

# The Neglected Pursuit of Sending Heralds

*An inquiry into the matter of “sending-complacency” in churches  
and an appeal to be rope-holders for Christ’s missionaries*

Our Lord Jesus famously commanded His disciples to “Pray the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into His harvest” (Mt. 9:38, NKJV). Almost two millennia have come and gone, and yet the harvest is still plentiful, and the labourers are still few. In mid-2021, for instance, of an estimated 2.5 billion Christians of every denomination living on the earth only 430,000 were serving as cross-cultural missionaries.<sup>1</sup> To put those figures in perspective, this means that only 0.0172% of professing Christians then living were actively serving on the mission field. Clearly, the cause of world missions is not a priority for many modern evangelical churches.

Rather than causing us to be critical of the church at large, such statistics should encourage us to examine ourselves. To ask ourselves: am I a part of the solution, or am I contributing to the problem by the apathy of my own sinful heart? It is true that many local churches are currently unable to send out missionaries because of lack in both biblically qualified men fitted for the task and necessary financial resources. But are we, both as individuals and churches, obeying our Lord’s command to pray regularly and fervently for the Holy Spirit to supply these deficiencies? It is obvious that our churches, overall, are falling woefully short in our calling to serve as senders. What can be done to change this? What needs to happen?

This piece intends to textualize and explicate on an interview with Mr. Jerry Slate, a pastor of Berean Baptist Church of Powder Springs, GA (USA). He is a man who has sought to support missionaries throughout the world, and to raise an awareness of and eagerness for the Great Commission, first in his own church, but also further afield. In other words, he engages in what this article will call, ‘missions networking’. He compiles the *Harvest Field Prayer Guide*, a monthly periodical informing its readers on missions and missionaries, with this aim in view. His inspiration to spend much of his time and energy in the endeavour of missions networking came from reading church history. In answer to the question, ‘Why have you decided to invest so much time in missions networking and informing?’ Mr. Slate responded,

*I was struck by the story told by Andrew Fuller, who served as the first secretary of the Baptist Mission Society. He famously wrote:*

*“Our undertaking in India really appeared to me at its commencement to be somewhat like...penetrating into a deep mine, which had never before been explored...while we were thus deliberating, Carey, as it were, said, “Well, I will go down, if you will hold the rope.” But before he went down, he, as it*

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<sup>1</sup> Zurlo, Gina , Todd Johnson, and Peter Crossing . 2021. “World Christianity and Mission 2021: Questions about the Future.” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 45:15–25.

*seemed to me, took an oath from each of us at the mouth of the pit to this effect, that, while we lived, we should never let go the rope.”<sup>2</sup>*

*That expression, “holding the ropes” really gripped my heart. I do not believe I am called to be a church planter in a cross-cultural context, I am called to be a Baptist pastor in northwest Georgia. As far as I am concerned, unless providence directs otherwise, Berean Baptist Church will be my one and only pastorate. But I also feel in my bones that I am called to be a rope-holder for cross-cultural missionaries by supporting and promoting them. The gospel ministry is spiritual warfare, I know that experientially as someone who has planted a church in my own homeland and has been pastoring the same church for over 21 years. I suspect that the level of spiritual oppression intensifies exponentially for men and women who have left their homeland to establish burning lampstands for Jesus in foreign contexts, for Satan vehemently opposes the spread of the gospel. I want to be a practical help and an encouragement to such brothers and sisters.*

Given his extensive involvement in and strength of conviction about ‘holding the ropes’, it is unsurprising that Mr. Slate has considered the matters which this article is deliberating. In answer to the question, ‘Humanly speaking, what do you think are the main reasons why there are so few missionaries?’, Mr. Slate answered,

*I believe that the single biggest reason there are so few missionaries is that many, if not most, local churches have abdicated their central role in fulfilling the Great Commission. Local churches do not see themselves as the sending agencies for missionaries, we have surrendered that role to the parachurch mission agencies. Now don’t get me wrong, I believe that parachurch mission organizations have an important, even a vital, role to play. But parachurch groups must only come alongside and serve the church, they cannot replace the church.<sup>3</sup> When the Holy Spirit sent out the first two cross-cultural missionaries in New Testament church history, Barnabas and Saul, He did not speak to them and say, “Go.” Instead, He spoke to the local church in Antioch and said, “Send.” Their calling was from God and not from men, but the Holy Spirit enabled the church to discern that call.*

*As Reformed Baptist churches, we have got to recover this vision for becoming sending and rope-holding churches. I once heard a Reformed Baptist missionary address this as he was about to be sent out. He said, “When NASA sent men to the moon, they did not launch their rockets from cardboard boxes.” Even so, missionaries must be nurtured, trained, and sent by robust local churches that are rich in grace and solid in theology. Romans 8 sets forth the well-known “Golden Chain of Redemption”, but Romans 10 articulates the “Golden Chain of World Missions”. Just like the Golden Chain of Redemption there are 5 links in this chain, which Paul gives*

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<sup>2</sup> S. Pearce Carey, William Carey, ed. Peter Masters (London: the Wakeman Trust, 1993), 147.

<sup>3</sup> A good example of what Pastor Slate is referring to is *Radius International*. Radius refer to themselves as a “finishing school.” The local church “loans” their missionary for a year so that they can be equipped with the unique skillsets required for Culture & Language Acquisition (CLA), training which is outside the scope of most local churches and their pastors. And then they give the missionary back to the church who in turn sends them out. That is a good example of a parachurch ministry serving the church rather than replacing her.

*us in reverse order from effect to cause: “**How shall they call upon Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have never heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent?”** When I was in Bible College there were students who were zealous for the cause of world missions who would say, “If you cannot be a goer, at least you can be a sender.” The words “at least” implied that it was less spiritual to be a sender than a goer. But according to Paul, having a solid sending church is where the work of world missions begins. Without it there can be no missionary enterprise.*

*But if churches are going to hold the ropes, they must know the ropes. We need to grow strong spiritual biceps if we are going to hold the ropes, and that means that sending and rope-holding churches must have robust missiology coursing through their veins that is both Biblical and confessional. Sadly, modern missiology is dominated by a deliberately a-theological perspective resulting in pragmatic and theologically liberal methodologies being the order of the day. Adding to this problem is the reality that good seminaries sometimes relegate missions to a few optional elective courses rather than teaching missiology as an integral part of all the theological disciplines. Therefore, pastors and elders of churches are often ill equipped to lead their congregations to become sending and rope-holding churches. And if our spiritual leaders do not have a clear vision and passion for missions, they will not be able to convey it to their hearers. And while associations of churches should be deliberately promoting the cause of world missions, nothing will come of it if it is not promoted on the grassroots level of the local church by her pastors.*

This diagnosis is convincing and significant. To illustrate it: a nation which does not seriously believe in the importance of defending itself will have little interest in an army, few applicants to join the army and almost no finances volunteered to build and maintain an army. Likewise, if pastors and churches do not comprehend the gravity of the commission to be senders and supporters, then it is not surprising that missional interest is low, nor is it unexpected that proportionally few churches ever send missionaries. If things are to change, then pastors and churches need a renewal of mind. The Bible teaches that a renewal of mind ordinarily comes to the believer by the word of God. This is demonstrated in Romans 12:1-2 where Paul, having given an exhortation in vs. 1 for his letter’s recipients to present themselves as a living sacrifice, explains in vs. 2 how they are to do this, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind”. In seeking the transformation of their lives and actions, believers must have their minds renewed by the word of God.<sup>4</sup> If churches are to live out the calling of Jesus Christ to be senders and supporters, they must experience renewal of mind through being taught the whole counsel of God’s truth about this. Our churches need to have their minds renewed to understand the vital importance of this aspect of Christ’s calling for the Church.

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<sup>4</sup> It must be by the word of God, because the reason of man is what we are being renewed from. Paul says in Col. 2:8, “See to it that no one takes you captive by philosophy and empty deceit, according to the elemental spirits of the world, and not according to Christ”.

Mr. Slate speaks into this by demonstrating the missiological emphasis which runs, like a thread, throughout the scope of Scripture. He states,

*Congregations will only catch a vision for missions if their pastors are zealous for it and teach it from their pulpits. And there are 2 important parts to that. In the version of the Great Commission given to us in Luke's gospel account Jesus says:*

*<sup>44</sup> Then He said to them, "These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me." And He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures. Then He said to them, "Thus it is written, and thus it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead the third day, and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things. Behold, I send the Promise of My Father upon you; but tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high." (Lk. 24:44-49)*

*In the Reformed tradition, committed as we are to redemptive-historical experiential preaching, we naturally love these words for they emphasize the fact that, while Jesus is not found in every single verse or passage of the Old Testament, He is found in every genre of OT literature, and therefore Christ is to be preached from all the OT, not just the New. But if you notice in verses 46-47, He does not only say that Jesus is found in the OT, but also that it is prophesied in the OT that Jesus Christ and Him crucified would be preached among all nations. That is, the cause of world missions does not begin with the Great Commission. It is prophesied, like Jesus Himself, in the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and in the Psalms. We must allow this fact to inform both our hermeneutics and our homiletic as pastors.<sup>5</sup> We must preach not only the Christology of the OT to our people, but also the missiology of the OT. The Bible is not only a Christ-centered book from cover to cover, it is also a missional book from Genesis to Revelation. And if we interpret it and preach it that way to our congregations, it will put missions into their blood organically.*

As Mr. Slate intimates, Jesus does not treat the fact that the gospel will be preached throughout the world as a purely New Testament teaching; even less so is it an 'add-on', or a 'nice extra' for us to focus on occasionally when it comes up explicitly in the New Testament. Rather, Jesus includes this truth in his summing up of Old Testament teaching, alongside things such as repentance, remission of sins, and that Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. Since this doctrine and truth is so prevalent in the Bible, it should be representatively prevalent in our pulpits. If it is so, hearts owned by the Holy Spirit will be drawn in interest, support, and action for the fulfilment of the Great Commission not just locally, but internationally and interculturally.

To foster and nurture this interest and obligation which has been doctrinally founded, there is great use in missions networking. Missions networking also provides opportunities to support and send in a more useful manner than otherwise. Missions networking, generally

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<sup>5</sup> Hermeneutics denotes principles of interpretation; homiletic refers to preaching.

defined, is making connections and relationships with people interested in or involved with missions work, with a desire to expand opportunities to fulfil the Great Commission. These opportunities can be separated into three categories: firstly, supporting missions work, secondly, sending missionaries, thirdly, in some cases, going oneself. To address individually this first type of opportunity (supporting missions work), I asked Mr. Slate this question, ‘Why is missions networking important in the support and ‘retention rate’ of current missionaries?’ He answered,

*In the New Testament we find Paul openly soliciting the prayer and financial support of other churches in his missionary endeavours. He called upon the church in Rome, for instance, to help him fulfil his mission to Spain in Romans 15. Networking between confessional Baptist churches is a way to invite multiple congregations to place their hands on the ropes. Missionaries need to be interceded for, they need funding, and they desperately need encouragement. Networking enables literally thousands of Christians from hundreds of Reformed congregations to do just that. The Scriptures tell us that when we “receive” ministers into our homes and churches and enable them to fulfil the calling God has placed upon them, we become their partners in ministry, and on that great and final day when they receive their rewards for their labours we will share in those eternal rewards, even for so small a thing as giving them a cup of cold water in the name of a minister. Networking facilitates such partnerships.*

But missions networking is not just important for the support of current missionaries, it is also influential in stirring up a spirit of aspiration amongst the churches to send (the second type of opportunity) and amongst some in the churches to go themselves (the third) by raising the knowledge of the world’s spiritual situation. Mr. Slate points out that it was through Jesus’ seeing the multitudes “weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd” that He was moved with compassion for them and commanded His disciples to pray for the Lord of the Harvest to send out labourers into His harvest field.” As congregants, we need to hear the teaching of the Scriptures on the necessity and centrality of missions work, but also we should be hearing of particular missionaries, particular churches and particular lost people. This will hearten us, like Jesus, to be stirred up within ourselves for specific places and peoples to pray, to support, to send, and to go; in short, to fulfil the Great Commission.

Mr. Slate uses William Carey as a living example of someone being moved to interest and action by knowledge of the world’s dire situation. He says,

*William Carey was moved to action in large part because he was enabled to see the world by reading Captain James Cook’s bestselling autobiography of his travels and began collecting every scrap of information he could find on the spiritual condition of the various unreached people groups living in his own day.*

The churches need missions networking to inform them of the work of Christ throughout the world, so that they can become personally invested in specific works, missionaries and peoples.

For pastors who see the importance of this, Mr. Slate would practically advise from his years of experience that you prioritise continuity of information. Commenting on this, he states:

*I believe it is hugely important. We should keep information about our missionaries and national pastors constantly before our people. They should be prayed for publicly on a regular basis during our Lord's Day worship services and during our prayer meetings. Our church members should hear about them so regularly that they begin to feel like they know them. I want our congregation not only to know the names of our missionaries and national pastors, but also to know the names of their wives and children, and of the churches they pastor. I would rather us support fewer missionaries, but support them well and pray for them consistently.*

In addition to faithfully doing this, it is also of value for a church, as part of their missions networking, to association with like-minded sister churches. In answer to the question, 'Is inter-church networking key to the actual sending and correct placement of missionaries?' Mr. Slate responds in the affirmative and gives two reasons. The first is that many churches, especially in his denomination of Reformed Baptists, have limited resources. He explains:

*Most of us struggle even to financially support one vocational pastor; much less fund a missionary sent out from us. But one important part of holding the ropes is for the sending church to promote their missionaries to sister churches, making them aware of the ministry they are called to and keeping them informed as to what their needs are... There is an old maxim that says, 'The squeaky wheel gets greased.' Sending churches need to be 'squeaky wheels' by disseminating information about their missionaries with great frequency. I think it is wise in the first several years on the field for the church to send out updates as frequently as once a month.*

The second reason for inter-church networking is based in the Scriptural model of sending missionaries:

*I am also convinced from what I see in the pages of the New Testament that church planters should be sent out two by two and as missionary teams rather than as solo missionaries. That is, I believe the NT models missions teams that have at least two elder-qualified men on them along with several assistant missionaries who can serve in diaconal type roles, freeing the church-planters to give themselves to prayer and the Word of God. It will be a rare Reformed Baptist church that has that many people called to the work of missions found in their own congregation. If we are going to recover the team mission model there must be a strong network built between churches, especially within formal associations of churches. So, you might have one man sent out from one church, and another member of the mission team sent out by a sister church.*

As we seek renewal amongst our churches and the blessing of God upon our missional endeavours, we must recognise the essential component of prayer. As was noted before, Jesus tells his disciples to "pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest". The word 'earnestly' is an exhortation for us to be urgent and persistent and committed in prayer for God to send out labourers. How much desire do we have for the glory of God? How earnestly do we seek the building of his kingdom? How compassionate are we towards the lost? Towards the unreached who have never so much as heard the gospel of Jesus Christ, which teaches that they can be a brands plucked from the

fire of God's wrath, and be translated into the glorious kingdom of his beloved Son? Jesus commands us to pray earnestly to God almighty that he will send out labourers into his harvest. He truly is the Lord of the harvest. He is the one for whom we work. If we are to see any measure of success, he is the one who must bless our labours in the field. Those who toil in their own strength toil utterly in vain. God can command the blessing from above, so let us pray earnestly that he would do so.

In conclusion, the dearth of missionaries and the disappointing level of support for the reaching of the unreached is something only Christ by the power of his Spirit can fix. We remain trusting in him, knowing that he reigns, even when the wicked prevail and the righteous seem to falter. Nevertheless, we must earnestly seek transformation of the churches in this matter. Christ works by his Spirit in and through his word (John 16:7-14), and we trust in his power. Therefore, we must first be informed by God's word, understanding the emphasis that it places on the gospel spreading to the ends of the earth, as well as the strength of the Lord Jesus' command in the Great Commission. Then, practical ways of fulfilling this commission can be gleaned from the Bible and from wisdom (insofar as the biblical guidelines are observed). Mr Slate helpfully suggests the biblical model and practical usefulness of zealous and eager missions networking. May God bless us all as we seek to play our pre-ordained part in this Great Commission. Praise the Triune God of heaven and earth for the champion of the Church, Jesus Christ, who states with all the authority of heaven and earth, "I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Mt. 16:18). Amen.

Benedict Allmand-Smith, October 2024