



Are we Enlarging our Tent and Strengthening Stakes?

“Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations; spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.”

Isaiah 54:2

Summertime has come and probably for many readers of the Messenger a popular summertime activity in vacation plans is a camping trip. Now a camping trip usually involves an experience with a tent. In any tenting experience, two issues are always important. One: is this tent large enough for the number of people it is expected to house; and two: is this tent and its tarps firmly anchored in the ground? It is these two issues that are addressed by the prophet Isaiah in chapter 54:2 of his prophecy.

Predicted Increase of God’s Church

Here is how Isaiah addresses the Jews in the name of the Lord: *“Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations; spare not, **lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.**”* In other words, make sure your tent is *large enough* and *strong enough* also. Lengthen the cords, strengthen the stakes.

On the one hand, these words occur in the context of a prophecy having to do with the return of the Jews to Jerusalem following their time of exile in Babylon. The whole section of Isaiah 40-66 deals at least in part with that theme, and it is also in view here in chapter 54. In grace and mercy toward His soon to be exiled people, the Lord promises that He will yet once more richly increase and bless them. This text has that immediate future in view. But even more than that, the words of this prophecy have to do with what the New Testament church will experience following the humiliation and exaltation of the Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour of sinners.

It’s that theme of humiliation and exaltation, of course, that we find in Isaiah 53. In that well-known chapter, the prophet highlights the saving work of the Servant of the Lord and what that work will involve – unspeakable torment for the Servant as well as undoubted triumph. That’s chapter 53. But what will be the fruit or effect of the Servant’s saving work? That’s chapter 54.

One of the things Isaiah sets forth here is that the church will increase. It is ultimately the church, the people of God, who are being addressed in these verses, and the promise is: Increase! For example, look at verse 3, *“For thou shalt break forth on the right hand and on the left; and thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited.”* In other words, the Lord will bless His church, His people, with *numbers*. *“Thy seed shall inherit the Gentiles...”*

Fulfilment of Isaiah’s Prophecy

Can’t we say that this has surely been the experience of the church the last two thousand years or so? What started out as a mere one hundred and twenty people in the upper room, on the day of Pentecost, that number increased to three thousand. From then on, the church began to spread, slowly but surely, all over the face of the earth. Isn’t it the fact that today, far away from Jerusalem, on the other side of the world, our congregations exist and gather weekly to worship the Lord Jesus – and not only we but many other churches all over the world! Isn’t that fact proof that the prophecy of Isaiah is being fulfilled?!

But now let's ask the question: Isn't that which is true on a universal level, on a worldwide scale, also true on a local level? In other words, is this promise of increase only for the universal church, the church at large, or may we and ought we to apply it to ourselves too, as a local church in a local setting? For sure, every one of our congregations is a local manifestation of the church of Christ – how can the promises of the Lord not apply to ourselves as individual congregations? Shouldn't we too, therefore, look for the fulfillment of this promise of the Lord? Shouldn't we look for increase? It is true that not every one will believe our report (ch. 53:1). Probably our lament here on earth will always be: "Who hath believed our report?" Not every one will believe. But that is not to say that no one will believe. Instead, the prophet in chapter 54 gives us reason to think that some, yes, even many will believe.

Enlargement of the "Tent"

It is in that context that the prophet brings up the imagery of the tent and issues the two commands that are so important with regard to a tent. "*Lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.*" With these words, the prophet is comparing the church to a tent. What he's calling the people to do is to make the tent as large and strong as possible. Give every effort to lengthening the cords so that you stretch out the canopy of the tent, while at the same time, driving the stakes in deep so as to support and maintain the tent. Aren't Isaiah's words a breathtaking picture of the church and the congregations of Jesus Christ growing, increasing and accommodating many, many more people?!

It may be that at this point you want to stop reading. After all, as Reformed churches and maybe particularly as Free Reformed churches, we have stayed far away from the "church growth" movement and marketing techniques of the last decades. And in one sense, rightly so. Probably much of what we have heard and seen of "church growth" lacks biblical basis and in some, if not in many cases, severely compromises biblical truth. We may never pursue growth as an end in and of itself, no matter what the costs, if it compromises the authority of Scripture, the glory of Christ and the purity of the church.

But having said that, I remember being struck at the time of my ordination by the prayer in the form for ordination which states among other things, that those gathered for the service beg the Lord to bless the ministry of a new minister so that the Church of Christ may increase. Now I'm quoting directly – to increase "*in number and in virtue (or godliness).*" "*Increase in number*" – that's first in terms of the prayer. In general, isn't it true to say that we tend to switch the two around? We place more emphasis on growing in godliness. If others join us, that's wonderful, but it's not our priority.

Growth in godliness is what we stress. And yet, biblically speaking, ought numerical growth not be one of our top priorities as churches as well? Remember the words of the Lord Jesus as recorded in Matthew 28:19, 20, "*Go ... and teach all nations ... teaching them to observe whatsoever things I have commanded you.*" That is the commission left to us by the ascended Lord Jesus. He's concerned for the nations, i.e. many peoples and many races. Well, that's the commission. Might we therefore not expect Him to bless our efforts and build His church – our churches too – with people, members of the nations not yet converted to Jesus?

Applications

Surely, the prophecy of Isaiah leads us to expect that. More than that, the prophet is calling us to prepare for it. The text is a command: "*Lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes.*" So what might that mean for us and for our churches? The following are two suggested applications.

1. Shouldn't we let the promise of increase help us to define our vision and focus as churches? How do we answer questions like: What are we about as a church? Why do we exist? What is our purpose here? To be sure, we are here to worship the Lord. That is our fundamental calling. The Triune God deserves to be worshipped. Moreover we hear from Jesus that the Father is seeking worshippers (John 4:23). So that's our first and foremost calling. One preacher has put it like this: "*Missions is not our first calling; worship is.*" Our primary task is to

worship the Lord – with the whole of our life and especially corporately as we assemble week by week in the sanctuary to praise and adore Him.

But if we are committed to worshipping the Lord, won't we also be committed to seeking for many others to worship Him too? If we believe that the Lord is worthy of our life's worship and devotion, isn't that what we are saying when we confess faith in Him? If we believe that, then won't our life's desire become more and more to see others around us join us in worshipping this great God and King? Of course, it will be. No doubt every true Christian can identify with that desire to one degree or another.

But the point is to let that biblical desire for increase and for true growth help us to define our focus and vision as church. This means to let all that we do as churches, every decision we make, every dollar we spend, to be consciously subordinate to this end. We exist to worship the living God and we want to see many others worshipping Him too, not only the covenant children the Lord entrusts to us but also "the nations" that live all around us.

In that sense, we are always called to "*lengthen (our) cords*." We are always called to prepare for increase. It needs to be part of the vision and focus of the church – not only for "preaching stations," but for long established churches too.

2. Shouldn't we let the promise of increase deepen and invigorate our faith? Isn't that what the Lord means when through Isaiah He tell us to "*strengthen (our) stakes*"? Surely, that means we're to give all diligence and effort to becoming strong in the faith and committed to increase for ourselves. That includes increase in the knowledge of God, increase in love to God, increase in likeness to God, and increase in zeal for God.

"*Lengthen thy cords*," says Isaiah "*and strengthen thy stakes*." Don't only make the tent wide and long, but drive the pegs deep into the ground. Let the present members of the church become truly rooted in Christ and increasingly built up in Him. Let them be growing in the grace and knowledge of the Lord, let them be flourishing in the courts of our God (Ps. 92:12-15). That is how we, in fact, may prepare for the Lord to give us increase. Because when He adds to the church, there will no doubt be challenges for the church. We can think of the letters of Paul to the churches and the challenges that he addresses in them. Challenges come when churches grow. But if the members are solid, if the faith is pure, if we are men and women who are more and more godly in Christ Jesus, we will be able to meet those challenges and navigate them in dependence on the Lord and to the glory of His great Name.

Conclusion

If you camp this summer, hopefully your tent is large enough and strong enough to hold you and protect you and your family. But let's also give thought and prayer this summer to the call of the Lord to His church – to our churches too – to be always engaged in lengthening the cords and strengthening the stakes of the tent of the church. Let us be proactively and passionately seeking others to join us in worshipping the Triune God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – all the while being further grounded in the faith and also growing in it. Who knows whether we might see the Lord mightily answering the prayer offered at the ordination/installation of every one of our ministers, that He increase our churches both in number and in virtue, by His grace and to His praise?!

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