

CIRCULAR LETTER
for the
GENERAL ASSEMBLY, 2003
by
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Dearly-loved brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ and partners in ministry,

I've been requested to write this letter to circulate among the churches of our Association, and my fervent prayer is that it may be a useful instrument in God's hands toward the development of a strategy for covering the earth with the knowledge of the Lord.

We're doing some searching introspection and asking ourselves: How well are we as Christ's churches obeying His command to go out and disciple all nations, marking them by baptism into the threefold Name of the Triune God? We realize that if we are serious about carrying out His commission, we need more than just a vision. We must have a plan to carry out this immense task of commending the gospel to a lost and confused generation.

As a group of reformed churches, we can be helped by Iain Murray's great missionary volume, *The Puritan Hope*, in which he traces the expansion of the gospel to its roots in the grand old Puritan theology that we hold in common. Iain points to an important observation by American church historian Kenneth Scott Latourette, who traces the great modern missions movement to the 17th and 18th century awakenings: "This Protestantism was characterized by an abounding vitality and a daring unequalled in Christian history. Through it, for the first time, plans were seriously elaborated for bringing the Christian message to all men.... Never before had the followers of any faith formulated comprehensive plans covering the entire surface of the earth to make these purposes effective."

As we constantly seek to develop a God-pleasing plan of action for our generation, it is valuable to see what the Church has done in the past. Is there a pattern from the early church that we should be following? What about the great New Testament missionary, the Apostle Paul? Is he just a bigger-than-life hero with a dynamic personality? Do we view his journeys only as part of the unrepeatable redemptive history?

I submit that God used Paul not merely to lay down almost half of the apostolic foundation. In God's wisdom, Paul's role was more than just to be the grand apostolic theologian of the New Testament. He was also the missionary to the nations, and therefore it seems crucial that we give careful attention not just to his *words* but to his *practice* in ministry.

While in Costa Rica in 1974 I began reading and studying two excellent works by a distinguished Anglican missionary, Roland Allen. *Missionary Methods—St. Paul's or Ours?* and *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church* comprise a reformational call to return to New Testament methods for missions. Allen says, "There is a summons to everyone who will hear to submit inherited patterns of Church life to the searching scrutiny of the Spirit." Through the years I've become increasingly convinced that God placed Paul's missionary work at the forefront of the expansion of the early Church to give us principles to follow in our service to

Him, even in the 21st century. We can draw principles from Paul's ministry that will assist us in formulating a strategy to cover the earth with the reality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

We must begin by clearly setting forth certain foundational pre-suppositions. First, the doctrinal base of our missionary strategy is that we glory in the gospel of sovereign and free grace. No other gospel has power to change lives and to establish churches. We must not go beyond what is written in Holy Scripture, but we do believe that the gospel is accurately expressed in our Confession of Faith (1689). God alone saves sinners and builds His Church. Second, Paul practiced Christ's love to people with an incarnational identity with them. All Christians are commanded to be actively telling the good news to others, motivated by the love of Christ. We must identify with Jews, Gentiles, and all peoples "to become all things to all men, so that by all possible means [we] might save some..." (1 Cor. 9:22b-23a). One way we express the love of Christ is by taking other people's cultures, language and history seriously. As J.H. Bavinck puts it so well in his classic work, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*, "Abstract, disembodied and history-less sinners do not exist; only very concrete sinners exist, whose sinful life is determined and characterized by all sorts of cultural and historical factors; by poverty, hunger, superstition, traditions, chronic illnesses, tribal morality, and thousands of other things. I must bring the gospel of God's grace in Jesus Christ to the whole man, in his concrete existence, in his everyday environment." The realization that we cannot really identify with people without knowing them is basic to our taking the gospel to the unconverted.

Paul the missionary calls us to imitate him in his principles of life. He sent Timothy to Corinth "to remind you of my way of life in Christ Jesus, which agrees with what I teach everywhere in every church (1 Cor. 4:17). What is Paul's pattern of life in missions? Did he have an overall design or plan of action that can instruct us? What better example for a strategic plan for missions can we devise than the one given to us in Scripture?

There are four basic principles that we can observe in Scripture.

First, it is the *church* that sends missionaries.

Missionaries were always sent out by the church in the first century. We see this spontaneous obedience to Christ's great commission in the church in Antioch when they placed their hands on Barnabas and Saul (Paul) and sent them off (Acts 13:1-3 and 14:26). The church chose from its spiritual leaders these two men to serve as missionaries, carrying the good news to faraway places (Acts 15:26). As we send off missionaries we must keep in mind that the Holy Spirit is the One who sets them apart to the work He calls them to do (Acts 13:2). We, as churches, simply recognize God's awesome call upon them to do His work.

The apostle and missionary Paul says, "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." What we do always rests on God's activity. In Bavinck's words, "We go into one land after the other throughout the entire world; we seek and we preach, and all the time it is God who completes His work of reconciliation through us."

Paul's question, "How can they preach unless they are sent?" forces us to face our responsibility as churches to send men out to preach the gospel, starting new churches and encouraging young churches in dark corners of the world. Over the last generation many men have become fired up to serve the Lord but have lacked concrete guidance in effective service. They've prepared

themselves to go; but when our churches have failed to direct and send them, they have gone out with other groups. Isn't it time that we have a strategy to send men to be missionaries both at home and to the ends of the earth? As leaders, our carrying out of the Great Commission must involve not only giving ourselves to preaching but also sending of other men to preach.

Bavinck reminds us that “the proper functioning of the officers in the congregation is always conducive to the spread of the gospel.” In Ephesians 4 Paul sets forth the various offices of the church and their existence “to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then...speaking the truth in love we will in all things grow up into Him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From Him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work” (Eph. 4:15-16). Bavinck goes on to say, “Here we have in a few profound words the difficult lesson which we are in the process of learning on every mission field and in all our evangelistic work. That church alone, which is itself a living spiritual fellowship, an organic whole, has power ‘to increase the body.’ All work, however costly and well-organized, which is not rooted in a church that has found the secret of mutual love, is in the long run powerless.”

Second, the church’s purpose in sending missionaries is to make disciples who form *churches*.

Paul’s missionary work established churches everywhere. This pattern was not peculiar to the apostolic time. In fact, for centuries the Christian Church’s mission efforts resulted in the formation of “fully-equipped churches.” Latourette informs us that “there was order in the expansion; the moment converts were made in any place ministers were appointed from among themselves,...who in turn could organize and bring into the unity of the visible church any new group of Christians in their neighborhood.” The great church historian Harnack, in his *Mission and Expansion*, tells how the “Christian federation of churches” stretched across the whole Roman Empire within a little more than a century after “the very first Gentile Christian church in Syrian Antioch” was founded.

The first century of missions covered the Empire not because of fund raising and technical organization but rather because churches sent out men who were willing to give all, even risking their lives to start churches. They appointed elders in each city (Acts 15:26, Titus 1:5) to continue the work. This was the practice that Paul followed in his missionary methods. After Jews from Antioch and Iconium stoned Paul and left him for dead, he got up and went back into the city and then left the next day for Derbe (Acts 14:19-20). Luke tells us they preached the gospel “and won a large number of disciples” and returned to strengthen the disciples and encourage them to remain true to the faith. Then we are told “Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust” (Acts 14:22-23). Even though these new converts had a pagan background, the churches they formed had elders within a relatively short time of being disciplined. It is not unusual in our day for missionary-established churches to exist for years without having their own elders to pastor the people. Are we following the biblical pattern? Are we committing them to the Lord and trusting Him? (I recommend Gordon Keddie’s *You Are My Witnesses* for your reading on this passage.)

We need to be reminded that neither we as sending churches nor our missionaries are indispensable to newly-formed cells of the body, Christ's Church. If we are to complete the task given us by our Lord, we must entrust His churches to indigenous elders who, by His grace, will faithfully pastor their people. This is the Pauline pattern for planting new churches and for covering the earth with the gospel.

Paul and his faithful coworkers lacked many helps that we now have in carrying the message to disciple the nations. Even without the speed of modern travel and communications, Paul accomplished incredible feats. The Early Church sent Paul out to take the gospel to the regions beyond. In the book of Acts, Luke records Paul's travels to no fewer than thirty-two countries, fifty-four cities, and nine of the Mediterranean islands!

We need men today who will go out with this vision of starting churches. In a dozen years (AD 47 – AD 59) the Lord used 'the Pauline band' to establish churches in the Roman provinces of Galatia, Macedonia, Achaia and Asia! Paul had completed his work in those regions. Listen to his own words, "But now that there is no more place for me to work in these regions...." Lacking printing presses, airplanes, trains, buses, or jeeps, and without even a completed New Testament, he succeeded in planting living churches over a whole region.

Missionaries are not sent to compete with the indigenous pastors or to take the national pastor's place. We believe that the ascended Lord gives "pastor-teachers" to shepherd all His people in His churches everywhere. God has designed the church so that she is fully equipped with all spiritual gifts to grow and multiply herself without "any necessary reference to us: that, though, while we were there, they might regard us as helpful advisers, yet our removal should not at all mutilate the completeness of the church, or deprive it of anything necessary for its unlimited expansion" (Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*).

If we really desire the extension of the gospel to the ends of the earth, we must establish indigenous churches that are not controlled by missionaries or mission boards but that have their own ministers and members functioning under the headship of the Lord of the Church.

We must practice a 'regulatory principle' for missions that calls us to submit even our inherited practices of missions to the searching scrutiny of the living Word of God. Yes, change can be good when it comes from the mighty Spirit of God.

While we appreciate the missionary work of those who have gone before us, there is a place for us to seek to call for a reformation in missionary strategy and practice. If our pattern of mission work is substantially different from that of the New Testament, something is radically wrong.

Third, the church's *financial policy* in sending missionaries must be *biblical*.

The financial strategy of the missionary work of the Early Church contributed to the growth and success of the churches. In the New Testament model, each local church both collected and administered its own financial resources. There were special collections from the churches for the needy in Jerusalem, as all of the churches were commanded to remember the poor and care for them. But Paul's relationship to the people to whom he preached never came from giving them money. Historically, great damage has been done to the church when large sums of money have been pumped into another culture. Silver and gold do not revolutionize a people. The

gospel puts joy and fire into people's lives. Money coming into a community from an outside source (even from loving, well-intentioned brothers and sisters in Christ) can rob people of their joy and fervor when it is perceived as controlling them or buying their loyalty. There are sad cases of such monetary "assistance" being given so much prominence that it seems to even quench the work of the Holy Spirit in a location.

Graham Cheesman, author of *Mission Today*, puts Roland Allen's excellent writing on Paul's financial policies in three brief statements:

"1) Paul did not seek financial help for himself. Particularly, he did not ask for support from those to whom he preached. There were plenty of religious charlatans preaching for money in Paul's day and he did not want to be confused with them (1 Thes.. 2:7-9; Acts 20:33-34). Rather, he would work by night to be able to preach by day. He accepted gifts from other churches he had already founded and had left in order to work in a new area (Phil. 4:16; 2 Cor. 11:8).

"2) Paul did not bring money to his converts. Each church he founded immediately became financially independent. The only exception to this rule was when he collected for one established church (Jerusalem) from other established churches (Corinth, etc.) by way of an expression of brotherhood in special need. However, this was a collection from the new churches on the mission field to help the original sending church back home!

"3) The churches administered their own funds. Even when he went to Jerusalem with the money from the provinces, Paul took with him representatives of those churches to carry the money. Paul kept his hands off."

Fourth, the church's passion and joy is to *obey* the great commission (Matt. 28:19-20).

One of my fondest memories of preaching came about in a pastors' conference in Carlisle, PA, in 1969. I remember well Ernie Reisinger introducing David Martyn Lloyd-Jones simply as "the Doctor." We were then privileged to hear Dr. Lloyd-Jones preach three evening messages on the great biblical truth of justification. But the address that shot an arrow into my own heart came just before lunch on the last day of the conference. The Doctor had been asked to speak on "The Responsibility of Evangelism," and the Doctor spent an hour masterfully persuading us that great missionary work is not so much duty and activity but passion and joy in speaking of Jesus Christ, the Savior of sinners. Dr. Lloyd-Jones called us to remember that when the disciples were commanded by the Sanhedrin not "to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus," they replied, "we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard" (Acts 5:18-20).

We need to have our own hearts burn with this passion--a zeal with knowledge of God that compels us to teach others, whether openly or in secret (because of oppressive governments), of our lovely Lord.

My desire is to stimulate us all to a lively searching of the Scriptures and our own hearts with the result of encouraging each other in fulfilling Christ's last commandment. How can we spur one another on in the work of missions? How can we hammer out a biblical strategy whereby we'll train evangelists and missionaries for more effective service? What can we do to challenge young men (and older ones!) to disciple the nations?

My hope is that we'll continue to discuss the principles here set forth and then march forward with concrete plans to cover the earth with the knowledge of the Lord. May the Lord of the harvest give us a glorious time of thinking through a strategy for missions in the General Assembly in Carlisle, PA. And may He grant us a great enlargement of our vision and reformation and renewal in our practice for reaching our generation (and future ones, as the Lord carries) with the gospel.

Yours for Christ's kingdom and glory,

Dr. James E. Adams ("Grizzly")

P.S. Here's a perfect number of books (7) for reading and having available (if possible) at the General Assembly:

Roland Allen, *Missionary Methods—St. Paul's or Ours?*
Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church*
J. H. Bavinck, *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*
Graham Cheesman, *Mission Today*
Roger S. Greenway, *Go and Make Disciples!*
Vishal & Ruth Mangalwadi, *The Legacy of William Carey*
Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope*