



## **The Church's Missionary Task:**

### ***Obeying God's Call to Reap in His Fields***

Have you ever sung the following words? *"Lord of harvest, send forth reapers; hear us, Lord, to Thee we cry; send them now the sheaves to gather, ere the harvest time pass by."* It's a good song of prayer based on Jesus' words in Matthew 9:38. Still, the song is a bit awkward because it's about us; we are the reapers for whom we are praying.

When Jesus exhorts his disciples to *"pray the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into His harvest,"* his assumption is that those praying for the harvest are those already engaged in the work. They are praying for *supplemental*, not *substitute* laborers. In the next chapter Jesus sends out his disciples as laborers into God's field.

The reality is, as Jesus says, *"The harvest truly is plentiful, but the laborers are few."* How true this is even of those within the church.

### **The Call to Missions**

It is clear from Scripture that Christian churches and their members are to engage in a missionary enterprise. While redemption has been accomplished through the work of God's Son, Jesus Christ, it remains for his redeeming work to be applied to people throughout all the nations. Toward this end God gives to the church a ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). The Great Commission of Christ (Matt. 28:18-20) provides the church with the authority, goal, means, and promise of the church's mission to the world. In short, the church's missionary task is to communicate the word of God to the unconverted.

In a healthy church, the missionary enterprise is spearheaded by her officers. The pastors, elders and deacons provide opportunities and participate in them, leading by example. The minister, as God's appointed spokesman, leads through preaching (Rom. 10:14), praying, and administering the sacraments. But every believer participates in God's mission by assisting the church's formal ministry and by applying God's word to every area of life.

Congregational missions, while including praying for and financially supporting missionaries, is not exhausted thereby. Each congregation of Christ must remain committed to the primary means of fulfilling our mission by planting churches and evangelizing her neighbors. God calls the people of the church to reach out to the community praying that God will draw unbelievers to the church, unite them to Christ, and raise them into reproducing disciples.

If the church exists to bring glory to God (Eph. 3:21), our desire should be for the church to grow. Sometimes church growth is thought of as a great mystery. It is not. In addition to biological growth from within, a church grows when visitors become members. Therefore, the plan of your church should be to pray for, seek, be prepared for, and retain, visitors who can be discipled into living members of the body of Christ. All our efforts notwithstanding, we trust that Christ alone builds his church (Matt. 16:18).

Sadly, and for a variety of reasons, not every professing believer has this vision for congregational outreach.

## **Roadblocks to Missions**

Why is it that so few laborers respond to the call of the Harvester?

### ***Fear***

Some of us have an unhealthy fear of change. We are scared to talk to our neighbors or embrace “strangers” in the church. Strangely, a fear of change is akin to a fear of breathing. Every new breath we take in brings new life. We also may forget that many of the things we now take for granted were scary at first. Remember the first time you called that woman who is now your wife? Remember the first time you got behind the wheel of a car, or gave a speech? To take that first intimidating step we need to remember: Fear of God casts out ungodly fear.

### ***Busyness***

Outreach should not be, but often is, looked at as something that eats into our time. In reality, outreach is exactly the sort of thing for which our time was given. Not only that, but as we look at outreach as a family event, we find that it doesn’t *take up* family time, it *makes up* family time.

### ***Complacency***

It is a lot easier to avoid outreach. A vibrant, outreaching church can be a busy church. Participation in outreach can require time, energy, and resources. Getting involved in people’s lives may require us to sacrifice in many ways. But we need to recognize complacency as a sin. In at least 14 Proverbs the *lazy* man is contrasted with the *godly* man. In the parable of the talents, Jesus equates laziness with wickedness (Matt. 25:26). God rightly calls his children to be workers.

### ***Stinginess***

Effective ministry costs money. The Bible frequently highlights the cost of funding vibrant ministry (Prov. 3:9, Mal. 3:10, Matt. 6:1-4 Mark 12:41-44, Acts 20:35, 1 Cor. 16:2, 2 Cor. 8-9, 1 Tim. 5:17-18). We also know that we reap what we sow (Gal. 6:6-10). Still, how easy it is to be like the rich man who laid up treasure for himself, but was not rich toward God (Luke 12:21). Instead, we should view the money that we have as a sacred trust which the Lord has given us to do his work and with which we can lay up treasure in heaven (v. 33). This is true of our personal resources as well as our congregational resources.

### ***Selfishness***

We may not want our church to grow. We may not want sinners to enter our inner circles. Are we disinterested in the messy and unpredictable work of evangelism and discipleship? Are we secretly hoping that others will do this work, but unwilling to be personally involved? If Christ means anything to us we will look out not only for our own interests but also for the interest of others (Cf. Phil. 2:1-4).

### ***Disobedience***

There are some people who simply do not care that the church, and specifically her members, must reach out to those who are lost. Some of us may not care that God commands us to “*be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you*” (1 Pet. 3:15). Instead, we tend to avoid such opportunities. Jesus’ words in John 14:15 apply to the area of outreach: “*If you love me, keep my commandments!*”

## **Preparing for Missions**

Overcoming roadblocks to missions helps us prepare to enter the fields.

### ***Preparing through Preaching***

Part of the church’s ministry is to remind God’s people that they are the light of the world (Matt. 5:14) and that they must shine before men (v. 16). Preaching should stir up love and good works (Heb. 10:24). Believers must hear the evangelistic imperative so that we can repent of our sins and

weaknesses, seek our righteousness in Christ, and pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit to make us more like the great Harvester.

### ***Preparing through Planning***

Many Christians tend to be reactive not proactive. But a faithful, witnessing church will never be merely reactionistic. J.I. Packer has defined sectarianism as the attitude in the church which defines identity by exclusion. Sectarianism says, *"We are the people who don't do this, that, and the other thing."* But we need to be the people who do! We need to be visionary.

Without doubt the greatest missionary of all time was a visionary. Luke uses a powerful phrase in Acts 19:21 to describe Paul's vision for ministry. He *"purposed in the Spirit."* One phase of Paul's work had been accomplished in Ephesus. He then planned, in concrete terms, to build upon God's blessings. Paul didn't just say, "I would like to see the ministry grow and the church expand." Rather, Paul laid out a plan, namely to minister in Macedonia, Achaia, Jerusalem, and Rome. Knowing that a spiritual purpose requires action, *"He sent into Macedonia two of those who ministered to him"* (v. 22).

As God's people we need to prayerfully brainstorm about new possibilities and how we might implement some of those ideas. Most congregations would benefit from developing a written plan outlining how they could more faithfully glorify God in reaching their neighbors for Christ. Without a plan, success in the mission is dubious (Luke 14:28).

### ***Preparing through Prayer***

Have we diligently asked the Lord for a plentiful harvest? Or might our prayer lives suggest that our desire is half-hearted? Regular and specific prayer for spiritual outsiders places us in a humble position to receive the gift of growth. Members who are diligently praying for growth will also respond more readily when they see God answer their prayer.

First and foremost, preparing for outreach through prayer means thanking God for our deliverance in Christ: "Lord, I am so unworthy of the least of your mercies. There is nothing good in me that could ever earn your favor. Yet you have smiled upon me in grace. Through Christ's death and resurrection, you have given me an inheritance in heaven. How can I ever thank you? I can obey your call to reap in your fields."

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