

Its Multiplication and Maturation

Acts 12:25-16:5

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Introduction

A popular travelogue, Rick Steves.

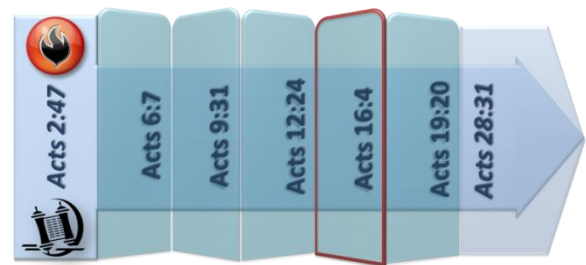


Waypoints on a trail so as to find our way home

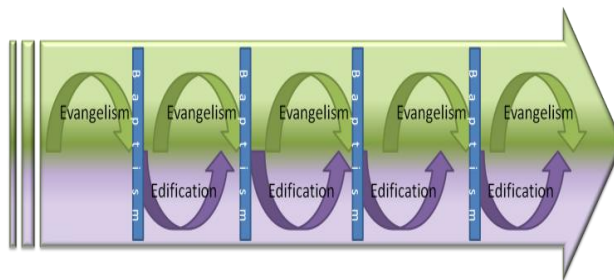


A missionary report...

Once again we take up a large section of narrative text. We are looking at the panel that runs from Acts 12:25 to Acts 16:5. This section focuses on the launch of messengers or missionaries to take gospel into strategic cultural and commercial centers.



We are really beginning to see the mission in motion! Check out the reality of that in this map.¹ The ongoing cycle of the increase of the word and the church through evangelism and edification shows the commissional church in its multiplying and maturing.



The Mission in its Sending Strategy (12:25-13:3)

²⁵ And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had completed their service, bringing with them John, whose other name was Mark.

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

² While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." ³ Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went...

Gathering the Team (12:25)

Through the ministry of Barnabas, the church at Antioch had been strengthened. As the work became too much for him, he had gone to Tarsus and brought Saul/Paul back with him to take up the teaching responsibilities. Paul and Barnabas had then gone to Jerusalem to deliver the benevolent offering collected in Antioch for the needy in the church at Jerusalem. Barnabas' nephew, John Mark, who was in the church at Jerusalem, returned to Antioch with them. Under God's providence, a team is being assembled.

Authorizing the Team (13:1-3)

The gathered church has its role in the mission. The church at Antioch has been faithful in its outreach to the neighborhoods. Now, it is called by God through His Spirit to set aside Paul and Barnabas to the task they have been called to. Through fasting and prayer, the church then publicly recognizes Paul and Barnabas (the laying on of hands or "ordaining"). The church then sends them out on the mission to take the gospel to the uttermost parts of the earth.

Notice the first phrase of verse 4 – "So being sent by the Spirit, they went..." This is important. The Spirit set the team aside. The church recognized the designation by the Spirit and so the going of the messengers is a being sent by the Spirit. I believe that this identification of Paul and Barnabas by the Spirit's spoken voice is a unique and non-repeated event in Acts. Paul and Barnabas are taking up here from Antioch what had been begun by the Spirit in Jerusalem. Our sending of people now to take the gospel where it is not or has not been preached is in the downstream flow of the Spirit's once-for-all giving and sending. We follow the pattern of this once-for-all event as a principle for sending gifted and able people.

The Mission in its Going Servants

(13:4-12)

With amazing brevity Luke relates the arduous travels that were undertaken. The focus here is not on the where they went and how they got there, as interesting to us as that might be. The focus is a sequence of stories selected out of all the gospel work that was done. These are linked together to show us how the mission is on the move through the going, preaching, gathering and yes, suffering of the servants.

13:12 Then the proconsul believed, when he saw what had occurred, for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord.

Spotlighting the Work

In Cyprus we see in a vignette of the whole first missionary journey. Through the interaction of these six characters, the work of the commissional church is seen.

The spotlight is on two sent servants with a young underling or helper traveling West to the Island of Cyprus. Going to the synagogues, they begin first to take the gospel to the Jews in those cities in a practical implementation of “to the Jew first, then to the Gentiles.” There they encounter and are opposed by a Jewish false prophet and magician whose name is Elymas and is called “Son of Jesus”. Through him, they also have an opportunity to meet and preach to an important Gentile local figure, Paulus, the proconsul. He is interested in hearing what the Scriptures say because he is an intellectual. The team’s preaching to him is opposed by Elymas who is struck blind. Luke records Paul’s Spirit-filled denunciation so as to show that *those who oppose the mission do so in the service of the devil, as enemies of righteousness, out of depraved hearts using deceit and fraud*. His physical blindness represents his spiritual blindness. The proconsul² believes and is saved when the power of God’s messengers and God’s message unite in teaching that astonishes him.

Luke highlights this for three significant reasons. First, it the leadership transfers to Paul (v.13 “Paul and his companions.”) Second, the ministry begins a movement towards the Gentiles. Finally, it is filled with figurative nuances. A Gentile with the name Paul accepted the message while a Jew opposed it. The Jews’ blindness pictured the judicial blinding of Israel (cf. 28:26-27). Through this, Luke shows us the mission in transition. On one hand Gentiles became the primary recipients of the gospel, and on the other God turned from the Jews and thus judged them.³

Observing the Pattern

So there is travel, a careful strategy of preaching where sympathetic people might gather, trouble in opposition by false religion wrapped in paganism, superstition and magic. But God enables the messengers to deal with the opposition and to preach with power and effectiveness to the salvation of people. This basic template will unfold everywhere through this whole panel.

The Mission in its Expanding Scope (13:13-52)

The team travels on. But John Mark leaves the team as they enter the badlands. We do not know the reasons why, but we do know that this caused no little problem between Barnabas and Paul later on.

So they arrive in Antioch, Pisidia. Luke's point of emphasis here is the content of the gospel preaching as it expands out to the Gentiles.

13:48 And when the Gentiles heard this, they began rejoicing and glorifying the word of the Lord, and as many as were appointed to eternal life believed. ⁴⁹ And the word of the Lord was spreading throughout the whole region.

Evangelizing Jews (13:13-16)

The team begins by going into the synagogue on Saturday where they are likely to have an opportunity to speak and an immediate hearing after the Scripture reading.

Preaching Redemptive History (13:16-41)

Paul preaches a redemptive history sermon that explains what God has been doing through redemptive history. The sermon is ordered in three main sections.

The first section is Israel's call out of Egypt until the ascension of King David (13:16-22). He is rehearsing a familiar story. But he highlights their redemption out of Egypt, failure in the wilderness, conquest of the land, the time of the judges, Samuel the prophet and Saul the king. It is ironic to note that Saul the king was from the tribe of Benjamin just as Saul/Paul the apostle was. The narrative culminates with the ascension of David to the throne, this king who was a man after God's own heart who would do God's will.

The second section goes directly to Christ as the offspring of David, the promised Savior (13:23-37). His forerunner, John, preached repentance yet affirmed that Jesus was greater. Paul identifies himself with John's ministry – it is about the greater Lord Jesus Christ who brings salvation to repenting believers. He tells the gospel story of the death and resurrection of Jesus, asserting their complicity in his death. Yet he was raised, seen by many and is now being preached. Paul quotes from a Psalm as proof through prophecy that the resurrection and ascension of Christ were to have been expected events.

The third section turns to the gospel call (13:38-41). He offers the comfort of the gospel to those who believe. He declares the condemnation of the gospel to those who reject and scoff.

Paul follows the pattern for gospel preaching that we have seen with Peter, Philip and Stephen. The gospel is about God's unfolding plan in history centered on Christ in His death, resurrection fulfilling the Scriptures. The gospel calls for people to believe and warns those who reject it. It quite simply is God centered – His plan in eternity, purpose on Christ, providences through history, provision through Christ and call to believe and bow. I am convinced in my soul that if this is not what we say in our evangelism, we are not giving the gospel.

Reaching Gentiles

(13:42-49)

A great interest in the gospel (13:42-43) by those at the meeting is met by exhortations to continue in the grace of God. Believers are being taught and pressed to turn away from works and law to faith and grace.

A dramatic turn to the Gentiles follows the preaching on next Sabbath when the Jews, jealous of the response to the team, began to publicly contradict Paul. This sentence is at the heart of the mission:

“It was necessary that the word of God be spoken first to you. Since you thrust it aside and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles. ⁴⁷ For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, “‘I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.’”

Grounding the mission in the Scriptures, Paul turns a historical corner – now the gospel goes to the Gentiles because of God’s plan to bring salvation to the ends of the earth. The kingdom is spread by discipling all the nations through the preaching of the gospel.

A joyous response by the Gentiles follows this declaration causing them to rejoice in God and glory in the Word. Those who were appointed to eternal life believed. So there is a general preaching of the gospel to all who will hear. Those who hear and were ordained to salvation, believe. The result is a wide dispersion of the Gospel through the region. No matter what your theological framework is, this is Luke’s.

Bringing Persecution

(13:50-52)

The Jews are inciting others, both religious and pagan, to attempt to destroy the expanding work of the gospel. But the disciples and the team are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit.

The Mission in its Ingathering Success

(14:1-7)

The team travels to Iconium. The point of emphasis here is that a wide response to the gospel engenders opposition from the unbelieving, religious Jews which requires faithful and powerful preaching in the midst of danger.

14:1 They entered together into the Jewish synagogue and spoke in such a way that a great number of both Jews and Greeks believed. ² But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. ³ So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord...

Experiencing Conversions (14:1)

Under the effective preaching of the team, a great number of both Jews and Gentiles respond to the gospel message.

Building Up Disciples (14:2-3)

This ingathering of believers stirs up opposition from the unbelieving Jews. In order to counter this, Paul and Barnabas spend considerable time here, discipling the new converts and confirming them in the faith.

Creating Division (14:4)

Because of the opposition of the Jews and because of Paul's preaching, the city is divided, some receiving and others rejecting the Word of the Lord.

Fleeing Danger (14:2, 5-7)

The two apostles leave after discovering a plot by their enemies to attempt to kill them by stoning them. Fleeing for their lives, the team goes to Lystra and Derbe, Lycaonia. Faithfully, they continue to preach the gospel.

The Mission in Its Growing Storms (14:8-21)

The next major stop is a very important one. Luke's point of emphasis is the necessity for clarifying the gospel so that there is no confusion with pagan myths.

14:15 "Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. ¹⁶ In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. ¹⁷ Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness."

Healing Miracle (14:8-10)

In the midst of the gospel work in the region, a man in Lystra who has been crippled from birth is healed by the command of Paul.

Provoking Confusion (14:11-14)

This provokes astonished confusion. In their pagan thinking, note what the people ascribe to the team (14:11-12). The amazed crowd mistakes the two disciples for gods. They think Barnabas is Zeus and Paul is Hermes. In their confusion and blindness, the people attempt to venerate the messengers. (14:13-14). They bring out whole host of animals and prepare to offer sacrifices and worship the disciples.

Requiring Correction (14:15-18)

A horrified Paul quickly stops this, pointing out the identity of the true God, for whom they are witnesses. He refuses the adulation and affirmation of the pagans. And he uses the Scripture to refute their false thinking.

Escalating Opposition (14:19-20)

How quickly the tide can turn. Through the slander against Paul (14:19a), some Jews from Antioch and Iconium turn the crowds against the apostles.

This leads to the stoning of Paul (14:19b-20). He is dragged out of the city, stoned, and left for dead. Imagine the terrible pain in this sentence, the wounds, the injuries, the crippling effect. I wonder, does he remember Stephen? In his later epistles, he indicates that he actually did die. See the disciples gather around, the tears, the crying, the grief. But, he gets up and actually walks with them back into the city!

The Mission in Its Confirming Relationships (14:21-28)

The team continues its commissional work as it builds up the converts and forms new gathered congregations. Luke's point of emphasis is to show how the commissional church is fully carrying out its discipleship mandate.

14:21 When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, ²² strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. ²³ And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

²⁴ Then they passed through Pisidia and came to Pamphylia. ²⁵ And when they had spoken the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia, ²⁶ and from there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled. ²⁷ And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. ²⁸ And they remained no little time with the disciples.

Establishing the New Churches (14:21-25)

The commissional church has an enormous responsibility to teach its people, to confirm them in the faith and practice of the Word of God and to organize them into Biblical gathered communities. I want to pause here because these sentences are weighty for our situation today.

- The disciple's souls must be strengthened by instructing their faith.
- The disciples' life must be explained in the light of the Word so that they will endure.
- The disciples' are gathered under the ministry of local elders who are initially identified and appointed by the team.
- The disciples are entrusted to the care of God as an expression of the team's faith in God.

Encouraging the Sending Churches (14:26-28)

The team continues to preach even as it is traveling home. Upon their arrival, they gather the church to make a report of what God has done, particularly in opening the door of faith to the Gentiles. *Here is Luke's purpose statement for this panel.* This first missionary journey is related in such a way that it itself reports on and rejoices in the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles.

Well, the church at Antioch is full of delight in the grace that God has bestowed on the team. But the church at Jerusalem is full of division over the grace that God has bestowed on the Gentiles.

The Mission in Its Transforming Struggles (15:1-35)

In chapter 15 and the first part of 16, we have two major internal threats to the mission of the commissional church, one involving doctrine and the other division. The commissional church faces doctrinal error in the formation of the circumcision party causing division, clarifying doctrine and certifying decisions. The failure to end deal fully with this sect in the church at Jerusalem soon became a constant source of trouble in the church.

15:7 Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. ⁸ And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, ⁹ and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. ¹⁰ Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? ¹¹ But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will."

Confronting Error (15:1-11)

The church, as it expands to include Gentiles, now must settle a question. The problem is the Judaizers, those who taught that Gentiles had to be circumcised in order to be saved. They were aggressive in propagating their error and in contending with the leaders in Antioch. Frankly, I believe Paul and Barnabas are sent to Jerusalem, not to find out what the truth is. Paul well knows what the gospel of grace teaches. Rather, they are sent to question the church which is the apparent source of this error. Within the church at Jerusalem there was this sect, this group that had not been dealt with (and probably never really was).

Clarifying Doctrine (15:6-18)

Peter's defense opens by explaining, through an illusion to Cornelius, how God had clearly affirmed His election of Gentiles to be saved. Further, if the Mosaic Law had been a yoke that not even the Jews could bear why burden the Gentiles with it?

Paul and Barnabas' take up the defense explaining how God authenticated through signs and wonders their taking the gospel to the Gentiles. This is a defense of their apostolic office and missional work.

James' defense concludes by explaining from God's prophetic Scriptures as he opens Amos 9:11-12 and argues that the present work of the gospel is the unfolding of what was prophesied by Amos.

Resolving Decisions (15:19-29)

James then proposes language to send. Curiously, the second point of this proposal later becomes the source of much trouble in the church. By the time Paul writes the book of Romans and Corinthians, he puts that transition into the category of Christian liberty. The apostles and elders write their decision into a letter that was then to be carried and explained to the new churches. These decisions embodied in this letter included:

A permanent inclusion of Gentile converts as true believers with neither circumcision nor obedience to the Mosaic Law required. So salvation for all under

the New Covenant is by faith through grace. This is NOT a new finding by the church at Jerusalem; rather it is declaration of what was supposed to be taught.

A temporary transition for Gentile converts so that there will be peace in the congregations. The focus here is on the common pagan practices that were most repulsive to the Jews. Note that immorality in the middle of this is in a different category as that of the rest of the food, eating related items.

Delivering Encouragement (15:30-35)

What great joy in the church as the mission is clarified and its expanding scope acknowledged. Paul and Barnabas, Judas and Silas all affirm together through instruction and encouragement the aim and purpose of the decisions. The church is growing in maturity as it is listening and learning under the teaching of Paul and Barnabas.

The Mission in Its Strengthening Work (15:36-16:5)

The commissional church must be involved in teaching so as to bring the believers to maturity in Christ, to equip them for their work of ministry, frame the foundations for faith and practice and to renew individual and corporate minds for believing God in an obeying way. The team, through a serious disagreement, is still able to go back to the newly founded churches to assess them and to assist them.

15:36 And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are." ³⁷ Now Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. ³⁸ But Paul thought best not to take with them one who had withdrawn from them in Pamphylia and had not gone with them to the work. ³⁹ And there arose a sharp disagreement, so that they separated from each other. Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus, ⁴⁰ but Paul chose Silas and departed, having been commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. ⁴¹ And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.

16:1 Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek. ² He was well spoken of by the brothers at Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted Timothy to accompany him, and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those places, for they all knew that his father was a Greek. ⁴ As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem. ⁵ So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

Traveling to Teach (15:36-40)

The team decides that they need to go back to the churches to further carry out the second part of the mission, teaching to obey. However, they disagree over ministry personnel so that the team is split up into two teams, taking different routes and covering different churches. Here is a good principle: a ministry team's differences cannot be about winning – Luke gives us no indication of who is right in this issue. But, they part ways in such a way that brotherhood is maintained and the mission is expanded with the needs of the church met.

Training to Lead

(16:1-5)

Part of the mission is to identify the next generation of teachers and leaders. Paul does this in Timothy (as well as many others). He was commended by those he served among in his home region. He is prepared for the ministry, even to being circumcised since he is half-Jew. So Paul's team now consists of Silas and Timothy. They travel through Asia Minor, delivering the letter and teaching the churches.

Reflect and Respond

I want to briefly reflect on the commissional church on mission in motion:

The commissional church should recognize, authorize and send those whom God has gifted and filled with desire to carry out the mission. The whole church must be passionate about the work of taking the gospel to the unreached. There will be people among the commissional church who will have a God-given passion, wisdom, and ability to launch out.⁴

Preaching and teaching are the core of both the evangelizing and edifying of making disciples. In Acts, evangelistic teaching and preaching tend to traverse the Biblical story line to focus on the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus with a call and invitation to repent and believe.

The commissional church propagates commissional churches. Paul and Barnabas on mission make disciples by evangelizing and edifying. Those who believe are gathered, taught while they are spreading the gospel in their own regions.

The strategy followed by the church at Antioch through Paul and Barnabas is to go to chosen locations (usually cultural or commercial centers), preach the Word, gather believers under teaching, and then plant churches with the believers God calls out to be saved from that locale. Church planting is a secondary goal in the mission – it is the product of God saving people in a locality.

We should expect opposition from both the religious world and the pagan world. It may even rise to the level of persecution and expulsion. We must seek the grace of God to rightly respond to it. The courageous and constant preaching of the team under enormous pressure should hearten our souls.

Doctrinal error must be confronted and corrected lest it divide and destroy the church. The fact that the church at Jerusalem never rooted out the Judiazers became a serious problem over time.

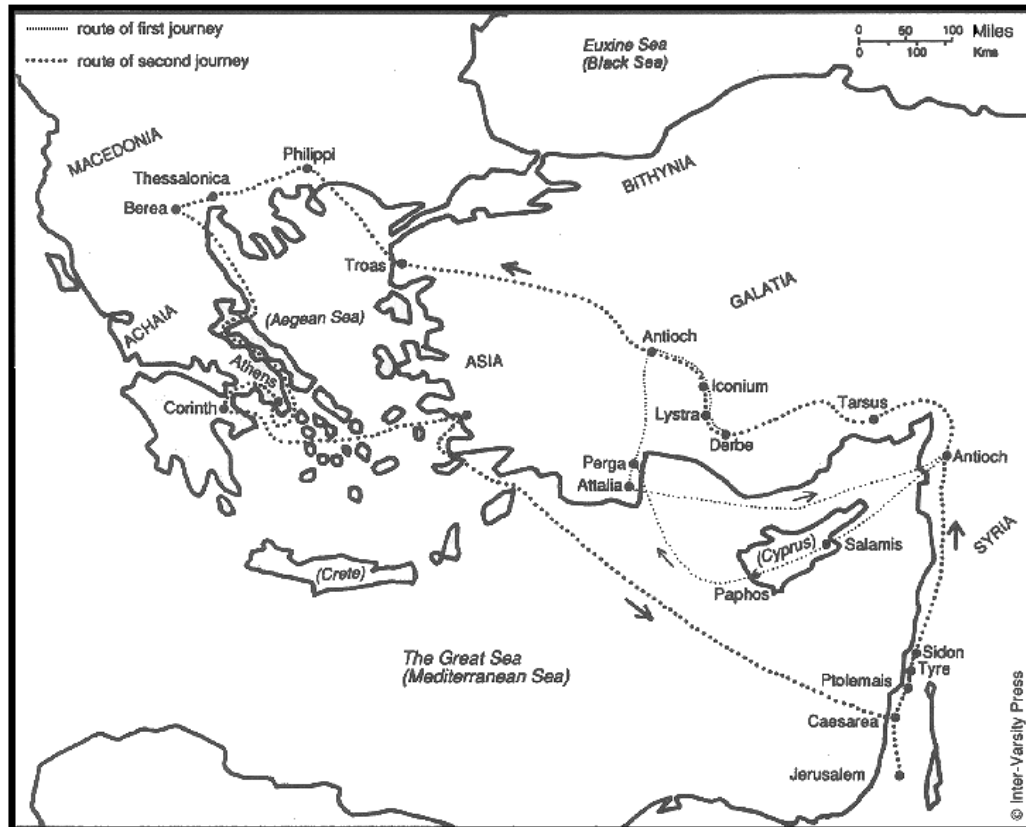
Differences in strategies or in personnel should be handled in such a way as to affirm the ministry of both parties and to expand the ministry of the gospel. Some differences in preferences, practices or people should be simply absorbed into ministry; but, when it can't it should be used to broaden ministry.

The commissioned church is forward thinking: it is looking to strengthen the work God has established through its ministry and to identify and train the next generation of leaders and teachers.

Here is the church on mission: *So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.* **May God be pleased to do this with us as well.**

Notes

¹ The Mission in Motion - Paul's Missionary Journeys



² Interestingly the Greek names of this proconsul and of the apostle were the same: Paulus.

³ John F. Walvoord, Roy B. Zuck and Dallas Theological Seminary, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983-c1985), 2:388.

⁴ This is the same principle that is operative in spiritual gifts – almost all the gifts are commanded of all, but special enablement are given to each to serve in ministry through those enablements or gifts. Therefore, the whole church may not be directly involved in that strategic work of the evangelistic portion of the mission, but will passionately, prayerfully and financially be involved as they serve in their own areas of giftedness.