

November 14, 2010

Matthew 24:14 / Luke 24:40-49 / Acts 1:8/8:1 / Rev. 7:9-12
 Pursuing and Embracing a Vision of Church Health (#9) - Taking the Whole
 Gospel to the Whole World

Today we come to the last link in our **Chain of Church Health** -- **FOREIGN MISSIONS**. And as I noted last week, so also I need to repeat again this week, its placement as the last link in the chain has nothing to do with it being a lesser priority!

All the links are to be pursued with equal zeal and equal earnestness and equal determination and commitment, because all of them are divinely mandated tasks laid out for the Church, by God, in the New Testament!

And I say that as one who did not always believe that! I don't know how this ever became ingrained in my mind (because it was not taught in any church I'd ever attended). But as soon as I was converted I headed overseas. For in my mind I had somehow come to believe that becoming a Christian meant you needed to become a missionary! It wasn't just a slight inclination, it was a deeply ingrained conviction. And thus within 3 months of my conversion I was on the mission field!

I just assumed that that's what Christians were supposed to do -- become missionaries! And thus when I finished my 2 year stint in the D.R., and entered Gordon-Conwell Seminary, I majored in foreign missions!

I took every missions course I could / and devoured numerous missionary biographies / I studied the history of the worldwide missions movement. / I joined the missions committee at the seminary / went to hear every missionary speaker that ever came on campus / helped organize and run "missions emphasis week" both my junior and senior year / and was there praying every time there was a concert of prayer for increased interest and involvement in missions!

In fact, I adopted the attitude of Keith Green (a then popular singer) who said, ***"If you're not called to stay, then you are called to go."*** Or again, ***"God calls you to go, but like Jonah you run..."***

Therefore, as I approached graduation, both Nancy and I decided we wanted to spend the rest of our lives on the mission field -- in Africa to be precise! So in May of 1986 we applied to two mission boards with the intent of going to the Central Africa Republic.

Yet, as September rolled around, and we still hadn't heard back from either agency -- a little dying Congregational Church in Westport, MA contacted us and asked us to come and apply for their pastoral vacancy.

It was something we did only because Dr. Christy Wilson Jr. (my missions professor at Gordon-Conwell) had repeatedly said: ***"Every missionary should do at least two years of ministry in their own culture, before they go overseas. Because if you can't minister in your own culture, you'll never be able to minister in a foreign setting."***

So we went to Westport (which did turn out to be quite the mission field in itself!) And the 2 years stretched into 8 years, before God gave us the green light to go back overseas again -- where we stayed for 11 years until we became missionaries in Perkasié, PA!

And I share all that, because I want you to know, I'm not only pro-missions, I've spent almost to the day, 1/4 of my entire life to this date living overseas, in some type of missions capacity. And God-willing, at some point in the future, I hope return overseas.

Do I still believe it's the only valid calling for every Christian? No! I moved beyond that years ago, when I came to realize it was not only unscriptural, but belittled all the other equally valid forms of Christian service.

And likewise, do I believe the soul of an African or Asian or tribal person is more precious to God than that of my unsaved neighbor? No! (Though I'm embarrassed to say that *IS* how I used to feel.)

But do I believe that a foreign missions focus and active involvement in furthering the missionary agenda of any church is indispensable to the health and well being of any church? **ABSOLUTELY!** Without question!

To even suggest otherwise (in my opinion) displays an ignorance of God's Word / and His stated desire for all the nations / and one of the most significant reasons for which the Church exists!

We essentially exist on this earth for one reason and one reason alone! **"To Know Christ and Make Him Known"** (as one man succinctly put it). That should be our goal in life. We are here to preach the Gospel and make disciples everywhere we go until we have reached those who live in the uttermost parts of the earth!

Some are called to GO, and others are called to STAY. Some are called to the mission fields of India, Africa, Mongolia and the Middle East / while others are called to the mission fields of Kennsington, Orlando, Seattle, New England, Perkasio or Quakertown! They are all equally valid places of service.

Wherever there are unsaved people (and they are everywhere!) we are called to the "mission" of reaching them with the Gospel and discipling them in the faith. THAT primary purpose should govern all the major plans we make in life and be an instrumental part of everything we are about -- because its stressed everywhere in Scripture -- and not just the NT!

That's the **FIRST** thing I want to point out today. Missions is not a New Testament invention! Even if I didn't have the New Testament I would still have countless texts from the Old Testament that tell me of God's desire that His glory / or all that is true about Him / and the Good News of His reign over all the earth was meant to be taken to the ends of the earth! Not just kept among the Jews like a national treasure to be jealously guarded and kept within the boundaries of Israel! As early as Gen. 12, Abraham was told that he would be blessed by God so that "through him, all the peoples of the earth might be blessed"! That's where we so often go astray!

So often we tend to *FORGET* that when God blesses us, it's not simply meant to be exclusively for us! It's meant to be shared with others! I was reminded of that in a conversation I had with one of the heirs of the "Cabot Paints and Stains" fortune (whom I worked for during my years at seminary). She was one of the sweetest, most down to earth people I ever met. Had you met her on the

street you would never know she was wealthy. And one day when I was doing a job at her house there was a magazine that spoke of the "new rich" ("neuvo riche") that were moving into the North Shore of Boston.

So I asked her: "What's the difference between the "old rich" (people who had money going back for generations, which is the category she considered herself to belong to) and the "new rich" (those who were making their wealth today)?"

And her answer has always stuck with me. She said, ***"The old rich have always understood that if you're going to be rich you have an obligation to help the poor. But the new rich have no such understanding at all."***

It's similar to what happened in Israel. God said to Abraham, ***"I'm going to bless you, and you will be a blessing."*** / And God adds in concluding: ***"Through you all the peoples on the face of the earth will be blessed!"***

Abraham understood that! But as time went by his own children, and their children's children, began to forget that. They began to jealously guard all God's blessings and not want to share them. They began to hoard, and selfishly keep within the borders of Israel, that which God had given them to take and share with those far beyond their own borders!

Thus, throughout the OT, we hear God reminding His people of the need to share what they've been blessed with, with all the other nations!

In I Chron. 16:8 we read: ***"Give thanks to the LORD, praise His Name; MAKE KNOWN AMONG THE NATIONS what He has done."***

Or again in verse 24: ***"DECLARE HIS GLORY AMONG THE NATIONS, His marvelous deeds AMONG ALL PEOPLE'S."***

WHY? Because the knowledge of God's glory wasn't simply given to Israel as a treasure to be known and understood by them alone! It was something He gave them to share (according to David) "among all nations & peoples!" It's exactly what God told Abraham! "I'm blessing you and you will be a blessing."

And what's the greatest blessing Abraham received? The revelation of the knowledge of God! Nothing compares to it!

Not money or lands or things! It's all rubbish when compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing God and His Christ! It's a blessing of such great worth, and such great potential to bless all that receive it, that it must be shared with everyone! Which means that someone has to go to everyone and tell them!

Likewise, Ps. 150 says, ***"Let everything that has breath praise the LORD."***

That is, praise Yahweh the God of Israel! / Yet how can they do that if they don't know Him / and have never heard of His Name / or are unaware of what He says He is like? How can they DO what God calls them to do unless someone GOES to tell them about Him?

Or take Isaiah 42:3-4 which says of Jesus: ***"In justice He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged until He establishes justice on the earth (that is, equity, honesty and righteousness). In His law the ISLANDS will put their hope."*** ("Islands" meaning those in far off places accessible only by ship!)

Or again Isaiah 49:6: ***"It is too small a thing for you to be my Servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel that I have kept. I will ALSO make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH!"***

How will He do that? Through us! The ISLANDS will put their hope in His law, and His salvation be brought to the ends of the earth, when His people climb on those ships / and go to those islands / or travel to the far corners of the earth to take the message of His salvation to all those distant places!

It won't happen unless they do! That's the whole point! If its ever going to get done, somebody has to do it! ***"How can they call upon one in whom they have not believed,"*** asks the Apostle Paul in Romans 10:14, ***"and how can they believe unless someone preaches to them?"***

And WHY else must it be done? Habakkuk 2:14 tells us, in one of the first "missionary" verses I ever memorized! ***"For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea."***

God's purpose in missions is not simply the "salvation" of those who believe! It's the display and the making known of His glory! The glory of His righteousness / and the glory of His mercy / and the glory of His justice / and the glory of His splendor and power and wisdom and grace! The glory of Christ / and His cross / and His resurrection! / The glory of all that God is and all that He does! That knowledge needs to cover the earth as the waters cover the sea! THAT'S what God wants!

And making sure THAT HAPPENS should be our primary life task! Proclaiming to all people everywhere, the knowledge of the Glory of God! The things they need to know about Him to know how glorious He is!

Which brings us to our **SECOND** point. What message can we share that brings Him the most glory? It's the message about His Son, who is, according to Heb. 1:3, ***"the radiance of God's glory and exact representation of His being."*** And even for this, I need only read Dan. 7:13-14 where I'm told about Christ, the Son of Man: ***"And (the one like a son of man) came before the Ancient of Days, and was led into His presence. And He was given authority and glory and sovereign power; and all peoples, nations and men of every language worshipped Him."***

Did you hear that? People from all over the globe will worship Him! That's a prophetic declaration! Rev. 7:9 declares the same thing! Which means I can not only KNOW I must take the Gospel to the ends of the earth (for that has to be done if people from every tribe are ever to be there worshipping Jesus).

Yet I can also KNOW, that if I will go and faithfully persevere in preaching the Gospel, then eventually, at some point in time, someone from that tribe will come to believe and bow at Jesus feet in worship! Because His word tells me that such converts WILL be there in heaven! It will happen!

And what confidence; and what determination to persevere; that should give to every missionary as they go! To know that people every tribe and tongue and nation WILL BE THERE dressed in white robes (the robes of Christ's righteousness) / and holding palm branches in their hands / and worshipping Him

who sits on the throne and the Lamb! Scripture promises it TWICE -- in Daniel 7 and Revelation 7!

And when Scripture promises us something, we can KNOW (beyond any shadow of a doubt) that it WILL unthwartably come to pass!

LISTEN: God's explicitly stated will is that people from every tribe and language group on the face of this earth, should know of His glory, and experience His salvation, and worship Jesus Christ!

And therefore OUR CALLING IN LIFE should be to do all that we can to make sure we have done everything we are responsible to do for that to come to pass! Starting RIGHT HERE where we are / and then spreading out in every direction beyond HERE, until the message of His glory and the knowledge of salvation through Christ reaches all people everywhere!

Then THIRD, Matt. 24:14 tells us, "***And this Gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world as a witness to all nations, and then the end shall come.***"

LISTEN: If the preaching of the Gospel to every people group on earth, is the one thing that must happen before Christ returns, how diligent we should be in making sure it gets done!

If His return is, as Paul says, "the blessed hope" of every Christian in every place, then we should be pursuing that goal with all our might! For if we read the text right, His return hinges on our task of taking the Gospel, as a witness, to all nations!

Some have said (and I'm not sure I agree entirely) that we as His people could actually HASTEN His return if we would simply complete the task He lays down as the condition for His return! Because it says that when the Gospel has been preached in the whole world, "***then the end shall come.***"

And my question to you is this: How could we NOT want that to happen! And the most common answer I've found to that question is this: Many Christians don't want Christ to return soon, because their hearts are still too firmly set on the things of this world. I myself have often fallen into that category.

There have been times when I've looked up into the heavens (I can remember riding in a "bussito" one night in the D.R.) and yearning with all my heart for Christ to come back at that very moment! (Some of you can probably say the same. You've had a burning desire for His immediate return!)

Yet other times (if I'm honest) I have to admit I wanted it to be delayed -- sometimes till I'm older or after I've died. Why? Because I had things in life I wanted to do (often things for Him!) or I had other things in life that my heart yearned for, more (I'm ashamed to say), than His return. More than being in His immediate presence and seeing Him win the Last Great Battle!

You see, if our hearts are happy here / if they are satisfied with the pursuit of earthly things or this earthly existence / then God's explicit commission to take the Gospel to the whole world, will NOT be our life priority!

Because doing so requires us to sacrifice many of the things our hearts have become overly attached to in this world. The things we feel are more necessary to our temporal comfort and happiness than doing God's will.

The difficulty is this: We can't support the work of foreign missions without sacrificing something! It will cost us time and energy and money and some of our toys and some of our comforts. / And for those who will actually sense the call to go, it will mean saying goodbye to friends and family and everything familiar, as they pack up their things into crates and move overseas (either short or long term)!

Which means the support of missions will force us to make some HARD, and sometimes AGONIZING choices concerning what is most important to us. Is it making Him known here, there and everywhere / Or is it the earthly things we may miss out on or have to go without if we take this command or this commission to reach the nations too seriously.

Where are you folks? There is no question what Christ wants! The question is: Are you willing to make the necessary sacrifices to ensure that it happens? And if you are NOT willing, have you prayed for Him to MAKE you willing?

My pastor in the D.R. used to tell us: ***"If you know you need to do something, and yet you find yourself struggling to even want to, the FIRST STEP is to pray that God will MAKE YOU want to!"*** That's what grace is all about -- God giving us what we need to carry out His will in us and for us!

And I can tell you this from personal experience: God is always more than willing to make us willing when we earnestly ask Him to do so! / When we confess our struggle, and the hardness of our hearts, and earnestly plead for His grace and assistance! You'll be surprised to find yourself (over time) wanting to do what months or years earlier, you had fought so fiercely against!

And then **LAST** - and going right along with that last point - if we persist in disobeying God and become so comfortable in our apathy and disobedience that we refuse to even pray that He would change our heart or make us willing and obedient, God will sometimes resort to what He does to the believers in Jerusalem in the Book of Acts -- make us obedient by making us uncomfortable!

Acts 1:8 and Acts 8:1 is an amazing study! Because in Acts 1:8 Jesus tells them, ***"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea, and Samaria and to the uttermost parts of the earth."*** He's very clear!

But what happens? The Spirit comes / and they do boldly stand up and witness for Christ (and thousands are converted)! Yet 7 chapters go by (covering at least a couple years) and no one ever leaves Jerusalem!

Why? Chap. 2:47 may give us the clue when it tells us: ***"They... enjoyed the favor of all the people."*** It's said in a good sense, but it can often have a bad result. Because people like being liked / and enjoy being popular / and love being part of a successful revival! And because they do, it can make it very comfortable for them to remain where they're at -- even though they've been given a divine command to GO!

Which brings us to Acts 8:1, where we read: ***"On that day (the day Stephen was stoned) a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the Apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria."***

FINALLY they leave Jerusalem and go to Judea and Samaria! But note this -- it was NOT because they willingly went! It was because they were driven to by a very severe persecution!

Why did God allow it? Because He knows that by nature we are like water -- we always tend to choose the path of least resistance! We go for comfort over stress and being stretched / and prefer pleasure and success over sacrifice and obedience.

And thus He also knows that sometimes we need to be made uncomfortable to be made obedient! Sometimes that's what it comes to! We won't move or do what He's called us to do until something forces us to move.

Sometimes, in order to get us to do His will, He must rock the boat of our lives / or allow the rug to be pulled out from underneath our feet / or permit troubling circumstances to break up the SERENITY that has lulled us into INACTIVITY.

Sometimes life in this world becomes TOO COMFORTABLE, and makes us forget that this world is not our home / prosperity is not our goal / and leisure, recreation, entertainment and the accumulation of things or the pursuit of our own personal dreams is NOT why we're here.

We are here for Him, not us! We are here to carry out His desires / and do His will, not our own!

So what will we do? We don't really have a choice! We must do the will of Him who died for us, so that we might live for Him, and in doing so, complete the task He's left for us to do -- bring the whole Gospel to the whole world!