

Happy the Church, Thou Sacred Place

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Happy the church, thou sacred place;
The seat of thy Creator's grace;
Thy holy courts are His abode,
Thou earthly palace of our God.

Thy walls are strength, and at thy gates
A guard of heavenly warriors waits;
Nor shall thy deep foundations move,
Fixed on His counsels and His love.

Thy foes in vain designs engage;
Against His throne in vain they rage;
Like rising waves with angry roar,
That dash and die upon the shore.

Then let our souls in Zion dwell,
Nor fear the wrath of men or hell;
His arms embrace this happy ground,
Like brazen bulwarks built around.

God is our Shield, and God our Sun;
Swift as the fleeting moments run;
On us He sheds new beams of grace,
And we reflect His brightest praise.

ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Missions as Church Planting

Kevin T. Bauder

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Historic Baptists agree that the work of missions is the work of planting churches. They derive this conviction from the uniform pattern of the New Testament. When the churches of the New Testament commissioned and sent out a member, it was invariably either to plant churches or to assist someone who was planting churches.

If the New Testament pattern holds, then a missionary's work is not primarily to educate the ignorant, to feed the hungry, to heal the sick, to seek justice for the oppressed, or to engage in other works of mercy. These works are incidental to missions. While such works may be useful in facilitating church planting, and while they may be performed as fruits of the individual missionary's Christian compassion, they are not properly the work of missions, and they should never be allowed to displace the work of missions.

Who, then, is a missionary? Properly speaking, a missionary is a church planter. The missionary's responsibility is to preach the gospel, baptize those who profess the gospel, train believers in the faith, and organize them into New Testament churches. If Timothy and Titus may be used as examples (there are some differences), the missionary's responsibility is not complete until the churches are fully ordered and self-perpetuating.

The work of the missionary involves a much broader range of responsibility than the work of the local pastor. As church planters, missionaries must master the same biblical and theological content that a pastor has to know, but they also must excel as witnesses for Jesus Christ. They must be able, with minimal resources, to organize a functional church. In the case of foreign missionaries, they must normally be able to communicate well across cultural and linguistic barriers. The work of missions has an exponentially higher level of difficulty than the work of a pastor at home—though this in no way demeans the work of the pastor!

If a man cannot pastor a church at home, is he really qualified to be sent as a church planter? And how does anyone know whether he can pastor a



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church at home unless he has actually done it? Clearly, Barnabas and Saul had significant experience in local church leadership before they were sent out on their first missionary journey. Why should the modern missionary be less qualified?

American churches have typically taken the attitude that men who cannot function in ministry at home can be sent to the mission field. The formula has been simple. On the one hand, the most qualified men are called to the most prestigious churches at home. On the other hand, the least qualified men are sent into places where their commissioning churches only have to see them every four years.

Within the Lord's vineyard, no work is more challenging than the work of missions. If it is as important as everyone says, then shouldn't the best and brightest be encouraged toward the mission field? More specifically, shouldn't the bulk of missionaries be drawn from men who have proven themselves in the work of the pastorate?

This suggestion raises a question about current missionary practices. Is it compatible with the "missionary call" about which so many make so much?

The answer to this question is that the New Testament does not seem to teach such a thing as a distinctive and lifelong call to missions *per se*. One can make an argument (though this is not the place to make it) that the New Testament does imply a calling to what is sometimes referred to as "vocational ministry." In order to justify the notion of a lifelong call to a specific area of service, however, a biblical interpreter must engage in considerably more theological gymnastics. In fact, the New Testament undermines such a notion, for it shows men moving not only from one specific ministry to another but also from one kind of ministry to another.

When modern Christians refer to "vocational Christian service," they include several different areas of ministry. They include New Testament ministries such as pastors, missionaries (church planters), and itinerant preacher-teachers. They also include certain responsibilities that support these New Testament ministries, such as theological teachers and coordinators of infrastructural organizations. These supporting ministries grow out of particular functions of New Testament pastors or missionaries, and are generally regarded as "vocational ministry" even though they are not biblical offices. For example, a theological professor or a coordinator of a mission agency is usually said to be "in the ministry."

Individuals are often led from one responsibility to another during the pursuit of their ministries. The same person may be a pastor at one time, a missionary at another, and a seminary professor at still another. A missionary may move between fields, and a pastor may move from one church to another. Nothing in the New Testament indicates that a person who moves

between areas of service is somehow betraying the call of God upon his life. If anything, the New Testament pattern favors such moves.

Theologically, no reason exists for not insisting that men be tried and proven before they are sent to the mission field. Practically, many factors should motivate churches and mission agencies to ask candidates to prove themselves in ministry before going to the field. Among these are the years of travel that candidates will spend in deputation, the high price of establishing a new missionary on the field, and the heavy toll that first-term ministry takes on new missionaries and their families.

The work of missions is one of the most vital aspects of New Testament Christianity. Churches that do not plant churches are failures as churches. Missions is too important to do in a shoddy or slipshod way. It is a work for the best and brightest of those who are called to minister.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
