

Commission Minded Assemblies

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From the beginning of Creation God has disclosed Himself to mankind. He wants to manifest Himself to the world, even if humans are unwilling to hear from Him. The Christian faith is the capstone of the Almighty's revelation to His creatures. In engaging in missions, the Church shares in the Lord's commitment to reach the world with the Gospel. There are numerous benefits to local churches when they are involved in foreign missionary endeavour. Believers profit from these activities, for in supporting the witness of Christ worldwide, they enjoy greater unity of purpose, dependence on the Holy Spirit, and love for the lost.

The Church and Missions

The Church was designed to permeate the globe. Among the last instructions that Christ gave to His followers before the ascension was the command to 'Go [therefore] and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them to the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit', Matt. 28. 19, JND. Acts 1. 8 adds: 'But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you: and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth'. Clearly, the Lord wants His Church to be witness minded and evangelistically oriented. Christ's message is meant to be shared, and includes all people irrespective of race, language, or socio-economic status.

The dynamic replicating nature of the Church is especially highlighted in the book of Acts. After early successes in the presentation of the Gospel in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria, the apostles began to face entrenched Jewish opposition. In chapter six the gifted apologist Stephen gained notoriety for his ability to confound the Jews in theological debate. His impassioned rhetoric finally led him to a confrontation with the Sanhedrin. After masterfully retracing the history of God's dealings with Israel, he delivered a caustic indictment of the self-righteous ruling body; this brought about the great preacher's martyrdom, see Acts 7.

Triumph Out of Tragedy

The death of such a prominent spokesman for the Way struck a blow to the early Christians. Rather than hinder the progress of the Gospel, however, Stephen's killing actually helped spread the faith. His murder touched off persecution in Judea and Jerusalem, subsequently scattering the believers across the Near East, Acts 8. 1-4.¹ These refugee witnesses 'gossiped the Gospel' to those that they encountered, and the seed that they sowed eventually bore fruit as far away as modern Syria, Acts 11. 19-21. Tertullian's axiom 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church' was vindicated by the experience of these harried saints. Stephen's death indirectly led to the establishment

¹ The word 'scattered abroad' in vss. 1 and 4 is *diaspeiro*: 'to scatter like grain, to disperse.' A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*.

of the stalwart assembly of Antioch in the midst of Gentile territory. The Lord Jesus' promise to build His Church is backed up by His sovereign ability to employ even tragic circumstances for the accomplishment of His will, Matt. 16. 18; Rom. 8. 28-39; Eph. 1. 11. In 1956, the murders of Jim Elliot, Pete Fleming, Ed McCully, Nate Saint, and Roger Youderian were the catalyst for the Gospel penetrating the hostile Auca tribe, as well as being the impetus for many people leaving the English-speaking world for mission work around the globe.² Therefore, one sees that God still uses martyrdom to accomplish His purposes.

Antioch: A Template for the Commission-Minded Assembly

The assembly in Antioch became the springboard for the first major foreign missionary offensive of the early Church. Acts chapter 13 verse 1 describes the varied composition of the fellowship in this manner: 'Now there were in Antioch, in the assembly which was [there], prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius the Cyrenian, and Manaen, foster-brother of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul', JND. It was an assembly that had been blessed with much spiritual gift. Like many modern congregations it had a diverse membership with able men of both privileged and humble origins. The Lord saves people out of different ethnic, educational, and social backgrounds; furthermore, He unites them and uses them in His service. What other group would include an arrogant ex-Pharisee and a decadent Herodian courtier? Yet these men cooperated in the building up of the local assembly. They became the launch pad for the first modern-style pioneer evangelistic team.

What Does a Missionary Look Like?

As far as the type of messengers that the Holy Spirit chooses, one sees that He elected men who were already active in prophecy and teaching. God calls those who are already engaged in His work – not those who are indolent or inactive. Barnabas and Saul were integral members of the local assembly. The Antiochen Christians might have been tempted to argue that they could not spare these valuable servants. Nevertheless, the Lord handpicked these indefatigable ministers to carry the Gospel to new territory. As the brethren ministered before the Lord, it became apparent that He was selecting the two aforementioned labourers to go forth into the harvest fields, Acts 13. 2. The commending assembly was blessed, because they followed the Spirit's leading. In so doing, they were drawn closer to God, and participated in what was dear to His heart. The sending forth of the missionaries was preceded by activities like prayer and fasting, which indicated a strong dependence on the leading of the Holy Spirit, verse 3. In evaluating the Lord's leading of missionary candidates, the assembly and the prospective worker are united in prayerful seeking of God's will. It goes beyond a mere analysis of the need of a particular country to a careful inquiry: 'Is the Lord calling this brother or sister to go to a foreign field? What can the assembly do to facilitate them getting to the field and carrying out the Great Commission?'

² The Aucas are now known as the Huaoranis.

The Missionary Contribution to the Home Assembly

When Barnabas and Saul returned from their first missionary journey they called the assembly together to hear what the Lord had performed through them, Acts 14. 27. Both before and after their mission, the assembly was linked with them by mutual interest and prayer. The assembly was interested in the mission and the workers were concerned for their home church. Upon returning, the intrepid pioneers kept the assembly enthralled with tales of God's grace to the Gentiles. One assumes that this would move the believers to praise the Lord for His dealings with the lost who heard the Gospel through their missionaries.

As a further benefit to the assemblies on the home front, the experiences of the missionaries from the foreign field were used to help sort out a doctrinal dispute in Jerusalem. Acts chapter 15 tells of Paul and Barnabas' crucial role in clarifying the position of Gentile believers and their relationship to the Law. Coupled with Peter and James' testimonies, the Divine blessing that accompanied the missionaries' labours proved that the Lord had received Gentiles on the basis of Christ's work without any need for circumcision, observing Jewish customs, or any other ritual. The missionary endeavour upheld the integrity of the Gospel by showing how the Lord dealt with the new converts.

Principles for Modern Commission-Minded Assemblies

Like their ancient counterpart in Antioch, modern assemblies stand to benefit from engagement in foreign missions. The following are activities that should be prayerfully considered by assemblies in the United Kingdom and North America:

-In praying for and financially supporting labourers overseas, Christians in the homeland participate in the work of God all over the world; thereby, reaping eternal rewards. By sending material support to missionaries and praying for their efforts, local believers cooperate in the common purpose of spreading the Gospel worldwide; moreover, this unity of purpose draws them closer together in their own fellowship. Both the universal and the local aspects of the church count towards 'church growth'.

-By corresponding with missionaries the local saints are encouraged in their personal witness to emulate the foreign worker in 'enduring hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ', 2 Tim. 2. 3.

-Establishing missionary classes where young people study the needs of different countries, as well as write to workers, is a boon to their spiritual interest. Numerous veteran missionaries first developed an interest in doing the Lord's work in such classes; others were attracted to foreign service by attending missionary prayer meetings or listening to missionary reports in the local assembly.

-Supporting missions in the home assembly helps believers cultivate their love for the lost. As they pray for specific countries, cities, foreign assemblies, and the like, the Holy Spirit develops their interest in souls.

There are many advantages to being a commission-minded assembly, not the least of which, is emulating the ultimate missionary, the Lord Jesus. He left heaven ‘...to seek and to save that which was lost’, Luke 19. 10. No worker has ever gone farther or done more to reach the unsaved. Even today our Lord continues to guide His church in the accomplishment of the Great Commission globally.