
The Local Church and World Mission

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From Genesis to Revelation the Bible declares God's gracious purposes for the world. God's eternal purpose in Christ embraces the nations. As Adam and Eve were leaving Eden, in total despair, God graciously gave them the first promise of the coming Messiah. One day the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head. Eve was the "mother of all living" and from her would come the rainbow nations of the world. From these nations God would call his international church, redeemed by the blood of the Lamb.

God's eternal purpose embraces the world

Throughout the Old Testament God unfolds his eternal purpose in Christ. In his covenant promise to Abraham he declares that his purpose is universal, "... all peoples on earth will be blessed though you." (Genesis 12:3)

The Psalmist speaks of God's purposes for the nations through his Messiah, "Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession." (Psalm 2:8)

The prophets declared the day when God's mercy will extend widely, "In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.'" (Isaiah 2:2-3)

Jonah's ministry prefigured the Gospel Age as he was sent to Gentile, pagan Nineveh, the capital of the evil Assyrian empire. Jonah struggled with and rebelled against the fact that God's purposes were more extensive than the Jewish people. He didn't want a wicked and uncircumcised people to experience mercy, but, reluctantly, he acknowledged the Lord's character and ways. "I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God who relents from sending calamity." (Jonah 4:2)

As we move into the New Testament, John the Baptist is given an insight into the significance for the world of the coming of Christ. The atoning work he had come to undertake had the world in view, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29) Jesus declares, "I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there will be one flock and one shepherd." (John 10:16)

Caiaphas, in his bitter hatred of Jesus, spoke prophetically that Jesus would die not only for the Jewish nation "but also for the scattered children of God, to bring them together and make them one." (John 11:52) As Jesus rode in triumph into Jerusalem the Pharisees, witnessing the acclamation of the Jewish people from Jerusalem and the Diaspora, said, "Look how the whole world has gone after him." (John 12:19)

After his resurrection Christ commanded that the Gospel be taken to the nations. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of

the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20) The disciples were to “go” and to “proclaim” the Gospel to all the peoples of world. (Mark 16:15-16)

This great task could only be accomplished by God’s power so before his Ascension Jesus promised, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1:8) As the first century was drawing to a close John was given a glimpse of the glorified church. “After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.” (Revelation 7:9)

Real progress has been made

As the curtain rises on the 21st century we rejoice that much has already been accomplished. Millions of people around the world, from many nations, profess Jesus Christ as Lord. In the face of persecution, heresy and moral failure, the church has grown, as Jesus promised it would. The world’s great empires have come and gone, but the church of Jesus Christ has continued and grown. In recent years the fall of the Iron Curtain has led to the advance of the Gospel in many Eastern European countries. During the past 50 years, churches in China have grown amazingly in the face of bitter persecution.

In his book *The Church is Bigger Than You Think*, Patrick Johnstone describes the growth of the church through history, and especially the advances made in many parts of the world during the turbulent 20th century. He also underlines the challenge facing us. Still 15-20% of the world population have yet to hear the Gospel, one billion men, women and children, especially amongst Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. Pioneer church planting is the priority amongst 3000 people groups in the world, and at least 1000 of these have no indigenous witness. Patrick writes, “No one need feel unemployed! Every one of us and every single congregation is vital to the final prosecution of the task Jesus gave us!”¹

Patrick Johnstone is more than merely a statistician. Successive editions of “Operation World” have stimulated prayer for many nations, previously ignored, and given us all valuable information about the task before us. Patrick believes passionately that, as Christians and churches around the world, we should take practical steps to bring the Gospel to the unreached peoples during our generation. Even if we are hesitant about making our timetables too specific, surely the urgency of the need and the unprecedented opportunities should stir us to action.

Local churches are central to God’s global purpose

One of the defining characteristics of evangelical churches is that we are people of the Word. The Bible is our primary standard and the foundation for our faith and action. In a recent article, a North American mission leader appealed to preachers and teachers to “teach the whole counsel of God”. This was not an appeal merely for orthodoxy, but that we recognise that “God’s Word is a missionary document.”²

One characteristic of many of the first century congregations was their commitment to the advance of the Gospel beyond their immediate situation. The apostles and early

Christians believed in the “both ... and” of mission (Acts 1:8 (KJV)). At one and the same time they were busy both in their own locality and also did everything possible to promote the Gospel cause more widely. Hearing news of Gospel blessing in Antioch the Jerusalem church sent Barnabas. (Acts 11:22) In obedience to the direction of the Holy Spirit the church in Antioch set apart their two most gifted leaders to a pioneer church planting ministry (Acts 13:1-3). Paul commended the church in Thessalonica because “The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere.” (1 Thessalonians 1:8)

Today secular pundits, seeing the desperate state of many churches in Britain, are pronouncing the demise of the Christian cause. We, too, are deeply concerned about the spiralling moral and spiritual decline. Yet around the world the church continues to grow and the Lord is clearly seen to be at work. It is vitally important that, as local churches, we have a global vision of the greatness of God’s purposes. We may live in small communities and belong to small fellowships, or live in remote parts of the world and see very little happening, but it is a tremendous encouragement to realise that we are part of the greatest enterprise in history. Significant interaction with the work of the Gospel around the world can be a tremendous stimulus to a local church in facing the demands of its own situation. Reading of what God has done and is doing in China in Tony Lambert’s book *China’s Christian Millions* encourages us to believe that the same can happen in our country too!³

Cultivating a global vision in the local church

How can local churches cultivate a global vision? Many churches struggle to develop a meaningful mission involvement. They faithfully support various missionaries and mission agencies, but often feel a lack of in-depth involvement. In some local churches the general level of missionary interest is not high. Nor, often, is the commitment to evangelism in all its various forms. Missionary meetings and conferences are not well attended, and consistent prayer for missionaries can be patchy. Pastors and missionary secretaries work hard to stimulate interest and prayer through regular missionary meetings, but it is very difficult to deepen missionary interest and to cultivate a sense of meaningful involvement.

Mission agencies can greatly help local churches by re-assessing the relationship they have with them. Mission agencies need to work more closely with local churches. Too often the agendas and programmes of agencies are established in isolation from churches. Missions seek candidates from local churches, and hope the churches will support them financially, but our relationships need to be significantly strengthened. The task of world mission is too important for us to allow inadequate relationships to get in the way! In fact it is only as we work together in an effective partnership that the task of world mission can be accomplished.

The early Christians spontaneously co-operated together in strategic areas and this contributed to the advance of the Gospel. Their co-operation is seen in:

The work of Gospel proclamation and church planting: during his great missionary journeys Paul drew on gifted men from many churches, including those which were newly established (Acts 15:40; 16:1-3; 20:4). Today we need to draw on gifted men from many churches for the great task of reaching the world with the Gospel.

A ministry of mutual care and encouragement: the apostles and others visited churches to encourage believers (Acts 8:14; 9:32; 15:41; 16:1-5). Churches around the world today need encouragement. Such a ministry does not imply either a continuing apostolate or the authority of one church over another.

The provision of leadership, ministry and pastoral oversight: the ministries of Barnabas at Antioch, Timothy at Ephesus, and Titus in Crete are examples of this (Acts 11:22; 1 Timothy 1:3; Titus 1:5). Developing church situations in many countries today would greatly benefit from such assistance. On a recent visit to Côte d'Ivoire a pastor made an urgent plea for help. In addition to his extensive family commitments, he is caring for 11 village congregations, with no means of transport. He is burdened about many other villages without a Gospel witness, and is committed to training men to share in the work. He needs help through experienced pastors visiting to assist him in the vital task of training indigenous evangelists and teachers.

Serving each other with gifts of love, both material and personal: the early churches sent financial gifts (Acts 11:29-30; 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8 and 9; Philippians 4:14-16), and even people, to help and encourage the Paul when he was in prison (Philippians 2:25). Practical help of this kind is greatly appreciated by churches in poorer countries today and some churches in the UK have already entered into significant partnerships with such churches.

Defining and defending the truth in the face of error: the Council of Jerusalem considered an important doctrinal issue and communicated the authoritative decision to all the churches (Acts 15:1-16:4). We are living in a global village where means of communication are very fast, especially with the growing influence of the Internet. Unbiblical teaching spreads like wild fire and church leaders need help in handling important doctrinal issues. The help is not all one way. It was encouraging to hear a report of church leaders in a tribal community in Irian Jaya handling a "new" teaching by taking the people back to the Bible, and to the things they had been taught by those who brought the Gospel to them. They seem to have identified the teaching as unbiblical more effectively than many in the UK and United States! It was the African bishops at the Lambeth Conference in 1998 who took a firm stand against an unbiblical "morality".

Our model for the relationship between local churches and mission agencies needs to reflect this dynamic New Testament model. Mission agencies and churches need to function in a growing partnership of trust, accountability, and co-operation. Churches send missionaries. This is God's normal *modus operandi*. Mission agencies can assist and work with churches in the practicalities of sending and in providing the skills needed to ensure an effective context for cross-cultural Gospel ministry.

Local churches need to identify and train gifted people

In each generation God's purpose is fulfilled as spiritually mature people are raised up. In the UK we have learned, to our cost, that doctrinal orthodoxy is not safeguarded mainly by establishing good confessions and by legal constitutions, but by a true apostolic succession of Bible believing people. Church leaders who no longer believe the Bible will soon find a way of circumventing and undermining the best of confessions and constitutions.

The New Testament Churches identified and set apart spiritually gifted men. Paul was always looking for suitable men to work with him. When he revisited Lystra the church leaders spoke well of a young man in their church and Paul took Timothy with him (Acts 16:1-3). As the time for his death drew near Paul urged Timothy, “And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others” (2 Timothy 2:2).

Are we raising up a generation of men who have proven skills in evangelism, Bible teaching, discipling and church leadership. Men whose first commitment is to the cause of the Gospel in the world? Does our church leadership reflect a spectrum of ages incorporating both the wisdom of age and the energy of youth? This is a vital issue both for the well-being of our churches and for the cause of world mission.

The church, of 500 members, in which I grew up recognised the importance of training young people. When I was a youth leader I was given my first opportunity to preach God’s Word in a Sunday service. This experience was significant in awakening in me a sense of call to the ministry and gave the church leaders the opportunity to assess my ability. When later I approached my minister to tell him that I felt the Lord was calling me to the ministry he told me that a number of people who had heard me speak at youth services had been anticipating this. In the same church, over a 5 year period, 2 other young men were given similar opportunities and also later entered the ministry. There is a real danger today that as evangelical churches we are not developing the incipient gifts of young preachers and missionaries through giving openings to minister God’s Word in the church.

If this is so, it has serious implications for the future of the Gospel around the world. There is an urgent need for proven workers, both pastors and missionaries, and an obvious shortage of gifted and experienced people. One of the great needs in many countries is for Bible teaching. We need men who can teach the Word and who can, at the same time, train others to be Bible teachers. Such a ministry requires experience. Our churches need to be nurseries where Bible teachers are trained and sent out. Recently it has been encouraging to see a number of men with pastoral experience being called to cross-cultural missionary work. Their churches have keenly felt a sense of loss at their going, but surely this is the quality of person we need to be sending.

In 1990 a church leader in Uganda, wrote “The missionary comes to us, feeling that he or she would like to do evangelism and church planting in a different culture. But in some cases, they have never done evangelism and discipleship in their own neighbourhood and churches.... We need more proven leaders on the mission field.”⁴

On my first visit to Spain, church leaders encouraged us to send more missionaries to their country, but also impressed on me the need for experienced people. They had observed over the years that the fine young Christians sent by various mission agencies had very little experience before going to Spain. The Spanish churches, many of whom are small and whose pastors work in secular employment to support their families, have needed to assess the gifts and train those who have come as missionaries to Spain.

In every sphere of life we look for people with ability and training. When I go to a doctor, I expect him to be fully trained in medicine and competent. I would be greatly alarmed if he was not! I expect the pilot of a plane to have been trained to a high level of skill before I entrust my life to him. In the great issue of people’s eternal destiny we need people who are equipped by God and who have been trained to be effective

servants of the Lord. There is no better place for this training to take place than in the local church.

Cross-cultural missionary work is very demanding. It involves learning a new language and understanding the culture of the people amongst whom you live and work. Before you go you need to have been given basic training and experience for the work to which you are called. You need a good working knowledge of the Scriptures and an ability to teach from them. You need to have had significant Christian and church experience. You need to be an effective witness to Christ and to be able to disciple those who have come to faith. You need to have leadership potential and skills and to be capable of and committed to developing those same leadership skills in others. The basic nursery where these skills are learned is the local church.

In the New Testament the training of potential leaders was a priority. Our Lord is the model for such a ministry. He invested considerable time and energy in training the Twelve. “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to him those he wanted, and they came to him. He appointed twelve – designating them apostles – that they might be with him and that he might send them out to preach and to have authority to drive out demons” (Mark 3:13-15). He spent time with them. They were able to observe him in action. They learned from his example and were inspired by him. His explicit intention was to prepare them to be sent out. He sent them out on evangelistic missions (Matthew 10:1-42). By the time the Holy Spirit came in Acts 2 these men had already gained valuable experience of Christian service and vital understanding of themselves through the time they had spent with the Lord.

Paul actively gathered a team of workers around him. He identified potential and then cultivated it by “apprenticing”. He took young Timothy with him and through the experience he gained with Paul he became a strategic church leader of outstanding spiritual character. Later Paul commended him very highly, “I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel” (Philippians 2:20-22). By the time of his third missionary journey Paul had gathered a team of workers from a number of churches. “He was accompanied by Sopater son of Pyrrhus from Berea, Aristarchus and Secundus from Thessalonica, Gaius from Derbe, Timothy also, and Tychicus and Trophimus from the province of Asia” (Acts 20:4). Like the church at Antioch, these newly established churches were willing to commit their best men to a ministry of cross-cultural evangelism and church planting.

Some world mission priorities for the local church

Over the past 50 years the Lord has been pleased to raise up many churches in the UK which believe the Bible and proclaim the Gospel. How can these churches play an even more effective part in world mission?

Keep your eyes on the big picture

We need to keep our eyes on the big picture. In the Bible God gives us his vision and agenda. He encourages us to think big thoughts, and to share his passion for the nations to be reached. It is easy for church leaders to accept that stimulating an interest in world vision is difficult and not to make it a priority. But we dare not turn in on ourselves.

This will lead to stagnation in the local church and be a denial of our biblical convictions. The task is urgent! People are dying without a Saviour and passing into a lost eternity. The Gospel has been entrusted to us and we have a solemn responsibility before God to go and make it known

Think strategically as church leaders

The church leaders in Antioch spent time “worshipping the Lord and fasting” (Acts 13:2). Whilst they were doing this the Holy Spirit directed them to release Saul and Barnabas to a new ministry. As church leaders today we need to spend time before the Lord, and to be prepared to think strategically and to take bold steps in new Gospel initiatives. The world was as hostile in the 1st century as it is in the 21st, but Gospel witness turned it upside down (Acts 17:6)! We need to join with churches from other countries who are already thinking strategically and stepping out in faith. Working together with them will be mutually enriching.

Pray as churches for workers to be send out

Jesus told his disciples, “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field (Luke 10:2). Those who see the greatness of the task are the ones who pray most urgently for the Lord to send more workers! As local churches we need to pray that the Lord will send out workers from among us. Like the church in Antioch we may well find that he calls our best people, but he will also raise up others to take their place. Nothing is more likely to stimulate the interest of a local church in world mission than when the Lord calls someone from the church to go as a cross-cultural missionary. May many more of our churches see this happening, and may the Lord who calls them be pleased to bless and use them greatly.

Footnotes

- ¹ “The Church is Bigger Than You Think”, Christian Focus/WEC, page 146
- ² Larry Sharp, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, January 2000.
- ³ Tony Lambert, *China’s Christian Millions* (sevenoaks, Monarch Books/OMF, 1999)
- ⁴ David Zac Niringiye, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, January 1990

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Christians who flourished in the days of Puritanism ... were men of prayer but not men of missionary performance; and the Christians of our present day are men of performance but need perhaps to be humbled by crosses and adversaries into men of prayer. It is out of the happy combination of these two habits that the evangelising of the nations is to come.

Thomas Chalmers, *Works*, vol. 12, p. 59
