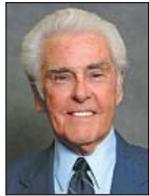


Return to the task

The spread of the gospel at Pentecost (Acts 2:1-47) continued its outward push, with the church at Antioch becoming the center of the mission to the Gentiles. Under the



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leading of the Holy Spirit, the church set Barnabas and Saul on the first missionary journey to spread the gospel even further.

Barnabas and Saul commissioned (Acts 13:1-3).

The mission to the Gentiles had already begun in chapters 8-11 but “what is new to these chapters is that for the first time a local Christian church was led to see the need for a witness beyond them to the larger world and commissioned missionaries to carry out that task” (John B. Polhill, “Acts, The New American Commentary,” p. 288). This was not an ordination since the two had already been set apart by God for ministry earlier in the book of Acts. This was instead a commitment of the church to support them in their mission enterprise.

Since that early commissioning service, many churches have performed similar services for professional missionaries but also for thousands of lay people who have been set apart for specific missionary activities in fulfillment of the Great Commission given by Christ to his followers (Matthew 28:18-20).

In my own church on Sunday, July 19, a group of church members was commissioned to ministry with Lakota Indians in South Dakota by working with their church in Bridger, S.D. Such a ministry helps to revitalize our own church at the same time it serves the Indian reservation.

When the company came to Antioch of Pisidia, Saul, who was now called Paul (Acts 13:5), followed

their regular routine of going to the local synagogue to share the gospel in fulfillment of his commitment to God’s revelation to the Jews. A marvelous sermon by Paul is recorded in Acts 13:36-41, setting the context for preaching to them about Jesus. The people in the synagogue implored Paul to come again on the next Sabbath to preach again.

Paul experienced popular acclaim on the next Sabbath but also violent rejection by the local Jews (Acts 13:44-47). This rejection led to Paul’s deliberate movement from preaching to the Jews as God’s chosen ones to his acceptance of God’s calling to become the apostle to the Gentiles. “For so the Lord had commanded us, saying, ‘I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the utter parts of the earth’”(13:47).

When today’s Christian share the gospel with unbelievers, we will experience rejection as some to whom we witness will not accept our message.

But Paul and his company also experienced joy when some listeners did embrace the gospel (Acts 13:48-52). When the Gentiles heard of Paul’s commitment to reaching them with the gospel, “they were glad and glorified the word of God” (13:48).

What are the challenges that face Christian churches today? We do not have to deal with the Jewish people as Paul did in his ministry to the Gentiles, but we do have significant issues to face in our culture.

(1) *Militant atheism.* Nigel Barber in 2011 claimed that atheism was replacing religion in economically developed countries while in underdeveloped countries there are virtually no atheists. He contended that atheism increases along with an increased quality of life. His research supports his conclusions as to why churches in developed countries are

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losing ground. “First, with better science, and with governmental safety nets and smaller families, there is less fear and uncertainty in people’s daily lives and hence less market for religion” (“Why Atheism Will Replace Religion: New Evidence,” *Psychology Today*, July 14, 2011).

Revitalized churches have the challenge of providing religious experiences that provide greater meaning to God and worship than Barber has found in his research.

(2) *Islamic expansion.* The Pew Center predicts that almost every religious faith will increase in the next 40 years. The largest growth will be Islam and Christianity. “Islam, world’s fastest-growing faith, will leap from 1.6 billion (in 2010) to 2.76 billion by 2057, according to the Pew study. At that time, Muslims will make up nearly one-third of the world’s projected population of about 9 billion people.”

Christian growth is predicted from 2.17 billion to 2.92 billion, composing more than 31% of the world’s population. Consequently, by 2050 more than 6 out of 10 people will be Christian or Muslim (Fox 59, April 2, 2015). It will take revitalized Christian churches to reach more people for Christ.

(3) *Diminishing younger adult members.* Research by several religious organizations have alerted our churches to a diminishing young adult population who are joining Christian churches. This challenge is being met best by vital churches that are reaching out to the population with innovative forms of ministry that make the Bible real.

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