to distant shores, but—what is of more value than worldly goods or thousands of gold and silver—bands of devoted missionaries, with hearts filled with love to Christ, ready to proclaim the glorious gospel to the perishing, may, by the same safe and speedy conveyances, be transported to the places of their destination to labor and die in the service of their Lord. No nation on earth, not Great Britain herself, possesses greater facilities, by commercial intercourse, to spread the gospel among the heathen, than the American people.

IV. The duty of American Christians to send the gospel to the heathen will appear in the last place if we consider *the revivals of religion with which they have been so signally blessed*. In this respect they have been distinguished above every Christian nation on earth. The American churches have, within the last twenty years, been remarkably blessed with the effusions of the Holy Spirit. [...] Multitudes have been “pricked in the heart” and led to inquire “what they shall do to be saved,” and thousands have been seen flocking unto Christ [...] A missionary spirit has been awakened in our colleges and theological schools which promises incalculable good to the church and the world. In these nurseries of Zion, numbers of holy, self-denying, devoted young men are now preparing to go far hence unto the Gentiles and are only waiting for the indications of the divine providence, and the increased liberality of American Christians, to send them forth.

[...] Patriotism demands that, as we have freely received, we should freely give. Do we love our country? Do we rejoice in her prosperity? Do we desire that she may be “a name, and a praise, and a glory”? How can we better testify our appreciation of her free institutions than by laboring to plant them in other lands? For where the gospel goes in its purity and power, there will follow in its train the blessings of civilization, liberty, and good government. And although it will not be the object of the devoted missionary to interfere in any way with civil government, but to confine himself exclusively to his appropriate work of preaching the gospel, yet who can deny, or who would wish it otherwise, that his influence, when honorably obtained through the success of his labors, will, in a greater or less degree, be felt in the relations of civil life; and, coming himself from a land of freedom, he will naturally spread around him an atmosphere of liberty. The patriot, then, [even] with no higher motive than the love of his country’s free institutions, should unite in sending the gospel to the heathen. But especially will the *Christian* patriot feel the force of the obligation, for, in his view, the *salvation* of his country depends upon it. Let me not be thought extravagant when I make this declaration. The salvation of our country demands that, as we have freely received, we should freely give.

We have dwelt on the unexampled prosperity of the country; and what bosom has not glowed with patriotic fervor in contemplating our unparalleled advantages, our rapidly extending population, our increasing wealth, our abounding plenty! But while we rejoice in our national prosperity, have we not reason to “rejoice with trembling”? Prosperity, alike in nations and individuals, has always been considered a condition of peculiar danger. What Christian patriot has not trembled for his country when he has reflected on the danger to which she is exposed by her unprecedented prosperity—on the worldliness which it naturally generates, on the dissipation and vice which it produces, on the forgetfulness of God and eternity which it so frequently creates? How important is it that some safety valve should be provided for this excess of prosperity! And where shall we find one so favorable, so desirable, as in the spirit of benevolence which distinguishes the missionary enterprise? If part of the wealth which now flows in upon us on every side, and which threatens to inundate the land with luxury and vice,

were devoted to the blessed cause of spreading the gospel among the heathen, we should be relieved of much of our anxiety for the moral purity of our rising country. With what different feelings should we regard those in our community who are diligent and eager in the pursuit of wealth, if we had reason to believe that they were laboring for *Christ*; that they were active in their worldly business, not for their own selfish indulgencies, not to amass unwieldy fortunes to leave to their heirs, but to aid in diffusing the knowledge of a Savior's name among the nations of the earth? We rejoice to know that there are such disinterested, devoted men in our land, men who labor to increase in wealth that they may be better able to advance the cause of the Redeemer in the world. May their number be greatly increased! Then will our nation's prosperity, instead of being the occasion of deep anxiety to the Christian patriot, be regarded with unmingled satisfaction.

Source: John Codman, *The Duty of American Christians to Send the Gospel to the Heathen* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1836), <https://books.google.com/books?id=ZCRdAAAACAAJ>. Public domain, Google-digitized.

Excerpts edited by John-Charles Duffy. Some paragraph breaks eliminated for a more compact presentation. The roman numeral IV inserted to continue the numbering of points used earlier in the source publication (I, II, III). Formatting elements that, in the source, marked the sentence beginning "Patriotism demands..." as part of a second numbered outline have been omitted here because other items from that outline were not carried over into the excerpted text. Spelling, capitalization, and punctuation emended in line with modern American conventions. Among those emendations are the capitalizing of *Indian* (lowercase in the source) and the lowercasing of *gospel* (capitalized in the source).

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