



ACTS ONE EIGHT

"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be My witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the remotest part of the earth." ACTS 1:8

Seeing the Need

The need in the world is evident. The disciples asked Jesus, *"Tell us, when will these things happen, and what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"* Jesus answered and said to them, *"See to it that no one misleads you. For many will come in My name, saying, 'I am the Christ,' and will mislead many. You will be hearing of wars and rumors of wars. See that you are not frightened, for those things must take place, but that is not yet the end. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, and in various places there will be famines and earthquakes. But all these things are merely the beginning of birth pangs. Then they will deliver you to tribulation, and will kill you, and you will be hated by all nations because of My name. At that time many will fall away and will betray one another and hate one another. Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold."* Matthew 24:1-12. Paul wrote, *"Realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. For men will be lovers of self, lovers of money, boastful, arrogant, revilers, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, unloving, irreconcilable, malicious gossips, without self-control, brutal, haters of good, treacherous, reckless, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power."* 2 Timothy 3:1-5. It appears that we are approaching, or into, the last days. The need for the Gospel is everywhere. As Jesus said, *"Behold, I say to you, lift up your eyes and look on the fields, that they are white for harvest."* John 4:35. He has instructed us to be witnesses to the remotest part of the earth, Acts 1:8. He has commanded us to make disciples of all the nations, Matthew 28:18-20. The need is great ... the fields are ripe ... and it is time to seize the opportunity.

The right question. A former Mayor of New York City would often walk up to people on the streets and ask, *Hello, I'm the Mayor ... How am I doing?* Creativity and productivity are rooted in the serious answers to meaningful questions about past and present performance ... and are not simply an extension of present activities. Momentum does not define meaningfulness. The Church, assembling itself geographically or causally, needs to ask, *How are we doing?* Our performance must be examined. We need perspective ... we need to survey the need.

Why do I ask? My personal experiences (in the pews and pulpits of many local churches in the USA, England, Russia, and Poland ... as a volunteer, staff member, and founder of Christian organizations ... and as a missionary) have caused me to evaluate what I have seen. The state of the church must be examined. Then, with an unbiased perspective, we must press on to meet the needs of today. My mission trips were difficult ... attacked and robbed ... poor conditions ... sleeping on the floor ... limited food ... water unfit to drink ... often no hot water ... and sometimes penetrating cold. It was a culture shock to this American. However, I have other memories of those trips ... people at my door before 7 AM to ask questions ... discussions and prayers until 2 AM ... 30 to 40 hours of teaching per week ... and honest, meaningful worship. In addition, nonbelievers eagerly came to Christ after teaching sessions ... after discussions ... at a table in my room ... in a mountain meadow ... in churches ... in a sports arena ... in a formerly communist high school ... in a town meeting hall ... and one night in a rain-soaked amphitheater. In reality, my greatest culture shock was the spiritual one upon returning to the United States. I remember preaching in a New England church. Near the end of my allotted 25 minutes, an elder stood up at the back of the center aisle. He pulled his left sleeve up a few inches - tapped the face of his watch with his forefinger - and then made a cutting hand motion across his throat. His sign language was clear ... *Wrap it up - it's lunchtime.*

How are we doing? The American church has been and is a major influence in mission work and church planting throughout the world. What of it should be exported to the remotest part of the world? Moreover, what of it should not? What of it should be imported by the church around the world? Moreover, what of it should not? It is a good time for the American church to ask of itself, *How are we doing?* The American church scene has changed. There has been a proliferation of Christian radio, television, books, magazines, music, and personalities. Mega-churches have come upon the scene giving the appearance of great success in numbers and facilities. We are more than a quarter of a century into the *seeker sensitive* and *seeker driven* movement ... implemented to bring more people into church and to the Savior. Have greater numbers come to Christ? What has happened to church attendance? Have the dramatic changes accomplished their goals? Is the need greater, unchanged, or less?

Church attendance. The mega-church phenomenon in America has flourished with its big buildings, big budgets, big staffs, parking attendants, food courts, and huge congregations. However, many have grown at the expense of smaller churches. I spoke with a senior staff man from one mega-church that has promoted itself as *the fastest growing church* in its city. He confessed that their growth was not from evangelism - but from attracting believers from other churches (sheep migration). The pastor of a smaller and consequentially shrinking church in that community refers to that mega-church in *Star Wars* terms as the colossal death-star siphoning the life out of all nearby colonies. We must look beyond the appearances of success. How are we really doing? The statistics show that overall church involvement is virtually unchanged in the past decade. Protestant church attendance has dropped significantly. In addition, church loyalty has diminished ... 1 in 5 believers in the US are now committed to multi-churches rather than one local church.

Church style. The seeker sensitive and seeker driven movement in America has changed many local churches and Christian organizations. The changes have been wrought, often painfully, to make the church experience as attractive as possible to the unsaved and to the next generation. Crosses have been extricated, architecture has been neutralized, projectors and mega-screens have displaced Bibles and hymnals, dress codes have been relaxed, contemporary music has displaced the traditional, and Saturday night services (once mocked by Protestants) are commonplace. The Sunday pulpit message has evolved to match the new style. It is lighter, more user-friendly, less doctrinal, less convicting, and more entertaining ... seeming to be almost market driven. The important question is not whether or not we like the changes. It is appropriate to ask if these changes are Biblical ... because good objectives do not justify the means. The answer is that most of these changes are neutral ... being neither holy nor sinful. How are we doing? Have we brought more people to faith and advanced them to discipleship? Did we accomplish our goals? Sadly, the answer is *no*. We have spent billions of dollars, possibly a trillion, to evangelize and disciple our US mission field. After surveying a quarter of a century's experience, we see that our goals were not accomplished.

Convicting conclusions. Numbers for church attendance and total numbers of believers are stagnant or drifting down in America. We have no more believers today than we did a decade ago. Moreover, today's believers are less knowledgeable, more swayed by the winds of false doctrine, and less committed than those of a decade ago. How are we doing? Honestly, not very well. We may have a church environment that is less offensive to nonbelievers, but that has not increased the harvest. We have made it easier to be a believer ... compromising the call and challenge to become a disciple. Immature and immoral believers feel comfortable in today's church, while many mature disciples feel somehow out of place. For details about the statistical analysis of this, see *Excerpts from The State of the Church* (available on www.ActsOneEight.org). Socrates' proclamation that *the unexamined life is not worth living* may be overstated ... but it does prompt legitimate self-evaluation. Examining the state of the Church in America brings us face-to-face with the unfortunate diagnosis that it is not accomplishing its mission. Having gained this perspective, we must ask and answer the question, *What shall we then do?* Understanding the past and present gives us the wisdom to move decisively and effectively into the future. It is neither time to complain nor time to blame. It is time to press on to accomplish the purposes of God. The need to evangelize and make disciples is greater than ever. It is time to press on to evangelize the lost and to equip the saints to evangelize. It is time to take true discipling much more seriously. We must be more than discontented that many believers have little more

role in the church than do passengers on a cruise ship ... and that they are ill equipped for much more than that. We must equip them to be committed and functioning disciples. Jesus challenged believers, *"If you abide in My word, then you are truly disciples of Mine; and you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free"*, John 8:31-32. Believers need to be set free via the Word ... set free as disciples. There is a critical need for in-depth Bible training that is meaningfully taught in useable, transferable form. God's people need to be equipped to be witnesses and disciples. Today's Internet provides a worldwide opportunity to strategically meet these needs in the vast and borderless fields of Cyberspace.

Seeing the Need, copyright 2003, was printed legally from www.ActsOneEight.org. You may copy it, unchanged, but only with its source and this copyright statement attached. Bible quotations are from the New American Standard unless otherwise noted.