



The Pastor: *The Church's Bridge to World Missions*¹

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I fear specialization, partly because of my involvement in the field of education and my awareness of what specialization has done in the church around the themes of Christian education; because it is in this century when the emphasis on the pastor's responsibility in the development of spiritual formation has been wrenched away from the mainline of ministerial training and preparation and put over in the special category called "Christian education." The majority of churches of America do not have a specialist in Christian education; they have pastors. For the most part, these pastors have been trained in conservative, evangelical traditions that today have very little emphasis on spiritual formation. One must wonder then if specialization is both a benefit for some and a limitation for others.

I trust that it may always be here that we keep missions focused well for all of us because it is in *all* of our agendas in ministry to be involved in the whole work of God in the world. The pastor is clearly the bridge between the people of God in a local congregation and the work of missions. Yes, there needs to be a whole church commitment. In Acts 13, of course, an important passage where we find the Holy Spirit asking the church at Antioch to separate, set apart, dedicate to the work that the Holy Spirit had called them, Barnabas and Saul, that we discover a church at work in missions as a whole. Regardless of what the motives might have been in the church at Jerusalem in sending Barnabas in the first place, we do know that Barnabas in arriving and verifying that indeed the work of the Holy Spirit was going forward in great ways, Barnabas took it upon himself to become the initiator of the short-term missions effort of the church which many people thought was invented in the twentieth century. And on his own hook, with his own awareness of the hurts that were characterized by the behavior of the church in Jerusalem toward "that man Saul," went over to Tarsus and recruited Saul on his own to come back into Antioch and then it says that they were asked to stay and teach, even for a year. And after this, the Holy Spirit worked through the church as a body to ask the setting aside...the commissioning to go out to a special work, of two men, Barnabas, and as yet called, Saul.

If the church is led by those who see such a vision not as a threat but as an opportunity and as a responsibility rightly felt, the pastor in such leadership can spare the church, the local body, the pain that comes from ignorance, insularity, and individualism—the three perilous "I's" that comes from a church that has no mission perspective.

A mission default in a local church destines the people of God to what, in cultures such as ours, becomes increasingly preoccupied with oneself, one's own culture, one's own background, and one's own needs, usually defined in terms of material, property, grandness, and as we see so often in our churches; even in terms of a kind of pomp and circumstance reflecting power in communities, a power that God never intended. Ignorance of what the world is like produces that.

As we gain more and more awareness that the world is small and that our place in it is important, we can gain perspective and see ourselves more clearly. There's an old saying in

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anthropology: “Never ask a fish to tell you how it feels to live in water.” The fish has no perspective. One of the problems that American churches confront today is that we are so familiar with what God is or isn’t doing in our own midst, that we presume ourselves to be characteristic of the work of Christ in the world. I know of very few people who have gone out from local churches, even for short-term experiences, who, upon coming back, have increased the awareness of the people of God in that fellowship, and helped to put down that sort of ignorance that makes us blind.

I’m impressed in the passage of Scripture that we read together that the news of God’s work in Antioch was received by the people of Jerusalem.

To what extent can the pastor become the ears, eyes, and antenna, and to encourage God’s people to pay attention to what is really going on in the world? If the pastor does not do this, insularity sets in, or another word very similar: isolation. This tendency to do our own thing in our own way, to be oblivious of our place in the world, to be oblivious of the sorts of benefits and blessings God has given us, particularly those of us in the West and especially in North America as he has made us responsible stewards of so very, very much.

Twenty-four hours ago at this very hour I was standing in the midst of the largest publishing operation in North American Christianity, indeed, in the world. 160 million pieces of biblical material go from that place every year. Within 72 hours I will standing in a nation and among Christian laypeople who are vitally concerned that they have so little available to them in the way of literature that is accessible to their people for the development of the church; where the church is indeed growing, but it’s hungry and in fact in some places, starving, and falling into a kind of false religion because of the inadequacy of the publishing operations and the inadequacy of language resources to meet the needs of the expanding church. I can’t help but think that in just four days span what it is that an American who is concerned about the world can see in a way of range and spectrum. We have so much and in many places there is so little. It is not enough that we be simply “doing our own thing” well; we’re still debtors to all.

Insularity can also cause us to think in terms of our own welfare and fail to be aware, concerned, compassionate, involved in prayer and in helps for those who are suffering elsewhere. If you’ve paid any attention to the news in the last few days, the Chernobyl accident, is impressing all of us around the world that whatever happens anywhere around the world ultimately affects all of us.