

RURAL THEOLOGY

Biblical Case for Rural Ministry and Rural Church Planting



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A Brief Examination of Scripture from a Rural Perspective

In attempting to examine the Bible from a rural perspective, one overwhelming question must be answered. Does a need exist to do this? After all, Biblical truths are the same regardless of the setting, correct?

Most books published in recent years concerning ministry in North America have been written from a suburban perspective by pastors of large and prestigious churches. J.D. Greear, Timothy Keller, and John Piper have been held up as models of success. The ability to numerically grow churches into the thousands in the suburbs appears to be the sole model of success for church growth in the United States.

Do not misunderstand me, these men are truly great ministers and their writings have changed the ecclesiology of North America. However, the teachings of these men often do not resonate with pastors and church planters serving in rural areas and in small churches. Rural pastors confess a great love and respect for these men, but often they feel a general disconnect between what they learn while attending conferences led by pastors of large, “successful” churches and the realities of their small, rural situations. Generally, the phrase heard from many rural pastors when leaving these conferences is, “What I just learned won’t work where I serve.” The great ideas from the great men do not translate into action when the idea is introduced to the lay leadership team made up of two housewives, two farmers, and a mechanic.

Sadly, these rural pastors are summarily dismissed as people with small vision who are unwilling to take the risks necessary to lead their churches to experience dynamic growth. Many times, I have heard that “small churches are small for a

reason.” The implication in this quote is that small churches are small because of small minded pastors and small-minded church members. I have even heard them labeled as lazy, and all they have to do to grow their churches numerically is just work harder. Usually, these criticisms come from pastors in suburban areas where they are surrounded by thousands of people to invite to their churches.

This disconnect between many conference leaders and their rural attendees is real and is more than just small-minded pastors whining about their current situations. Rural ministry is unique! Seldom do national conference leaders take into consideration the dynamics of pastoring a small, rural church when they offer growth conferences. “Leading a church to change” is one thing when your current church leadership comes from the business world and the church sees you as the CEO. It is an entirely different issue when attempting to persuade the venerable patriarch farmer to do something “new” and the church sees you as the hired hand.

This paper will look afresh at what scripture says concerning rural ministry. The goals for this examination will be twofold. Hopefully, it will provide validation for pastors serving in rural areas. Seldom are they championed. They are not invited to lead conferences, write books, or preach on national stages. Typically, they serve in small churches with limited finances and with a small network of ministerial friends. They face the constant temptation to consider “real” ministry to be what they read in books written by “successful” pastors in suburban areas, not what they are doing in small towns. This paper will attempt to provide rural pastors with validation for their ministries.

Second, I will attempt to provide a look at rural ministry from a scriptural perspective, making a connection between rural ministry in scripture and rural ministry today. Maybe the Bible does have something to say that would help pastors serving in rural North America be more effective in their ministries.

A Brief Examination of Scripture from a Rural Perspective

This section will provide a brief “walk through” the Bible. The goal is to paint in very broad strokes a picture of the Bible from a rural perspective. As such, it is inaccurate to attempt to draw too many conclusions from these broad generalizations. The goal is to paint a general picture of God’s love for rural people and ministry. Another goal is to discern principles concerning rural ministry and their impact on ministry today. Please be patient as we defer discussion on the finer points to later writings.

The Old Testament

Genesis to Saul

The Pentateuch seems to demonstrate a bias toward rural settings. The first five books of the Bible seem to view rural settings as ideal while urban areas are seldom presented in a positive light. When a society grows too large in the Pentateuch, it grows out of control.¹

¹ P. David Ray, *Small Churches are the Right Size* (NY: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 39.

Genesis starts with the first man and the first woman being placed in an idyllic setting-a garden. They are placed in a garden and given agricultural tasks, to subdue and name the animals and to eat from the plants they are tending. Immediately upon leaving the garden, humanity is found tilling the land and keeping flocks (Genesis 4:2).

One of the general themes of Genesis focuses on fulfilling the task given in Genesis 1:28, “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth.”² Filling the earth is the first priority in Genesis. In fact, Genesis is the story of how people fulfilled God’s command to fill the earth.

The fulfillment of Genesis 1:28, however, did not go smoothly. The story commonly known as the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9 provides an example of man’s tendency to congregate in one place rather than to scatter to fulfill God’s first command to fill the earth. In this text, men wanted to build a city, a tower, and a name for themselves, “otherwise, we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”³

Too often when we read the story, we become fixated on the tower that was being built. The text indicates that God was concerned not only with the building of the tower but the construction of the city as well. God had not instructed them to congregate in cities but to, “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth.” The problem in the story of Babel is not the tower but the failure of people to do what God commanded, be fruitful and fill the earth.

² Holman Christian Standard Bible

³ Genesis 11:4 HCSB

God confused the residents of Babel with different languages and dispersed them, forcing humanity to return to the task of filling the earth. In Genesis 11:8, the tower is never mentioned in the resulting judgment. The judgment was that their language was confused and that the people stopped building the city and returned to filling the earth.

It is not reasonable to think that God was concerned that they might actually build a tower tall enough to reach Heaven. He was concerned, however, with the fact that by building a city, they had forsaken the one task God had given them.

On a side note, I am not claiming that cities are inherently evil or that cities are to be avoided. I am just stating that Genesis has a bias against cities as they thwart God's initial directive in Genesis 1:28.

Abraham provides a transition from the task of filling the earth. The earth is now filled with people, and God chooses Abraham and his progeny to be His selected people through whom God will bless all nations.

God speaks to Abraham concerning how he will be the father of a nation. In Genesis 15, God promises Abraham that he will be the father of nations and that his offspring will be too numerous to count. Filling the earth becomes a prominent theme for Abraham and his descendants.

This original command to fill the earth comes with a promise that the seed of Abraham will possess a specific land of their own. While the expansion of humanity continues, Abraham's seed is to inhabit a land given to them by God. Possessing the land becomes the focus of the rest of the Pentateuch.

Interestingly, God did not promise Abraham that his seed would possess a city. Rather, God promised him land. At this point in history, land is vital for national survival. The world is agriculturally-based and subsistence farming provides the backbone for any nation during this time period.

The only two cities that play a prominent role in the Abraham stories are Sodom and Gomorrah. The entire narrative of these two cities is very negative as they face the judgment of God for their wickedness.

Possessing the land promised to Abraham becomes the focal point of the rest of Genesis and continues through Joshua. Each person after Abraham plays a role in assisting this new nation in possessing the land. Exodus begins with the Israelites in slavery while building cities for Egypt.⁴ The greatest event in the Old Testament is designed to emancipate Israel from building cities in slavery to enjoying the Promised Land that would be, “a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey.”⁵

The ideal situation in the Pentateuch involved the possession of rural, farm land where crops could grow and a nation could grow and God’s command to go and fill the earth could be accomplished.

Urbanization of Israel

The rural emphasis found in the Pentateuch continues with the first two kings of Israel, Saul and David. Both kings came from agricultural-based families. Saul herded

⁴ Exodus 1:11-12

⁵ Exodus 3:8

donkeys, and David was a shepherd. Neither king grew-up in an urban setting. Neither king established his seat of government in an urban setting.

David, however, provides a transition. He accomplished three things during his reign that were necessary for the urbanization of Israel. He united the tribes of Israel into a nation, established and maintained a court system, and developed a standing army.⁶ Under David's rule, Israel was still very rural but the transition to urbanization had begun.

As important as these accomplishments were, David's greatest accomplishment was to establish his seat of leadership in Jerusalem. Harper's Bible Dictionary describes this transition by stating, "Jerusalem was elevated to its place of central importance by David ca. 1000 B.C. He turned Jerusalem into a religious and political symbol of the unity of the people of God."⁷

David established Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Solomon developed it into a cosmopolitan setting that became the center of Jewish culture. Again, Harper's Bible Dictionary describes the development by Solomon:

Solomon (ca. 962-922) increased the symbolic importance of Jerusalem. It was no longer central for just the hill country, but for the entire kingdom. His building program in Jerusalem paralleled his consolidation of David's kingdom. He extended the walls from the Ophel to enclose the Temple Mount (1 Kings 3:1). Jerusalem became a 32-acre city. Administrative buildings and palaces filled this area and the Temple replaced the tabernacle.⁸

⁶ Chad Brand, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003) 986.

⁷ P. J. Achtemeier, *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, 1st ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, P., & Society of Biblical Literature, 1985) 446.

From this point forward, Israel is centered in Jerusalem. As Jerusalem goes, so goes the nation. The New Bible Dictionary describes this transition by delineating two motifs that define Jerusalem, “Jerusalem is at the same time the place of Jewish infidelity and disobedience, and also the place of God’s election and presence, protection, and glory.”⁹

Once Solomon becomes king, Israel develops into a nation where Jerusalem is its center for government and for the Jewish religion. Worship at the Temple becomes the unifying element of the nation. Prophetic judgments against Jerusalem imply that these judgments are for the entire nation. Jerusalem is God’s people in every place and time whether in blessing or in judgment.¹⁰

The exile and return of the Jews to Israel merely heightens this emphasis of Jerusalem as the “Holy City.” Nehemiah demonstrates a powerful drive to rebuild Jerusalem and its walls thus re-establishing the Jewish nation and the Jewish religion. Neither seem to be complete until Jerusalem is rebuilt. No emphasis can be found on rebuilding or restoring the rural communities that surround Jerusalem.

The Old Testament closes with Israel firmly united around Jerusalem. The rural areas that were valued in Genesis have given way to the rise of Jerusalem. Politics,

⁸ P. Ibid., 466

⁹ D. R. Wood & I. H. Marshall. *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 563.

¹⁰ Geoffrey W. Bromiley, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in one volume*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 1030.

education, and religion are centered in Jerusalem. Whoever controls this city controls the nation of Israel.

The New Testament

The Ministry of Jesus

By the time the New Testament begins, Jerusalem is firmly established as the center of the Jewish universe. Rural areas in Israel have no religious significance.

The birth story of Jesus provides a shocking change of venue for the religious leadership of that day. The Christmas stories state that the Chief Priest and the Scribes know the Messiah is to be born in the rural village of Bethlehem, but do not see this as significant enough to warrant an investigation.¹¹ They seem to think that if this child born in Bethlehem is the Messiah, He will soon come to Jerusalem to declare Himself as king and expel the hated Romans thus elevating the Jews to world dominion.¹²

Into this myopic focus on Jerusalem as the center of Jewish life, the Son of God was born in Bethlehem, a farming community famous for growing grain and raising sheep. Bethlehem was out of the way and far from the center of the Jewish world. Yet

¹¹ Matthew 2:4-6

¹² Charles Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 1111.

this small, rural town filled with farmers and village dwellers was where God decided His Son should be born.

To further direct the narrative away from Jerusalem, Jesus grew up in Nazareth, another rural setting.¹³ Nazareth was a community of less than 500 people far from any city. Particularly difficult to understand was that Nazareth was far from the religious and cultural center of Judaism, Jerusalem. The logical choice for raising a child that would ascend to Jewish prominence would have been Jerusalem. There, Jesus would get the proper training, network with the right religious leaders, and develop a reputation as a religious scholar.

Instead, his parents, returned to Nazareth to take up residence in the “backwoods” of Galilee, far removed from the center of political and religious influence in Jerusalem where a Davidic king would be expected to reside.¹⁴ While the brightest religious students of Jesus’ day were in Jerusalem studying the law, Jesus was far away in the remote, rural village of Nazareth learning carpentry.

Nazareth was hardly the place for a young man to be raised that was destined to change forever the religious landscape of the world. Nazareth was not Jerusalem. No religious leader in Israel expected the Messiah to grow up in such a forlorn area. Also, Nazareth had a poor reputation throughout Jewish circles. Nathanael’s question, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” was a prime example of the lack of

¹³ Luke 2:39-40

¹⁴ R. B. Zuck, D. L. Bock, & Dallas Theological Seminary. *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), Page 20.

respect Jesus' home-town had in Jewish circles.¹⁵ This lack of respect was likely, "due to an unpolished dialect, lack of culture, and quite possibly a measure of irreligion and moral laxity."¹⁶

The possibility of a different rural dialect is strengthened by the account of Peter's denial. While waiting in the outer court area, Peter was asked if he was part of Jesus' group. The second accusation came with an interesting statement, "You certainly are one of them, since even your accent gives you away."¹⁷ Could it be that Jesus and many of his followers had a rural accent that was a source of prejudice in Jerusalem?

Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist, came to preach repentance and to announce the arrival of the Messiah. A peculiar aspect of John's ministry was that he forced those in Jerusalem that wanted to hear him to come out to the wilderness where he preached. He was a rough man in coarse clothes that preached hard sermons of repentance. Instead of being dismissed as some heretic out in the wilderness, the religious leadership from Jerusalem came out in large numbers to hear John's message.

Jesus began His public ministry by being baptized by John in the Jordan River. Starting in a remote area with an eccentric prophet far from Jerusalem was not the accepted way to begin a public ministry in Israel.

¹⁵ John 1:46

¹⁶ Brand, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*. 1178

¹⁷ Matthew 26:73

As Jesus began His ministry, He had one significant opportunity to touch the world. With the limited time available, where did He take the Gospel? Jesus spent the preponderance of His ministry bypassing the large urban areas that were the center of religion and focused on the rural areas of Israel.

A word study of where Jesus served and where He sent His disciples paints a clear picture of Jesus' value for rural people. Jesus spent a great deal of time preaching in small villages. The Greek word for village is *Kome* which is most commonly defined as village.¹⁸ The size of a village can best be described as:

"Village" meant a country town or hamlet, generally five acres or less in size, un-walled, with only a few houses and few (if any) places of business. A "large" village might have 20 houses with 150 people. Archeologists tell us there were hundreds of villages dotting the countryside in Israel.¹⁹

An example of selected texts that demonstrate how Jesus ministered in villages would include:

1. Matthew 9:35 Jesus taught in the villages
2. Mark 8:23 Jesus healed a blind man in a village
3. Luke 9:6 Jesus sent His disciples into villages
4. Luke 9:52-56 Jesus stayed in villages-the first one rejected Him
5. Luke 10:38 Martha, Mary, and Lazarus lived in a village
6. Luke 17:11 Jesus healed ten Lepers in a village
7. Luke 24:13 Emmaus was a village

¹⁸ James Strong, (1996). *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship: 1996)

¹⁹ <http://showcase.netins.net/web/agros/smrhmay.htm>

On twenty-six occasions, Jesus ministered or sent the disciples into villages to minister. His focus on village ministry was greater than on any other people group in the four Gospels. The villages were where Jesus spent most of His time, did most of His teaching, performed most of His miracles, and did most of His training with the disciples.

Topos is a Greek word used to define an area marked off for a town or dwelling.²⁰ Most often this word was translated as “place,” an area smaller than a village but still a named entity. Often this word was used for where farmers gathered to spend the night. There were seldom any businesses in a “place.” Rather, it was a grouping of farmers that lived together and left their “place” to go to their farms each day. Examples of Jesus ministering in “places” include:

1. Mt. 14:35 Jesus prayed in a place called Gethsemane
2. Mark 1:45 Jesus avoided the cities and preached in deserted places
3. Mark 6:7-13 Jesus sent the seventy out to minister in places only
4. Mark 6:33-35 Jesus taught in a desolate place
5. Luke 4:37 Jesus’ reputation went out to every place
6. Luke 10:1 Jesus sent the disciples to places-where He Himself was about to go

Jesus ministered, prayed, taught, and sent His disciples to places. In Luke 10:1, Jesus sent the disciples to places where “He Himself was about to go.”²¹ These places, small remote gatherings of farmers, were not too small for Jesus. He did not bypass

²⁰ James Strong, (1996). *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship: 1996)

²¹ Holman Christian Standard Bible

the small groupings of farmers to focus on reaching the masses that lived in nearby cities. Rather, He sent the disciples to prepare the way for Him to visit with farmers.

Another word used to describe where Jesus ministered was “*chora*” which was generally translated as, “the rural region surrounding a city or village, the country.”²² A “*chora*” was the open land between two villages often translated as “field” or as “region.” A *chora* was the open agricultural land that surrounded villages. This was where crops were grown, the sheep were shepherded, and much of Jesus’ ministry took place. *Choras* were so remote that they did not have names.

Remarkably, Jesus’ ministry often included serving in open rural areas that were too remote to have a name. These places were significant in Jesus’ ministry.

1. Matthew 8:28 Jesus drove demons from two men in the area of the Gadarenes
2. Mark 1:5 Jesus was baptized in a country area of Judea
3. Mark 6:55 Jesus healed many people in the countryside
4. Luke 2:8 Jesus’ birth prompted the shepherds from the surrounding countryside to visit
5. John 4:35 Jesus stated that the fields (countryside) were white to harvest

By far the most remarkable text concerning the word *chora* is John 4:35 where Jesus states that the countryside (*chora*) is ripe for the harvest. Jesus addresses this statement to His disciples when they return from a town in Samaria and find Him talking to a Samaritan woman standing beside a well. Using an agricultural analogy, Jesus states that the harvest is not months away, it is now. The fields (places) are ripe

²² James Strong, (1996). *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the test of the common English version of the canonical books, and every occurrence of each word in regular order*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship: 1996).

for harvest right now. The analogy is powerful; rural places, *choras*, are ripe for the harvest now!

Another word commonly used of Jesus' ministry was "*agros*" which means, "land, field, countryside."²³ *Agros* was the Greek term used in connection with farming. It was the Greek word from which we get today's word, agriculture. Jesus went out from the villages and places and ministered in farm areas. Examples of where Jesus went and where His message was carried include:

1. Mark 5:14 Jesus spoke and all who heard went into the countryside to tell what they had heard.
2. Mark 6:56 Jesus entered villages, cities, and the countryside.
3. Luke 8:34 Jesus' words were reported in the countryside.

Again, Jesus was seen going out to the remotest parts of Israel to talk to the uneducated, field workers. He spent a great deal of time and energy making sure they knew that the Kingdom of God was at hand. Those that heard Him and experienced His healings went most consistently to the countryside to report Jesus' activities.

Another important aspect of Jesus' ministry was the agricultural illustrations He used to teach spiritual truths. Illustrations of seeds growing, farmers plowing, and crops bearing fruit were common to His teaching. Seldom did He use any story, parable, or illustration that was urban based. If His sermons and teachings were targeted to the people listening, then the bulk of His teaching was to people living in rural areas.

²³ IBID

Ron Klassen of Agros Ministries presents an interesting aspect of Jesus' ministry when he notes:

There were several large cities (Sepphoris, Tiberias, Samaria, and Scythopolis to name a few) located in close proximity to where Christ grew up or traveled during his ministry. Those cities are not mentioned in the gospels and, as far as we know, were not visited by Christ.²⁴

While Jesus had an opportunity to visit cities in the immediate area, He chose to minister in rural areas to people with little influence, power, or finances.

The Missions Strategy of Acts

The Great Commission sent Christianity "into all the world."²⁵ The Acts commission gave specific directions: Jerusalem, all Judea, Samaria, and the uttermost parts of the earth.²⁶ Again, we see God returning to the sending motif started in Genesis 1:28 and reaffirmed as the Jews are sent out to be a light to the Gentiles. Christians are now given a mandate to go out as witnesses.

The question comes, where are Christians supposed to go? The Acts 1:8 directive commands that the new Christians in Acts start in Jerusalem, an urban setting, and continue out until they reach the remotest parts of the earth. The Greek word for uttermost is *eschatos* which means the end of, last, or lowest in importance.²⁷

²⁴ <http://showcase.netins.net/web/agros/smrhmay.htm>

²⁵ Matthew 28:18-20

²⁶ Acts 1:8

²⁷ James Strong, (1996). *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing every word of the text of the common English version of the canonical books, and every*

God commissions Christians to go to every location no matter how remote. Even the “second class” areas of that day were to be reached. No place was too far away, too rural, or too unimportant for the Gospel’s proclamation.

The book of Acts is a history of how this command is fulfilled. As with the rest of Biblical history, the fulfillment of God’s command in Acts does not go smoothly. At first, the church does not seek to accomplish the task. However, after the stoning of Stephen, the church is finally disbursed and the Gospel begins to reach into the entire Roman world.

Paul represents a major shift in strategy. He begins his ministry by attempting to reach major cities and then handing off the task of reaching the outlying areas to the new Christians from the cities. David Hesselgrave states it this way, “Paul considered an area evangelized when a church was planted in its major city... When Paul chose a target city for missionary endeavor he looked beyond the city to the surrounding region.”²⁸

To say that Paul had an urban strategy is to misrepresent Paul’s intent. Paul had a desire to reach *everyone*. His strategy for doing this was to start in the city and then to see the new Christians take the Gospel into the countryside. He felt no tension between rural and urban ministry. Both were important to Paul. The beginning of rural ministry started in the cities.

occurrence of each word in regular order, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship: 1996).

²⁸ David Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A guide for home and foreign missions*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1980), 97.

An example of the value Paul placed on people in smaller cities can be seen in Colossae. This was a town that had once been a major commercial center but had experienced significant decline by the time of Paul's writings.²⁹ Yet Paul wrote to them and used some of his most eloquent language to encourage the Colossians in their walk with the Lord.

Implications for Rural Ministry Today

Scripture is predominately written from a rural perspective. From the Garden of Eden to the life of Jesus, the Bible has much to say about rural ministry today.

Again, a statement needs to be made at this point. I am in no way attempting to denigrate urban ministry. A valid and powerful foundation for urban ministry can also be made from scripture. However, the goal of this paper is to raise the awareness of rural ministry by providing a fresh look at scripture from a rural perspective.

Ministry in rural and urban settings is not an either/or proposition. No dichotomy can be made from scripture to separate the two. Scripture powerfully indicates that God desires that none should perish, that all should hear the Gospel, and that Christians should employ all means necessary to carry the Gospel to every part of the earth, rural *and* urban.

With this in mind, what can be learned from scripture that might be helpful to those serving in rural areas today? First, scripture provides overwhelming validity for those ministering in rural areas. God loves people in rural areas. His own Son was born in a small town and grew up in a remote village far from Jerusalem. Jesus spoke with a

²⁹ Brand, *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 30.

rural accent, used farming illustrations, and ministered primarily to people in rural areas. He gathered around Him men much like Himself, men with no formal education and no networks with religious leaders in Jerusalem. And with a team of men from rural Israel, the world was changed.

For those serving in rural areas, Ron Klassen and John Koessler in their book, *No Little Places*, make an interesting observation:

We admire missionaries who serve in tiny villages halfway around the world. We don't question the significance of their work when it takes them years to develop a small congregation. Is a similar ministry in a small town in North America any less important?³⁰

They quote Francis Schaffer when he states, "In God's eyes... there are no little places."³¹ God made no mistake placing ministers in rural areas. These outposts of the Gospel are no less significant than the large suburban pastorates. God loves all people everywhere, and He calls people to minister in His name in the remotest areas of the earth.

Second, God not only loves those that minister in rural areas, God loves those that live in rural areas. Across North America millions of people live in rural settings, some by choice and some by heritage. Each one is important to God. He sent His own Son to people in rural areas. These people, living in rural settings, deserve a relevant

³⁰ Ron Klassen and John Koessler, *No Little Places: The untapped potential of the small-town church*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1996), 27.

³¹ IBID.

witness just as much as people living in urban areas. *No one is exempt from the Great Commission!*

Therefore, missiologists are remiss if they do not consider a strategy for reaching people living in rural areas. A strategy for reaching North America with the Gospel must include a strategy for reaching everyone, including those living in the most remote parts of the continent.

Third, it is possible to have a successful ministry in a rural area that impacts the world. Jesus provides a model for ministry that was very rural yet impacted the entire world. Men throughout history have served in remote villages and their impact can still be felt today. Missionaries such as Jim Elliot are shining examples of Christians that literally gave up their lives for rural ministry. Here was a man that never preached to thousands in crowded stadiums. His passion was to, “take the Gospel to an obscure tribe in South America.”³² In today’s world, His ministry would probably not be a model used in church growth conferences. However, his life and death changed the face of missions around the world. The Christian world will never know how many people chose to serve in rural areas after hearing about Jim Elliot’s sacrificial commitment to missions in a remote area of South America.

Another example of a man dedicated to rural ministry was John Newton, the writer of the great hymn, *Amazing Grace*. Much is known about Newton’s life before he became a Christian, how he was a sailor, a slave trader, and basically opposed to the

³² Klassen, 27.

tenants of Christianity. Most remember him for his dramatic conversion and the one great hymn that has become the favorite of millions.

But most know little else about his life. What they miss is that he became a small-town pastor, devoting 16 years to the little village of Olney, near Cambridge, England. The town consisted of one street lined with stone houses that had thatched roofs. The people were, by and large, poor, uneducated lace makers working by hand in damp, poorly lit homes.

During his 16 years at Olney, Newton turned down bigger and what some might deem better offers. But, Newton's considerable talents were not wasted *in* a small place, nor were they limited *to* a small place. In those days, psalm singing was predominant in congregational music. John Newton wanted more hymns, of which there were few. So, he began to compose them.³³

Ultimately, he served successfully for sixteen years in a small-town church.

During that time, he wrote over 820 hymns and helped abolish the slave trade in England. John Newton was a success not because of where he served but because of how he served.

Conclusion

Could it be that God desires to pour out a great revival using people in rural North America? The Great Awakening and the Second Great Awakening both had their greatest impact in rural America as they swept through the western frontier areas of their times (i.e. Western New York through South Carolina in the First Great Awakening and through central Kentucky, middle Tennessee, and Alabama during the Second Great Awakening). Both movements changed the religious climate of the nation. They also impacted the nation in ways that shaped the future. New phrases and ideas

³³ <http://www.rhma.org/smltalk/1998-2001/st01-1.html>

resulted from these revivals such as “work ethic,” “temperance,” “public education,” and the heightened awareness of the missionary movement.³⁴ Neither awakening started in an urban area or had a significant impact on the established urban areas of their times. Major cities such as New York, Boston, or Richmond did not play a prominent role in either revival.

If we are going to pray for another great awakening, should we not look toward rural areas to be the harbinger of great things to come? Since country folk have been at the forefront of most of the great movements of God in North America, should we not look to the countryside for the next great revival?

God loves rural people. He sent His Son to live among rural people. God even used rural people to produce the two greatest revivals in American history. Yet the focus of Christian ministry today seems to have passed them by. Current Christian missiology in North America seems to be focused on the suburbs and their children, the next generation. All the while, Christianity continues to lose its hold on the rural communities that once were the staple of Christian life in North America.

In Luke 14:16 and following, Jesus tells a parable of a man hosting a large banquet. Those invited responded with excuses that extended from buying land and oxen to getting married. The master sent his slaves out into the streets and alleys to fill up his banquet hall with guests. With space still available, the master sent his slaves into the highways and lanes to finish filling his great banquet hall.

34

http://college.hmco.com/history/readerscomp/rcah/html/ah_077700_secondgreata.htm

American Christianity has not been able to move past the excuses heard today in the suburbs. Most people are still too busy accumulating material possessions, moving up the business ladder, and struggling with family issues. They do not have time to come to the banquet. Yet God gives a clear command for us to go to the back alleys of our inner cities and bring in those rejected by society. He also sends His followers into the open rural areas to bring in those normally not included in such a feast.

Today, the rural areas of North America deserve to be treated as a viable mission field and deserve quality pastors trained specifically to minister to the unique needs of rural people. The need in rural America requires this strategy and scripture demands it.