

(2:17). Again and again the apostle tried to find ways to return to the church, but he had repeatedly been hindered. While this may have been due to ill health or persecution elsewhere, ultimately Paul sees behind it the malevolent hand of Satan (v.18).

After these repeated frustrations, Paul just can't bear any longer to have his spiritual children left alone. He is not able to go himself so he sent Timothy, 'our brother and God's fellow worker in proclaiming the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you for the sake of your faith'. (3:2). You would be hard pressed to find a better summary of mission than that one!

Paul sends Timothy. Mission is about being sent, and sent not primarily to build bridges or pull teeth or sell computers or treat sicknesses, although these works are important and noble. Mission is about being sent to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Relief work is about meeting temporal, physical needs. Both are important and, of course, in very many cases both go hand in hand, but they are not the same.

Why, in this instance, does Paul send out Timothy to proclaim Christ? Certainly not to plant a church, since the church has already been planted. He is sent to strengthen and encourage them. In other words, they are already believers but the work of mission amongst them isn't finished because they need to be built up so they can persevere until the end.

It is worth noting that Paul sees it necessary to send Timothy because the faith of the new believers will always be tested and shaken, and unless they are strong it won't survive.

Paul, unlike so many in the western church, understood that suffering is an integral part of the Christian life. If you ask someone, what are you destined for as a Christian? They will probably reply that they've been ordained for eternal life, and adoption as sons, and glory.

Of course, all that is true. However, I doubt many would include in their answer what the apostle included: 'indeed, you yourselves know that this is what we are destined for.' (v.3) We were destined to suffer. It is for this reason that teaching regarding suffering was part of the basic instruction that Paul gave to his churches (v.4). ('In fact, when we were with you, we told you beforehand that we were to suffer persecution').

When people become Christians we normally guide them through a series of basic studies on the Christian life, with teachings on salvation, faith, obedience, reading the Bible, prayer, going to church, and witnessing. These are very good, but I think Paul would add an eighth study: suffering.

Since suffering is such an integral part of what it means to follow Jesus and because, to varying degrees, it will come to anyone who's prepared to stand up and be counted, then it is essential that people be taught and encouraged and strengthened, lest all the hours and weeks and months spent in evangelism all be for nothing. 'I sent to find out about your faith; I was afraid that somehow the tempter had tempted you and that our labor had

been in vain'.

A passage such as 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5 ought to keep us from shallow and superficial understandings of mission. It is certainly true that the last 20 or 30 years have seen a growth in missionary work unparalleled and unprecedented in human history. It is true that 8 out of every 10 people on the globe have access to a full Bible in their own language, and 9 out of 10 to a New Testament. It is true that radio broadcasts cover 99% of the world's population. It is also recorded that over half the world - 3.3 billion people have seen the Jesus film, and there are reports that show that there have been over 100 million decisions for Christ as a result of seeing this film. All of this may be true, but passages like this one help us not to get too carried away by such statistics.

Our work is not just getting the gospel available and out - that's step one.

Our work is not just bringing people to a point where they turn away from their lives of godlessness and follow Jesus - that's step two.

Our work is then sending people out so that these believers can be further taught and equipped and strengthened so that they can press on to the end. And that is a spiritual and eternal reality that no statistic on earth can quantify. According to the New Testament the work of mission - evangelizing, teaching, and bringing to maturity - isn't over until it's over.

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