

COMMISSIONED OR CONDITIONED?

A question and a challenge for the Church

In recalling his encounter with Jesus Christ, the Apostle Paul, responded to Jesus' words with, "What shall I do, Lord?" (Acts 22:10) No doubt, the mind of every human ponders this question when confronted with the reality of the Lord Jesus. How do we respond; what shall we do? What does the Lord want from me?

The conversion of Saul and his appointment as the emissary of Christ to the Gentile world is a landmark event in recorded history. It serves as a proof of the power of the resurrected Jesus in changing the chief persecutor of Christians into the great ambassador of the gospel. It marks the real beginning of the "Gentile era," the expansion of the message of salvation beyond the boundaries of Judea and Galilee with the first mission trips.

For this reason, the story is truly a significant guideline for us today in our response to the claims of Jesus Christ. Paul was humbled, as evidenced by his praying, he was obedient, as evidenced by his baptism, and he was willing, as evidenced by his acceptance of the charge to take the gospel to the non-Jewish world.

The parallels are clear--- we must humble ourselves, obey Christ in repentance and baptism, and accept the task he has called for us to do. That task is very simply--world evangelism, the same for us, as for Paul.

When Paul repeated the story of his Damascus road experience in Acts 26—he said he was told by the Lord—"I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and a witness of what you have seen and I will show you. I am sending you to open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light, from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."

Paul was commissioned for Christ's purpose, just as Christ has commissioned his disciples to "Go into all the world. " We must see our goal as-- winning the world, turning those in darkness to light. Is the great commission still the hope of the world, or have we made it a hopeless cause?

Are we obeying that commission or have we been conditioned to put the task of world evangelism in the background? What we see today, unfortunately, is a lack of real investment by Christians in the areas of the world not reached for Christ. Is the life and soul of the middle-class American more valuable than the Mayan in the jungles of Guatemala, the Asian on the plains of Mongolia, the African in the deserts of the Sudan? If your answer, most assuredly, is No....then why do we spend 95% of all of our church resources here in the United States?

Are you appalled at the statistics that show CEO's of major corporations earn 300 times more in a year than the average worker of their company? Does it shock you that the wealthiest 225 people in the world earn more than 3 billion of the world's poorest families combined? We may see these statistics as cruelly unjust. But shouldn't we be equally distraught with the imbalance of our investment, as Christians, in the rest of the world? Studies show that actually around only 1% of total giving by churches goes to the unevangelized in foreign lands.

Some of our concerned congregations are doing wonderful work in other countries, but many ignore the foreign field. According to most reports, the average church gives 8-12% to what it calls missions, but that usually includes domestic and benevolent

programs. Some research indicates we now have 1 paid clergy in the United States for every 180 people, while approximately 2 billion people are totally unreached, without a minister, a Bible in their language, or knowledge of Jesus Christ.

The efforts of the independent Christian churches shows stagnation in terms of personnel dedicated to overseas evangelism. According to figures from the Missionary Directory of Mission Services there has actually been a decrease in the number of missionaries listed as “on the field” in the past ten years. We know in that period there has been increased support of national ministers and evangelists in other lands and more short-term mission workers, but overall we are not producing the full-time mission leaders needed.

There are simply not many people looking to become missionaries or workers abroad who will train national evangelists. Examine your graduating classes from Bible colleges and you find few going into the mission field.

Some problems are evident. Many of our brightest students, who may have a passion for cross-cultural work, find themselves graduating with large school debts, and decide to take that church job in the nice city in the U.S. with salary and benefits, enough to support their family and pay off bills.

Compare this to the mission recruit’s plight of also wanting debt relief but at the same time needing to invest large amounts of time and money, without pay, to travel around the country seeking supporting churches, often giving up in despair for lack of finances.

Perhaps our numbers of interested young people are reduced because of a general lack of exposure to the message of missionaries by our leaders and churches. As a youth, I looked forward to having a visiting guest speaker from a foreign country display artifacts and show pictures. Today, it is rare to see a church invite a mission speaker to take up a morning service with their reports. They are usually asked to just send in material or come and speak to a committee.

Have we been so conditioned to thinking of our own community and convenience first, that we have forgotten the purpose of the church? A recent national survey indicated that a majority of people felt the purpose of their congregation was ..”to meet the needs of my family.” Do we see this self-centered attitude being played out with our expenditures? It is pretty easy to get a family to pledge that \$1,000 toward a new building for their youth, but what about that plea for a simple sanctuary to be built on a foreign field? Congregations routinely vote to borrow millions for local buildings. Would a church go in debt to help build an overseas complex, I wonder?

It is sad that some missionaries and recruits speak of feeling a bit like Lazarus, the beggar, hoping for some crumbs from the table.

What is really being preached about missions in our pulpits? I recently examined a popular sermon book outlining an entire year of preaching and found only a couple of sermons that related to Great Commission themes. Look at the sermon websites, the magazine articles, the popular published books, and most deal with issues of Christian living. The evangelism topics are usually promoting church growth or planting here in the United States. Check the websites, creedal statements, and brochures in most churches and you see scarce mention of world evangelism.

It is sickening to turn on the television in our nation and look at the extravagance of the religious programs. One is reminded of Paul’s observation in his day of those who were in the gospel for their own gain. Most of the content is dealing with end-time

predictions and healing our miseries.

A regional newspaper recently carried a large story about a denominational church gathering in large numbers to dedicate and bless a \$250,000 steeple for their building. Surely the millions of dollars we waste here in the name of religion could feed the hungry of the world.

The contemporary music in churches speaks little about going, witnessing, and other mission themes. Most of what we talk about, sing about, and do in church is praise and inward spiritual development, which is needed, of course, but is not the actual work we have been commissioned to accomplish.

If the total job of the church is to convert the sinner and preserve the saint, is it not logical to think half of all money, personnel, and resources should be spent on each? And if the souls of the world are equally as important as those at home, that would mean a very minimum of 25% of all funds to our church treasuries ought to be dedicated to foreign evangelistic work. When we consider the saturation we have accomplished here compared to the vacuum in the rest of the world, it should be more like 40-50%.

It seems the thinking of Paul, and Jesus as well, (Mt 10:14) was that no one really had the right to hear the gospel twice until everyone had heard it once. It is obvious that they did not spend an inordinate amount of time on unresponsive people, preferring instead to move on to the next town. And yet, we pour most of our energy, time and money into what is already the most evangelized and Christian nation on earth. Everyone here has numerous opportunities to respond to the message and even if unresponsive, we continue to preach and prod, while ignoring billions who have never heard the gospel.

Are we commissioned to take the “good news” to the “uttermost parts of the earth” or conditioned to see only those people who are around us, as our field?

We are a wealthy nation with the capacity and, I believe, the compassion to fulfill the Great Commission, if we would just break out of our condition of narrow vision and see the world as God sees it-- waiting to hear.

We live in a global age and Americans should be keenly aware that injustice, ignorance, and poverty anywhere in the world impacts everyone. Helping to alleviate despair in the dark corners of our globe will open many doors to the light of the hope in Jesus.

We must be willing to look beyond ourselves and sacrifice luxuries at home and at church. It's imperative that we begin to give more than 3.5% of our personal income in the Sunday offering. Leaders must revolutionize those church budgets, settling for fewer local staff, programs and buildings, in order to give the poor, desperate, and lost of other nations a glimpse of the love of God in Christ.

What would happen if giving to churches were suddenly doubled, then the output from churches for foreign missions tripled? What would happen if the next staff position at the megachurch was not for another associate, but a missionary to Africa, Latin America, or China, with full salary and benefits paid? What would happen if ministers, even if it meant less help for them at home, began promoting and encouraging members to see that our true mission is-- the gospel to all nations? What would happen if one of our Bible colleges stepped up and said-- all school bills will be paid for anyone willing to commit five years to foreign Christian service? Secular colleges do it, when they need doctors and teachers in disadvantaged areas.

What would happen if some influential people in our brotherhood would speak out

and say--it is time to realize that foreign mission work is seriously underfunded and we are never going to reach the world this way; to say that--- our priorities have been mostly about us in our own land and not about our Lord, nor about His world?

Who is ready to be commissioned to make the change? Or will we remain conditioned to accept the status quo?