# What is the role of the local church in missions?

William Carey, the 18th century Baptist missionary, once said to his band of fellow Baptist pastors concerning his burden for India’s missionary work and evangelization: “Well, I will go down, if you will hold the rope.” To which they gave an oath saying: “while we live… we should never let go of the rope”[[1]](#endnote-1). In other words, every believer is either a goer or a sender, as Dr. John Piper is fond of saying, any other alternative is pure disobedience. However, this significant moment of church history does not find its source in William Carey nor Andrew Fuller, rather it derives its power and purpose from the last words of the Lord of the Church Himself.

Before His ascension, Christ proclaimed to his disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them inthe name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”[[2]](#endnote-2) We can see three clear parts to the “Great Commission” and it is only when we comprehend what Christ is saying in these verses that we can comprehend the role of the local church in missions. As we will see, Christ gives an indicative, an imperative and a promise, all of which are to fuel the zeal and power of the local churches in its missionary activity.

# The Indicative:

Missions, primarily, is not about men and women giving their lives away for moral or humanitarian purposes. Rather, missions is primarily about the proclamation of a specific message with a specific content. In verse 18, Christ says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”. In the Greek, it is clear from the indicative verb “given” that Christ is describing the current reality post his resurrection: that of the authority and glory given to Him as the resurrected God-man who has overcome by His blood. The Son of God had become incarnate, lived a sinless life and kept the law perfectly and had died on a wooden cross, bearing the judgment of lawless men and women who had rebelled against the holy God of the universe. He was buried and was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures and He is now proclaiming to His disciples the present reality of the Gospel – that Christ, having overcome death and sin, is now given all authority in heaven and on earth. The One who for us and for our salvation became flesh, “after making purification for sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high…”[[3]](#endnote-3). “He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him”[[4]](#endnote-4). He has been given authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom the Father has given him”[[5]](#endnote-5). Thus, God “now commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead”[[6]](#endnote-6).

Now that we have a message based on the reality of what God has done in history, more specifically in the person of his Son, what is the response? What is the proper response to all of this good news of the Gospel? The answer is found in the next verse of the Great Commission.

# The Imperative:

In light of the reality of what God has done in the cross, Christ’s imperative to his disciples is in verse 19: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them inthe name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you”.

First of all, we need to note that the imperative flows out of the indicatives of the Gospel, not the other way around. We see it all over the New Testament. The four gospels give the finished work of Christ before the book of Acts starts to command all people everywhere to repent. The first eleven chapters of the epistle to the church in Rome is all about the indicatives of the Gospel – what God has done in his Son – and it is only in chapter 12 that Paul says the key word, “therefore”, to indicate the proper response of the believers to what God has accomplished. We also see the same pattern in Ephesians when Paul labors in the first three chapters to convince the local church in Ephesus of God’s love which finds its origin in eternity past before he “urge[s] [them] to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which [they] have been called”[[7]](#endnote-7). Another significant pattern is seen in an early hymn of the church which is commonly referred to as the “Carmen Christi” or the “Hymn to Christ”[[8]](#endnote-8). The Carmen Christi is comprised of verses 6-11 of Philippians chapter 2. In this hymn, Christ is spoken of as though being in very nature God, yet he emptied himself and in humility took on the form of a servant. Paul uses this hymn which speaks of the indicatives of the Gospel as a foundation to give to the believers the imperative: have the same mind as Christ and serve others in humility[[9]](#endnote-9). The first observation therefore is that the imperative of verse 19 is rooted in the indicative of verse 18.

Secondly, we see what the disciples are commanded to do: go, make disciples, baptize them and teach them what Christ has commanded. When the disciples are scattered, we start to see many churches in many different locales in the then known world: Philippi, Ephesus, Rome, Antioch, Jerusalem, Galatia, Corinth and more. What is of significance to us is how the command to “go” and obey Christ’s commission is carried out.

# The first century church and missions:

We read in Acts 13 that while the local church in Antioch was “worshipping the Lord and fasting”, “the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off”[[10]](#endnote-10). This is significant for a couple of reasons. First of all, it was in the context of the life of the church, when they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, that Barnabas and Saul were set apart for a specific calling. The church was being obedient and being what it was- a vibrant community of Christ worshippers. They were not primarily concerned with holding on to their “members” nor were they afraid of their own being “set apart” and leaving. Their primary vision was fulfilled in seeing, shortly after Barnabas and Saul were sent out into the mission field, that the “Gentiles heard [the Gospel], [and] they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed”[[11]](#endnote-11). The second reason the above passage is significant is because the local church, after the hearing the clear calling of the Holy Spirit, laid hands on them and sent them off. If Barnabas and Saul needed prayer, fasting, laying on of hands and being sent off by the local church in Antioch, how much more are we in need of being obedient to the Scriptural pattern. If the local church’s primacy in sending off missionaries by the clear leading of the Holy Spirit was important for the apostles and disciples, it ought to be important for the twenty first century church.

Later on, in Acts 14:27, we read the following: “when [Paul and Barnabas] arrived and gathered the church [of Antioch] together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles”. We need to note that Paul and Barnabas were not “doing their own thing” or “just serving the Lord” on their own. They were sent out by a local church of which they were worshipping and accountable members and in the local fellowship of the saints. After completing their mission, they returned to their church and reported to them all about what God has done. We see here not just the sending mission of the church but the sustaining accountability of the mission. Had Paul and Barnabas fallen into an error similar to that which we see in Paul’s rebuke of Peter’s un-Gospel like actions in Galatians, the sending members of the church of Antioch would rebuke and correct Paul and Barnabas’ teachings and actions accordingly. Simultaneously, as the church hears of what God has done through the labors and preaching of Paul and Barnabas, the church is encouraged and the members glorify God for his grace in saving the Gentiles!

For our last consideration of the imperative, we must consider the flip-side of the “going” – the “sending”. God has appointed that those who proclaim the Gospel should live from the Gospel.[[12]](#endnote-12)

In other words, those who are “going” and are “set apart” by the Holy Spirit with a unanimous acknowledgment by the local body of believers, ought to be supported financially.

We see just a snippet of this matter of “holding the rope” in Paul’s epistle to the local church in Philippi when he expresses his thanks to them for being the only church that sent him aid while he was in Thessalonica through Epaphroditus[[13]](#endnote-13). In 2 Corinthians11:8 Paul told the Corinthians: “I robbed other churches by accepting support from them in order to serve you”. Paul, in order to be fully set apart for the Gospel of God, accepted financial support from local churches in order to not rely on the Corinthians while he was still preaching the Gospel to them. This was normal missionary activity in the New Testament. The believers who were called of God to be “devote[d] to prayer and to the ministry of the word” were to be supported by the local churches so that the Gospel might be proclaimed and come to fruition in the planting of other local churches[[14]](#endnote-14).

In our day, the fact that there are as many as 3.11 billion unreached peoples in a world with only 7.39 billion, which is almost 42.2 percent of the world’s population, is a daunting task[[15]](#endnote-15). It seems too impossible. Indeed it is impossible to reach 3.11 billion unreached peoples with the Gospel, but glory be to God that the imperative given by Christ is crammed between an indicative and a promise!

# The Promise:

Christ’s very last line before ascending is in verse 20 of Matthew chapter 28 and reads: “And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”. What a promise to cling to from the One who cannot lie[[16]](#endnote-16)! Christ worked through his church in the first century to turn the world upside down, all because they took him at his word that he was with them. We have the resurrected Christ in us, the hope of glory[[17]](#endnote-17). He has bound Satan by his work on the cross and defeated the grave and is now reigning in glory from whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead[[18]](#endnote-18). The one who made all things and spoke the world into existence is the same one who has engraved us on the palms of his nail-scarred hands and has promised to always be with us[[19]](#endnote-19). This same Christ promised his presence where two or three gather in his name, specifically in the administrations of the local churches, as they exercise their authority under the headship of Christ[[20]](#endnote-20).

# Conclusion:

As we have seen, the idea of local churches sending out missionaries, supporting them financially and prayerfully, as well as holding them accountable to their teachings and life, is biblical and is rooted primarily in the words of the Head of the church which he spoke just before his ascension. Christ gave the indicatives which served as the sure foundation for the imperatives and gave a promise to seal the declaration of his sovereign reign as the “king of kings and lord of lords”[[21]](#endnote-21). The local churches are therefore comprised of believing members who are busy about their Master’s business. They are either sending those set-apart or they are being sent to declare the glories of the Gospel by making disciples. The point is clear: either we’re called of God to go down into the well or we’re called to hold the rope for those who go down. There is no third option for local churches. May our response to those are called of God to go in our local churches be the same as that of Carey’s friends: “while we live… we should never let go of the rope”[[22]](#endnote-22).

1. John Piper, *Andrew Fuller: Holy Faith, Worthy Gospel, World Mission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Matthew 28:18-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Hebrews 1:3. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Colossians 2:15. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. John 17:2. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Acts 17:30-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Ephesians 4:1. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. <http://christiandefense.org/Article_%20Carmen%20Christi.htm>; Philippians 2:6-11. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Philippians 2:1-4. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Acts 13:1-3. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Acts 13:48. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 1 Corinthians 9:14. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Philippians 4:14-18. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Acts 6:4. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. https://joshuaproject.net [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Numbers 23:19. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Colossians 1:27. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. The Apostle’s Creed. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Isaiah 49:16. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Matthew 18:20. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Revelation 19:16. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. John Piper, *Andrew Fuller: Holy Faith, Worthy Gospel, World Mission* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2016), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)