

Auctioned Off!

As a young boy I often went to auctions with my father. He was quite interested in antiques and frequently went to estate sales to find those rare antique gems. To me an auction was an exciting, yet mysterious event. In fact, from my recollections it almost seemed that people enjoyed the process of the auction much more than the actual purchasing of merchandise. First, the auctioneer would start talking in what sounded like "speaking in tongues." Yet my father knew exactly what he was saying. The asking price started high and gradually came down until with a slight flip of a hand, tip of a hat, or nod of a head, an anonymous person (at least from my perspective) would accept the bid. Then the real fun began as interested buyers with almost poker-like strategy would jockey back and forth with counter bids until finally the auctioneer said his famous, "Going once, going twice, sold to number 34."

Many years have passed since I last participated in an auction. However, I recently met some missionaries who had just participated in one. What did they buy? Well, nothing since they were, in fact, the ones being auctioned off!

Perhaps I need to explain. They had been sent out by a missions board that in turn required them to return every year to the States to participate in a missions conference in order to secure their support for the following year. At this conference both the husband and wife were required to give separate reports of their accomplishments and needs before the attendees. After each report the master of ceremonies would come out and, in the presence of the missionary, like an auctioneer, start the bidding. "Who here will support this missionary for \$200 a month?" At that price usually no one nods, so the price would be lowered. "Who here will support this missionary for \$100 a month?" Maybe one or two would accept the bid. Gradually he would lower the bid until, "Who here will support this missionary for \$10 a month?" At the end, all of the accepted bids would be tallied and the sum would form the basis for their next year's support. Yes, they were literally "auctioned off."

If you are like me, your reaction probably ranges from embarrassment to disbelief. However, this little story has caused me to be quite thankful for the New Testament pattern of being "commended to the grace of God." Let me list several reasons why.

1) I am thankful that being "commended to the grace of God" is THE New Testament pattern for missions: "And thence sailed to Antioch, from whence they had been recommended to the grace of God for the work which they fulfilled" (Acts 14:26 AV).

Often we take for granted that people understand the concept of being "commended to the grace of God." We often hear this phrase, but do we really believe it is the New Testament pattern? In addition, do we really understand the process of commendation? Verse 26 of Acts 14 says that Paul and Barnabas returned to the church "from whence they had been recommended to the grace

of God." In other words, this passage describes the end of their mission, but at some time earlier they were commended to the grace of God. We know that this happened in Acts 13:1-4, which says, "Now there were in the church that was at Antioch certain prophets and teachers; as Barnabas, and Simeon that was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen, which had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. As they ministered to the Lord, and fasted, the Holy Ghost said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them. and when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away. So they, being sent forth by the Holy Ghost, departed unto Seleucia; and from thence they sailed to Cyprus."

From this passage we are able to understand more fully what commendation means and what the process of commending someone means. First of all, it is the pattern of New Testament missions, since Acts 13 initiates the first of several missionary trips of Paul and his companions.

Secondly, it is based on the character of the men who were commended. Paul and Barnabas were spiritual men deeply involved in the activities of the local church. They were not novices, nor recently converted, but established men in their walk and their ministries.

Thirdly, the Holy Spirit called them forth into the mission field. Obviously, the Holy Spirit spoke to the hearts of both Paul and Barnabas, who became convinced of the calling. But also He spoke to the rest of the assembly, since after prayer and fasting they "laid their hands on them."

Fourthly, the passage says that "they sent them away." Where? Into the missionary harvest fields. When did they send them away? Relatively speaking, it was immediate. The silence of the Scriptures on the modern concept of deputation speaks very loudly. Who sent them away? It was both the assembly and the Holy Spirit. With what financial guarantees did they send them away? Most likely it was like the position of most assemblies even today, "We'll help when we can and with what we can." But remember, in those days there were no telephones, no email, no Western Unions, no ATM machines, and no checking accounts. In other words, they probably left with some money in their pockets, but had to trust God for their future needs during the course of their first missionary journey. The proof that God was faithful to them and supplied their every need is recorded in Acts 14: 27: "And when they were come, and had gathered the church together, they rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles."

Frankly, being "auctioned off" is a method that is totally foreign to the pages of God's Word, but commendation is not. Being commended to the grace of God gives me assurance that I'm completely within God's will. How else can one know for sure that he is in the will of God unless he follows the Scriptures?

2) I am thankful for the New Testament pattern because it speeds the evangelization of the world.

Instead of wasting precious time and money for the purpose of returning to the States for the annual auction support drive, the missionary can focus his energies and monies directly on the evangelization of the lost. Likewise, the New Testament pattern speeds the arrival of new missionaries on the field. More than once I have met eager and zealous candidates for the mission field who were waylaid on the homefront because their mission board required them to spend one or two years going around in "deputation" to try and to raise support. On the other hand, a missionary who is commended to the grace of God can be immediately sent out into the harvest, as was the case with Barnabas and Paul: "And when they had fasted and prayed, and laid their hands on them, they sent them away." (Acts 13:3 AV). In other words, when the local assembly was convinced that God was calling Barnabas and Paul to evangelize the regions beyond, there was no deputation delay, but an immediate sending forth of the workers into the harvest.

Perhaps you are an interested candidate for the mission field who is convinced that God has called you. But doubts have been hindering you from committing yourself to "going out in faith." My advice to you is, if you are convinced that God has called, then take the step of faith into God's grace and go into the harvest fields.

3) I am thankful that the New Testament pattern acts as a divine filter and easily separates those who only think they are called from those who really are called.

I recall a story of a young couple who approached their elders and said that they were convinced that God had called them to the "jungles" of some Canadian province and announced that they were moving there. Notice that this couple did not come asking for advice, nor with a request for prayer, but came with their minds made up and the idea that the assembly would automatically give them some financial guarantee. The elders, being wise men, knew that this impulsive couple was not ready for mission work and simply responded with, "May God bless you on your move. Keep us informed with prayer letters of your progress," without any mention of financial assistance. Needless to say, this couple was quite ruffled by this response and never went anywhere, since their faith only went as far as the financial guarantee (or lack of it) that was offered to them.

In other words, there are plenty of missionary candidates who will be quite willing to go out as missionaries only if and when their deputation pledges come in and the sum of them all rise above the minimum financial level that the mission board has set. However, to suggest to these same candidates that they go forth without any financial guarantees while trusting God for their future, well, let us say that many would be "filtered" out of the running.

To go forth while trusting God completely for one's financial resources requires a different type of faith, the faith of Abraham, who went forth not knowing how God would lead him in the future: "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb 11:8).

This is spirit of New Testament missions and the type of missionary candidate God is looking for.

4) I am thankful that the New Testament pattern is God's divine method of supplying for His work and frees the missionary from the embarrassing methods of man.

Imagine having to endure the embarrassment of a "missionary auction." Yet how simple and free of embarrassment is the Lord's method. The word "commend" means to entrust or commit or give over to another. Practically speaking, this means that those who are commended "are sent away, that is, handed over to the Lord, for Him to do with them as He sees fit" [1]. In other words, the commending assembly hands over the care of the missionary to the Lord Himself, who is quite able to supply for our needs. To some this is almost too simple to be true.

It hardly needs to be mentioned that the New Testament pattern frees us from the common practice of having to ask and beg for money. If this were God's method then the missionary who tended to be Mr. Public Speaker, who was able to give the flashiest report, and who was able to tell the most heart-wrenching stories would be the most supported. But this isn't God's method. Instead of telling man all of his needs, the commended missionary in faith tells the Lord, who in turn works in the hearts of believers who are sensitive to the Spirit's promptings. The missionary is then free to concentrate his efforts on the more important work-- not the raising of money, but the salvation of souls, discipleship, and church planting.

This is how the Lord sent out His disciples during their days of training. To the twelve He said, "Take nothing for your journey, neither staves, nor scrip, neither bread, neither money; neither have two coats apiece" (Luke 9:1-3). Likewise, when He sent out the seventy He said, "Carry neither purse, nor scrip, nor shoes: and salute no man by the way. And into whatsoever house ye enter, first say, Peace be to this house. And if the son of peace be there, your peace shall rest upon it: if not, it shall turn to you again. And in the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give: for the labourer is worthy of his hire. Go not from house to house" (Luke 10:4-7).

Later on when He asked them (Luke 22:35), "When I sent you without purse, and scrip, and shoes, lacked ye any thing?", they answered by saying, "Nothing." What a powerful testimony! They lacked nothing since the Lord was and is able to supply for the needs of His laborers.

In other words, they went forth, not begging for money, but concentrating on their mission goals while trusting God that He would open doors and supply for their journey needs. Of course, God does open doors by the work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of other Christians. All believers should be sensitive to the leading of the Lord and be willing and be ready to give from their abundance to those in need as described in 2 Corinthians 8:14, "But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality."

5) I am thankful that the New Testament pattern commends us to the grace of God not to the grace of men.

The grace of man in all of its goodness and wisdom might try to auction off the missionary while thinking that this will secure his necessary funds. But how does man know what the missionary needs? Can he foretell the future? No. Yet God knows exactly what our needs will be and how best to supply for them. After all, isn't Jehovah-jireh one of His names, that is to say, God will provide (Gen 22:14)? Don't forget that the grace of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you.

Let me give you an example of this from our own lives. In 1996 our son Joel had a terrible accident. He fell from a second-story window and suffered a very serious head injury and contracted a bacterial infection within the brain. It looked bleak, not only from the physical standpoint, but also from the financial, as we had no insurance. Due to lack of proper medical care in the Balkan states, a stateside doctor counseled us that we must bring him back to the States where Joel could receive proper treatment. So we did. But the same doctor also told us to be ready for financial bankruptcy due to the fact that we had no insurance. I remember being called into the financial office the day after Joel's admittance to the hospital and having to meet with the director, who knew we had no insurance. She politely informed me that Joel's hospital stay, surgeries, six-week IV antibiotic treatment, and rehabilitation would be very, very expensive. She asked me how I intended to pay for all of this. My reply was "I have a very rich father." She in turn told me, "Well, then you'd better call him up." After I left the office, I entered the elevator and on my way up to Joel's floor I contacted my heavenly Father via prayer and said, "Lord, if there ever was a time when we need your help it is now. Please show Yourself strong." And indeed He did! God worked in many miraculous ways at that time while touching the hearts of many believers in such a way that not only were all of Joel's hospital bills paid for, but we also were able to channel thousands of dollars into the work of the Lord in Albania and were able to help pay for the purchase of a meeting hall for the saints. Truly God knew our needs, and His grace was more than sufficient.

6) I am thankful that the New Testament pattern allows for the ongoing participation of the homefront saints in the work of foreign missions.

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul thanked the believers for their "fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:5). He was thinking not only of their own zeal for the Gospel, but also of their prayer and financial support that they directed to him (see 4:15-19).

In other words, instead of the funding of a missionary being decided at a once-a-year auction, God's ideal is that saints on the homefront maintain an active and ongoing role in the work of foreign missions. How? By reading missionary reports, writing missionaries, praying for them, and being committed to a sacrificial lifestyle. As you do these things the Holy Spirit will do His work with divine promptings and direct you as to where you should invest the Lord's monies. In this way you will be coworkers with the Lord in His harvest: "We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth." (3 John 7-8)

I recall an instance a few years back where we were in need of a four-wheel-drive vehicle. If you

have ever been on Albanian roads you'll understand why. A brother from Scotland was passing through town one weekend along with some other believers. They stayed with us for only a day or two. As they were leaving, the brother handed me a large sum of money and simply told me that "The Lord spoke to my heart last night that you might have need of this." Needless to say, I used it to purchase a needed vehicle, and he, through his giving, participated in the Gospel effort.

7) I am thankful that the New Testament pattern gives the glory, not to man, but to God.

It is exciting to live by faith. Oh yes, sometimes it can be a test of one's faith, but in the end our faith is strengthened, and God, not man, is glorified. I can personally testify that God is always faithful and that we have never gone without during our years on the mission field. But more than that, although I've mentioned a few instances above, I could continue to tell of remarkable instances when God worked in the heart of a believer on the homefront (with whom we had never discussed our needs), who in turn sent us some funds that miraculously supplied for our needs.

For example, last year we were praying about holding our first church camp. We spoke only to the Lord about the financial side of this idea. That is, we had not mentioned it to anyone on the homefront, nor in a prayer letter. During this time of seeking God's will there came a fairly substantial gift from a sister in Florida earmarked specifically for "camp work." We didn't know the sister, but yet she felt led to send us this gift. How did she know about us, and, more importantly, how did she know about our interest in holding a church camp? Obviously, the glory goes to the Lord.

Sometimes we tell these stories to missionaries of other persuasions (either of the auction or deputation philosophy) and they can hardly believe us. Yet that is the beauty of following the New Testament pattern. To Him be the glory forever, Amen!

Auctioned off? For old antiques it is okay. But for foreign missions, I am thankful for the pattern of the New Testament. How about you?

[1] Global Strategy, The Biblical Plan of Missions, page 40, published by Christian Missions in Many Lands, 1999.