

Proclaim and Plant

Missions Month

Acts 14:19-23; Romans 1:1-17

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Priorities

Today is the last Sunday in Missions month. It's no secret missions is important to First Free. We have over sixty missions partners and devote about 25% of our budget to missions. But it may not be as widely known what we prioritize in missions. And so, this month we've been highlighting our priorities from our missions policy.

The first week we said we prioritize missions to unreached people groups. There are over six billion people in the world who have not come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. All of them need Jesus. But we prioritize unreached people groups. An unreached people group is a people group with less than 2% evangelical Christians among them. We prioritize them because they have little to no access to the gospel, and around 60% of the unbelievers in the world live among unreached people groups.

The last two weeks we've talked about the priority of partnering with the local church. parachurch ministries and missions agencies are very important, but the Great Commission belongs chiefly to the local church. And so, we need to prioritize the local church in sending and supporting missionaries.

This week we want to think about what missionaries should prioritize as they go to the nations. There are many good things we can do in the world. There are many needs. The suffering in our world is great and overwhelming. There's physical suffering. So, there's need for doctors and medical professionals in underserved parts of the world. And there's need for food and clean water. There's also social suffering. Disease and unplanned pregnancies have left our world with around 140 million orphans. So, there's need for orphan care. And there's need for pregnancy crisis centers.

I'm only scratching the surface. There are many more needs we could highlight.

In the face of such great needs, what should the church prioritize in missions? If we take Paul as a paradigm for a faithful missionary, there's a pattern that emerges in his first missionary journey. Let's scan through it briefly before drawing a conclusion.

In the first part of Acts 13, Barnabas and Paul are set apart and sent out (v. 3). They go first to Cyprus. And what do they do there? "They [proclaim] the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews" (v. 5).¹ They also *teach* the Gentiles. And "the proconsul" (Sergius Paulus) "believed ... for he was astonished at the teaching of the Lord" (v. 12).

From Cyprus, they go to Antioch in Pisidia (v.14). And they *brought* the good news that Jesus was the Messiah to the Jews (vv. 32-33). They *proclaimed* that everyone who believes in Jesus is forgiven their sins (vv. 38-39). Then they *spoke* the word of the Lord to the Gentiles and many believed (vv. 44-48).

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

The same thing happened in chapter 14 at Iconium and Lycaonia. They *spoke* with Jews and Greeks and many believed (v. 1). Then they continued to preach the gospel in Lystra (v. 7).

At Lystra there's a bit of a change in the pattern. While Paul's preaching the gospel, he sees a crippled man and he heals him (vv. 9-11). The crowds were amazed and said that Paul and Barnabas were gods (v. 12). But Paul and Barnabas used this to *preach* the good news and call them to turn to the living God (v. 15).

All of their preaching led to opposition. They were driven out of most places. Things got so bad in Lystra that Paul was stoned and left for dead (v. 19). But the next day he was at it again! He went to Derbe and *preached* the gospel and made disciples (v. 21).

Then something remarkable happens. Get the picture in your mind. Paul has travelled from Antioch all the way around to Lystra. If you look at a map, you know that at this point in his journey he's not that far from his hometown, Tarsus. And not that far from his sending church in Antioch. If it were me, and I had just been stoned and left for dead, I'd high tail it back home.

But not Paul. He and Barnabas go in the opposite direction of home! They go back through each city and strengthen the new believers and encourage them to continue in the faith (v. 22). And then they appointed elders in every church (v. 23). Even though many people had believed the gospel, they knew their work wasn't done. They needed to make sure churches were firmly planted in these cities so these converts could grow in their new-found faith.

So, what are the top priorities in missions? Hopefully the picture is plain enough. Missionaries must prioritize proclaiming the gospel and planting churches.

There are many good things to do in the world. But in missions, our priority must be the good news, not simply good deeds.

This isn't to say taking care of physical and social needs is not important. It is. I'm not making an either/or argument. It's a both/and argument. The argument I'm making is one of priority. Christians are called to do good to all people. But there's a priority to proclaim the gospel and plant churches.

Actually, good deeds and the good news go hand in hand. As the church sends missionaries to proclaim the gospel and plant churches, they should be doing good along the way. Paul and Barnabas certainly did. Our good deeds validate the gospel and adorn the gospel. And they can serve to advance the gospel, as we see in Acts.

Now that's not to say that good deeds are simply a means to an end. Doing good is an end in itself. But good deeds can serve the *greater* end of proclaiming the good news and planting churches.

Now that we've established the priority of proclaiming the gospel and planting churches, I want to spend the rest of our time pressing into these two priorities. Specifically, I want to ask the question, "*Why* are proclamation and planting priorities?"

PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL

First, why is proclaiming the gospel the number one priority for us in missions? To answer this question, I want to turn our attention to Paul's letter to the Romans. Romans is, in part, a missionary

letter. On our first week in this series, we saw that Paul asks the church at Rome for support in his mission to Spain. But before he asks for missionary support, he wants the church at Rome to understand his theology of the gospel. In the first verse of Romans, he says he's set apart for the gospel of God. In verse 5, he gives the clear aim of his mission. He wants to "bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of [Christ's] name among all the nations." He wants the nations to believe the gospel and live consistently with the gospel so that Christ will be glorified. And how does that happen? Through the proclamation of the gospel. The theme verse for the whole letter is in verse 16: "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

Why is the proclamation of the gospel the number one priority for Paul in his missionary efforts? I want to give three reasons from Romans.

The Reality of Judgment

First, the reality of judgment. After Paul announces his purpose to bring the nations to saving faith (v. 5), and states his theme that the gospel is the power of God (v. 16), he announces a problem in verse 18. All people, Jews and Gentiles, are under the wrath of God. As chapter 2, verse 8 says, "for those who ... do not obey the truth ... there will be wrath and fury." At the end of the first section of Romans, Paul makes it clear that the main problem facing humanity is our sin against God and God's wrath against sin. In chapter 3, he says, "None is righteous, no, not one" (v. 10). "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (v. 23a).

The doctrine of hell is under fire in our day. But as our Statement of Faith says,

We believe that God commands everyone everywhere to believe the gospel by turning to Him in repentance and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ. We believe that God will ... judge the world, assigning the unbeliever to condemnation and eternal conscious punishment and the believer to eternal blessedness and joy with the Lord in the new heaven and the new earth.

Hell is real. In fact, the New Testament speaks more of hell than heaven. Hell is described as the unquenchable or eternal fire (Mk. 9:43; Mt. 25:41), which speaks of eternal physical torment. Or outer darkness (Mt. 22:13), which speaks of banishment from God. It's also described as a place of destruction, or ruin (Rom. 9:22).

Second Thessalonians 1:8-9 ties these images together. When Christ returns, he will "[inflict] vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will suffer the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might."

In the garden, when Adam and Eve sinned, they experienced God's wrath through physical suffering. They were alienated from God. And their nature was corrupted. In hell, all of these will be final and eternal.²

Christians should care about all suffering in the world, but they should care most about eternal suffering. Judgment is real. And the fact is that apart from Christ, people will face eternal judgment. That's the first reason we should prioritize proclaiming the gospel.

² *Evangelical Convictions: A Theological Exposition of the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America*

The Exclusivity of Christ's Atonement

The second reason is the exclusivity of Christ's atonement. There's only one way to escape God's wrath. It's through Christ's death on the cross, as declared in the gospel.

Paul says "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, *and* are justified by his grace as a gift, *through* the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith" (Rom. 3:23-25a). Propitiation means to satisfy the wrath of God. It's only through Christ's atoning sacrifice that God's wrath can be satisfied.

As Paul goes on to say in Romans 5, sin and condemnation and death came into the world through one man, Adam. And through one man, Jesus Christ, righteousness and forgiveness and life came into the world (vv. 17-19). Although we're all guilty of sin, through faith in Christ we can be justified, or declared "not guilty."

There's no other way. "[Jesus] is the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through [him]" (Jn. 14:6). "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). It's only through Jesus' death and resurrection that we can escape God's coming judgment. And Jesus' death and resurrection are declared in the gospel. That's the second reason we must prioritize proclamation.

The Necessity of Hearing

The third reason is the necessity of hearing the gospel. The justification we need comes only through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 2:16). And the only way to believe is if we hear. And the only way to hear is if someone preaches the gospel.

This is what Paul says in Romans 10:13-15: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!'"

Let me say it again. The only way to be saved from God's wrath is through faith in Christ's work on the cross. And the only way to come to faith is by hearing the gospel. And the only way someone will hear the gospel and believe is if someone proclaims the gospel. That's why Paul is set apart for the gospel (Rom. 1:1). The gospel is the only thing that's powerful to save (Rom.1:16). That's why he makes it his ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named (Rom.15:20).

As we trace the growth of the church throughout Acts, what we see is the word does the work (cf. 1 Thess. 2:13) of bringing people to faith in Christ. As the word increases, the number of those obedient to the gospel increases (6:7; cf. 12:24; 19:20; 28:31).

This is why proclaiming the gospel must be a priority in missions. The whole world is under the wrath of God. And apart from the saving work of Christ they will suffer God's just judgment eternally. The only way for them to be saved is to hear the gospel and believe.

Some would say that if we prioritize proclamation of the good *news* and people's *spiritual* needs, then we may forget about good *deeds* and people's *physical* needs. But that's not actually true. Some

sociologists have demonstrated that historically it's churches who prioritize saving souls that do the most social good.³

So, let's not neglect to do good deeds and alleviate physical and social suffering in our world. But at the same time, let's prioritize proclaiming the gospel and alleviating eternal suffering in our world.

PLANT CHURCHES

Let's now turn to the topic of church planting. Why is church planting a priority for missions at First Free? And why was it important for Paul?

We've seen that on their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas took great pains to make sure that churches were planted and established in the places they proclaimed the gospel. But why? This is what I see in Scripture: we should prioritize planting churches because the mission involves both evangelism and edification.

There isn't a verse in the New Testament that says, "Go and plant churches." But if you look at the Great Commission I think it's somewhat implied. Remember what we learned the first week. The Great Commission has three participles that modify the main command to make disciples. The first is to go to all nations. We've covered that. But what about the other two—the call to baptize and to teach people to observe all that Christ has commanded. Both baptism and teaching presume the existence of a local church.

What does the church do with new believers? They baptize them, as a way to mark them off as belonging to Christ and his church. And normally, when someone is baptized, they are added to the church (cf. Acts 2:41). So, you can't fulfill the call to baptize without the existence of a local church. And if there isn't a local church, then one needs to be planted.

The same thing is true about teaching them to obey Christ. Did you notice in Acts 14, when Paul and Barnabas went back to strengthen the churches, one of the main things they did was to appoint elders in all of those churches. It was critical that there *was* a church. But it was *also* critical that the churches had solid leadership who could teach the faith and form the faithful. They needed evangelism *and* edification.

We see something similar in Titus 1:5, where Paul gives instructions about establishing the churches in Crete. He says, "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you."

Then he goes on to talk about the qualifications of an elder. They need to be strong in character. *And*, they "must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it" (v. 9).

In order for the Great Commission to be fulfilled, people have to be taught to observe all that Christ has commanded. And that teaching responsibility falls *first* to qualified elders and pastors, who know the truth, can teach the truth, and correct people who contradict the truth.

³Andy Johnson, *Missions*, 23

The elders and pastors don't do all the teaching. But their office and ministry set the tone for all the teaching in the church. They're the ones responsible for equipping other teachers and disciple makers in the church.

Without elders, you can't fulfill the command to teach well. And you can't have elders without churches. And if there isn't a local church, then one needs to be planted.

That's why I say I believe the call to plant churches is not only *described* in the New Testament, but that there is an implicit *prescribed* command to plant churches.

We can't limit our view of missions to preaching the gospel for the sake of conversion. Our aim is to make disciples. And that happens in the context of the local church. So, the missionary work isn't complete until churches are established and stable enough to continue on their own.

Conclusion

There are so many things we could focus on in missions. There are so many needs and so many good things to do. My goal in this series has not been to minimize the good ministry that other churches or parachurch organizations are doing around the world. I pray the Lord blesses them. My goal for this series is to give a biblical rationale for why *we* prioritize the things that we do at First Free.

It's my hope that we have helped you gain greater clarity on our priorities. We prioritize people groups, partnership with the local church, proclamation of the gospel, and planting churches.

Some of you may be thinking about going into missions at some point. I hope you'll consider these biblical priorities of people groups, partnership with the local church, proclamation, and planting.

Many of you give to First Free. I hope this helps you see that your giving is being distributed according to these priorities.

Many of you give to missionaries independent of First Free. I hope these priorities help you think about your own priorities in giving.

Some of you serve on our missions committee now or you may serve at some point in the future. I hope these priorities will help you to focus, among the myriad of people and ministries that ask for our support.

And for all of you here, I hope that above all, you have been reminded of the urgent need of the nations, the need for the local church in mission, and the absolute necessity for making the gospel central in all we do.

I hope you'll partner with us in advancing this mission prayerfully and diligently.