

Article of the Month – May 2008

Why are you standing there, doing nothing?

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In last month's article I promised to take a closer look at the missiological implications of Jesus' parable about the Vineyard Owner (Matt. 20:1-16). There are four elements that demand our special attention: the urgency of the job, the remaining short period of time, the excuses of potential workers and the generosity of the reward for all participants. Finally we may wonder how to best assist this Desperate Personnel Recruiter?

First there is the persistence of the vineyard owner, going to the market place five times that one day to hire personnel. Only he knows how much work there is to be done and how short the time is.

He must have been desperate indeed, to leave overseeing the work in his garden five times to mobilize and recruit new personnel. Maybe he left the work with the urgent request to his already engaged laborers 'to pray for more workers' (Matt. 9:37,38)!

Then there is the aspect of the duration of the day. This may be interpreted in three ways. That whole day may be seen as the Church Era, in which the worldwide job of evangelization and missions unfolds itself. Then it may be interpreted as the period of a national Church since its inception and the impact it made on its nation. Finally it may be seen as a personal issue: some decided to serve the vineyard owner early in life, others did so later and some only did it as an afterthought.

Thirdly, it is remarkable that the recruiter does not comment on the previous business of any of the people hired earlier, but the ones he recruits at the 11th hour (05.00 p.m.) he asks: "Why have you been standing there all day, doing nothing?" The lame excuse they come up with is "Because nobody hired us." Lame indeed: the simple truth is that they had not been there before, they had failed to make themselves available – otherwise they would certainly have been hired earlier too.

A final aspect is the reward: everybody receives the same reward, whether they worked all day long or just the last hour. The owner's reward system is divine and therefore too generous to be understood, certainly by performance-and-reward-oriented western mindsets. Of course he has a right to be generous; it's his nature, after all. Anyway, let's have a look at Jesus' message for today's Church and its individual disciples.

First we see a greater urgency for mobilization and recruitment by the end of the day than in the beginning. At the 11th hour of church history people are being called into work they never did before because they were not available, whatever the reasons may have been. This is certainly true for most of the churches in the Developing World: they may have worked their backyards – whatever these may represent – but largely failed to join the vineyard owner in his work of cross-cultural missions.

Then we note that at the last hour of church history apparently still 25-40% of the vineyard still needs to be worked. The vineyard owner undertakes to recruit those who never participated in that work. During the past few decades He initiated an incredible mobilization and recruitment of churches and personnel from Latin America, Africa and Asia in order to finish the work of cross-cultural missions in the world, His vineyard.

Thirdly, we see how He emphasizes the immense importance of this vineyard work of cross-cultural missions to the remaining unreached people groups of this world, when He calls non-participation in this ‘standing there, doing nothing’. That’s a strong remark, one that should force us into considering and evaluating our own lives, goals, purposes and motivations in the light of His. How useful have our churches and we ourselves been in the light of world mission’s urgency? How lame are our excuses?

The good news lies in the *last aspect*: there is a full reward to be reaped by all, even by the last ones – whether churches or individual missionaries – to engage in world missions now, during the last hour of world history. Africans will reap equally with Americans and Asians with Europeans. The bad news is, that at 05.30 p.m. there will be no more recruiting. A night will fall in which no one can work (John 9:4). Latinos, Africans and Asians are invited to join now, to not forsake their reward!

Then the final question: How could *we* best assist the Vineyard Owner? I believe by doing four things: *firstly*, making ourselves available immediately for world missions in whatever form, leaving behind our ‘doing nothing’; *secondly*, praying as instructed (Matt. 9:37,38); *thirdly*, exercising faith in what we might consider as ‘least-likely candidates’ and *finally*, mobilizing their churches and recruiting their missionaries to finish the job of world missions to the remaining unreached people groups.

Isn’t it a highly significant work of the Holy Spirit that the number of non-western missionaries has surpassed that of their western colleagues? South Korea for instance, was only 3% Christian around the year 1900, but has now pushed England from its second place as missionary-sending nation in the world, with over 11,000 missionaries in the field. True, many of them may not work cross-culturally, but this country has shown how a praying nation will inevitably become a sending nation.

Let’s roam the ‘market-places’ of the Church in the Developing World for more personnel. Let’s motivate and stimulate them, train and encourage them, tell them over and over that we believe in them and, what’s more: that He believes in them. Then we may look forward to that Day of Reward, where we will all together receive our Denarius – but then without grumbling or jealousy!