

# A Church for All Peoples

**A**lthough intensely personal, the Christian faith is not individualistic. Jesus came not only to save sinners, but also to build His church (Matt 16:18). He came to establish communities of His followers among every people group on the face of the earth - communities that would reach out to others cross-culturally to share the good news of salvation.

When Peter ended his Pentecost message, he appealed not just for individual conversion, but also for a public identification with other believers (Acts 2:38). When people came to Christ, they were incorporated into a new and caring community which is both universal and local by the very fact that it includes all God's people in all places and in all times. Yet, while it transcends both space and time, it is also a community which expresses itself visibly and locally through groups of believers gathered into congregations.

In his masterful commentary on the book of Acts, John R. W. Stott describes the marks of the first Spirit-filled community that emerged following the Day of Pentecost:

*First, they were related to the apostles (in submission). They were eager to receive the apostles' instructions. A Spirit-filled church is an apostolic church, a New Testament church, anxious to believe and obey what Jesus and His apostles taught. Secondly, they were related to each other (in love). They persevered in the fellowship, supporting each other and relieving the needs of the poor. A Spirit-filled church is a loving, caring, sharing church. Thirdly, they were related to God (in worship). They worshipped Him in the temple and in the home, in the Lord's supper and in the prayers, with joy and with reverence. A Spirit-filled church is a worshipping church. Fourthly, they were related to the world (in outreach). No self-centered, self-contained church (absorbed in its own parochial affairs) can claim to be filled with the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a missionary Spirit. So a Spirit-filled church is a missionary church.*

The New Testament letters, which are replete with references to "one another," bear witness to the mutual interdependence meant to characterize the life of these early Christian communities. In fact, these letters, most of which are addressed to Christian churches located in the principal cities of the Roman Empire, deal with matters of Christian

faith and practice related to the nurture and development of congregational life.

A variety of metaphors illumine not only the relationship between God and His people, but also the mutual interdependence that characterizes God's people. Christians are branches of the same vine, living stones in the same building, sheep in the same flock, children in the same family, organs in the same body.

These congregations are meant to be kingdom communities. Jesus taught His disciples to pray that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. The Church is a colony of heaven. It is a segment of humanity in which the ground rules are defined by God's will. In a sense, the Church is meant to be a pilot project of the kingdom of God, a kingdom outpost, an anticipation of Christ's reign on earth. Thus, the Church glorifies God, that is, makes God "look good," by continuing in the world the works of the kingdom which Jesus began. Although the Church cannot avoid entirely the organizational and institutional forms of the culture in which it exists, essentially the Church is the community of the King.

This means that the goal of Christian missions is not limited to mere physical presence among unbelievers nor to the verbal proclamation of the gospel among those who have never heard it. It is not limited to establishing a network of mission stations across a defined geographical area. Neither is it confined to dotting the countryside of a given nation with a series of preaching points or developing Bible study groups in scattered urban neighborhoods. Nor is it restricted to the conversion of individual persons. The goal of missions is to establish within every people group in the world, within every piece of the human mosaic, indigenous church movements which are capable of so multiplying congregations that the entire people group is both evangelized and incorporated into the fellowship of the church.

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However, the goal of planting new congregations which are capable of paying their own bills, making their own decisions, and evangelizing their own kind of people is not sufficient. For many years, missionaries believed that when these objectives had been accomplished, the missionary task

was complete. Behind this conviction lay the assumption that only affluent, well-educated Christians were capable of establishing church movements in new cultural and linguistic spheres. The newly established churches in Africa, Asia, and Latin America were too deprived economically and educationally to engage in cross-cultural mission. We now realize that for mission to go full circle, it is necessary for the churches established by missionaries to become sending churches in order to gather the momentum necessary to penetrate each of the world's remaining unreached people groups. Thus, today's existing mission societies relate increasingly not just to the churches which they have brought into being, but to the mission structures which have emerged and are emerging from those churches.

Where there are no churches, there shall be churches. The Apostle Paul captured this central thrust of biblical missions when he testified to the Christians living in Rome: "And I have so made it my aim to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build on another man's foundation" (Rom 15:20). Cultural boundaries must be crossed. Social barriers must be penetrated. Linguistic obstacles must be bridged. Religious resistance must be overcome. A church movement must be brought into being within each people group. Churches that feel a responsibility themselves to work cross-culturally must be planted. That is the purpose of missions.