



## The Office of the Christian Believer in Missions

### In missions

It is now nearly 40 years ago that we were recruited to join a few veteran missionaries in seeking to reestablish our denomination's mission in mainland China after the interruption of World War II. There we were two or three foreign families and a couple of single workers confronted with the question of how so few missionaries could ever hope to bring the gospel to the perhaps 3 million Chinese in that area. If this must be regarded as largely or exclusively the work of this handful of foreigners it could obviously never be done. Yet this is the way in which most of us have probably assumed, as much of the Christian Church came to assume, that we should regard the Christian mission. The mission must be carried out by "missionaries" – who else could anyone expect to do it?

### The inspired history and pattern

Faced with the situation, we need to turn to the Word of God which gives us our missionary orders to learn how the Lord wanted them carried out. The Acts of the Apostles, the Bible's early history of missions (which its opening verse suggests that we properly see as the "Acts of the Lord") begins with His instruction to His followers, "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." The Lord's little group of followers, facing the overwhelming missionary mandate, not only as we did in a little corner of China, but world-wide, were assured that the Holy Spirit would provide the power to do it.

To whom was that power to be given? Was it given only to a few apostles, or even a few preachers? The account in the next chapter stresses the fact that "all" of the Lord's followers *"were filled with the Holy Spirit."* The Apostle Peter explained that *"this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and your daughters will prophesy...'"* (vv. 16, 17). Whereas in an earlier time the Holy spirit had enabled some leaders to be God's prophets to speak His Word to the people, now (as Moses in Numbers 11:29 had already anticipated would be desirable) the Holy Spirit had been *"poured out"* in new intimacy and abundance on all of God's people to qualify them to take their places in the Christian mission to all of the peoples of the world. In this New Testament age they are to be no longer like mere "servants" who do not know what their Lord is doing, but are to be his "friends" or "sons" who have an active part in it (John 15:15; Galatians 4:1-7).

The book of Acts goes on to tell how this prediction of the first chapter speedily began to be fulfilled in exactly this way. The church in Jerusalem grew amazingly, first to 3000, and soon to 5000 – but its very success threatened to keep it in Jerusalem, for what convert would want to leave that exciting and phenomenally growing fellowship? In that fellowship it soon appeared that initiative automatically fell to the chosen apostles. (Even support of the poor increasingly preoccupied their time – and had to be transferred to some assistants or "deacons," to keep them from being diverted from their proper service of the word, Acts 6.)

Then, in the Lord's providence, apparent disaster struck. *"On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem,"* spearheaded by a young man named Saul, *"and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria"* (Acts 8:1) – the adjoining districts which the Lord had mentioned in His instructions in 1:8! How would the new church weather this

sudden storm? *"Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went"* (v.4). Who was leading in this missionary outreach? Would someone suggest, "the apostles"? The apostles had not scattered with the rest, but evidently remained in Jerusalem (v.1). We read about Philip, the deacon, one of these scattering people, preaching in Samaria. Then in 11:19 this story is continued.

*"Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."*

Now it was not the apostles, but the ordinary believers, who in Jerusalem had been meeting under and profiting by their leadership, who were telling the gospel. At first they naturally spoke to their own kind of people, fellow-Jews. But some of them who apparently had been more accustomed to associate also with non-Jews, began to speak to Greeks *"telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord."* This was apparently the first sizeable missionary breakthrough into the non-Jewish world, one led not by Christians in any special office or sent out by the church as "missionaries," but by the church members, speaking of or "confessing" their Christian faith to all kinds of people.

This Antioch church did not begin by any decision of church leaders in Jerusalem. Only after the church had already begun, *"news of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts."* Barnabas, *"a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith,"* remained to help this remarkably growing church as *"a great number of people were brought to the Lord."* Seeing the need of more such help, he remembered Saul, the persecutor who in the meanwhile had been converted and returned to Tarsus. He went there to look for him, *"and when he had found him, he brought him to Antioch"* and *"for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were first called Christians in Antioch."* Skipping over to chapter 13, we then find, not two, but five such *"prophets and teachers"* working with that church. Thus, as Paul expressed it in Ephesians 4, the Lord gave them *"pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up"* and each part does its work (vv. 11-16). At that point the Holy Spirit directed that church to send out the two, Barnabas and Saul, who had just experienced and helped this missionary outreach in Antioch to carry the missionary effort elsewhere.

These missionaries who had just been helping a church that was established not by apostles in Jerusalem, but by the testimony of ordinary members in Antioch, encouraged the same kind of membership activity among their converts. A striking demonstration of that appears in Paul's First Letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 1:4ff.

He expressed his joy and enthusiasm about that church as it *"became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia – your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God..."*

We see how what had happened in Antioch was repeated in Thessalonica, in Ephesus, Corinth and wherever else those missionaries went. The church spread so rapidly as the missionary message was being brought and not only or mainly by Barnabas and Paul, but by the growing number of converts to whom they had taught it, speaking working under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their "office" as believers.

We should observe in this development that it was not a matter of shifting "authority" over and management of the missionary program from the missionaries to the new local church – as it has sometimes been treated in discussions about mission policy – but of from the beginning bringing the gospel so that, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians (1 Thessalonians 2:13),

*"when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe."*

They had been taught from the very first, not to believe and serve the missionary leaders, but the word of the Lord, which the missionaries themselves believed and obeyed.

We may also at this point observe that this kind of membership missionary activity has come to be popularly called "personal witness" or "witnessing." A closer study of the New Testament suggests that this usage of these words is not strictly correct and may be somewhat misleading. The Bible's use of the word "witness" is for an "eyewitness" as he appears in a courtroom to testify to facts as he saw them. His testimony must be to facts, not to his feelings about them (which would be dismissed in a court as irrelevant). In that sense the apostles were such witnesses, but we and all others who receive their testimony are not. We are called in the New Testament not to "witness," but to "confess" which means, literally, "to say the same thing" as the witnesses from whom we received the testimony. The Apostle John pointed out, in the same vein as Paul,

*that we really receive "the testimony of God, which He has given about his Son ... Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son."*

(1 John 5:9-11)

### **Return to the Bible's pattern**

In the later 1800's a Presbyterian missionary in North China, John L. Nevius, became convinced that the way in which the gospel should be brought to the millions of non-Christians was through the activity of the ordinary believers whom missionaries should train from the beginning to become self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating churches. This suggestion was very different from what had become the usual missionary practice of expecting the missionary to provide and manage everything and expecting missions to provide buildings, support and control to churches on the mission fields for a very long time. His suggestions were dismissed by fellow-missionaries in his own field as hopelessly impractical in our times and he was given no support in his efforts to carry them out. About that time (1890) Presbyterians who were beginning a new work in Korea, asked him to meet with them and to outline for them the more Biblical methods he had been promoting. Dr. Nevius' principles were

- 1) that each Christian "*abide in the calling wherein he was called,*" support himself by his own work, and be a witness for Christ by life and word in his own neighborhood,
- 2) church methods and machinery be developed only as the church was able to be responsible for them,
- 3) the church call for full-time work those who seemed best qualified and whom it was able to support, and
- 4) churches be built in native style by the Christians with their own resources.

Crucially important in Nevius' program was his stress on continuing Bible teaching and study seeking to make every believer a student who would be equipped to teach others the gospel (cf. 1 Timothy 2:2). The mission committed itself to the approach suggested by Dr. Nevius and its work in Korea became one of the great missionary successes of all time.

Another missionary in China, Roland Allen, an Episcopalian, considering the missionary task in the light of the Bible, came to a conclusion similar to that of Dr. Nevius and in 1912 published it in his book, *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours?* That remarkable work reads almost as though it were a practical commentary on the way we in our Heidelberg Catechism (XXI,54) confess that Christ "*gathers, defends and preserves for Himself, by His Spirit and Word*" His church. Allen pointed out that while the Biblical method of Paul was to depend on and stress the work of the Spirit and Word, most missions had been diverted into stressing buildings, subsidies, and auxiliary services such as schools and hospitals. All of these expensive and elaborate foreign "helps," well-

intended to support the missionary outreach of gospel, often turned out to inhibit and hinder its real spread. Roland Allen's work which did not get much attention in his time, later came to be recognized as a forerunner of a world-wide rethinking of missionary methods.

Shortly after our missionaries had to leave China upon the Communist take-over, in about 1950, our Christian Reformed mission board and synods studied and reconsidered our missions policies. Our older missions, including that in China, had operated along the lines which Nevius, Allen and others had criticized. Our churches' earliest, and long the largest, such work was that among the Indians of the Southwest. There, I recall that when I once mentioned to a veteran missionary the need to more deeply involve the converts in the missionary effort, his response was that it would be a long while before we could do that – although the work had been going on for perhaps 40 years! When our churches took responsibilities for a missionary program in Nigeria, a work that had begun under others' sponsorship, they agreed to follow there what was called the "indigenous" method of stressing the activity of converts and their churches and not undertaking to build churches for them and pay local preachers. The amazing development of that work and of the Nigerian churches, in contrast with the problems of other fields under the "older" methods, prompted a reconsideration of the churches' whole mission policy and some changes in it.

A few incidents may help to explain some of the changes which were involved. While we were in China our mission employed evangelists who had previously worked for our mission. The Mission paid them what was even 35 years ago apparently a modest salary of \$40 per month plus housing and some children's allowance, as I recall. The problem that this entailed appears when one considers that at that time a local carpenter was paid the equivalent of about \$8 per month. How could the Chinese carpenters who became Christians hope to undertake the support of the minister whom the mission was paying five times what they earned? A senior missionary remarked that we used to keep these salaries low, thinking that the Chinese church would have to pay them some day, but, since these men would work for the mission for the rest of their lives, why should we not be more generous with them? I believe that it was at the synod of 1950 that the famous Dutch missionary and professor J.H. Bavinck was a visitor seeking some financial help for the Dutch churches to reestablish their Indonesian missions after World War II. It must have been a little disconcerting to him to find the synod talking about making mission churches more self-supporting! I recall asking him how successful the Dutch churches had been in their centuries of work in Indonesia in establishing self-supporting churches. His reply startled me by its frankness. He said that the Japanese had done more toward that than the mission had when they put the missionaries in concentration camps, so that the churches had to become independent! Although the Lord may overrule our efforts in this way, it is hardly a recommendation of a mission program that under it the missionaries must be removed if there is to be an independent church! In missions it becomes more and more evident that too much "help" can become a hindrance.

Later developments of the churches in Nigeria have continued to demonstrate the soundness of the policies of stressing direct evangelism and the involvement of converts in it from the beginning, and the wisdom of leaving such matters as church buildings and the support of pastors to the churches. The annual reports tell of the hundreds of meeting places and total attendances that are beginning to near twice the total membership of all of our home churches. We may safely say that if we had tried to control and pay for all of such activities as we did in some other places, they could not have occurred! Also from China, which for a third of a century has been virtually cut off from foreign contact so that we did not know what if anything remained of the missionary labors that had ended in communist persecution, recent times have brought the amazing news of an "underground" or "house" church movement, without outside missionary help, involving virtually only the activity of converts in their "office of believer." Their number has been estimated as high as 50 million.

In the 1950s our foreign missions moved toward stressing bringing the gospel and the activity of converts in the office of believer, and tried to avoid being diverted into subsidiary activities. In our time the mushroom-like growth of World Relief and the new effort to merge it with world missions appears to reverse this direction and to threaten our missionary efforts with deeper involvement than ever before with activity which has little direct relationship to the churches' missionary mandate to bring the gospel.

## **The believer's office in missions at home**

The believer's office, evidently so strategic in missions in the Bible, and shown to be so crucially important in a number of later missionary efforts, is equally essential in effective evangelism at home. In pastoral experience in a variety of churches, I have noticed that the contacts with people outside which eventually led to their conversion were first made by Christian neighbors or fellow-workers in the routine of living rather than by some special or deliberate campaign. Especially in one decade of work with a church that was growing by such accessions, I learned to defer to, consult with and be ready to help the members who had made such contacts, rather than to attempt as a minister to immediately try to take a leading role in them. One recalls the apostle's characterization of the pastor's and teacher's role as properly

*"to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up."*

(Ephesians 4:12)

Later Dr. D. James Kennedy, in his 1970 book *Evangelism Explosion* and his seminars in various places, publicized such efforts to recruit and train church members to take their key role in evangelistic outreach. In his book he appeals to the same texts that were cited earlier in this article as the Bible's precedent and guide to such evangelistic efforts by church members. He suggests that "*Satan's greatest victory*" was selling the people the idea that evangelism is for preachers. He compares it with the notion that fighting wars to defend the country should be left to generals and admirals. Although one may question details of his program, some of the practical suggestions and the rather hasty reception of members, for example, his stress on the members' office and role in evangelism is soundly Biblical and urgently needed.

Not only is the life and work of members directly essential to effective church evangelism. It is also necessary if the work of those involved in special efforts is to be effective. No matter how deep the concern of a minister may be about getting the gospel into the neighborhood, if it is not supported by the interest of members in strangers and new-comers when they appear in church as well as by their own behavior, it can be effectively counteracted. Conversely, the evangelistic concern of members who bring a neighbor along to church may do little good if the minister is more preoccupied with entertaining the people or airing some social, political or ecumenical hobby of his own than bringing the Lord's gospel to them. I have repeatedly encountered people who expressed their interest in one of our churches' radio broadcasts and their corresponding disappointment with a local church which they visited. The well-known preacher, D. M. Lloyd-Jones, on occasion called attention to the fact that the congregation's worship and behavior needed to confirm what was said from the pulpit in a common testimony of God's Word and Spirit. The Apostle Paul in the passages already cited from 1 Thessalonians 1 as well as others, repeatedly stressed the same point. I have sometimes seen how the exemplary behavior of members brought others to church to see what accounted for it. Thus the gospel "sounds out" from the congregation during the week as well as on Sundays.

The calling and role of the members in evangelism is also crucially important in the recruiting of some for special services. A survey of our denomination's missionary programs from their beginning highlighted a persistent problem of recruiting through much of that history. The churches were always aware that there was a missionary duty to bring the gospel to all the world, and they showed a readiness from the beginning to support it with their gifts. The critical question that kept baffling them was who was going to do the work. As long as they assumed, as most seemed to do, that missionaries are rare, extraordinary people, they looked in vain for those extraordinary people. When the church is awakened to the fact that the Lord in the New Testament called all believers to a missionary confession of Him in the world, and promised and gave the Holy Spirit, who leads people to faith in Christ, to equip and help them to make such a missionary confession, matters are put on a quite different basis. Then, like believers in the New Testament, when some of them begin to speak and work in this way, their interest and concern in evangelism grows and the Lord provides them with further, sometimes larger, opportunities for such service. Then, like the apostles, (Matthew 9:37-10:5), they learn to see the need and pray to "*the Lord of the harvest*" to supply it, and He finds plenty of work for them to do!

If the Lord's missionary commission to bring His gospel to all the world is to be properly carried out, it will have to involve all of us who confess His name, acting in the office of believers, as well as the faithfulness of the relatively few who are assigned to special offices. The comprehensive calling and infinitely varied labors of all who believe in Him, in the world in which he has placed them, is the subject for a final article in this series.

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## **Note**

1. *Roland Allen's remarkable book was more concerned about missionary practice than doctrine, and tended to relativize the latter. A 1983 book, A Roland Allen Reader: **The Compulsion of the Spirit**, edited by David Paton and Charles H. Long (by Eerdmans), contains selections of his writings, including those of a later date. It shows how his earlier appeal to the Spirit and Word gives way to a modern critical view of the Word, and leads him eventually to leave his church positions and celebrate the Lord's Supper with his wife at home! Pitting Spirit against Word leaves one with no way to distinguish the Spirit from above from those from below (1 John 4:1). Allen's own drift seems to parallel the way others have exploited the "indigenous movement" to promote the modern apostasy. This does not discount the value of Allen's early book. It merely exemplifies the way in which a man (like Solomon) can fall away from earlier wisdom. When men or churches leave the Word of God, they, like the Pharisees, become "blind guides" (Matthew 5:14).*