

# No Place Left as the Benchmark

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**I** was walking with a group of Church Planting Movement initiators during an outing at a CPM conference. One of the most fruitful ones sidled up to me as we strolled along. He asked, “Steve, would you say we are experiencing a CPM in our city?”

He was experiencing second- and third-generation churches, and perhaps even some were fourth-generation at the time, but they weren’t yet consistently reaching to fourth generation and beyond in multiple locales.

I replied, “I’m not sure. But probably not yet.”

He paused then asked the real question. “Is CPM all there is?”

The kingdom was growing by leaps and bounds in this city over the course of two years. People were coming to Christ and being discipled. New reproducible churches were being formed. And this

was happening generation by generation. My friend was rapidly becoming a poster child of CPM breakthrough in the Western world.

I said, “No, a movement is just the beginning. The movement is not the goal. The real goal is what Paul declared in Romans 15—no place left for the gospel to be proclaimed. Every people group, every neighborhood and every ethnic segment with multiplying disciples and churches among them.”

A look of relief spread across his brow. “Whew! I’m glad to hear it. I knew there must be something more.”

What registered with my friend that evening was critical in whether or not the movement in his city would move toward the end-vision of the whole city being reached or plateau out with satisfaction at having achieved a certain kingdom status. He realized that day that a movement is not the end; it’s just the beginning!

## RAISING THE BENCHMARK FOR MOVEMENTS

Paul’s statement in Romans 15 is one of those precious moments when the missionary raises his head above the spiritual fray, surveys the battle and offers an assessment.

Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done—by the power of signs and wonders, through the power of the Spirit of God. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known [or “named”—NASB], so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.... But now that there is no more place

for me to work in these regions...  
(Rom. 15 :17-20, 23 NIV).

Paul's work was an apostolic work; thus it was a foundation-laying work (v.20; see also 1 Cor. 3:6ff). Paul's role was to enter a place where Christ was not being "named" or "known" (v.20), share the gospel, make disciples and plant churches that could multiply to reach that region.

Paul declares that from Jerusalem all the way to Illyricum (northwest of Macedonia), he had fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ (v.19). At first glance this appears to contradict the record of Acts. Personally, Paul probably started churches in only 10-15 places in the midst of his mission tours.<sup>1</sup> This appears to be a far cry from a full proclamation from "Jerusalem to Illyricum."

To add an exclamation mark to this assessment, he states in verse 23 that there is "no more place for me to work in these regions." Clearly, in Paul's mind, the role of the apostle is to get to the point where there is no place left to lay the foundation for the gospel of the kingdom. Paul had accomplished this end-vision and was moving on to Spain in his plans to reach the Gentiles.

### SEEDS OF MOVEMENTS

In all likelihood, Paul's mind was ringing with Jesus' parables of the mustard seed and leaven (or that spiritual concept found in Matthew 13:31-33). That handful of churches he and his partners planted were the mustard seed planted in each region. As they began to multiply

and reach other neighborhoods, towns and village Paul felt free to move on. Movements of the kingdom were starting in each region with sufficient life and momentum embedded in them to carry the proclamation of the gospel to every nook and cranny.<sup>2</sup>

Paul didn't have to plant every church—just a few church-planting churches with a vision for their region and beyond.

### RECOVERING THE REAL END-VISION

The danger my friend faced that evening was succumbing to the wrong end-vision: movements, rather than no place left. Paul could have stayed to build upon the foundations of these movements, as others behind him would, but that was not the role of an apostle. The eyes of an apostle are on the horizon, where Christ has not yet been named.

## The danger my friend faced was succumbing to the wrong end-vision—movements rather than no place left.

I believe that what followed were something akin to Church Planting Movements or disciple-making movements in these Roman provinces. However, movements were never the goal. Giving every ethnic group, every city, every village and every family the chance to become disciples of Christ was the goal. Movements were just the most biblically complete, rapid, deep and transformative way to get there.

An all too present temptation in kingdom movements is for the movement catalyst(s) to pull out before there is sufficient momentum to get to no place left. The astounding numbers within a movement so thrill us that we lose sight of the bigger vision: every community and segment reached with the gospel and embraced by life-giving, multiplying churches.

A frequent admonition I give to colleagues in the beginning stages of CPMs is to stay in the fray until they can see that the movement will get to no place left. What that means is that they need to track the movement's progress toward all people having a chance to hear the gospel.

The temptation to slow down and not finish the task is great amidst an explosive movement within a city or people group, but greater still is the same temptation globally.

### **GETTING TO NO PLACE LEFT GLOBALLY**

Like his Lord, who had to get through all the towns and villages of Israel during his three years,<sup>3</sup> so Paul sensed a divine urgency associated with his apostolic stewardship.<sup>4</sup> He seemed compelled to bring in all the Gentiles as an acceptable offering to His Lord (Rom. 15:15-16).

He and the other first century believers vigorously gave themselves to Jesus' mandate to proclaim fully the gospel of the kingdom to all of the ethne in their generation (Matt. 24:14, 28:19-20). Whether the breadth of ethnic diversity was understood at that time is not certain, but they pushed the

frontiers of the gospel from province to province and from district to district within those provinces.

Movements were not the vision. Completing the Great Commission was. No place left.

The question for our generation is whether we will take up the baton to finish the race that others before us have started and have run so faithfully. With over 3,000 people groups, both unengaged and unreached with the gospel (UUPGs), it is easy for us to become complacent and stop running. Instead, we have the opportunity to increase our pace and run the final lap. We have the resources but do we have the resolve?

The finish line is in sight. Sacrificial effort on the part of the global church could result in the completion of the original mandate Jesus gave His followers. In two thousand years, a multitude of people groups have been reached with the gospel. We are in that number. But the benchmark is no place left. Will we take up the baton to get there?

### **SET AN URGENT DEADLINE**

In getting to no place left in people groups, cities and regions, setting a

deadline seems to galvanize believers toward a sense of urgency to finish what Jesus started. It is as though we wake up to realize that time is running short and faith-filled efforts must be employed.

Jesus imbued the early disciples with a sense of urgency.

We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming, when no one can work. (John 9:4, ESV)

Several of His parables also highlighted the urgency.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the most piercing is the Parable of the Faithful and Unfaithful Servants:

Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning, and be like men who are waiting for their master to come home from the wedding feast, so that they may open the door to him at once when he comes and knocks.... If he comes in the second watch, or in the third, and finds them awake, blessed are those servants.... And that servant who knew his master's will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating. But the one who did not know, and did what deserved a beating, will receive a light beating. Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more. (Luke 12:25-36, 38, 47-48, ESV, emphasis added)

These parables compelled the early disciples to finish what the Master commanded before He returned.

# **We have the resources but do we have the resolve?**

# Throughout the history of the church, great pushes toward finishing the task have been matched by great sacrifices.

Will our generation rise up with a new sense of urgency? If we resolved to bring the gospel fully to the remaining 3,000+ UUPGs by a date such as 2025, what effect would that have on our efforts? Would great sacrifice match a great effort? Would it move us toward a spiritual wartime footing in which we called every believer to be part of a global effort to eradicate areas devoid of the gospel?<sup>6</sup>

## A COSTLY DEADLINE

The remaining UUPGs are in the most difficult-to-reach and most overlooked places. Getting to no place left in any generation—ours or another—will come with a great price. Jesus declared and demonstrated the path toward fruitfulness. It requires death—death to self and, not infrequently, physical death.

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. (John 12:24, ESV)

The disciples of Jesus pursued the salvation of the *ethne* with a similar level of sacrifice:

Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. (2 Tim. 2:10, ESV)

Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. (Phil. 2:17)

## HE IS WORTH IT

A clue to Paul's motivation in settling for nothing less than no place left (Rom. 15:23) is found in the same chapter:

But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Rom. 15:15-16, ESV, emphasis added)

Paul is so filled with gratitude for his salvation and calling that he longs to bring every one of the *ethne* back to his Lord as an acceptable offering. In this way he could declare the Son's unique worthiness.

Throughout the history of the church, great pushes toward finishing the task have been matched by great sacrifices. We cannot have one without the other.


Moravians sold themselves into slavery to have the chance to preach the gospel in the neglected slave populations of the West Indies. Moravian missionaries

lived by the rallying cry, "To win for the Lamb who was slain the just reward of His suffering." Many of them died in faith knowing that they were an integral part of finishing the task and hastening the Day of Christ (2 Peter 3:12).

The end is in sight in individual Church Planting Movements, but let us not rest until we reach no place left.

The end is in sight in bringing the gospel to the remaining 3,000+ UUPGs, but let us not rest until there is no place left.

The commission is worth it.

He is worth it. 

<sup>1</sup> Cilicia (?), Cyprus (perhaps Salamis & Paphos), Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, Derbe, Philippi, Thessalonica, Berea, Corinth, Ephesus; add to this record a visit to Crete (Titus 1) and perhaps Illyricum at some point.

<sup>2</sup> Roland Allen was one of the first in the modern missionary era to propose that view of Paul's mission. Roland Allen. *Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours*. 1927.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark 1:38-39; Matt. 9:35

<sup>4</sup> E.g. Gal. 2:7-8, 1 Cor. 4:1ff, 9:15ff

<sup>5</sup> E.g. The Parables of the Banquet (Luke 14), Ten Virgins (Matt. 25) and the Shut Door (Luke 13)

<sup>6</sup> Steve's new books *Hastening* and *Rebirth* explore such a scenario and what it might require of us to be that last generation.