

5. Healthy Churches Learn to Think Regionally

A healthy church learns to think beyond its local community. Christ was constantly expanding the vision of the disciples. On one of His early ministry trips, with the disciples, Christ took them through Samaria, so they could begin to develop a larger vision. John 4:3-4 says, “He left Judea and departed again to Galilee. But He needed to go through Samaria.” Christ needed to go through Samaria for two reasons. First, Christ knew that there was an entire town that was open to the Gospel. We see in verses 39-41 that many people believed in that town.

However, Christ needed to go through Samaria for a second reason. That reason was to expand the vision of the disciples. John 4:35 says, “Do you not say, ‘There are still four months and then comes the harvest’? Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look at the fields, for they are already white for harvest!” The disciples had gone into the town and all they had found was food. In contrast, the woman of Samaria had gone into the same town, less than an hour later, and found a whole town full of people who wanted to find out how to have eternal life. Christ wanted to give the disciples a vision for the area of Samaria.

Later, Christ called some of His disciples and promised them that He would show them how to become fishers of men. The next day, He told them, in Mark 1:38-39, “Let us go into the next towns, that I may preach there also, because for this purpose I have come forth.’ And He was preaching in their synagogues throughout all Galilee, and casting out demons.” Here, we see that Christ was expanding their vision to the whole region, so they would begin to think regionally, instead of just thinking of their home town.

By the time Christ spoke His final words to the disciples, He was giving them a vision for the whole world. Acts 1:8-9 says, “But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’ Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.” The disciples had seen that Christ had a vision for their home town, the entire region of Galilee, the nearby regions of Samaria and Judea, and then, His final words gave them a vision for the whole world.

In Acts 10, the Lord sent Peter to take the Gospel to the household of Cornelius and the other Gentiles who were gathered at his home. Peter had learned from the example of Christ. Acts 10:23 tells us that Peter took six others with him as he went to the house of Cornelius. That verse says, “Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day, Peter went away with them, and some brethren from Joppa accompanied him.” Later, when Peter was giving the church in Jerusalem a report about his ministry, he said, in Acts 11:12, “Then the Spirit told me to go with them, doubting nothing. Moreover, these six brethren accompanied me, and we entered the man's house.” Peter helped those early believers develop a vision for the surrounding region by taking them with him as he went to share the Gospel in Caesarea.

We see that Paul did the same thing as he took various people with him. Verses like Acts 20:4 show us that Paul always took people with him as he traveled. That verse says, “And Sopater of

Berea accompanied him to Asia—also Aristarchus and Secundus of the Thessalonians, and Gaius of Derbe, and Timothy, and Tychicus and Trophimus of Asia.” These men were all developing a vision for other areas as they traveled with Paul.

We see that Paul also helped the churches, that developed in each city, develop a vision for their surrounding area. In Acts 14:21, Paul shared the Gospel in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch. Then, in Acts 16:1-5, he visited the same area again. We see that when Paul came to Derbe, he met Timothy who had a good report from the brethren at Lystra and Iconium, even though Iconium was forty miles away. This would indicate that Paul and Barnabas had given the Christians a vision for the surrounding area on their first visit. However, Acts 16:5 gives much greater evidence of the fact that the churches had developed a vision for the surrounding area. That verse says, “So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and increased in number daily.” In order for churches to increase in number daily, a lot of Christians had to get a vision for the surrounding areas.

Acts 19:8-10 says that the same thing happened in Ephesus. Those verses say, “And he went into the synagogue and spoke boldly for three months, reasoning and persuading concerning the things of the kingdom of God. But when some were hardened and did not believe, but spoke evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them and withdrew the disciples, reasoning daily in the school of Tyrannus. And this continued for two years, so that all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks.” Notice that all those in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus. The Roman province of Asia was the area that is now western Turkey and extended more than two hundred miles from Ephesus. That region had many other cities. In fact, the seven churches mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3 were all in the province of Asia.

In the city of Ephesus, Paul found that the school of Tyrannus was available during the hot part of the day when most of the people took a break from work and the students of Tyrannus took a break from their studies. As a result, Paul used that school during that part of the day. Then, Acts 20:20-21 shows what Paul did the rest of the day, as Paul reminded the leaders at Ephesus how he had trained them. Those verses say, “How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.” Once Tyrannus needed his school back, as it got cooler in the afternoon, Paul would take the developing leaders with him from house-to-house to show them how to share the Gospel with both Jews and Greeks.

As a result, many of those men developed a vision for the surrounding area. They began to take the Gospel back to their home towns in other parts of the province of Asia. In this way, the Word of God spread throughout the province of Asia in just two years. We have an example of this in the book of Colossians. Paul originally wrote the book of Colossians to Christians, in the cities of Colosse, Laodicea and Hierapolis, who had never met him. These three cities were located in the province of Asia about one hundred miles east of Ephesus. We know that Paul had not visited these cities, because Colossians 2:1 says, “For I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh.”

Then, Colossians 4:12-13 says, “Epaphras, who is one of you, a bondservant of Christ, greets you,

always laboring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him witness that he has a great zeal for you, and those who are in Laodicea, and those in Hierapolis.” Here, we see that Epaphras was one of the people who had learned from Paul and taken the Gospel to these cities. Paul had helped him develop a vision for the cities in the region where he grew up. In addition, Paul had also helped Epaphras develop a vision for other areas, because he was with Paul in Rome (while Paul was a prisoner) at the time the book of Colossians was written.

As Paul shared with the leaders, and others at Ephesus, he had helped many of them develop a vision for the region of Asia they had come from. As a result, many learned from Paul as he taught in the school of Tyrannus and then as he showed them how to share the Gospel from house-to-house. They had learned what to share and how to share it. They had learned to depend on the Holy Spirit for boldness. Then, they had gone back to their home regions and shared the Gospel in the cities and towns they came from. This resulted in the Gospel spreading throughout Asia, because people had developed a vision to reach their families and friends for Christ.

As leaders, one of our greatest ministries is to take people with us and share our vision with them. If we have a vision to help them reach their relatives, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and other acquaintances with the Gospel, they will develop that same vision. If we have a vision for the entire region, they will develop that same vision. Christ showed us, by His example, that if we have a vision for the world, those we take with us will also develop a vision for the world. Paul did the same. We see that as people became Christians and grew, because they were being taught the Word of God and being shown how to share the Gospel, they began taking the Gospel to the places for which they had developed a vision.

Christ has called us to follow His example and show people what to share and how to share it. We will show them as we take them with us as we are sharing the Gospel. This can have an even greater impact if we take them with us to share the Gospel with their relatives, friends, coworkers, neighbors, and other acquaintances. They will see our concern to share with the people they are concerned for and they will begin to develop a vision to reach out to others as well. We can also take them with us as we travel to other areas to share the Gospel. This will help them to see the need in other areas as well as our concern to share the Gospel in those areas. Christ and Paul both demonstrated, by their example, that it was their priority to train others by taking others with them wherever they went. May the Lord richly bless you as you take others with you to help them develop their vision and learn to share the Gospel with others.