

Missional Thinking Series

AWAKING THE CHURCH TO MISSIONS

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# ACTS

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# Awakening the Church to Missions:

Lessons from the Early Church

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# Awakening the church to Missions

## Lessons from the Early Church: Acts

### Introduction

For the last six years I have been traveling and teaching throughout Latin America and the Caribbean as part of a program of instruction in missions for the Wesleyan Church. The Wesleyan Churches of this area have come together for the purpose of promoting and becoming involved in missions. To do so, they formed a mission's board called JIBACAM (Spanish acronym for Missions Board of Latin American and the Caribbean). Its focus has been on building mission awareness through conferences, with the hope that someday they could begin to send their own missionaries to other peoples and other countries. In the last year they realized this dream and sent a person from Peru to Equatorial Guinea.

The biggest obstacle to making this happen was a lack of understanding, at the local church level, on what it means to become a 'missions' church, and be able to call people to missions, send missionaries and support the work of missions and those they will send as missionaries. The need to deal with this lack of awareness of what missions is and what is involved became the basis for the development of several seminars on missions. These seminars have been presented in over 25 countries as part of a plan to bring missions training to the local church in the countries that are part of JIBACAM.

As I have traveled, I have noted several key concerns that have affected the ability of this group to take the next steps toward fulfilling their dream of calling and sending missionaries.

1. A lack of awareness of what is involved in calling people to missions. The churches do not have a plan to promote and instruct the people in missions or to deal with those being called to missions. They feel inadequate or ill-equipped to do the teaching.
2. A lack of faith in their ability to support missions. They just do not see how it is possible to provide the funding needed for sending and maintaining those who will be sent.
3. A lack of knowledge of when and how a church is to become involved in missions. There is the feeling that a church needs to have a certain number of members, a certain level of development and a certain level of financial stability before they can become involved.

These issues are not unique to these churches or the countries, which, by the way, have been considered by most the “mission field” of the past generation. They have been the ones receiving missionaries from other countries. But, now we see that their concerns are the same as any other country or sending church.

Many churches will say they are not ready to become involved or unable to do so at this time. They will talk about lack of finances, often stating that the current building

program or economic situation makes it difficult or impossible to give to missions. Maybe they will give when their situation improves.

New church plants that are part of a stronger denomination will say they are not ready and cannot afford to give. But, they say, when they are bigger, stronger and more financially secure then they will begin to give. They also talk about the need to teach the new believers about tithing before they can talk about giving to missions.

Older churches that are in maintenance mode or dying will use that fact to state that there just isn't enough to cover the bills, maintain the building, and be involved in missions. They often make the promise that when things improve then maybe they can give again.

The reality is that at all points in the life of a church, new and growing, healthy and building, old and fading, reasons can be found not to be involved. But all the reasons are based on our limits, our problems and our lack of understanding of what God wants and can do through every church at every point in its life.

The point of this series of studies is to look at the early church and its involvement in missions. It had many of the same problems. It didn't understand what God wanted. It often became focused only in the moment, the needs of the moment, and couldn't see beyond that moment. It was definitely a church with limited resources and, as a result, could easily have determined that nothing could be done.

When you look at the availability of resources and the state of the development of the world at the time the church began, it is amazing what was accomplished. It began at a time when transportation was slow and potentially dangerous. The church began at a time when communication was slow and dependent on hand-carried mail. A slow and unpredictable process. The church began during difficult times. Church groups did not buy property, did not build churches, and at times, barely could support those who led and taught them. This was especially true of those who left their homes to become missionaries and pastors in foreign nations.

The church was opposed constantly by the Jews, hindered by the religious groups of that era, was eventually persecuted by Rome, and attacked from within by false teachers. Yet this church accomplished the miraculous. During this era the church grew faster and spread farther in a shorter period of time than at any other time. All without the benefits of modern transportation, modern communication, and modern technology.

Yes, they had little idea of the true extent of the task God had given them. Yes, they had little personal resources. Yes, they had limited access to training and preparation. Yet when God spoke they listened, when God spoke they went, and when God called they responded. They did not think about what they didn't have, what they didn't know, or what was not feasible. Because the one thing they did know was that

God had called them to the work and that God would provide through them all that would be needed to do the work.

People left home with only the clothes on their back and a small bag of necessities, and they conquered their world. In three hundred years the gospel had reached from Spain to India and what is now southern Russia to Ethiopia.

What they did not understand - God taught them. What they did not have - God provided. What they thought was not possible - God revealed to them as possible.

The only barrier to continuing this process is our lack of understanding of what God can do when His people, His church, obey the command to carry the gospel to the world. When we willingly become involved in God's mission, then God will take care of all the issues. According to Paul in 2 Corinthians 8-9 everyone who gave had enough and everyone who received had enough. They knew who was in charge and knew that if they were obedient to God, He would provide. They just had to teach this to everyone, give what God required of them, and go where God sent them.

The book of Acts contains the story of this incredible mission and those who gave their lives to that mission. From this book we can gain the insights needed to move beyond the limits of our life and into the unlimited life of God. We can do missions. God will make it possible. We must choose to believe and give ourselves to that mission. Then we will see God's blessing and provision.

## The beginning is the ending

Ac 1:3

After his suffering, he showed himself to these men and gave many convincing proofs that he was alive. He appeared to them over a period of forty days and spoke about the kingdom of God.

Have you ever paused to think about who you are today and how you arrived at this point in time? Taken time to reflect on your current abilities and skills and how they have grown or changed over the years? Taken time to consider how your knowledge has grown and made it possible to live the life you are living at this moment, in this place?

Even as one thinks about the point at which they began, that person must realize that they are at another point of beginning. Everything that has happened has made this very moment possible. But this moment opens the way to everything that will be possible in the father.

At every moment along the way we receive information, experiences, and instructions that will help us make the decisions that will carry us forward. The end of one stage is the beginning of the next stage. One ending becomes the next beginning - if we will allow it. This means that everything that lies ahead is directly linked to and made possible by what came before.

There are three texts used to define the great commission. One in Matthew, one in Mark and this text in Acts. We often refer to them as the “beginning of the mission.” Some believe that up until this point, the goal of reaching the world with the truth was not clear. But that is not true. Jesus had told his disciples many times that He had come to save the lost of the world. That God loved all of the world. That anyone, yes anyone, who believed would be saved. He came to seek and save all who were lost. But since He physically, in the time allotted, could not go everywhere, He chose to focus on a place and a group to begin the process.

He spent three years teaching and preparing. Three years living, before others, what God wanted all who follow Him to do, proclaim His love to all who would listen. He spent three years in a foreign culture reaching out to neighbors, countrymen, outcasts and foreigners. The call to missions in Acts 1:8 was a summation of all that had gone before and the beginning of all that was to come after.

To make this even clearer, Jesus spends another 40 days, after his resurrection, with His disciples and others. He revealed Himself to them at another level, another intensity. He reviewed all of the teaching he had given, all the events that had occurred, and all the responses that they had received. He wove all of it together so that they would clearly understand what had brought them to this moment, and His proclamation of what would be expected of them.

They were the witnesses. There was no other way to describe the life they had lived, the events they had seen. They could

not escape the facts; no matter which way they went, what decisions they made, how they responded. They would always be witnesses of those three incredible years. They had been created anew as the children of God, the family of God, a witness to all. Those three years and this forty days of review were ending.

The ending made possible the beginning, the new adventure that now lay ahead. Jesus defined what that future would be like and how it would impact their lives. They would continue to be witnesses. That reality would take them into the world in ways they could not comprehend. He told them clearly that they would continue the process of giving God's truth and love to neighbors, countrymen, outcasts and foreigners. Just as he had done in the past, so they would continue the process. Not only them, but all who would follow.

Each, ending of one era, one group, one ministry, would become the basis for the next beginning. Each would make possible the next. The teaching of the one would give skills to the next. The faith of the one would empower the next. The hope of the one would revive the life and hope of the next. The call of the one to go into the world would open the doors for the next to go even farther into the whole world.

His disciples were learning a valuable lesson. One that would be taught and retaught, to those they brought to salvation through to their Lord and Savior. Likewise all the teaching, all the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives should bring us into that same mission.

All our teaching, all our activity, all that we are should bring about this end, which in turn, is a beginning in the life of all we teach, touch and lead. A beginning that takes them to the world with the gospel, that involves them in the mission of God. That reveals that they too, like those of the early church, are the witnesses. The ones who are to go to their neighbors, countrymen, outcasts and foreigners.

The life of the church is more than caring for the hurts and needs of a particular group in a particular place. It is about preparing that group to get beyond its hurts and needs and get involved in the mission, to be the witnesses that God intended them to be, in a world lost and without hope.

Are we as a church, (local, national, universal) bringing our flocks to the same ending that Jesus brought His group to? An ending that became the beginning of bringing hope, faith, love and God's salvation to all who will believe.

Read the following scriptures.

Mark 16:14; Luke 24:25-27; 24:45-49; John 20:31; 1 John 1:1-4

Luke 1:1-4; Acts 10:39-41; 2 Peter 1:15-16

Discuss the following concepts

What is the purpose of an eye-witness?

How does one pass the truth on to another?

Who can be a witness to God's activity?

Why should one testify or be a witness?

How are you or your church doing at being a witness?  
(Neighbor, countryman, outcast, world)

Mission – 02

Acts 2:1-11

“They” are not “we”

The greatest barrier to any message is just this simple; “they” are not “we.” They don’t, they can’t, we don’t, we can’t, so we won’t. We make these statements as the introduction to all of our excuses. By defining them as different from “we”, we create a world of impossibilities.

I mean really, let’s be honest, how does one go to the world so different from our own?

We don’t know their language, which means they don’t know our language. We can’t reach them, which means they don’t attend our church. They don’t think like us, which means they won’t understand. They can’t change, which means they will never be like us. And as long as they are defined as “not like us” then we do not have to take action until they make the changes needed to be like us. Right? Wrong!

Actually we are not interested in changing the world. We want the world to change first and then we will be able to do

something. This is what keeps many at home and uninvolved.

Did Jesus understand this problem? Probably. Did he have a plan? Absolutely.

His plan was to make them wait. Have them pray. Do so until they became open to a totally new possibility - The reality that the people wanted to hear if they were willing to communicate.

They are in prayer, They are waiting, They are ready. The Holy Spirit comes and opens the door to communicating to the world. The door opens to becoming something new, something God wants to create in all of us. A person who is more like Christ, ready to grow and learn how to communicate with those not like us, to draw them to be more like Christ.

The same can happen today, if we will take the steps involved in leaving our comfortable and familiar abodes, our comfort zones, and venture out into a world that is not like us at all. If we will open the door to becoming someone that is more than our “we.”

This lesson is about realizing that the world is everywhere - all around us. The lesson is that the world needs translators. People who know the truth and can translate it so that those who don't know the truth will hear it and be able to respond. To hear that, the goal is not to make them like us, or for us to

become like them. The goal is that all of us together will come to be like Christ.

Whether God gives us a unique gift, of speaking a new language, in a moment, or we have to spend the time and energy to learn a language, the focus is the same, communicating the gospel in a language and form that others will understand. As long as we remain in our homes, churches and world then this will never happen. When we step out through the doors that we hide behind, then anything is possible.

On that specific day, about 120 met in prayer, waiting for direction for the next step. When it came, they moved out of the location where they were praying and into the streets, into the world. There they met people from all over; they met neighbors, countrymen, outcasts and foreigners. It was there, outside the room, that they received God's help, God's gift. It was outside the walls of the meeting place that communication began and the hearts of those present were touched. On that day everyone heard the truth in a language that they could clearly understand. That day there were no barriers of culture, language and status. The ones inside went outside and met anyone and everyone who was ready to listen.

On the very first day of sharing the gospel, when they went out there, neighbors heard, countrymen heard, outcasts heard and foreigners heard. Heard clearly and responded. They heard because they went out and let God communicate through them.

Today we have so many churches and groups are unwilling to go out there. To work at learning a new language and work at communicating to other people. So many are waiting for them to change, be more like us, come to us and then they can communicate. We want them to be like “we” and come inside instead of us leaving behind and going out there. We don’t want to risk our “we.”

That, to be honest is a bit confusing. Why? We think that we are what they should look like. As if somehow we are the key, the primary example of what it means to be the body of Christ. We want to think of ourselves as somehow like the original group. Funny thing is we think that we are like them. We think of our language as the key language, our culture as the key to understanding, our location as the ideal place to learn the truth. When in fact none of these things are anything like what existed then.

Very little of who we are looks anything like the first group that gathered that day in that first prayer meeting. None of us speaks that language. None of us dresses like them. That culture no longer exists anywhere in the world. That setting will never be recreated. Once they left that room everything changed. We, was not longer restricted to a particular group or setting. It was expanded to include anyone, anywhere who heard, in whatever setting and by whatever language was available.

We need to have our thinking refocused. Just like what happened on that day. The blessing they received within took them out to the world. The blessing they received prepared

them to meet the people and communicate clearly what they had received. For some, that meant hearing it for the first time in their own language from strangers. for others, it was in their local language from people who knew them and knew how to communicate to them. The blessing that our Lord's witnesses received, opened their eyes to see the world and freed them to go out and be bold and confident witnesses.

It is the same today, whether you are go outside to the person next door, or to a person around the other side of the world. They need us to leave ourselves behind, our world, our language and learn who they are and how to communicate with them. At first they may be confused. They don't really expect us to come to them, they don't really expect us to understand their lives, and they really don't expect us to try to do it in their language. But that is exactly what we need to do.

Farmers learning to talk to educators. Businessmen learning to talk to factory workers. Youth learning to talk to the old. Builders learning to talk doctors. Seems difficult and almost impossible. But we are not talking about the latest political issue, health concern, or social development. We are talking about the eternal truth of God's word. And we have the Holy Spirit to guide us in the translation process. God revealed this when He helped a group of people leap beyond their limits and talk to people from all over the world and in their own languages. You can be sure it was not just a "word-for-word" translation but included all the inflections, nuances

and culturally correct forms so that there was no confusion, no misunderstanding.

The only confusion that day was on the part of those receiving the truth. They could not believe what they were hearing and that they were hearing it. Hearing it from a group that usually would not associate with many, if not most of them. It was not just about communicating in their language, but across cultural and social barriers. It was about bridging cavernous voids of time, distance and understanding. They knew what was happening and it confused them, yet it opened the door so that they could hear the truth.

Today is no different. We are called to the same task. Cross the voids, no matter how immense or overwhelming they may seem. We are called to go outside of our protected environments, learn the language of those around us, whether near or far, and tell them the truth. If we will do this, they will respond.

Read the following scriptures

1 Corinthians 13:1; Jeremiah 1:7-9; Luke 12:12; 2 Corinthians 2:12; Psalm 145:10-13; Acts 4:13, 31.

What does it mean that the Holy Spirit will give us words to speak?

How does Jesus presence in your life affect your ability to communicate?

Why should we go out to the world?

Whose words will you use to communicate? Think carefully about this.

How long has God been seeking out people to communicate His truth?

How is today the same or different from any other time that God has called on people to communicate the truth?

Mission – 03

Acts 2:38-39

The far away has become near

On this day all barriers and distance were eliminated. On this day all four groups included in Jesus' command (regarding where they would go to be witnesses) came together to hear the first ever public proclamation of the gospel. Peter's concluding statement makes it very clear that he was aware of the diversity of the group before him.

“the promise is to you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

My home (Jerusalem), my people (Judea), my enemies (Samaria), my foreigners (the world). All are present, hear, and respond to the message. A multitude of languages, social positions, relationships, and citizenships. All are present to hear the gospel. Can you imagine what it must have been like to be part of such a diverse group? Can you imagine

what it meant to offer the same hope to ALL who were being called? Can you imagine how rapidly the world changed for everyone present on that day?

On that day all of the past history of God's promise was brought to a focal point so that it could be explained and applied to ALL who responded.

Promises made to Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, David and a host of prophets. Promises that someday, their willingness to follow God and proclaim His message would open the door of blessing for all the nations of the world. Promises made by God, who used every opportunity to remind the people of Israel why He had chosen them. Not just so they could enjoy his presence and blessing, but so they could be a channel of that blessing to others.

Peter's review of several key scriptures highlights this truth. God promised and today, what He has promised has been fulfilled in Jesus. This same Jesus, has become Lord and Savior and opened the paths of life that lead one into the presence of God. He has conquered all that would prevent anyone from receiving forgiveness and the chance to receive God's pardon and blessing.

No longer would the message of God be a future hope. No longer would it be restricted to one group. It is now the message of today and a message for all the nations. For all who hear and respond.

It is not a message for one group. On this day the message passed from the Jews to everyone beyond them. It is not just a message for ourselves. It is a message for everyone beyond us.

For ages the promise, the message had been held in trust for this day. A trust that often was misunderstood and misinterpreted. A trust that was often restricted and controlled for the benefit of a small group. This trust was selfishly guarded as the property of one group. A mistake that was now to be corrected. The disciples had heard the words of the Lord, they had prayed for the direction of the Holy Spirit, and now they took that trust and released it to all who would hear and respond.

This change did not happen after years of teaching and preparation. After years of building a strong and well developed organization. After years of careful training, and development of programs and methodologies designed to create stability and effective ministries, without negatively affecting the core group.

No, it occurred on the first day of the life of the new church. It occurred without concern for finances and structures. It occurred without worry about how the work would be done and what training would be needed. It occurred because they had heard the message and allowed the Holy Spirit to take them out into the world, out where the lost were, out beyond the safety of their concepts of what should be done, and of what we think should be done. Out to the world, to you, your

children, you who are far off – all whom God will call to be His own.

The first act of the, as yet, unorganized, unstructured, unfinanced, unprepared church was to go out to all the world and proclaim the gospel. They did not worry about these things. They remembered clearly that Jesus had promised that all the needs would be supplied to those who obey and love the Father (Jn 14:12-14). They remembered clearly that Jesus had promised that the Holy Spirit would guide them in all truth (Jn 14:26). Not just the word to be spoken, but in all truth. Truth about how to lead, truth about how to organize, truth about how to maintain, all the truth they would need at each step in the process of going to you, your children, you who far off, and you in all the world.

This was all possible because they had been listening to Jesus. Listening for three years. Listening since the resurrection (40 days ago). Praying obediently, listening and waiting for 10 days for the Holy Spirit to come and show them what was next, give them the words to speak and the strength to do what they would be told to do.

We could look at this and say we need a time of preparation before we go, we need times of prayer before we go. We need to be disciplined before we go. And this would be a valid point and yet have no validity at all. The issue is not really the amount of teaching received, the time spent praying, or the time given to preparation. It is really about our willingness to go and to speak at the moment God sends us. Too often we become focused on the “before”, on what we

think needs to be done, and never get to the after, what God wants us to do. We never enter the moment and so never see what God can do out there.

It is the difference between the many being called and the few being chosen. Many are interested but want more time, time to do all that they think they need to do or obtain what they think is missing. The result is they become so involved in the “before” they never get to that moment of going out to the work.

Then there are those who are always ready, who are always going, even when God is teaching them, even when they are being prepared, even when they are praying. The moment God speaks, they are already going out. Notice the difference in the disciples before the resurrection and at this moment. Before, they weren’t listening, before they weren’t responding. Before, they weren’t waiting on the Lord. Now they are.

Peter’s sermon reveals the difference. It uses scriptures not previously used as part of Jesus’ teaching. He had heard them before, but now the connections are made clear. All he has heard, as a child, as a youth, as an adult, as a disciple of Jesus; all are coming together. It has become clear that the work is out there “to you, your children, you who far away, all whom God will call.”

Are we ready to be out there? Are we ready for the far to come very near? Are we ready to meet the people out there?

Read Isaiah 59:19; Joel 2:28-32; Ephesians 2:13-22

Who are the ones who will believe?

Where are the ones who will believe in relation to your church?

Do you really need more teaching, more prayer, more preparation to go out there?

What do you really need, in order to go out, so that all who are far from God can call on His name?

Mission – 04

Acts 3:24

Heirs of the heirs of the heirs....

It's happened. . No more quietly moving around, speaking in soft tones in quiet corners. All it took was one act of faith, one act of proclamation, at the right moment, in the right place and suddenly everyone is aware Peter and John healed a man who was born a cripple. They did it at the very entrance of the temple, at a time when a great crowd of people were present. Right at the doorstep of the leaders who only a few short weeks ago were responsible for the crucifixion of Jesus.

Now the leaders became aware. I mean how can you cover up the healing of a man born lame? The healing of a man who was, in the minds of everyone, far away from hope. Most believed that his illness was a direct result of sin in his

family, and so it was a permanent punishment. But on that day, in Jerusalem, that lie was put to rest and God would be glorified. The man was healed and freed from the prison of that lie, the prison of his illness and the prison of his sin. He was free and became an heir.

The people were amazed by what has happened. They were amazed at the message they were receiving, the resurrection of the one they helped to crucify. They were amazed to hear a lowly fisherman explain the promise of God and its fulfillment in Jesus. They are amazed at the warning that Peter and John dared to proclaim. “If you do not listen, you will be cut off from being a member of the people of God.” A death sentence to any Jew. They were amazed that Peter then proclaimed that all those who believe in Jesus are the heirs of the prophets and of the covenant of Abraham.

Those who were present had the first opportunity to become the next generation of heirs of the promise of God. They were the ones who could receive the blessing and so become the source of blessing to others. It would be through those who listened and received the message that others had the opportunity to become the true heirs and so the ones God will use to bless the nations.

In that moment the method of determining the heirs of the kingdom of God changed. No longer was it a birthright by physical birth. It was now a birthright by spiritual birth. This is exactly what Jesus was telling Nicodemus in John 3. The heirs of the kingdom would not be determined by their physical birth but by their spiritual birth. Those heirs would

now be found outside of the normal process, normal structure. They would be found in the streets and cities and countries of the world.

Peter proclaimed it to all who heard and many received the message and became the new beneficiaries of God's will. The heirs of the heirs. But what if Peter and John had not gone out that day? Had not gone to the temple that day? Had not proclaimed the truth and freed that lame man that day? How many people would have lost the opportunity to become the heirs of the heirs?

Actually how many times throughout their history had the Jews failed to proclaim this reality? God had called them to be a nation of priests (Exodus) to the world. From the beginning they were encouraged to share their birthright with the nations. David repeats this idea over and over when he talks about the nations coming before God in praise and adoration. Over and over they had failed. No more would this be true.

On this day the error was corrected. An outcast, a lame man was used to make it clear. A new law of inheritance had been established.

Fast forward to today. We are the ones who have inherited the right to be heirs. We have received this message and we have allowed it to enter us and it has resulted in our spiritual birth into the family of God. Yes, we are the heirs of the promise given to Abraham, the covenant that has been passed down through the ages. We are the ones who will be

used as God's means to bless the nations – to go to those who have not yet heard or had the opportunity to be made into the next generation of heirs.

The heirs of the kingdom are out there waiting to be found, waiting for the opportunity hear the message and claim the birthright that God has prepared for them. But if no one goes searching for them. If no one goes out to proclaim this truth, then many will lose this incredible inheritance (their birthright as the spiritual children of God.

It is exciting and challenging. It can be scary and filled with danger. There is no way of knowing who will respond, where to find them, and how others will react to our activity. But our heirs are out there. We cannot bring into existence the next generation of heirs by staying in our safe but isolated little realms. Our hallowed and protected centers of self-centeredness and comfort.

Describe your situation any way you want. Make all the excuses you want to make. Try out any form of explanation that you can find. No matter what you do, say or feel, the next generation is out there, and that is where we need to go.

If, by some chance, they do come to us, it is because someone found a way to go out to them first. Someone somehow made contact with the people out there. And they did so in such a way as to convince them, that there is so much more to life and so they came.

No matter where you look, life and its continued existence is dependent on a process that results in heirs. Heirs who will carry what they have received and give it to another generation. That process, no matter what it is, involves taking in something that is outside of the individual. Resources that will make it possible to produce the next generation. To obtain these resources means entering into an environment that is outside of the individual. To remain in isolation will result in death.

The resources for the reproduction of the next generation of believers are outside the church. We need to go outside of those who already believe. Go to the people called: you (Jerusalem), your children (Judea), you who are far away (Samaria), and all who will believe (the world). To find them we will need to go outside our comfort zones. We will need to understand that no matter where we are in our spiritual life, without them we will grow stale, lose our vitality, and die.

A healthy body is one that is always bringing in resources from without. Whether it is growing, training, living, it is always bringing in new resources (food, air, water) to continue the process. This continues from the time we are babies until we are old and dying. To remain healthy requires that we bring in new resources every day.

In the church it is the same - from the day a church is born until it comes to an end. The only way for it to be healthy is to be bringing in others. Others, who will become its life, and eventually its heirs. Others, from every part of the world.

Read Matthew 8:10-11; Genesis 18:18; 28:14; Romans 4:13, 16; Revelation 7:9; Luke 13:28-30; 14:21-24

Do you have an heir or are you an heir? Reflect on what that means to your parents and/or your children. How important is it to have an heir?

Why did God reject some people in the scriptures above? Who became the heirs, or those to receive His blessings?

Do you have an heir to the faith that you have received from God through Christ?

Are you helping others to become heirs to the truth? How and where?

## The Mission – 05                      Acts 4:25-26

### The storm that never stops

Well, it has to happen at some point. At some point the brick wall, the barrier will appear and present itself as the insurmountable challenge. It could be in the form of a threat, a job that appears bigger than we can accomplish, limits in our resources, etc. We will have to face this fact of life; there will be opposition to any activity that reveals obedience to God.

In Acts 4, the opposition was in the form of the leaders objecting to the apostles proclaiming in the name of Jesus, the resurrection of the dead. The leaders were at a loss as to

what to do and so put the apostles in prison. The next day they threatened them and commanded them not to speak or teach in the name of Jesus.

Peter's response was a clear challenge to the authority of the religious leaders and of his decision to obey God. "Which is better in the sight of God, to obey man rather than God." In other words, who is really in charge of what we do and what we say; the ideas of man or the authority of God; the dead religion of man or the living truth of Jesus?

This response completely confounded the leaders. They were at a loss as to how to react. Everyone knew the man who had been healed. Everyone knew the story of Jesus' resurrection, especially those responsible for the crucifixion. Everyone was watching to see what would happen. Who would succeed in maintaining their position and, as a result, the right to continue? This was a critical point of decision. If Peter failed to take a stand, what would have happened the newly started church.

It was stand or run. Reveal their faith or hide the truth. Proclaim the gospel and give it life or remain silent and sound the death knell for all to hear. Would it be the end of the beginning? This is exactly what the leaders wanted and what all who oppose the truth are hoping for.

But on that day no one ran, no one hid the truth. The gospel came to life and became a beacon to all who would seek freedom from their sin and brought the opportunity to know

the source salvation, Jesus. What had been brought out into the open would remain outside, visible for all to see.

Now they are ready to enter the inner room again. Not because they are afraid and hiding. Not because they have been forced to run away or back down. They enter to gain new strength for the next opportunity. They enter to come before God to receive His blessing and direction. They enter because that is what “family” does. They come together to share the fruit of their labor and enjoy a time of rest and refreshment from their labor.

Peter and John returned to the family to report, so that all would know what had happened and be encouraged. They returned to call the church to a time of rejoicing and petition. A chance to thank God for His presence and to pray for His continued guidance and strength. A chance to challenge each other to be strong in the faith and expect greater expressions of God’s power as they continued to proclaim the truth.

The prayer was brief and to the point. At first glance, certain aspects of this prayer seem a bit extreme. Those praying compared their situation to a psalm of David (Ps 2) about the opposition of the nations against the Lord. At this point there was no outside opposition. It was all coming from within one group of people, members of one nation. There were no kings involved on this day. So what nations were being referred to, what peoples were doing the plotting? At this point in time the number of people who knew what had happened, who had heard the gospel and were opposing, it was very small. All the activity was happening in one city, in

one small corner of the empire. At least that is what it appeared to be in the eyes of many.

The leaders thought they could stop what was happening. They probably thought, “they are only a small group of people. If we can stop this now, then nothing will come of it. If we can silence this group of uneducated, unsophisticated followers of a minor person from an unknown city, then all will be well. By tomorrow no one will remember what happened.”

But the truth was far different. For, from the beginning, the nations have been in opposition to God. All peoples, in all time, have sought ways to plot against any who proclaim the truth. Rarely have the kings of this earth been willing to share their power with anyone, even God. What happened on this day in Acts is representative of all that has happened in the past and everything that will happen in the future, and will continue to be true until the Lord’s return. The nations will rage, the people will plot and the kings will oppose the Lord and His salvation.

So the activities of this day represent something that was much bigger than what was happening with a small group of people in a remote, isolated part of a much larger world. It is about what will happen every time a group of God’s family chooses to go outside to the world. It is about the opposition that will always exist and that must be dealt with. No matter where we are, who we are, or when we are sharing this truth, there will be opposition. Opposition to the sovereign right of God to rule. Opposition to those who part choose to proclaim

to all how to become citizens of His kingdom. Opposition designed to force anyone willing to go outside back into hiding, into safety.

It is not about why. Why are they opposing us? Why are they raging against the truth? Why are they plotting to harm us? That is the wrong question. We are not the focus. All the opposition, while directed towards us, is really against the creator of the universe. It is an opposition doomed to failure even before it begins. Yet because it is directed against us, the ones called to proclaim, they have the hope that in this moment, in this location, maybe they can block the truth from being revealed.

Yes, that was the point of Peter's response to the leaders. "I know what you are raging against; I know who you are opposing. It is not me. It is God, the source of the truth. So tell me, who should we serve, God or you?"

Today we must make the same kind of choices. Will we remain in seclusion and avoid the conflict? Will we obey man and not God? Or will we accept the risks and move out into the world? Will we accept the truth that there will be opposition?

If our answer is no, then we lose. And we are not the only losers; everyone we could have spoken to loses as well. We lose the opportunity to see God work, to see the power of God moving among the people. They lose their souls to the false prince of the nations.

If our decision is yes, then we can experience what this small group of people, in a remote corner of the world, experienced. They prayed and God responded. He shook the building, He shook them and then they shook the world. They became bolder in their proclamation. They were united. They received even more power and God's grace was on them. They won honor and respect for their faith and those who heard them received the salvation of their souls from an eternity of loss.

Say yes and take the risk. Don't be afraid of the raging of the nations. Don't be afraid of the schemes of man, they can only destroy the body, not the soul. Don't be afraid of those who oppose the Lord. They cannot win. Say yes and receive the power to go out to the world.

Read Psalms 2:1-6; 1 Kings 22:13; Daniel 3:16-28; 6:10-21; Isaiah 8:9-18; Proverbs 21:30; Isaiah 14:27; 46:8-13

Have you ever felt threatened by those who are not Christians? Why did you feel threatened?

Have you ever read the story or testimony of someone who has suffered for their faith? Discuss how the story made you feel?

Why are you afraid of those who are not a part of the family of God?

Review the stories of Daniel and his friends. Reread the passages in Isaiah. Think about why you are afraid and then

remember what God has promised in bringing His salvation to others.

What is your responsibility? What is your risk? What are the benefits of obedience?

Mission – 06

Acts 6:1-7

### Danger, Beware of Blind spots

So much was happening. So many people were coming. So much to be done. At some point it had to happen. Something was overlooked. Someone was missed. Someone felt forgotten.

It happens all the time in our ministries too. Not because of a conscious effort to exclude or forget. We just don't have the time, or take the time, to think through all that is happening and make the necessary adjustments needed to provide for all the contingencies. Even the best planning and preparation has flaws. Flaws that won't be seen until we are well into the activity or program. The issue is, what do we do when we discover the mistake? How we respond will allow things to continue and grow; or will ruin all the work and effort expended.

The church in Acts was growing fast. It was taking in people from all kinds of backgrounds. The largest group was, of course, those from the neighborhood. The family and friends of everyone already part of the core group. The other

members were people from outside of the neighborhood. People who came from other countries other backgrounds. Likewise, in our churches, we have similar situations. We generally see those closest to us, those most like us. Unfortunately, we tend to minister to them first. Then when they are cared for, we take time to look beyond. Beyond who we are, who are part of our group, to see those who have come from outside.

That is what was happening in the life of the early church. People were responding. The group was growing. And the group from outside was feeling forgotten and omitted from all the benefits of being part of the whole. They cried and asked the leaders why they were not being treated as equals. Why were they not receiving the same as the other larger group?

The church became aware of a hazard in the road. A blind spot that had not been anticipated. Now they had to deal with the situation. The decision to be made could drastically affect the future of the new church. They had basically two options. Continue as they were, without making any changes or make changes.

The first choice would have effectively divided the new church into two camps. The “us” and “them” camps. The “us” would have been the Jews, the original heirs, the “true” heirs. The ones who had been there from the beginning. And “them,” the ones who had arrived only recently. They came from other countries, other cultures, other social statuses.

They were not in the original group or related to the original group.

Making this decision would have been devastating.

The other decision, to make changes, would create a new level of unity and purpose and effectively expand the possibilities of who could belong to the group. “Us” and “them”, become “we,” we who are the followers of Christ, we who are heirs of the kingdom without regard for place of birth, style of life, or social status. But making this decision included another possible blind spot. Who would become the new group of leaders, who would be assigned the responsibility to care for the issues that could potentially create another “us” and “them” the division?

Here again they had to choose make a choice. The original group had many excellent leaders. They would do an excellent job. Nothing would be out of place. No one would be forgotten, but somehow everything they would do would be tainted. Tainted by the fact that no one was willing to trust someone from the “them” group to share in the responsibilities and work. Making this choice would express a lack of confidence and in time have the same result as the decision to make no changes, to not deal with the issue.

The other choice would be to include among the new leadership, individuals from the “them” group. This would help to create a new structure, a new approach, a new understanding of who “we” are. This decision would open more doors to ministry, more possibilities for involvement

and a greater vision of who can be part of the group. It would allow for a greater ability to reach even farther into the world of those out there.

This new young church went one step farther. They not only voted for the change, they decided that the new leadership group would be made up of all outsiders. They even included someone who had been completely outside of their world, a person who originally was a Gentile and had converted to Judaism. They opened the door wide and stated very clearly that there would be no barriers, no blind spots. They voted to not just go part way into the world, but to move their world into the world out there.

Let us use the family as an example of this situation. As our children grow and approach adulthood there comes a time when we will need to find husbands and wives for them. The question is where will we find them? We have only a few options. They can be married to each other, or another close member of the family. Or they can marry someone outside of the family but still related in some way. Or lastly they can marry someone totally outside of the family.

Medical science informs us that marrying a sibling or even first cousin will result in the development of serious and even deadly genetic problems in the next generations. This is not good for the continued health and development of the family. Marrying members of the family that are not closely related is better but will in time restrict the overall growth and development of the family in other ways. True health

and growth involves seeking partners outside of the immediate family and its relatives.

The first decision maintains all the property and control within the immediate family. The second level allows some freedom but in the end still does not recognize the rights of anyone who is not part of the family. The third choice opens many doors to greater resources, greater security and greater contacts, all of which can also involve various types of risk.

This is true today. All churches state that they want to grow. And their ability to grow will be determined by the type of decisions that they make when new people start to enter into the church and create changes in the original conditions that existed. Our willingness to accept the presence of these outsiders, our ability to identify their needs, our ability to share equally all the resources, and especially our willingness to share the responsibilities and authority with them, will determine what happens next.

We all want to believe that we want to reach those out there. We want the world to know Christ. We want to be obedient but with a condition. We don't really want to share. We don't want outsiders coming in and disturbing us, and we don't want to go out to them. And so, in reality, what growth our church had will end, those that we reached will leave, and the opportunity to proclaim the gospel will be lost.

It is not about having a plan, more training or any other excuse we might think up. It is about our willingness to be a part of those out there and letting them become a part of us.

That was the issue the church leaders faced that day. Will we choose to let those out there become a part of us, to help us grow to become more than we thought possible, become the church God wants us to be.

The leaders chose to open the doors to the future, to continue to go out there. Acts reports that this decision resulted in the church increasing rapidly. Even some of the priests responded who had been enemies of the church. They found the truth because the door were opened wide. The message was clear, there is room for everyone in the family of God. There is a place for all and work for all in this family. No restrictions, no prejudices.

It is a choice that will be faced over and over. There will always be another challenge to deal with, another situation that affects how we share what we have with those who have joined us from outside. There is only one plan. Open the doors, let them in, and allow those within to go out to bring in more. Share everything - resources, responsibility and leadership.

Read Exodus 18:18-23; Colossians 1:3-8

What was Moses' response to Jethro's suggestion about sharing his responsibilities with others? Was the recommendation a good one? Why?

How did Paul react to Epaphras starting an independent work in the city of Colossi?

Have you ever had to share responsibility with someone?  
Have you ever had to turn over your work to another person?  
Reflect on how you felt and why you felt that way?

Why do we resist sharing authority and responsibility with others?

## Mission 07

## Acts 8:1

### The original Fear Factor

**He's dead.** They grabbed him, passed judgment and stoned him.

How could they do that?

The place just went crazy! Suddenly they were throwing stones. Stephen is dead! Then came a momentary pause and people started running everywhere. Stephen's supporters ran to escape a similar fate. The Pharisees ran, hoping to catch another leader and rid themselves of another pest, another irritant. The crowds ran to get out of the way, lest they be mistaken as a supporter of Stephen and suffer a similar fate, or be grabbed by the Roman soldiers who didn't care who they grabbed or if they were part of the problem.

The next days were crazy. Those from other cities and other areas of Judea and Galilee decided it was time to go home. The Jews from other countries decided they had had enough of Jerusalem. The believers in Jerusalem had to decide what

to do; stay and risk being arrested or leave and risk losing what they could not take with them.

People were also forced to make decisions about their new found faith. With Stephen's death, the pent-up anger and rage of the leaders had been released. They were ready to attack again, at least to attack those of lesser stature than the apostles. Now they could go after the followers and thus weaken the leaders. And they had the perfect weapon in the form of Saul, who was willing to attack without fear or restraint anyone who called himself a follower of Christ.

The apostles stayed in Jerusalem. They sensed a especial protection from what was happening. The believers in Jerusalem stayed. Saul found some of them and began to fill the prisons. The deacons (of which Stephen had been a part) chose to leave. They appeared to be especially vulnerable. The Jews from other lands who became followers of Jesus also left. They stood out from everyone else because of their language and other factors. The church was in turmoil and yet...

Before we go forward let us go back. Let us consider just what happened on that day. Why did the leaders attack, and in such a violent manner? What made this day so different?

Lets consider a few things that made this day different.

Message – The message was not different. Stephen's accusation was really no different than that of Peter. He told the leaders, right to their faces, that they were responsible for

Jesus' death. He further told them that he would obey God, and not them, when it came to his future activity and the continued proclamation of the gospel. So Stephen's presentation and accusation was not substantially different than what they had heard before.

What was different was the person who was speaking. Before, it was a person from Judea or Galilee, a person who was from the area. Now the message was coming from Stephen, a Jew who had accepted some of the culture and lifestyle of the Greeks. He had become a Hellenistic Jew; someone distasteful to the Jews of Palestine. Someone seen as corrupted by the influence of the world and less than worthy in the eyes of many from Palestine and especially to the Jewish leaders.

Person – Before, the people they had been dealing with were those who had spent three years with Jesus. They knew who they were and knew what to expect from them. They also knew that those twelve, as well as the others close to Jesus, had intimate knowledge of the history of the past three years, and especially of the past couple of months. At least two of this group had witnessed the trial of Jesus and could look them in the eye and remind them of specific words and actions. They had tried to silence them only to have them released from prison by angels, only to see the intensity of their activity increase. Opposing this group had become an action in futility and only increased their frustration.

But now, the opposition came from Stephen. He was not one of the twelve. He had not been with Jesus. He may not have

been in Jerusalem during the Passover. He definitely was not present during the trial and crucifixion. He probably was not in the group who saw Jesus alive after the resurrection. He, in fact, was a foreigner but acting and speaking like one of the original followers. He represented a significant shift in the power structure and what was happening in the church. His presence represented a real possibility that this movement would not, could not be contained. The Pharisees and priests would lose all they had.

Audience – Jerusalem was a large city. Everyday people were coming and going. Most of them on a regular basis. Except for a few merchants who came in to trade, there was not a great change in who was a part of the crowd on any given day. During those first days of the church there were many from other countries that had come for the celebration that happened 50 days after Pentecost. Possibly by now many of them had left, although it is clear from the events of Acts 6 that there were a sizeable number of them still present. All in all, the people present are not significantly different than those who had been there since this all began.

What was different was the shift of people from supporting the old leadership (the Pharisees and priests) to the leaders of the fledgling church. Much more important was who has begun shifting. The teaching, the organization, the admiration, and commitment of the church's members are having a profound effect now on the Jewish leadership. Acts reports that many priests and leaders were becoming part of the church. When the old leaders looked at their ranks they

saw that they were diminishing. People were abandoning them to join the new group of believers.

The advice to be patient, given by Gamaliel, was wearing out (Acts 5:34-39). The Jewish leaders were no longer interested in whether they were dealing with God and His truth. Day by day all they could see was what they were losing. They were losing their power, their position, their control and money.

Still it took one more factor before they crossed the line. They needed a scapegoat. On this day they received it in the form of a group of Jews from Alexandria. A group that had not been a witness to all that had happened in the past three years. A group who felt they were under attack by Stephen. A group that was already struggling for recognition by the Jewish leadership, and felt what little they had in the way of acceptance and recognition was about to be lost. This group provided the lightening rod, the focal point needed to make it possible for the leaders to react.

It was all based on a lie, but isn't that always the truth? It was based on a false identity; they really thought they were the chosen ones. It was based on fear, as usual. We fear what we don't understand. We fear anything that might prove we are wrong. We fear anyone who challenges our world and its shaky foundation.

What is interesting is that the same issues that made the stoning of Stephen a reality are the very same issues that prevent the church from being completely involved in the mission of God. We like the truth as we have defined it, a

truth that allows us to be comfortable where we are. We like our identity as it is. It may not be what God wants, but the world doesn't know that and believes we are followers of Christ. We are satisfied with what we know. We understand what we are doing. Don't ask us to take risks, to have faith, or go where we have no understanding of what happens next. We don't want to hear anymore. To hear more may mean we will discover that we have made mistakes. We don't want that much honesty. No changes please. We know what we are doing and how to maintain things just as they are.

That may actually be the real reason behind all that happened on that day in Acts. The church had become comfortable and it was time to move on. It was time to apply what had been learned in a broader context and explore their faith in new ways, new locations, and among others who needed to hear. It was time to go "farther out there." God wanted them to move farther out there and the Jewish leaders did not want them to go farther out there. The two concepts are incompatible.

Did Stephen know that he was to be the lightening rod for change? Did he know that his actions, his death would open the door to going "farther out there?" Did the leaders have any idea that their attempt to stop the continued spread of the gospel would have the opposite result? We will never know because nothing is said. It doesn't matter. What matters is God knew. God allowed it to happen. God led the church to a larger world out there.

At some point every church, every group will come to this point. Someone will begin to talk about something “out there” and the need to go “out there.” To do more than they are already doing. As this begins others will resist this call, resist the evaluation, try to avoid the truth that there is more “out there” and that we need to go even farther. We need to be part of the mission to the world, not just to those like us.

We will either be part of those who resist the call to go “out there,” or we will be those who go. We will either be forced out of the group, because the leaders don’t want us and leave no place for us; or we will get organized, make changes and go. Never mind the risk, never mind the persecution, we must go.

Read Matthew 10:17-23; 23:33-39; Mark 13:9-11; John 15:20; Luke 21:2-19

For those who had paid attention to the words of Jesus, the above events would not have been a surprise. Read these scriptures and reflect on whether you are ready to take a stand, a public stand for Jesus.

Why do you think people resist obeying God’s word and sharing it with others?

What will it take for you to go out into the world with the gospel?

What does your church need to do to get involved or to maintain its involvement in going to the world?

What will it cost you? What are you willing to pay, as an individual, as a church?

## Mission 08

Acts 8:4-8, 25

Where they went, that was the mission

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

They preached the gospel wherever the road took them. The events caused them to head for home; leave Jerusalem, and as they traveled it seemed natural to explain why they were on the road. So they shared what they had heard, shared about the risen Lord, told others the good news. There was no grand plan for missions, just a realization that they had something wonderful to share. And so missions took to the road.

On this day the road led Philip into Samaria.

One wonders if Philip had a plan. Did he know what he was going to do, where he was going to go, how he would support what he was doing? Actually, he probably didn't. Just yesterday he was in Jerusalem taking care of the needs of the local church. He was helping the Apostles take care of all that was involved in the administration of a church of thousands. No one was thinking about making plans to leave Jerusalem, much less making plans for starting a whole new ministry, especially in the country of the Samaritans.

But it was in Samaria is where Philip ended up. Here he was, a Hellenistic Jew from far away in the land of the outcasts of Judaism. There had been no time for plans. Probably very little time to pack. Philip may have been high on the list of those the Sanhedrin wanted to arrest. He was an outsider like Stephen, so punishing him could have discouraged the continued spread of this new faith.

And so he fled with little time for preparation. Little time to consider the best options, little time to raise funds and get organized. Yet the mission to the Samaritans had begun, with no preliminary campaign, no exploratory visits, no evaluation of receptiveness or potential places to minister. Philip simply arrived in Samaria. We are not even told the name of the city. Just that it is a city in Samaria. Was it the first one he came to, one in the center of the country, or the one with the largest population? No information is given. Simply that Philip arrived and began to proclaim Christ.

This is such an interesting approach to beginning God's mission to Samaria. Forced out of Jerusalem, forced down a particular road forced to move into the world, forced into missions whether the new church was ready or not. In other words, mission was about preaching the gospel . Forced to go without preparation for such a venture. In other words, dependent on the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as was promised. Forced into missions with little or no financial support. In other words, dependent on God's promise to provide for their needs.

Philip arrived in that city in Samaria, arrived at the place God had sent him. (Nothing is random when God is involved.) Philip arrived and immediately began to tell others the gospel. God honored his faith and courage. The message was powerful. The Word says that the people heard his words. The life was powerful. It says God used Philip to perform miraculous signs. The people in that city paid close attention to him.

Now things get even more interesting. It was beginning to look like a repeat of the events of Jerusalem. There were miracles, demons were cast out, people who had been suffering were released from their pain and misery. The sorrow and burden of life WAS lifted and the people discovered joy. They discovered the powerful and wonderful presence of God among them. God was placing His stamp of approval on this new mission of the church.

All because Philip had left Jerusalem, and gone down the road, entered into a city in Samaria and spoke to a people. Never mind why he had to leave, never mind how he chose this road or this city, never mind why he ended up speaking to this group of people. None of that is of great importance. Of greater importance is the fact that he went. And because he did the gospel reached another people group out there and began to change their lives. Because he did they had the opportunity to encounter the risen Lord, be freed from the chains of sin, and find the joy that is only possible when God is present with those who love Him.

What a challenge this event presents to us today. Missions is not about our level of preparation, our level of knowledge of where to go, our level of financial preparations for getting involved. The early church was not ready for what happened. They had no idea that they were about to be sent out into the world, whether they felt ready or not. They had no idea that they would be expected to trust God in new ways for His guidance and provision.

Missions is about being ready at every moment to go down whatever road presents itself, to whatever location may be on that road, to whatever people we meet at a location on that road at that time.

When you look at what happened and how the mission of God was spread at that time, then several truths become very apparent. Truths that will affect how we make decisions related to our involvement in God's mission. Truths that can help us do a better job of being prepared and yet not bound by our ideas of what must or must not be done before we can get involved in missions.

Being ready to go is not about our level of preparation. It is not about how much training we provide or receive. It is about the level of our faith which makes it possible to use the training. There are people who have been attending church for decades, receiving training in God's word week after week who will never be ready (or willing) to go. Yet they are often the ones who say "we are not ready, we need more training." What they often mean is, "we don't want to deal

with the risks involved so we are looking for the perfect program, plan and people to do it for us.”

Being ready to go is not about our level of research and awareness of where to go. It is not about finding the best place to go, the most receptive people to go to, and the best location for the ministry. If we use this to guide all of our decisions, then vast areas of the world will never be reached. We will determine it is too difficult, too resistant, and not the right time to go. Church planting and missions that are dependent solely on research and information will ultimately fail. Not because it is wrong to know about the place we are going, but it is wrong when we use that process as the sole basis for our decision. Instead of looking for God’s direction, we are looking for settings that humanly represent success.

Being ready to go is not about providing for all the costs and needs of a ministry. We just don’t have those kinds of resources. We have never had those kinds of resources; and the truth is outside of God we will never have enough resources. The reality is that our resources are dependent on factors that we have no control over and are based on abilities and knowledge that have been given to us by God. We just cannot provide for all the needs that will be involved in mission. We do not have the ability to anticipate everything that can happen and provide for it. If that is our criteria for getting involved in missions then it will never happen. But God has no problem in this area. He knows our resources, he knows all that is needed, and He is able to provide what is needed when it is needed.

So the early church found itself on the road to missions. They were not untrained. They had been receiving teaching daily from the Apostles and others. They were not unprepared. Every day was a lesson in dealing with the structural and organizational needs of a growing church. They were not underfunded. They had learned, day by day, how God could provide, how God could move people to give, how God was able to meet the needs of all who were members of His family, His church.

That meant they had no fear of the road ahead. They had no fear of how they would live. They had no fear to go down the road to “wherever” and share the gospel with whomever they met. They had no fear because they knew the God they served and the mission He had called them to.

What about us today? Why are we afraid to get involved in the mission? Why are we afraid of the road that leads us out there? Why are we so uncertain to head down the road to a place, a city, a people and proclaim the gospel? Why are we so afraid of the mission?

Philip led the way and we need to follow him down the road to missions.

Read Mathew 10:23; 12:14.15; Luke 4:29-31; John 7:1; 11:53-54

Jesus’ ministry was often affected by changes in the political and religious world around him.

How did these changes in direction affect His ministry?

Do you think Jesus was ready for these changes in direction?  
Why? How?

Did it matter to Jesus which road He had to follow? Why?

Was Jesus' ministry about a location or about an action?  
How are location and action, the same, different or  
connected?

What road does God want you to follow that will take you  
out there?

Mission 09

Acts 8:5-25

## Buying the Blessing

Philip comes and preaches the gospel. God blesses and miracles occur. Peter and John come and they too preach the gospel and are given power by God to heal and to impart the Holy Spirit. The air is filled with anticipation and possibility. Enter one Simon Magus, a person who is used to being in the spotlight. He has been a person of influence and has been watching all that these three are doing. He also hears the gospel and responds. He becomes a follower.

But why is he following?

In the past Simon has had access to power. Power to perform magic and influence the people around him. He was given a prestigious title and people followed him hoping that he would respond to their needs and requests. They gave him

gifts, paid fees, and provided services for him. They deferred to him and gave him a place of honor at whatever gathering he attended.

Now this has all changed, first with Philip and then with Peter and John. They brought a different message. One filled with hope and freedom. One of power, power that brought healing, power that came without a fee to those who had need of help, power that brought recognition and a connection to the source of all power. Of course Simon Magus chose to follow, of course he was amazed, of course he desired to be a part of what was happening, of course he sought to be part of the inner group who had the power.

But he missed the point. He did not see what made possible the message, the miracles, and the direct access to God's presence and power. He wasn't making the connection between the truth of the gospel and the source of its power. Everything in his world had been about buying, selling and trading for power and prestige. So he applied the same principles here. If he knew the cost then maybe he could buy into the system and have access to the power present and also any and all blessings and benefits that came as a result of that power.

His thinking contained two dangerous concepts.

1. That God's gospel and its blessing could be purchased. This was a continuation of the structures that were created by the Pharisees and Priests. One could buy their way into the kingdom of God through

money or good works. The currency involved was not significant; what was significant was that you had money or good works. They were the proof that you had become part of the kingdom.

2. That one's place in the family of God was related to one's financial status. That those with money were those who would hold the positions of power and be the ones to dispense God's presence and blessing to others.

Both of these led to another erroneous concept. Simon believed that by obeying he would receive the same blessing (or greater) as others. He saw how others were blessed. He saw what God was doing. As a result, he decided that he would get involved so he could get the same blessings as others had.

In our world today, there are those who give. They give, they go and they do whatever looks good so as to impress God and others. The more they do the more attractive they look. They want to attract others with money and resources so that they can have more. They want to attract God's blessing so that He will give them more of what they want. They want to attract the attention of others so that they can gain prestige in the kingdom. They want others to depend on them to supply what they need. They want to be a prince, an indispensable leader in the kingdom of God.

That is what Simon Magus wanted and it was for this that he was condemned. He was warned to change or risk losing any

part he might have in the kingdom of God and its blessings. Simon Magus wrongly thought he could buy the blessing.

As I reflect on this story, I wonder how many churches have chosen to become involved in missions, not out of love for God or for the lost. Not out of a desire to obey and please God. Rather they choose to be obedient out of a desire to gain access to the blessings they see others receiving. They choose to get involved so as to look good to others and have bragging rights, so they can say “look what we have done and are doing.” They choose to get involved because they don’t want to lose any opportunity to be in the limelight and be recognized by others.

That is doing missions for the wrong reasons.

The reality is, there are no guarantees of specific types of blessings for getting involved. For one group, God may provide extra finances to continue the work. For another, every gift for missions comes at great cost. For one group, there may be recognition for what has been accomplished. For another, there is only obscurity; no one except God knows what is being done. For one group they become the center of great ministries. For another they are asked to continue the work in isolation, struggling in difficult settings with only their faith in God to maintain them.

Real involvement in missions is about knowing the heart of God. It is about going no matter what the cost. It is about giving without any thought of receiving. It is about serving without any thought of recognition or position. It is about

doing the work, trusting only in God's promise to provide what is needed, when it is needed, and in the manner that will be most effective.

We are only told some of the stories of the early church. Stories that highlighted what God was doing. We are not told the hundreds and thousands of other stories. Stories of how God quietly worked and quietly changed lives. No fanfare, no publicity but no less important to the story of mission. All of these quiet events occurred along with the more visible events. Each made the other possible. Each contained the same power, same message of love.

That is what the mission is about. It is not solely about the great, exciting moments. They are important. But they are built upon a steady, constant commitment of faith to the truth. A commitment that will cause our involvement in mission, without concern for the price to be paid or the nature of the blessings that may be received. We get involved because that is who we are, because that is who our Lord and Savior is. We get involved because we know the world needs to hear the message, period.

Will we get involved without concern for what we may or may not have to give? Will we get involved without concern for the blessings we may or may not receive? Will we get involved because that is who we are, who we should be, and what we should do as children of the family of God?

Read the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-11. Compare this with the story of Daniel in Daniel 5:16-17.

Read Peter's judgment of Baal who loved the wages he might receive for his service in 2 Peter 2:14-20.

What is the difference between giving for recognition, and giving to God?

What type of giving opens the door to freedom? How is this different from what Peter describes?

In 2 Kings 5:15-16 why do you think Elisha refused Naaman's gift? What was the difference between Elisha's attitude and that of his servant Gehazi (2 Kings 5:21-27)? What can happen when our motives for service or mission are false or selfish?

Read Romans 6:17-18, 22. What are the true blessings that everyone will receive from true obedience that is based in love?

## Mission 10

## Acts 8:26-40

The long road is really the short road.

Once more Philip is on the road, another road. This time God gives him very specific directions. They are for a something very different and in many ways very far from the road he has just been on. Look at the contrasts.

### 1. Knowledge

- a. Samaria – This group of people have had close ties to the religious truth that they

received. They were the remnants of the people of the northern kingdom of Israel and those who had been taught about the very real existence of God. They had a faith in His existence. They believed.

- b. The Ethiopian – He is from a country that had only one other contact with the people of God. It was more than seven centuries in the past. But he had one thing. He had a copy of God's word and he was searching it for the truth. The Ethiopian was returning home from Jerusalem and was reading in the hope of finding an explanation of what he had seen and heard in Jerusalem.

## 2. Location

- a. A city in Samaria – Philip visited a group of people. People who probably had been talking about the recent events in Jerusalem. Maybe some of them had witnessed those events. Maybe some were returning home to share what they had learned. They would be able to encourage and help each other.
- b. A lonely road – Philip met the Ethiopian on the road. Two strangers. They would only have a few hours together. No one would travel with him after they parted company. There probably was not anyone else to share and encourage the Ethiopian when he arrived back to his home.

### 3. Future

- a. On the road to many places – this city in Samaria would be accessible to many leaders. There would be future opportunities to receive training and to have contact with the apostles and others. They would also be able to visit and be a part of whatever was happening in the area. They would not be isolated or forgotten.
- b. The end of the long road – Ethiopia was far from the center of activity. It is likely that very few, if any, would travel there and few, if any, would have the resources to travel to Jerusalem. The Ethiopian and those who responded to his message would be dependent on what he had learned from Stephen and of their study of the Old Testament.

We are all looking for a Samaria to work in, a convenient place to get involved in missions. Easy to reach, easy to support and easy to maintain control of. Something close. The people already know something about the truth. They are ready. Others have already visited them (Just like Jesus who had passed through Samaria during his ministry). It is a guaranteed success story.

Very few are looking for the ends of the earth. A place that is hard to get to. A place that we will have had little contact with. A place that we may not be able to maintain our presence. A place where they know little of the truth and are

not ready (by human standards) to receive the truth. And of course, the work in this difficult place will have to be maintained without our continued support and presence. We prefer to go where we can provide what is needed and have control of the progress of the work.

We are afraid to take the risks involved. To take the risk of sending someone to a lonely spot on an empty road. Lonely because there will be little support. Lonely because we will not be there. We are afraid to take the risks. How can we risk telling others What if they make mistakes in understanding and interpreting the Word. They may not do the work the “right way” (our way). They may fail without us.

This is a dangerous way to look at God’s mission because we are defining the mission based on our ability to start, care for and maintain the work. WE define where we will go, and what we will do. We define how it will happen based on our ability to support what we are doing, maintain clear guidelines for development and direct the work in our way. We will go but only our terms.

Philip presents an incredible challenge to any church that is thinking about getting involved in missions for the first time, and for any church deciding why it will continue to be involved in a specific work or mission. Mission is not about how long we can maintain our support or our presence. It is about how we can make contact with whoever God leads us to. It is about putting our faith in God, His word and the Holy Spirit’s ability to reveal truth to those who have

received the gospel. It is not about what we can or cannot maintain.

It is not about a commitment for a specific period of time. It is about doing what God wants, for whatever period of time God determines is necessary. One door opens and it becomes a lifetime of sharing and ministry. A ministry that creates an environment of growth and ministry and mission for those going and those receiving. Another door opens and presents huge risks in time, people and resources. This brings opportunities for great acts of faith, believing that God will use whatever time and resources we place at his disposal.

Both doors lead down the same road - a short road. The road involved is not about the distance between two points. It is about the distance involved in following God's direction, just one step. You see both roads involve the same decision, going. The same activity, sharing. The same message, the gospel. The same result, people finding God, receiving forgiveness and a place in His family forever. The road to Samaria and to Ethiopia may appear different but each involved all the same activities. Philip faithfully went where God led, directly or indirectly. He faithfully shared the truth, either to the crowd or the individual. He faithfully believed that wherever God's word was planted, it would bear fruit and continue to bear fruit.

The road to missions may take us nearby or far away. It may appear difficult and long. It is really only as difficult or as long as we make it. Philip simply walked to Samaria. Then he was led down the road to Ethiopia and, when he was done

with the work given him, the Bible says that suddenly the Spirit of the Lord appeared and took him to Azotus, where he continued traveling down the road preaching the gospel (Acts 9:40). Philip only had to make one decision, take the first step. The Lord took care of the rest. One time it was an easy well-traveled road, the next time it was a far and lonely road, and the last, well only God knows the road he used to get Philip to Azotus. But once there, he kept taking the first step. Walking, without worry about how long he would be there, who would come after him, or how the work would be maintained.

Where will your first step on the “long but short road” take you? Remember, the length of the road is about taking the first step. The length of that road depends on your decision. The short road is about going where God takes you. The road is always short when it involves placing our faith and trust in God.

Read Ecclesiastes 9:10; Isaiah 29:18-19; 35:8-10; 55:10-12; Ephesians 5:15-17

What can we learn about trusting God’s guidance for the work he has given us?

Who is ultimately responsible for what happens? How is that affected by our attitudes and actions?

What kind of opportunities is Paul referring to in Ephesians?

What is the true measure of success in God’s mission?

## Our enemy is really our future brother

The story of Saul has always been at the center of missions. He was marked by God to be the central figure in carrying God's mission to the world. His conversion is a pivotal point in the development of missions. His story is significant. But why is it so significant? Is it just because of his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus? Or is there more to the story?

Consider with me a possible scenario involving the road that he has chosen to walk. The road that ultimately leads to his trip to Damascus.

Saul has been studying in one of the great schools of Judaism. His teacher is Gamaliel, who is regarded as one of the two great teachers of this era. It is this same Gamaliel that may have been present during the appearance of the apostles before the Sanhedrin and recommends that the leaders leave them alone. His reason is very important. If this teaching is from God, they may find themselves opposing God. Not a good position to be in.

Saul, along with others of the Sanhedrin, did not heed this advice and when the opportunity presents itself, they begin an organized effort to destroy the church. Saul now actively attacks the believers. His threats are not empty and result in many being thrown into prison. His threats carry the ominous tone of death.

But it isn't working. The people are not renouncing their faith. The church is not being destroyed. Instead it is growing and spreading into Judea, Galilee, and Samaria and now as far as Damascus. They are running from Saul and the Sanhedrin, but not with the results they had hoped for. Instead of causing them to be afraid and silent (a normal response to death threats), they are even more fearless, more daring and more vocal.

Imagine the affect this could be having on Saul. Imagine what could be going through his mind as he reviews what is happening. It is clear that he is becoming angrier and working harder to stop them, but at the same time it would appear that he is also becoming more and more confused. His confusion results in greater efforts to control suppress and destroy what is causing the confusion. He is steadily losing control of the situation. It makes him angry! But why.

Consider the following elements that are part of the current events and are possibly preparing Saul for his meeting with the Lord on the road to Damascus. Preparing him to hear the question the Lord will ask, and preparing him for the decision he will make.

1. Stephen – Always in Saul's mind is the image of Stephen and his death, and a desire to prove that the decision to stone him was correct. Yet there is doubt. Stephen did not scream out in anger or attempt to plead for mercy. There was no fear or doubt on the face of Stephen as he died. Rather there was peace and serenity. There was no accusation but

forgiveness of all who participated. Hiss the words echoed in Saul's mind, as Stephen's declared that he could see God and Jesus at his right hand. Always the debate, was I right to help kill Stephen or did I help kill a righteous man? The image will not go away.

2. Apostles – They are still in Jerusalem. They are still preaching and teaching in Jesus' name. They remain defiant to the orders of the Sanhedrin. They seem untouchable. When the persecution began they remained in Jerusalem and continued their practice of teaching in the temple. They come and go with no restriction and no fear. They seem eager to face any threat and treat it as proof that they are right. They are not reacting as would be expected if they were wrong. They truly believe they have the truth.
3. Sanhedrin – Saul's leaders are ineffectual - a constant reminder of their apparent impotency to take action. They appear afraid. They have been accused of crucifying an innocent man and have no evidence to prove otherwise. They are weak. They cannot or will not act. They depend on others to step in and carry out their desires. They themselves remain uninvolved. Their teaching is empty. They do not appear to have the knowledge or skill to defend themselves, much less attack the teaching of the apostles and those following their teaching. Stephen's blistering attack on their theology and lives keeps ringing in their ears.
4. The Believers – While many left the city, there are many who remained. They continue to gather and

share the gospel. They continue even though Saul threatens to put them in jail. When he does, they are not fearful. They sing praises and continue to speak of their relationship with Jesus. When beaten, they may cry out, but not with pleas for mercy. They cry out like Stephen, with words of forgiveness. Though their bodies are in pain and suffering, their spirit is at peace. Their faces so peaceful, so tranquil. Too few are abandoning their faith. Too many are being strengthened by his attacks. Day after day Saul is confronted with people who will not yield, will not abandon their new found faith.

5. The Scriptures – Saul has studied the scriptures all of his life. He knows them well. But the people he is attacking know them just as well. When Saul accuses with scripture, they respond with scripture. When he uses tradition, they respond with scripture. When he speaks of history, they respond in like scripture. Now when he studies the scriptures all he can hear is their interpretation, their awareness of what Jesus has taught them. And not just the apostles, but everyone seems to be studying and growing in the knowledge of the scriptures. Their words and the scriptures keep echoing through his thoughts.
6. Growth – For all of his efforts to bring an end to the preaching of the gospel, it just keeps spreading. In fact, it seems that the more he tries to destroy this new faith, the faster it grows. When he started his attack, the group only existed in and around Jerusalem. Now it has spread beyond Jerusalem to

Samaria and then to Galilee. He has heard a rumor that someone is now traveling with this gospel to Ethiopia. And now there is a group in Damascus meeting and teaching this new faith.

He now is on the road to Damascus. Why? What does he really hope to accomplish that he hasn't been able to do up until this moment? Is he hoping that maybe in a location away from Jerusalem he can succeed? Is he hoping to escape the images and sounds of Jerusalem and find clarity for his actions among those who are less intimately connected to the events that have filled Jerusalem?

But he can't escape. And now he finds out why. He has been fighting the truth. He has been fighting God. He has been doing the very thing Gamaliel, his teacher warned against. On the road he finds his answer and discovers the reason for the peace and resistance of the followers of Christ that has plagued his thoughts and thwarted his efforts to control them. He finds the truth, it is Jesus. He is saved. And with his salvation the door opens to a new era of growth and expansion of God's mission. It will be several years before Saul can actively participate. Too many are afraid of him. Too many do not trust him. Too many are ready to kill him for what they believe is treason. In their minds he has defected to the enemy.

Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus was not a total surprise. In many ways Saul had been prepared for that encounter. Prepared by God through the faithful actions and teaching of the new church and its very young members.

Mission is about being faithful always in the proclamation of the truth. God will use us and our involvement in His mission to pave the way to greater expansion. He will use our commitment to overcome what appear to be insurmountable barriers to do the work He has given us. Saul was a very real and dangerous threat to the church. Those he put in prison, those he tortured, those he pursued were very aware of the danger. Many left Jerusalem because of the reality of the threat. But they didn't flee in the normal sense; flee and hide. No, they fled and went public with all they had learned. They fled but remained faithful to the heart of the gospel, to tell others of God's love and offer of forgiveness.

The truth is that any time a person, a group, a church decides to be involved in God's mission, there will be obstacles. There will be those who seek to destroy and undermine what God wants to do through them. At times they may find themselves attacked, punished, jailed, and even killed, for faithfully carrying out God's mission. At times it may seem hopeless.

It is not. For every time a person, a group, or a church is faithful, God works and more hear the truth. God works and either removes the barriers, or uses them to further His kingdom. In some cases, He brings about their conversion. Saul was not the only enemy to become a brother, many more have joined him and more yet will do so. Our task is to carry out the mission faithfully so that God will have access to us as a tool He can use to convince others of the truth.

Read - Isaiah 45:9; Exodus 23:22; Proverbs 16:7; 2  
Chronicles 13:12; Psalms 2:1-8

How do you respond when you face opposition? Why?

What does it mean to take a stand for what you believe?

What is important enough in your life to take a stand for?  
Why?

Every day in the news we see people willing to risk their lives to protest a government or decision of the government. Do you think they began their protest with the knowledge they might be imprisoned or die? How does such a stand for truth compare to taking a stand for the truth of God?

When we choose not to get involved in God's mission is it the same as running away from the truth? What would have happened if the apostles and believers of the early church had not taken a stand even though then knew Saul was ready to imprison them and even kill them?

Consider how many have suffered so that you could be a part of a church. Consider how you should respond to their gift for you.

## Don't touch me

So why don't you like "them?"

"Well, they are different." "How are they different?"

"They don't have the same values as us. They don't act like us. I mean, did you see what they did at the meeting? They talk funny. They are so hard to understand. They have strange ideas about how to do the work. They don't have the same priorities as us. They don't think like us. They will never fit in. It would be so much easier if they just stayed by themselves. And the truth is they don't like us either."

"How do you think that makes them feel?"

"Heh, they are probably thinking the same things about us. That, they don't belong here. So we would all feel better if we just leave each other alone."

Have you ever heard a conversation like the one above? A conversation that defines everyone as "us" or "them." Us, the ones who are part of our group and receiving all the blessings and protection of our members. Them, the ones who don't belong in our group and are different from us. The ones we don't want to have any contact with.

When this attitude exists on a larger scale it is called ethnocentrism. It involves the complete exclusion of those who are not part of our group. If they are allowed to interact

with us, they are expected to change their lives to match ours at all levels. Even then, they are restricted in how they may participate in our group. They are always made to feel the stranger.

This attitude existed within the young church. Not in a truly visible way, but it affected the directions and decisions of the young church. Up until this passage in Acts 10 those being reached by the gospel were Jews or converts to Judaism or related in some way to the Jews, like the Samaritans. So far, there has been no organized attempt to reach beyond the boundaries of the group called “us” to the group called “them” or more specifically, from the group called Jews to those called Gentiles.

This was all about to change and would have a dramatic affect on what happened next in the church.

Peter represented this attitude of ethnocentrism; although in a very interesting way. When God gave him the vision of the blanket of food, Peter was living in the house of a tanner, a person who was considered ceremonially unclean because he dealt with dead animals. So even though he was willing to accept contact with an unclean Jew, he was unwilling to deal with his prejudice towards contact with a Gentile.

While staying in this house God sent him a vision. It involved a sheet full of animals, both clean and unclean. He was told to get up, kill and eat. This command was impossible for Peter to obey. As a good Jew, he could not eat many of the animals present in the sheet. Also, because they

had touched the animals that had made the clean animals unclean and uneatable as well. This vision was sent to Peter three times. If he had received it only once it may not have had any impact. Three times was enough to get Peter thinking. So when a group of Gentiles arrived at the home of his friend he was willing to allow them to enter the house and hear what they had to say. Not an easy decision for any Jew, even one willing to live in the house of a tanner, whose occupation affected him in the same way the unclean animals affected the clean animals in the sheet.

The depth of Peter's struggle was highlighted when arriving at the house of Cornelius the next day. The first words out of his mouth were not to share the gospel. They were to say that under normal conditions Peter would not come to the house of Cornelius, much less enter it, even to share something as important as the gospel. But that it is only because God told him to come that he was willing to be there.

So Peter asked why they wanted to talk to him and heard the other side of the story. This was not a one way problem. Cornelius also had received a message from God to send people to bring Peter. Cornelius was one of "them" and knew that he was not liked by people from the "us" group. He needed help to get over his negative attitudes as well.

Once all the stories had been shared and it was clear that God wanted Peter there and that Cornelius and his household wanted to hear what God had for them, Peter shared the Gospel. Peter began with a little history of what had happened and how God had commanded them to preach the

message of forgiveness. But that was as far as Peter got and God acted by blessing these Gentiles with the same gift of the Holy Spirit given to the Jews.

But why did God interrupt. Maybe Peter was taking too long. Maybe Peter was about to tell them that they probably should go through the procedure of becoming Jewish converts. Maybe Peter was going to discuss the rules and regulations of being a member of the group. All were issues of concern for Peter, a Jew, talking to Cornelius, a Gentile, a Roman Gentile, a hated Roman Gentile.

Before any of that happened, and to make it clear that the only issue was one of faith and belief, God took action. Peter was surprised. The circumcised Jews that came with him were astonished that God would give His greatest gift, the symbol of His presence to Gentiles. Even more than that, that God would choose to dwell in a Gentile. Something they did not believe was possible.

This left only one other decision to take. Should they be baptized and be recognized publicly as members of the church of God? Peter no longer was hesitant. His question was less a question and more of a challenge to those present. God has acted, now we need to respond. God has clearly shown us that they are welcome in his family. Now it is our turn to respond.

Every generation of the church, in every location, will go through this process as it makes the decision to get involved in missions. Every church must learn that God makes no

distinctions of “us” and “them.” He only knows that they are lost and need to hear. Every church must be willing to leave its world behind and enter the world of those out there. Those who are, for whatever reason, different than” us.”

Sometimes it will take a great deal of effort to move a church in this direction. We easily become trapped in our world and do not want to deal with those out there. We are comfortable where we are. We understand ourselves and what to expect. Going to them means becoming uncomfortable, Being ready for whatever God chooses to do. It means giving up control so that God can be in control. It means allowing God to define what is necessary and let Him choose who will be accepted into the family.

On that day in the life of Peter and the early church a major change took place. It would take years for the impact of the change to be fully implemented but the door was now open and would never be closed again. The gospel is for everyone, even us Gentiles.

Read Leviticus 7:19; 11:1-47; 20:25; Deuteronomy 10:1-21; Daniel 1:8

The Jews had many rules regarding what was clean and unclean. Over the years they added more rules in the form of traditions and guidelines; their goal being to keep themselves pure before God. This excluded others from being part of their fellowship and having access to the temple and blessings of God.

What kind of rules do we have today that are similar in purpose as the laws of clean and unclean of the Old Testament? How does that affect the life of the church?

Have you ever been excluded as a result of a group's rules about what was acceptable? What effect did that have on you and your attitude towards them? Was your attitude any different than theirs? Why?

## Mission 13

## Acts 11:1-19

And God created a controversy to reveal

Have you ever done or said something that became the center of controversy? Where people criticized your decision even when you did what God was telling you to do? Even when the evidence was very clear that God was directing your activities and blessing the work?

I have been down that road. When I was in college I and a friend organized a ministry of evangelism for youth. It involved renting a building and starting a program in the center of our town. The controversy centered around two issues. The first was the fact that we did not even consider using the church for this program; a place where we could be watched over and under supervision. The second related to the location we chose. We rented a storefront between two bars; a terrible location with negative influences and environment.

Not all opposed what we were doing. My father gathered together a group of adults who caught the vision of reaching a specific group of people, with the gospel (youth who would not come to a church). They gave generously so we could rent the building, remodel it and train staff (other young people) to make the vision possible. They too were criticized for supporting such an activity in such a location.

Over time some of the critiques began to see what God was doing. Some began to support the ministry. They even began to allow their own children to attend the program and become part of the staff. They changed their minds as they saw what God was doing. God was fully prepared to work outside of the church, fully prepared to use different methods to reach the lost, and to go wherever was necessary to reach them.

This was exactly what Peter had to deal with. God wanted to reach a group that was outside of the core group, the Jews. He used whatever means was necessary to reach them. He also sent people to this group instead of waiting for them to come to the existing meetings and locations. If Peter had waited, Cornelius and his group probably would not have come and so would not have heard the gospel.

A few were willing to go with Peter, but no one from the core leadership was there. A group of Christians from Joppa decided to go along. The story suggests that they went into Cornelius' house with Peter as his support group and witnessed for what happened and the decisions that were made.

Others were not so supportive. As soon as they heard, they chose to criticize Peter. Their comments are very clear in what they implied. “How dare you go to that place?” “How dare you enter the house of an outsider, a Gentile outsider?” “How dare you involve other Jews in what you are doing?” “How dare you not consult us in this matter?”

Peter’s answers, the witness of the friends, and especially God’s presence in the decisions and actions were enough to change their minds. But it shows us what we could face and deal with when we choose to get involved in missions as directed by God.

The “group” wants to be consulted. The “group” wants control. The “group” wants to make the decisions. The “group” wants to be the center. The “group” tends to be restrictive in its thinking and its direction. Missions is not about what the “group” wants. It is about what God wants.

Getting involved in missions, really involved, will result in criticism. “How can you do that? How can you send someone to another country and put them at risk? How can you afford to waste money on such risky activities? How can you?”

Why does this happen? It could be any number of reasons:

1. Some are afraid of the changes that may result from such an action. Getting involved with those who are different from us can, and usually does, result in changes in who we are.

2. Some are jealous of the blessings, rewards, and recognition that others are receiving. People may respond negatively because they aren't in the center of the action and just cannot tolerate losing their place in the limelight.
3. Others do not like to lose control of what is happening. Someone is acting without the permission of the "group" or without its input and direction.
4. Many do not like those that are being reached. They feel they are inferior and so we should not go to them. "They" need to change and then come to us.

All of these reasons and more are used. All of them fail at one critical point. They assume the mission is ours and that we decide the who, what, where, how and when of missions. Who does what, and to whom we will go. What we will do, and what will be used to do it. Where we will go and where we will make the gospel available. How we will do the work, and how we will make the decisions about doing the work. Finally, when we will go and when we will allow others, besides us, to get involved.

This assumption is untenable and unacceptable. The mission is God's and He is the one makes all of the decisions. If He had allowed a group, any group to have such control, then we would not be here at this moment. I would not have been able to write this thought and you would not be around to read it.

God used the events surrounding Peter and Cornelius to accomplish two very clear purposes. The first was to declare,

in a thundering way, that everyone was welcome into His family. Further, that they were welcome unconditionally. Second, to declare very clearly that the mission was His and He would always retain the right to do whatever He determined was necessary to bring the gospel to everyone, no matter who they are, or where they are.

When the leaders and others heard Peter's report and the testimony of those with him, they realized that God was in charge. They had no choice but to accept the events as clearly from God. It would forever change the church. It would open even more doors to missions. Even to the Gentiles. To us.

We have similar decisions to make. When God calls one of our own to go, how do we respond? Do we criticize them? Do we try to convince them to stay home and not go to them? Do we talk about how much work there is to do here? Do we try to discourage them with talks about the risks and what they are giving up? Do we discourage them by suggesting they will not have sufficient funds for the work God is calling them to do? Suggesting that we will not support them unless they do what we tell them to do? How do we respond? What does it take for us to see that God is the one calling? What will it take for us to agree that it is God's mission, give support to those being called, and agree with those who say we need to be involved?

Missions, for whatever reason, creates controversy. Why because we resist going. We resist submitting. We resist including others. We resist the changes inherent in mission.

The controversy is about human issues, created by humans. For God there is no issue, no controversy. We are to go. We are to go where He sends. We are to tell whoever we meet. We are to take the risks involved. It is not important how many support what we do. What is important is that we obey God and go. He will do the rest.

Read Matthew 20:1-16. This is the parable that talks about a landowner who had an unorthodox idea about how to get the work done and how much to pay for the work.

Who did he hire? Why do you think this was unusual? What was the reason for his decision to keep hiring? What were the benefits of this decision?

What is the issue that causes the first group to be upset? Why do you think they were upset? Can you think of something they received that none of the other groups received? What could they give that the others could not give?

How does it make you feel when others receive the same, or more than you do, for a job? Why? How do you feel when a new person gets the same rights and privileges of someone who has been a member for a long time?

Why are some churches so resistant to making the changes needed to get involved in missions? What will it take for them to change their attitude? Why does God have to convince us to do the work He has given us?

## The first rule of mission

This story has always fascinated me. It reveals the real heart of missions and the guiding rule that comes out of missions. That rule is this: whoever you are, wherever the road takes you, and whoever you find yourself with, share the gospel. That is the rule of mission. The heart of missions is what makes the rule functional. It is why people, who have been caused to move, for whatever reason, are ready to share with others. They have found God and experienced His love and want others to have that blessing as well.

The activity of the people in this story was not an organized mission program as we know it. It was not based on a sending organization. It was based on the rule. Whoever you are, wherever you and whoever you meet, share the gospel. They are some of the people who had been driven out of Jerusalem. As they traveled they shared and organized fellowships which, in turn, continued the process. How do we know this? It is here in this passage.

Those who were scattered traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch sharing the good news with the Jews. From there, it spread to other places, one of which was Cyrene. Then a group of people from Cyprus and Cyrene went to Antioch. More expansion. This new group discovered that the Greeks were open to the message. More expansion. Each group heard and got involved in the further expansion of the mission.

Everyone seemed to be taking the mandate of mission seriously. This expansion was not related to key leaders going to key places. The story was no longer about key leaders. It was not about the Apostles or the Deacons. They were the catalyst to get things started. Now those they taught were getting involved.

This expansion made possible another means of reaching outside of the Jewish community. Again, we hear of Gentiles being reached and responding to the gospel. The central leadership of the church learned of this and wisely sent Barnabas, a Greek Jew, noted for his ability to handle complicated situations and discern the truth. Remember, it was Barnabas that brought Saul to the leaders and helped them understand the truth of Saul's conversion.

Barnabas saw an opportunity to continue the expansion and sought out Saul to come and help. He agreed and so began a year of intense training. The Scripture says large numbers of people came to the training. It was so effective that it was in Antioch, where the fellowship made up of both Jews and Gentiles believers were first called "Christians." This was a great tribute to the focus of those who were carrying out God's mission. They were known by all as followers of Christ, whether of Jewish or Gentile background. They became identified with Christ.

All of this came about without a conscious plan by the central leadership; only a clear awareness that wherever we are we need to share and organize a fellowship. The rule: whoever, wherever, whoever.

Do we know how to be the “whoever” of the story? Are we looking for someone else to go or some other organization to do the work? This story in Acts was not about the pastors, teachers and leaders going or being sent. It was about anyone and everyone doing their part to get the message out. It was not about having a degree in evangelism or cross-cultural ministry. It is not about having lots of resources, books, programs and organizations to make the work possible. It was about a willingness to do what one could with the tools and abilities available.

Remember at this point none of the gospels had been written or even conceived of. There is no New Testament, only the Old Testament and the remembered stories and teachings of Jesus. These people had to rely on their memory and the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide them in their teaching. It meant that they paid very close attention to what they were taught so that they could accurately share it with others.

Do we know how to go “wherever?” Do we even know where “wherever is?” Based on this story “wherever” is just outside our door and continues until we are at the remotest part of the world. It also includes every location and person that we meet along the road. “Wherever” is a place outside of our control, but totally within the scope of God’s power and control.

Do we know “whoever” is out there? Do we know what they look like, how they feel, and how they will respond? Do we know just how different things will be when dealing with “whoever” and what may happen when reaching out to

“whoever?” No we do not know. Again the story helps us see the truth. One group shared with another group. That group spoke to another. From there the word spread to another group, the Greeks.

The people had no idea where that would lead? But we do. It came all the way to us, here and now, and to a multitude of groups who are different. Differences that are hard to fathom but that are all linked by one truth, God’s mission. His mission reveals His love to all by following the one rule: whoever you are, wherever the road takes you, and whoever you find yourself with, share the gospel.

Are you ready to reveal the heart of God, His mission to others? Are you ready to allow the one rule to guide and control your life?

Read Ecclesiastes 11:1-6, this is an interesting passage that discusses setting priorities in our lives.

What do you think the bread is in this passage?

How can one recover bread that has been soaking in water?

Why is it futile to base our life solely on current conditions?

Consider the importance of understanding the nature of God’s work?

How often should we sow our seed? Who is responsible for the results?

What bread or seed do you have to share with others? What is hindering you from doing just that?

## Mission 15

Acts 11:25-30

### Missions without a manual

Did you ever wonder how they did it? How those early Christians got the work done? What methods or materials did they use? Did they have a discipleship program?

It is the same question I have often thought about in regards to the growth of the church in England late 1700's and the frontier of the USA. What did these evangelists use to teach the people? What plan was in place that helped them know what to do? What kind of resources did they have to disciple and train the people?

My great-grandfather was among those who started and cared for churches in the frontiers of the USA. He traveled from place to place teaching and preaching. To do this he took a horse-drawn wagon and modified it, made it into an early version of a mobile home. He took his family with him and they traveled from town to town teaching and preaching. My grandmother told me he carried three books with him; a Bible, a concordance and a Bible handbook. These were his resources.

I have had the privilege of talking to others who knew my great-grandfather. They tell me he was a sincere person and a

man of prayer. He was highly respected by the church and served it faithfully. He was responsible for planting several churches in his life, several of which are still active and doing well. They remember my great-grandfather's commitment to teaching God's Word.

John Wesley is known for his commitment to the same ideals. He traveled by horse throughout England with his Bible and a plan to teach the people the word of God. His plan did not involve manuals or programs or the need for a great deal of finances. It was a simple plan; gather the people into small groups and have them study God's word and apply it to their lives. This plan was very effective and spread throughout England, to the USA and beyond.

For Barnabas and Saul it was even simpler. They had only two resources, the Old Testament and the Holy Spirit to guide them. They also had a deep commitment to teaching and sharing with others what they had learned. There were no manuals, no programs, and no library of resources to draw from.

The people responded. They saw the faith of Barnabas and the evidence that the Holy Spirit was with him. The report says that as a result of the encouragement of Barnabas a great number of people were brought to the faith. They heard the story of Saul's conversion. They heard the depth of his teaching and benefited from his knowledge of the Word of God.

Barnabas and Saul became a team. Barnabas saw the need for a teacher to help the church grow. Saul benefited from the confidence Barnabas placed in him. Together they worked and the Scripture says that great numbers came for the teaching. A teaching that was so effective that the community began to call the believers Christians, “people who were like Christ.”

Without books, personal copies of the Bible, or discipleship tools, the church grew. The church reached into its community. The church revealed a new standard for life, a new code for living. A code found in the life of Christ. The testimony was clear and those watching saw the difference. Without radio, television, or other mass media the message traveled from person to person. The gospel was being proclaimed, the people were being taught and the people of Antioch were hearing and seeing the difference.

Missions is not about a manual. It is about our relationship with Christ. It is not about books and resources. It is about our lives being lived in the presence of others. It is not about plans and programs, it is about commitment to one thing, telling others the truth and then helping them grow in their relationship with God.

Yet we, today, spend so much time looking for the right program, the right tools, the right structure, before we get involved. We are waiting for someone to come along and tell us how we should do it. We are so afraid to just go; to go with only God’s word. To go with the resources we have; a

wagon converted to a mobile home, or a horse that takes us from place to place sharing the truth.

We are always looking for someone else to prepare materials for us to use. There is only one material that is needed - My life, committed to doing God's work, carrying the gospel to the world. We are always waiting for the right time. There is no such thing, because with God every moment is a critical moment for someone. It is always the right time to go to the world, to be involved in the mission.

Saul and Barnabas are examples of this reality. They were men of faith and full of the Spirit, men who were not bound to their past, bound to their culture, or bound to how things were; but rather to how things could be. They were individuals ready to take risks, ready to leave their homes, ready to do what God asks. They did not wait, they did not hesitate. They took what they had (their lives) and put it to work. They took the knowledge they had and shared it with others. They used whatever resources were available and began to work. They even found the means to gather an offering to send back to the believers in Judea, to help them during a time of famine and struggle.

We do not need more resources, a better plan, or more tools. We only need one thing, obedience. An obedience based in faith and guided by the Holy Spirit. The key question for each church is not about whether we have what we need to be involved in missions? If you are asking that question then you have missed the point of why Jesus came to earth. The key question is not when we will get involved? If you are

asking that question then you do not understand God's command.

The key question is, do others know that we are Christians? This knowledge does not come from having more meetings, raising more funds, or studying another book. It comes from our going into the world and being the people God has called us to be. It comes from taking what we have, a relationship with God, and sharing that with others.

When we have people who are Christ-like, people of faith, people filled with the Holy Spirit, then those who are not Christians will respond. They will come and they will desire to be taught the truth. First we must go, just as we are, but with the greatest resource available, God in our lives, for all to see.

The real manual of missions is your life.

Read Matthew 12:35 – What good has been stored in your life that you can use right now to carry out God's mission?

Read Matthew 28:19 – We are commanded to go and make disciples of every nation. What resources did those who received this command have that you have as well? Are you using those resources to proclaim the gospel and disciple others?

Read 1 Thessalonians 1:3 – Paul wrote this to one of the Macedonian churches. A church with little resources (1 Corinthians 8). He honors them for their work, their labor, and their endurance. What resources did he say they had that

made this possible? Do you have the same resources? What could God do through you and your church if you made full use of those resources to get involved in God's mission?

## Mission 16 –

Acts 13:1-3

### Going Hungry to Go

Acts 1:14 reports that the new group of believers were constantly together in prayer. We are told in Acts 2:1-4 that this period of prayer resulted in the coming of the Holy Spirit and 3,000 were added to the group. In Acts 4:24-31 we have the report of another prayer meeting. They prayed for power to proclaim the gospel with boldness. God responded. He sent the Holy Spirit and they spoke the word boldly.

In Acts 10:9 we are told that during a time of prayer Peter received his vision to go and visit Cornelius. The result of this time of prayer was the opening of the door to ministry among the gentiles. Acts 12 tells the story of the escape of Peter and the death of Herod. In the middle of this story (vs 12) we are told that many people had gathered to pray. They probably were praying for Peter's safety and more, because at the end of the story in vs 24 we are told the word of God continued to increase and spread.

Here in Acts 13 we find another group in prayer. We are not told why they were praying, but we are told that God responded and set the stage for the next major phase of the

growth of the church and the spread of the gospel. Missions became the focal point of the church. The rest of the book of Acts is about what happened after this prayer meeting.

One thing is clear in all of these prayers. Each resulted in a response from God that led the church forward in His mission. In some cases it gave new direction to the work, in others a greater boldness to carry out the work. Only one of the above stories actually contains information on what the believers were praying about. Yet it appears clear that the focus of all these times of prayer was the same - seeking out God for strength and direction to carry out the command to go to the world with the gospel.

In each occasion the key result was greater boldness, greater courage to go and to present the gospel. This boldness resulted in more people hearing and responding to the gospel. It resulted in new doors being opened so that more would be included in those who were to be reached.

Their prayers, their conversations with God, focused not on their needs, but on having the power to do more, on having the courage to speak to anyone, on bringing honor to God in the world.

We see this in Stephen's brief conversation with God as he died. Remember, prayer is talking to God. Stephen asked God to forgive the sins of those who were killing him. What a powerful prayer. Seeking forgiveness for others. That prayer was incredibly powerful. While they did in fact kill the man, they did not stop the message. That prayer of

forgiveness bore fruit. Those who were scattered continued to share the gospel.

Now let's fast forward to today and our times of prayer. When was the last time you were in a prayer meeting whose sole focus was praying for the lost. Whose goal was to seek out the power of God to make the church bolder in proclaiming the message? When was the last time no one prayed for their needs, their sickness, their comfort? Where the entire time of prayer was given to praying for missions, praying for those lost in sin, praying for God to send His Holy Spirit, to lead them into the world, to show them where to go? When was the last time you went to a prayer meeting that focused on asking God for the courage to proclaim the gospel? When was the last time you were in a prayer meeting that focused on praying for people from within the church to be called and sent into missions? Is it possible that maybe you have never been in a meeting like that?

And we wonder why we are not involved. We wonder why people are not being saved. We wonder why we are so weak.

Until we begin again to pray, not for ourselves, not for our needs, but for others, we will never understand the mission, we will never touch another life with the gospel. Until we begin to pray, not for others to get involved, but for the courage of God so that we will get involved, we will never experience the joy and rewards experienced by the church in the book of Acts. We will be lost and blind. Lost because we do not know where God is and how to follow Him. Blind

because we cannot see beyond ourselves to the world around us.

What is even sadder is the fact that so many have not even been to any kind of prayer meeting. The only prayer they hear and are part of is what they hear from the pulpit on Sunday. And do we dare talk about the nature of that prayer and its content. When the church gathers, what is its focus? Are we coming together to seek God's presence and His power so that we will be better equipped to go into the world? What are we seeking to do in worship, and more important, for whose benefit is it?

It would be an interesting study to look at the focus of the prayers found in the New Testament. Many, if not most of them, have the same focus as those found in Acts. They are about carrying the gospel into the world, they are about asking God for greater power and boldness to proclaim the gospel. They are about the mission of God and fulfilling that mission.

Read the Lord's prayer again (Mt 6:9-13) and consider what its focus is. Honoring God, seeking God's will, forgiving others, and protection from the enemy. Only one line deals with personal needs.

So what is the focus of your prayer, of your church's prayer? When you make the mission of God the focus of your prayer, then you will be involved in mission. When you delight yourself in God, you will find that your desires will change, they will become the same as those of God and He will give

you the desires of a heart that is in tune with Him. That is the intent of the David in Psalm 37:4.

What is God's greatest desire? What is His greatest delight? The return of His lost children. What prayer does God guarantee to answer? The prayer that brings Him the greatest delight, a desire to be part of bringing the lost children home.

Review your prayer life. Does it reflect a delight in God and in His desire? Does it reflect a desire to be involved in His mission? When it does, then you will be involved in mission and will see the lost from all over the world return home to their Father.

Read Matthew 9:37-38. What is the focus of this prayer of Jesus? Who are the workers that are to be sent out?

Read Jesus' prayer in John 17. How much of this prayer is about carrying out God's mission? Who does Jesus pray for? What does He ask God to help them do?

Read Job 22:23-27; Psalms 145:17-19; Proverbs 16:2-4. They talk about finding our motives, the focus of our delight and God's response. Reflect on your motives, what delights you, and what God wants to do in and through your life.

## Sent to do CPR

There is a reality that exists in all of the world. Every person is already dead and without the help of someone who knows CPR they will never be revived from death. They will simply move from the death they are living in now into an eternal death. At least at this moment, they have a hope of being revived and receive the life that God has to offer.

The only ones who have the ability to revive those who are dead are found in the church, among the members of the family of God. It is an ability possessed by all who are the children of God. All who have been revived automatically receive the ability to revive others. Once you receive the message of salvation and it revives you from your life of spiritual death, you are given the tools, your witness, to do the same for others.

It makes sense, then, for those who have received life to make the gift available to others. We are encouraged to give to others and share with them the blessings we have received from God. Remember Jesus stated very clearly that all who receive salvation from God automatically become His witness to those yet to receive.

Spiritual CPR involves three simple steps.

1. Call – Each of us must recognize that we are called by God to go to those who have not yet received Him.

While we are all to be involved in going to all four of the areas Jesus talked about in Acts 1:8, some will receive more specific calls. Some of us will be called to go to friends and family, others will be called to go to the next city or another part of their country, others will be called to go to the outcasts of society, and others will be called to go to other countries and cultures. That is the focus of this verse in Acts 13:4. The church in Antioch was already involved in the first three areas and now the time had come to take the next step. Enter the world.

This call was not a new idea to the leaders of this church. Those involved were people who had already left their homes and carried the message to other cities. Saul had received a very clear call from God that he would be sent to the world to carry the gospel. Barnabas had been used on two occasions to help in the development of new works among groups of other cultures and backgrounds. They people had already been busy carrying out the call at all of the levels.

2. Preparation – No one is called without preparation. God does not expect us to do the work without adequate training and knowledge. The group that started the work in Antioch were Jews who had studied God's word throughout their lives. They also had received a period of training and instruction on the teachings of Jesus from the Apostles while they were in Jerusalem. They had the opportunity to practice what they had learned as they moved from Jerusalem to Cyprus and now to Antioch.

There they received another year of training and preparation from Saul and Barnabas.

Barnabas had the same background as the others. He also had served as one of the original deacons in Jerusalem. He was noted as a man of generosity. He had been used by God to pave the way for Saul's acceptance by the leaders of Jerusalem after his conversion. It was Barnabas who was chosen to go to Antioch to help in the guidance and development of the new church there. It was Barnabas who went to find Saul and lead the church into a period of growth and development.

Saul received extensive training in God's word as a member of the school of Gamaliel. He has received a special call from God to go to the Gentiles. He had already proven his ability to explain the scriptures to others and has been especially called by God for this work. He was a key player in the process of training and preparing the church for what God was about to do.

The people of this church had been trained in God's word, they had been prepared for what God wanted to do, and they have experienced what God could do when the training and preparation were put to use in the way God intended it to be used. The church in Antioch was trained and so prepared for the mission that God had for them.

3. Response – There was no hesitation, no indecision. The leaders responded immediately. The only delay (though

not really a delay) was to pray for the guidance and strength for what lay ahead. God said go and they went. Responding to God involves a complete confidence that He knows where I am going, what I will need, and what I am to do. The text suggests just that. Saul and Barnabas went on their way on their way led by the Holy Spirit, who led them to go to Cyprus. When they got there, there was no hesitation. They responded to the leading of the Holy Spirit and began immediately to proclaim the gospel. The church had responded and sent them. They responded and went where the Holy Spirit led. They responded and the people of Salamis heard the gospel. The dead received the benefits of this special CPR and received life from God and membership into the family.

So what are we waiting for? We have seen clearly that we are all called. The preparation is available to anyone who receives God's salvation and is ready to study God's Word. The key in all of this is our willingness to respond. If we are willing to accept the call, then God will make available to each of us all that we need to be prepared for the work.

Stop and think about the CPR used to resuscitate someone who has had a heart attack. At that moment the person is dead. They need someone who knows what to do in order for them to survive that moment of death and regain life. A person who accepts the responsibility, (a call to save a life), a person who has been willing to be trained (specifically in the techniques of CPR), and a person who responds. No matter how willing we are, no matter how well we are trained, until

we actually respond to the need, the person has no hope of surviving the heart attack. In fact, the amount of time for someone to respond to the need is very short, only minutes. Without a person willing to respond, they will remain dead.

I know the reality of this. At one time in my life I worked in an emergency room as an orderly. I accepted the responsibility of helping those experiencing a heart attack. I received the training. I had the opportunity to respond to people in need. I have seen a person revived as a result of my response to their need. It is quite an experience to see a person who was dead, come back to life because I accepted the responsibility, received the training and responded.

There is a world out there filled with the spiritually dead. They are waiting, hoping someone will accept the responsibility to help them. Waiting, hoping for someone who is properly trained to guide them. Waiting, hoping for someone who will respond and go where the Holy Spirit leads them.

The plan is very simple. Let God send you to do the CPR they need.

They are dying. RESPOND.

Read Luke 10:2 Who do you think are the workers Jesus is referring to?

Now read Luke 10:3 Now who is Jesus talking to?

Read Isaiah 49:8 and 2 Corinthians 6:2. Both refer to the day of God's salvation. Paul suggests that the day of salvation is now. How does this relate to those who have not heard the gospel? How does this relate to God's call to carry the gospel to the people of every tribe and nation?

God has promised to lead us and guides us. So why are there still not enough workers for the harvest?

## Mission 18

## Acts 13:6

### Trekking one by one

In my preparations for teaching current issues in missions I have seen some grandiose plans for reaching the world. Great programs for training leaders to carry out the plan. Ambitious ideas for carrying the gospel to every person. Usually they are based on a multiplication factor. Some are simple. Some are more complicated.

A simple one looks like this. "Each one reach one each year." This results in a multiplication by two every year. If one person did this and all that were touched did the same, in ten years that one person would reach 1024 people in 10 years.

A more complicated method involves training 10 leaders who then train 10 more and so on. In just 5 years with this plan 1,000,000 people would be reached.

For some reason these plans, while good on paper, don't seem to work in real life. Or at least rarely work. Why? As I have reviewed these programs, they usually have one factor that could be the cause of their failure. So many require the people go to a specific training program. "Come and receive our training. Join us and we will equip you." Even when their plan, their program is taken to another country, this factor remains intact. To receive the training one must go to a specific location to receive it.

Consider a different option. An option that became the basis of missions for the first century church. This verse (Ac 13:6) explains it simply and completely. They traveled throughout the land. Village by village, person by person. They went to the people. They sought out the people, in their country, in their towns, in their homes.

Jesus used this same method in His ministry when he sent out the seventy. He told them to travel from city to city proclaiming the arrival of the kingdom. He told them to enter the homes and share the message. He gave them authority to heal, release and teach all they met along the way.

In Sierra Leone for almost 50 years, (maybe more), the Gbendembu Wesleyan Bible School has used this same plan. Each year the school sends the students out to do evangelism. It is called 'dry-season trekking.' It involves traveling from village to village proclaiming the gospel. It has been a key tool in reaching the people of the northern part of the country. During our time in Sierra Leone we continued the process and saw more than 12 churches started

in this manner, simply by sending people to the villages to proclaim the message.

When we moved to Papua New Guinea we established a similar program through the Bible School. Each year the students are sent out on a two week assignment to go to the villages, to go to the people, in areas where we have churches and into new areas. We have seen a great response to this activity. New churches have been planted, new ministries started.

Here in Panama we have started a School of Sowers, training people to go to the next home, the next neighborhood, the next town. Step by step, moving out into the world to proclaim the gospel.

It is not about what plan or program is used. All of them have great content, since they are based on the teachings of Jesus and those who knew Him. All of them have one clear focus in mind, getting the gospel to the world.

It is not about numbers. In one location the response is incredible and the church grows rapidly. In another, those called to go face great opposition and challenges. The growth is slow and sometimes at great cost. In the early years of missions there were those who labored for a lifetime and only saw a few saved. But they planted the seeds, and in the following generations, the seeds began to grow and yield a harvest of souls.

None of that is possible if we don't understand that we have to learn to trek. To get up and move, so that we can reach the lost in their homes, their villages, their countries. To get up and travel throughout the land.

Trekking is not a simple task. It involves preparation, cost, and commitment. A trek is not just a little hike, along a pleasant trail. It is not a stroll down a shady, calm path. It is a determined effort to cover a specified distance, no matter what the cost. A trek is a long journey. A journey that measures the depth of our commitment and stretches us to the limits of our resources. It is long, not because of the distance involved, or the time required. Some treks may cover very short distances and periods of time. It is long because it requires us to do something that we consider difficult to do.

It is interesting that when people realize you are 'trekking' they are more interested in what you have to say. They are interested in why you are on your trek, what you are learning about yourself and the world around you, and what they can learn from you that will help them in their life.

Missions is about trekking. It is about traveling throughout the land. It is about going to the people, in their homes, in their work, in their villages, in their country. It means we have to get up off our seats, and start walking, until we reach them.

That is exactly what Saul and Barnabas did. They began trekking. They went from person to person, place to place

and shared the gospel with everyone. It involved leaving the known for the unknown. It meant being obedient to God's command to go to the whole world and doing so one person at a time, one village at a time, on place at a time.

Missions will not be done by staying at home and developing a plan, a program so others can do the work. It will only be done as we begin trekking into the world. Missions is not about numbers, people are not numbers. Missions is about knowing the people one by one, and sharing the gospel with them one by one; where they live, in their language, through lives committed to trekking until Jesus returns.

Read Matthew 10:5-20; Mark 6:7-9; Luke 9:1-6; 10:3-16.

In these scriptures Jesus gives out guidelines for those who go trekking. What are the key elements of trekking? Can every person be involved in trekking, going out to those who are in the world? Since we are all expected to go, what places could you go to? (Remember trekking is not about distance or time, it is about destination). What will it cost you to go?

Mission 19

Acts 13:5-12

Feeling the heat

Do you know what it is like to have nothing go wrong? To have everything be exactly where it should be when it should be. To not have anything breakdown or fail at the worst

possible moment. Do you know what it is like to have the perfect day, where everyone was kind, helpful and did exactly what they needed to do?

If you have experienced that in your life then I want to talk with you and discover your secret. Because in the world I live in, that just never happens. A good day is when I find the solutions to my problems is without too much stress and strain. A good day is when those around me find the strength to set aside all of their distractions and challenges to focus on accomplishing the task at hand.

I don't even want to talk about what a bad day looks like! Yet, we must be ready for that reality. Jesus warned us that there would be bad times, that we would have to deal with opposition and with our personal limitations. We would have to face the fact that we have an enemy and he is powerful and he will do whatever he can to make sure something goes wrong.

Saul and Barnabas were having a great ministry. People were responding. Even leaders in high places were listening to the message of the gospel. Until one day. On this day, even a wise and insightful person was being confused by a servant of Satan. On this day Satan tried his favorite tricks, lies and confusion, to destroy the work that was being accomplished, not only in the life of this leader but all who would be affected by his decision. A negative response could make it very difficult to continue the work as before. A positive response would open even more doors.

Things were getting hot. The faith and commitment of Saul and Barnabas were being tested. Today we call this type of encounter a “power encounter.” This is a situation where God’s power is challenged by Satan’s power. The focal point is on those who are going and sharing, and on those hearing the message. It is an attack on those serving God and a warning to those who have been serving Satan.

The attack can take many forms; physical attack, emotional attack, spiritual attack. The goal is to undermine the faith of those serving God and make them appear weak and helpless, and so make the message of God’s love impotent and empty. The attack usually relates to areas of personal weakness and fear.

The warning, to those listening to the message, often involves threats. “You will lose this, you will suffer in this way, and you will put your family and others in danger. You will look like a fool for listening to them and rejecting the ways of your family and your ancestors. You will bring down a curse on all those around you. You will become an outcast, a pariah among your own people.”

The reality is clear. The task before us will eventually result in opposition by Satan and those who follow him. How we respond will have a long-term impact on whether the people will accept the message we bring to them from God or not.

The reality of mission is this. There is no perfect day, no event without opposition, without struggles. Satan is actively working to oppose us. He may use our own weaknesses and

limitations against us. He may use people like Elymas the sorcerer, (people with access to Satan's power) to create fear and anger toward us. What Satan uses to oppose us, what he uses to test us, to seek to burn us, is unimportant.

What is important is our response. That response is based on our awareness of what we are doing, where we are going and the nature of the opposition that awaits us. That response is based on our awareness of the power of the God we serve. The fact that there is opposition means we have chosen to obey God and go out into the world. We have chosen to enter into the territory of the enemy.

Everyone knows when you enter the territory of an enemy there will be opposition, there will be efforts to remove you, disarm you, and even destroy you. That is the normal response of the enemy. You are seen as a spy, an invader and will be treated accordingly. The chance that everything will go smoothly and without problems is highly unlikely.

This means that we need to be very honest about what missions involves. It involves entering into the realm of Satan to reclaim that which rightfully belongs to God. Satan and those who serve him do not want this to happen. They will do everything possible to oppose, undermine and destroy anyone who comes as a servant of the true King.

Let us be equally clear about another fact. No matter what power is exerted, no matter what type of attack is used, it is based on a false assumption. Satan and those who serve him neither have the right nor the power to maintain control of

what they have falsely taken control of. This was made extremely clear by the response of Saul and Barnabas. They correctly identified who Elymas was, a child of the devil and an enemy of the truth. His power, his position, his activity were all a result of his alliance with Satan.

This meant they had the right to expose his position and reveal the power of God over Satan and his servants. They revealed that God is against all that Satan does, directly or indirectly, through those who serve him. In this case God gave them the power to act in a very visible and direct manner. Elymas was blinded for a time. A rather fitting punishment, since his words and actions involved blinding people to the truth.

On this day God's response was visible for all to see. Another day it may be quite different. What does not change is the fact that ultimately God is in control. To be effective in missions we need to understand clearly this truth. Saul and Barnabas did and were able to respond. They knew that God was in control. They knew that no matter what opposition they faced, God would respond and reveal His power so that all would know the truth.

Missions involves entering the world. It involves facing the opposition of Satan, his followers and all who are opposed to the truth. It also involves knowing that we serve the one and only God, who has absolute control over everything. It involves going to the world and living out that truth for all to see, no matter what the consequences.

On this day, God responded by protecting His servants and giving them power over the enemy. On other days, He allowed those who served Him to suffer, yet through their suffering and faithfulness they gained power over the enemy. God's responses will not always be the same, but when we faithfully carry out the mission and live for God, He will reveal the true nature of the enemy and people will see the truth of the message we have for them.

So it doesn't matter how hot things get, how difficult the work is. God will reveal Himself. Our task is to go out there, and take the risks involved, making it possible for God to use us to reveal himself to others.

Read Matthew 10:21-31; John 15:18-16:4

Jesus warned the disciples that there would be opposition. They would be attacked because they followed him. He also said they should not worry, but that they should testify to the truth and that he would send the Holy Spirit to help them in those times of attack.

Do you believe that people will attack you just because you are a Christian? Do you believe that God will be with you and give you the strength to face such an attack? How important is it for you to stand firm in your faith when things are going wrong because of your commitment to Christ?

## Forgotten Purpose Restored

A change in name occurs; a refocusing of the mission is presented. Saul now becomes Paul and God uses him to remind the Jews that their task has always been to go to the world, to go to the Gentiles.

Paul and Barnabas have been on the road, they have been teaching and the results are a bit unsettling to the Jews. They are being told that all of their understanding of their religion contains a key error. They were not given the law simply to save themselves but to guide them to God and help them reach those outside of their race.

Paul wants them to see this truth. He goes to their synagogues. He teaches and preaches. Those “other” people, the Gentiles, hear what is happening and begin to come. They follow Paul and Barnabas asking even more questions. The next week, more Gentiles come for the meeting. The Jews are not happy for two reasons. One is simple, jealousy over the popularity that Paul and Barnabas are experiencing. The other is the judgment they receive because they have failed to do what God intended them to do, carry the truth to those outside of the Jewish people. They do not like to hear that they are to include others as part of the family of God and to share their inheritance with them.

The truth is that it has always been in God’s plan to save anyone from anywhere in the world. That was the promise to

Abraham, through him all the nations would be blessed. It was part of God's action to select a people from among all the nations to be his special people. They are to be a nation of priests to the world. They are to be a witness to the world of the greatness of God.

David understood this and proclaimed over and over in his Psalms that the nations would come and join in the praise of God. The prophets continued to remind the people of Israel that God would reach out through people of Israel, through the one to come, the offspring of the line of David, and call people from the world.

Yet the Jews continually lost sight of this truth. Here again the Jews were in opposition to God's Word. Even when Paul quoted for them the words of what many considered the greatest prophet, Isaiah, they still did not listen. They refused to accept the possibility that the blessings of God were to be shared equally by all, that each of them was to help those they came in contact with to know and understand this truth. They rejected the truth and then forced Paul and Barnabas to leave the area.

This was not an isolated setting. It reflects the reality of human nature. We do not like to share with others the blessings we have received. We are afraid there will not be enough to go around. We are afraid that we will lose our place in the limelight. We are afraid to share God. Why, because we don't really understand just how great God is and how unlimited His love and resources are.

We forget all too quickly that our very existence as a church, denomination, body of believers, is a direct result of someone willingly sharing all they had, all their knowledge of God, with another person or group. We forget that fact and become like the Jews, all closed up and self-centered. We fear what we might lose and never realize what we might gain.

Little churches are afraid of big churches, one denomination rejects another, one organization distrusts another. We become ingrown and ineffective. We need to be reminded continually that it is not about our group, our structure, our special place in God's heart. We have the false belief that it is all about us. When it is really about how 'us' can be used by God to reach 'them.'

We need regular reminders that God intended, from the beginning, that a key function of every person, structure, group, or people was to allow God to use them to communicate His love and desire to restore everyone to Him.

When we don't allow God to do so we are rejecting the God of the Bible and replacing Him with a god of our own creation. This is a very dangerous position to place ourselves in. We make ourselves unworthy of the eternal life God is offering us. In this passage that is what Paul states regarding this group of Jews who opposed the proclamation of the truth. He even uses the cultural act of shaking the dust from his robe to indicate that their rejection of the message will result in their rejection by God and loss of future blessings.

Do we really understand the seriousness of not being involved in God's mission? Do we really not understand the depth of God's command to go to the world? Are we really willing to risk God's presence and blessing to stay where we are and be who we want to be? Do we have such a small concept of our God that we cannot see the blessing waiting for those who willing share all they have to reach all that can be reached?

This mission of God is not new, it is as old as the existence of man. In fact, it probably was already in God's mind even as He made the plans to create man. God has always sought us out. God has always told man that He wants us to be part of the process of seeking out all who need to be found. God has always blessed those who willingly accept this assignment.

Here again is the commission to go. "I have made you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth." Do not be one who rejects the word of God, Do not be one who loses their place, their blessing, their God.

It says those who heard and responded were filled with Joy and with the Holy Spirit. Be filled with Joy and the Holy Spirit and go.

Read and meditate on the Scriptures Paul used as part of his message. Psalm 2:7; Isaiah 55:3; Psalm 16:10; Habakkuk 1:5; Isaiah 49:8. How are you fulfilling your part in God's plan?

Review the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3; 22:17-18; 26:3-4, and Paul's explanation found in Galatians 3:6-9. Who is a true descendant or offspring of Abraham? What will you need to do to be a blessing to all the nations of the earth?

## Mission 21                      Acts 14:8-18

### Sometimes actions speak too loudly

“What a day. God is working. He gives the power to heal a man. People are listening; it appears that they are listening. It looks like there is going to be an incredible response to the gospel. Then everything goes wrong. The people are focused on the wrong thing. They completely miss the point of what we are doing and why we have come. Truth gets mixed up with myth and the people are ready to give us honor and respect for all the wrong reasons.”

“It is a circus. People are bringing gifts, providing us with special privileges; they are ready to serve us because of what we have. The message is being lost as the people organize a feast in our honor. No matter what we say or do the crowd is not interested in the truth. They only see the power and potential benefit. Their gods, their beliefs, their desires, are all mixed up together with our words until it is hard to separate the truth from the myth.”

On this day we are given an inside look at what can happen if we are not careful about what we do and what we say, even when what we do is beneficial. It is a challenge for everyone who seeks to honor God's command by preaching the gospel and caring for the needs of those who are lost and suffering. It doesn't matter if you are feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick. There is always the risk that the focus will be on what we can give them and not on who has provided the resources.

What Paul and Barnabas did was honest and without the intent to bring glory and power on themselves. They saw a man who was listening, whose heart and soul were burning for the truth. They saw that he believed and sensed that God was ready to heal this person. What they did not anticipate was the effect this act of love would have on the crowd around them. They did not expect nor desire such praise and honor.

But this is what can happen to anyone of us who enters the world of another person, another culture, another belief structure. We are different and it will become clear, because of who we serve, that we have access to power and resources that they don't have access to. We may come with clothes and food to give to them. They could respond to the gospel simply because they want us to continue to supply them with food and clothes. They might even come to our meetings, listen to our words, even change their customs to protect the flow of goods.

We may come with medicine and skills to heal and care for the sick. They may respond as mentioned above or if they have no understanding of medicine and sickness, they may see us as beings of power who have access to the spirit world, or, as in the case of Paul and Barnabas, gods or their representatives. A very dangerous situation.

We have access to knowledge and technology that they may not have. We bring it with us and the people are in awe at what we can do. Again, they give us special attention and do all they can to encourage us to continue to supply them with tools and technology. They make changes on the surface but not within.

Sometimes their response is very clear and we have the chance to correct any misunderstandings. Sometimes it is less subtle and so will be much more difficult to correct. The attempt to correct the misunderstanding can even place us in danger. Why else do you think the crowd's response changed so drastically when the jealous Jews arrived? When people have made a commitment, even a false one, for the purpose of gaining your favor, and there is even a suggestion that you may withdraw the benefit that they have been receiving, they can react negatively, even violently.

On this day, the action that was at the center of the controversy was an innocent one. Paul and Barnabas had no intention to use the healing of the man as a means to win the people over to their side. In their minds it was merely evidence that what they were teaching was true. Healing a person was not a tool to win people over to God, but a tool to

open the door to sharing the truth. A tool to validate the truth of what they were sharing.

But what if Paul and Barnabas decided that the best way to win converts was to provide them with food? What if this was the key tool used to make converts and only those who joined the church would continue to receive the benefits? What could have happened on this day and what would have been the consequences for the gospel in the future?

I am afraid to think about what could have happened. At the least they would have been expected to continue feeding people. The day they failed to provide food would have been the beginning of the end of their ministry. Everywhere they went the people would only listen if first they fed someone as proof of their message. The people would have believed only to gain access to the power, the benefits they saw that came with the message. They would not believe the message on its own merits and then be free to enjoy whatever else might come.

It is very tempting to put actions above the truth and then hope the truth will be heard; to use gifts, skills and other resources as the means of winning converts. It is tempting because it is so much easier to do. It is much easier to allow these actions to become the gospel and so drown out the true gospel.

Does that mean we no longer give, no longer seek to heal, and no longer seek to help? No, but it does mean we need to be very alert and very wise in how we give, how we provide

medical treatment and how we seek to help. We need to do all within our power to be sure the people understand that we are not giving, not providing so as to win them as converts. We are doing so because we care. We are doing so to gain the right to speak. We need to be very clear that receiving our gifts is not based on their acceptance of our faith. Their response does not determine how long, how much, or who will receive.

Even then there will be people who do not understand. There will be people who respond for the wrong reason. It will be hard for us, even as it was hard for Paul and Barnabas to convince them otherwise. It even may result in them responding negatively to us and the message. At least at that moment.

Not all will misunderstand. Paul and Barnabas later returned to the place of confusion. They returned to Lystra and it says that they did so to strengthen the disciples and encourage the believers. They met with the people and appointed elders and spent time with them praying and fasting. They warned them that life would not always be easy. You see, the words and the actions of their first visit did have the desired effect. Only because two people were willing to be faithful to the truth and keep on teaching.

We are called to action. There are times when our actions may be misinterpreted, even misused. That is not important. What is important is that we act and that we maintain our focus and purpose. That we maintain our integrity. We have come to care for those in need and earn the right to speak the

truth. But, we are not there to “buy” the right to speak and so create a false need, a false belief.

Giving is risky, but the rewards, the souls saved for eternity, are too great to ignore. So be prepared to be misunderstood by some. But keep in focus those who will understand the truth and find salvation because you have accepted God’s call to mission.

Reflect on the stories of Joseph, Daniel and his three friends. Genesis 41:12-40; Daniel 3:12-18; 5:13-17; 6:1-22

In each of these stories there was the opportunity to gain personal glory as a result of God’s power. What do you think would have happened if each of these had failed to give the glory to God?

Reflect on the people of Israel. After 40 years of God’s provision and protection, after years of victory in the conquest of the Promised Land, why would Joshua tell them (Joshua 24:14-22) they would fail to keep their promise to serve God?

What was the difference between Joshua and the people?

Do we serve God for the benefits we receive or for the relationship we have gained?

How does this affect our involvement in missions?

## Going back to go forward

Who are the Gentiles?

How many times have you read God's Word and did not realize that you are a Gentile? You are not a member of the chosen people; at least not the way the terms are used in the Scriptures.

Who were the Gentiles? Why was it so hard to go to the Gentiles?

The Gentiles were considered heathens. People, who worshipped false gods, were involved in the worst forms of sin, who oppressed the people of God. It did not matter how educated they were, how kind they were, they were always and forever labeled 'Gentiles.' As such they were hated, rejected and avoided as much as possible. They were not worthy to be included among the people of God. Very few of them ever earned the respect of the chosen people. The best they could hope for was to be relabeled God-fearers. Even then they were considered as the lowest social class in the religious system.

The Romans were Gentiles. People who paid to become Roman citizens were Gentiles. People of any group other than the Jews were Gentiles. A large number of the people present when Paul spoke these words, "we will go to the Gentiles," were Gentiles. This comment would shake the

foundations of the system and of the world. It would begin a revolution in thinking and a war with the Jews. Those inside the church, who were called Judaizers (those who sought to maintain Jewish law and require all believers to submit to that law) and those outside of Christianity, the Pharisees, scribes and priests in Jerusalem to Jews all over the world, who wanted to completely destroy this new belief system.

The declaration of Paul and the reality of Peter's experience with Cornelius and the reality of God's open invitation to all Gentiles, would forever change the church. A new level of persecution would begin, and the expansion of the church would accelerate even more. Paul declared for all to hear, "the Gentiles belong, the Gentiles are to be equals in the kingdom of God." This declaration was a shock wave with ever widening and growing ripples, effecting more and more people.

This is what happens when we finally understand and clearly declare that the Gentiles are welcome in God's family.

But wait, we are the Gentiles and we have already been welcomed. Yes, that is true, but let us return to a comment made earlier. How often have you read God's word and not realized that you are the Gentile being referred to? I know it happens to me. I don't see myself as a Gentile. Why? Because Gentile is a term that is also used to define those outside of the faith. Modern versions of this attitude are the use of terms like, savage, heathen, pagan and worse.

Each era of the church or “religious system” defines those people who have been marked as rejects and worthless as the new version of the ‘Gentiles.’ People not worthy of our time. People who we perceive as somehow less worthy than us and so we treat them like babies, as untrustworthy, as Gentiles. Not too long ago the term used of them was ‘native,’ then it became ‘national.’ Some use terms like indigenous and tribal to distinguish those who are different. These were seen as less offensive, yet they still carried the same idea - people not really acceptable, even if they did believe in God. We are very reluctant to call them our Brothers, our Sisters, our Co-workers.

Up until this day there was a limited acceptance of the Gentiles. Now Paul is calling them Brothers. This fact opened wide the door for the spread of the gospel. Here the Gentiles heard for the first time and in absolute clarity that they had the right to be members of the family. They were called worthy. They were called Brothers. They rejoiced. They were no longer lower class citizens but full citizens in the kingdom of God.

The Jews present understood exactly what Paul had just said. They were no longer the exclusive members of the people of God, they were no longer the only ones chosen. They would have to share with the Gentiles. The Jews did not like what Paul said and they stirred up opposition.

Today the church has the same issue to deal with. While we have found less offensive terms to use when referring to those who do not believe, the intent is still the same. And

until we clearly see the people out there as our Brothers, our Sisters, our Family, we will be reluctant to go, reluctant to give and especially reluctant to share.

Hear the word very clearly again, because sometimes we need to be reminded of exactly what God is telling us to do. We need to say as clearly as possible that we will go to the Gentiles of our world. Why? Because they are our Brothers, because they have the same right as we have - to hear about God's love and be adopted into God's family.

We can do this by remembering that terms like Gentile, savage, pagan, native are terms for describing lives of sin, lives lived without God. We can do this by remembering that before we found God, those terms applied to us. We lived like pagans, like natives, we lived for ourselves, without God.

We can declare with Paul, we will go to the Gentiles for they are our Brothers, our Family and they need to hear that they are welcome, that they can come home.

Read Romans 9:22-30; 11:13-36. Place yourself in the place of a Gentile, then read it again and place yourself in the role of a Jew.

If God was willing to graft us into his family, who else is included in this choice?

Who do we treat as Gentiles and what attitudes do we have towards them?

How will this affect our willingness to get involved in God's mission to make the 'Gentiles' His people?

## Mission 23

## Acts 15:1-35

### The Taste Test

Do you like to put salt on your food?

How much, or how little salt do you like to use?

What kind of salt do you prefer, raw salt from the sea, processed salt from a mine, or maybe iodized salt from a factory?

Of course we like salt on food. Why?, because it brings out the flavor of the food. At least that is what we believe. I wonder if it is really the flavor of the food that we taste, or in reality, the taste of the salt mixed with the flavor of the food.

As we have lived in various cultures we have seen different approaches to the use of salt. In Sierra Leone the most common form of salt comes from the salt beds near Freetown. These salt flats provide a form of unprocessed salt. It takes much more of this salt to have the same result as salt processed in a factory. We have visited a salt mine in Colombia. It is possible to use that salt in its raw form but it contains other minerals which will end up in your food, as well. We have lived in Papua New Guinea and eaten with people in remote areas where they do not use salt at all, but

rather use various types of herbs and leaves to add flavor to their food, or they eat their food without seasoning.

We have also lived in countries that actually add other ingredients into the salt to provide important minerals and medicines to help protect the general population from various diseases. In many parts of the world iodine is added. This helps prevent certain types of diseases related to the thyroid. In Guyana a specific medicine is added designed to protect the people from elephantiasis. This medicine kills a parasite that enters the body and causes liquid to gather in the legs which then swell.

So salt comes in many forms, is processed differently and is used in different ways. So which way is the best way to use salt? Add it while you are cooking? Add it when you are ready to eat? Or both? Which salt is the best salt? Sea salt, rock salt, processed salt, or salt that occurs naturally in your diet? What additives are the best to put in your salt? Iodine, magnesium, treatment for elephantiasis or others? So many questions, so many options. The answers really depends on where you live and what your needs are. The bottom line is, we need salt to live.

This is what the discussion is all about in Acts 15. Everyone wants to know what a true Christian looks like. What type of clothes does he wear? What type of rules does he live by? What type of food does he eat? A modern-day version of this discussion could be: What type of music does he listen to? What type of beverage does he drink? What type of clothes does he wear?

As with the question about the salt, the answer is quite simple. A Christian is one who has received the Lord as his Savior. The rest of the questions will be dependent on where he lives, what is normal and acceptable in that location, and what clearly brings honor to God and does not distract from the truth.

We are often too worried about where the salt came from, how it was processed and what minerals or treatments have been added to it. We forget that the real issue is that we need the salt. In the same way, we often become too focused on the external issues of what we think a Christian should look like and lose the key focus. A true Christian is one who has given his life to God, been forgiven, and has committed his life to serving God.

In Jerusalem the council met. One group wanted to create standards, controls that would allow them to evaluate every person based on their idea of what a Christian looked like. Peter stood up and reminded them of his vision from God and the events surrounding the conversion of Cornelius. He reminded them that God had no such concern. Then Paul and Barnabas stood and shared all that God had been doing among the Gentiles. Again the focus was that God was not setting such a standard and neither should they.

The council listened and took a decision. Bottom line is we need salt. Oh sorry. They didn't talk about salt, they talked about what was needed to identify a person as a true follower of Christ. They determined that, yes everyone needs to be saved, but the evidence of salvation would not be about

circumcision, clothing or any other similar external issue. It would relate to living a changed life.

The Christian life is about abstaining from sinful practices. The counsel focused on three of these.

1. Sexual immorality - The focus of this request involved living in a way that encouraged others not to continue in their sin,
2. Eating food sacrificed to idols – The focus of this request was a reminder that our lives should be about worshipping only God and not being involved in the world or its practices.
3. Abstain from eating meat with the blood still in it, or the blood itself – The focus of this request was that we should always be concerned about not offending our brother (eating meat with blood was a cultural and religiously offensive act to the Jews). We should focus on activities that encourage and build up each other.

So, what does this have to do with salt? Well we all need salt, but it doesn't matter how the salt is obtained, the form in which it is used and what else is in the salt. I don't have to buy your salt or change my salt to look like yours. I mean really salt is salt. Isn't it? In the same way salvation is salvation, isn't it?

Have you ever seen what happens when the wrapping is changed on a product, salt for example? Or the name used to identify the product is changed? It is interesting how people

react. They don't trust it, even though it is exactly the same. They will begin looking for the old product, with the old name and the old wrapper. Maybe in time they will begin to accept the change, but with reluctance.

I know. When I move to another country I am always checking the product names to see if I recognize them. Then I discover the same product locally and find out it is just as good as the one with a western brand name on it. And it is usually cheaper and more readily available. Obvious, the best way to sell it is using the local method and the local name.

The gospel is the same. Using a local approach and local realities will make it more accessible to more people. The real test of the gospel is whether it tastes good to the people receiving it. They want the salt, not the wrapping. They want the gospel, not our wrapping. And the bottom line is, just like everyone needs salt in their diet, everyone needs the gospel. Unlike salt, which can be found almost everywhere and is easily accessible, the gospel will only be available and accessible as we bring it to others. Our task is to present it in a way that is understandable to them in their local.

Read the following Joel 2:28; Romans 3:21-24; 4:11-12; 10:11-13; Galatians 4:1-5

Reflect on what these Scriptures say about who can receive salvation and become a member of the family of God. What requirements are involved? What changes are to be made? In these scriptures is anybody excluded for any reason from

receiving the good news? How do these relate to how we present the gospel today and to whom we present it?

Remember the goal is not to get it to taste the way we like it, or use what we use. The goal is for the gospel to taste how God knows it should taste.

## Mission 24

## Acts 15:36-41

### Perfection is not required

Over the years we have watched missionaries, students and leaders enter the ministry only to fail and fall away from their calling. On the other hand we have seen others who seemed inadequate grow and become foundational workers for the kingdom.

We have often had people ask what it takes to stay in focus and not give up. We have had times when we have had to review this discussion on a personal basis. What does it take to carry out the call of God, no matter what happens? What is the difference between those who go and fail, and those who go and serve? What is it that makes it possible for them to do more than survive, but thrive in God's work?

I would love to have been part of the discussion between Paul and Barnabas regarding John Mark. I would love to know why Paul felt John Mark was not ready and why Barnabas was willing to believe in him, even after he had

failed and deserted them. It would be interesting to hear and see how the other leaders responded to this discussion.

What were the issues?

1. Call – Was their concern over the reality of John Mark's call to be involved in missions? The two people he served with were giants of faith and service. Barnabas had a proven track record of ministry and evangelism. Paul was an incredibly gifted teacher and had as clear a call to mission as anyone has or ever will have. How do you compare the call of an unknown person, almost unknown, to these two individuals? How do you evaluate the life and ministry of John Mark in the light of that and his failure? But, if there was no clear evidence of a call in John Mark's life then why take him with in the first place?
2. Gifts – Was the concern related to a lack of spiritual gifts? Again consider John Mark, who is a young man and learning how to use his gifts, and Paul and Barnabas, men with experience and the ability to effectively use the gifts they have received. Did John Mark not have any gifts, the wrong gifts or was he too immature in his faith to use them effectively? Again why take him along if he has not proven himself in a prior setting?
3. Ministry – Do we know what John Mark's ministry experience was? Was there a problem with his willingness or ability to carry out the ministry and

work assigned to him? Was there an unwillingness to submit to the leaders, their evaluation and their encouragement? As before, if any of these is true then why take this person along? Why put the entire ministry at risk, and create the potential for confusion and unnecessary conflict as a result of his attitude and behavior?

We are not told much about John Mark. What we do know is he returned with them from Jerusalem after they had delivered their gift to help the Christians there during a time of famine. Also it is somewhat clear that John Mark had gifts, he had ability and likely had a call. Otherwise they would have not taken him with them.

Remember this was not going to be an easy trip. They had very little finances and every person represented extra work to provide for the food and transport involved in the work. It also involved the unknown; entering places that were unknown to them; dealing with languages that were unknown to them; encountering people and cultures that were unknown to them; risking their lives because they did not know how the people would respond.

Even after visiting many countries, encountering many different cultures, learning three new languages, I still find that the unknown can be unsettling. I don't like the feeling of not knowing where I am and, even more, the feeling that I may not know how to get back to a place I am familiar with. I don't like the feeling of not being able to communicate. It

is unsettling to not know what people are saying and are thinking, and not being able to share openly with them.

It is also very uncomfortable to not know the rules. Rules that guide ones actions, rules that guide relationships, rules that determine if you will be accepted or be unacceptable. Cultural rules can make my efforts impotent if I fail to act in the right way, do not give recognition to the correct person, or use the wrong hand or gesture in any number of settings.

Bottom line, it is not simple to be involved in missions.

For any of these reasons and a number of others John Mark could have come to the point that he could not function. Today we call this “culture shock.” Whether through fear, overload, or weariness, John Mark decided to give up and go home. He abandoned his fellow workers.

But his story was not over, and that became the center of the argument between Paul and Barnabas. Their debate concerned what would happen next. How would they deal with the failure of John Mark? Paul did not want to deal with it. He expected his travels would become more difficult and he needed someone who he could place his confidence in. But Barnabas saw something in John Mark, we are not told what, maybe he had a clearer idea of what had happened, maybe John Mark renewed of his commitment to God’s call, or had a change in his attitude. Maybe it was as simple as he just needed another chance. Barnabas saw something and was willing to give him that chance. He wanted John Mark

to go them, and he wanted the church to believe in him again.

This is a real part of the work of missions. We can have everything in place. We can be prepared, as best as we know how. We make the decision to get involved, but something goes wrong. Maybe the person we send or support gives up. Possibly the money invested is lost. Or, our intentions are misunderstood and we feel that we have been criticized unfairly. Perhaps we hear of a negative experience in another church, another group. We are brought face to face with the challenges of mission and the dangers that those we send will face.

As a result of either of these two situations we choose to quit what we are doing or choose to not get involved. Either decision means that Satan has won and there will be people who do not receive the message in time.

Both Paul and Barnabas knew the cost. They also knew the need. Rightly or wrongly, they disagreed on what to do next. Whether the decision was handled correctly, or not, they ended up organizing two teams. It meant stretching the funds, which were already limited, but it allowed for greater faith in God and His ability to provide.

What is also important to notice is that the church in Antioch did not focus on the failure. Nor did they allow the failure to restrict their actions. They could have focused on the risk and the danger. They had adequate evidence of the beating of Paul, the opposition of the Jews, and the fact that John Mark

had run away from the team as a result. They could have abandoned the mission, they could have abandoned John Mark.

Instead they expanded the mission. They allowed Paul and Barnabas to create two teams. They allowed Barnabas to take John Mark and allowed Paul to take a stranger, Silas (stranger to them). Instead of focusing on the dangers and the failures, they focused on the possibilities. They allowed God to increase their faith and sent out the second wave of missionaries. Not a big wave, but it has been growing ever since, until it has reached to the remotest places of the world.

Getting involved in missions is about overcoming barriers. It is about overcoming our failures, our fears and our limitations. The story of John Mark is just that. Barnabas helped him to overcome, helped the church to overcome, and even Paul later admitted that John Mark was a good worker and desired his help (1 Ti 4:11). The barriers existed but they were overcome and more people heard the gospel.

Every church will have to deal with the barriers to their involvement. They will have to deal with their fears. They will have to deal with the challenges that exist in getting involved and staying involved. Missions is not just taking a shot at it; about giving it a try and seeing what will happen. It is about facing the reality of the opposition in the world. It is about realizing that God has called us, God has given us the gifts needed to go, and that God has and will continue to prepare us for the ministry that lies ahead. It means realizing there are risks and being willing to take them. It means that

when we stumble, and we will, we get right back up and get back to the work.

I don't understand all of what happened in John Mark's life on that first trip. But I am glad that Barnabas was there to help him get back up and get back to work. It stands as a challenge and testimony to us all today. It challenges us to get involved and challenges us to keep on getting involved, even when the work is difficult.

Read Luke 14:27-34. Review the life of Gideon in Judges 6-7.

Both of these passages deal with the cost of serving God. They also encourage us to think about what God will provide if we accept the challenge and the cost involved.

Why was Gideon unwilling to do as God commanded him? What did God want Gideon to believe and trust in?

What will it cost you or your church to get involved in God's missions? Evaluate your level of willingness to obey and what is affecting your decision? What do you think God is ready to do and provide if you accept His call to service?

Mission 25                      Acts 16:6-10

A road without fog

Yesterday I was working with a friend from our church. We were laying a tile floor in another of the churches here in

Panama. As lunch neared I needed to make a decision about what we would eat. My decision was easy. I gave my friend David some money and asked him to go and buy lunch for us. So began a search that lasted for at least an hour. When he returned I asked what had taken so long. His answer was interesting; in the community where we were working there was no place to buy lunch. So he took a bus to the first place he could find, bought the food, took a taxi back because it was late and there were no buses. No buses because many of them were on strike. In the end we ate a typical Panamanian lunch, rice, beans, chicken, and some lettuce with vinegar.

The process of getting our food involved a number of factors and affected all of the decisions that were made after that. First, we determined that the church was not going to prepare food for us (they had done so in the past). Then he had to obtain information about where he could find a restaurant or other source for our lunch. Then he had to determine how he would get there and back. He also had to make a decision about what to buy based on his knowledge of me and what I ate and his preferences as well. All of these decisions were affected by where we were on that day and what was happening in the world around us.

My concept of what I would like to eat, how far he should go to get that food, the cost involved, and how he would get there and back was quite different then what actually happened. You see I thought he would only have to travel three blocks to get the food, which determined in my mind how long it would take to get there and back. I was thinking

of something simple like empanadas (meat pies common in Latin America), though I did not share this information with David. The money I gave him was based on what I was thinking of for our lunch. It was good that I had given him more than I thought he would need. It is good to allow for the unknown, which is exactly what had happened.

In the end, what determined our meal was, where the time we were there and the resources available there. It was adequate to meet our needs and allowed us to continue our work. What was important is that being where we were, at the time we were there, and with the resources available is what determined what we would have to eat on that day. All of these factors did not alter the work or inhibit us in our work. We got done what we had planned to do on this day.

This is what was happening with Paul and his decision about where to go next. He was thinking of going to the next region – Asia, was actually closer than Macedonia. He was becoming familiar with the Asian cultures and lifestyles of that region and may have had a better understanding of how to travel and live in that region. But it was not about what he had in mind and was prepared for. It was linked to other factors; factors that Paul would not have been aware of. Factors affected by events and conditions outside of his control, but fully within the scope of God's knowledge.

Paul may have been looking at his resources and thought that he could afford to go to Asia. God saw the true extent of the resources available and knew exactly how much more it would cost to go to Macedonia and already had in place the

plan to provide what was necessary. Paul may have been thinking about some of the people he had met along the way. Perhaps some Asian travelers and traders had been in the towns he had already visited and he thought visiting their homes would be a good way to continue his work. God had something very different in mind and He would provide the money, food and shelter Paul needed to do his work.

What is important is that Paul was available to do the work, willing to do the work and prepared to do the work. He was where God wanted him and ready to go where God sent him.

At times we wrestle with the question of where we should begin in our missionary endeavors. Which country to be involved in? Which missionary to support? How much can we afford to give? What we should really be thinking about is how can we be ready to do what God wants when He asks us to get involved?

Note that Paul was already involved in the work of missions. He was already traveling in the world to proclaim the gospel. He went from place to place preaching and teaching. When he finished his first trip, he was ready for the next. He has already been prepared by God to do the work. He has studied God's word; he had accepted God's call and he had been involved in preparing others. This decision about where to go next was not made in darkness or confusion. He was not confused or disoriented. He was not at a loss for what to do. He was only looking at where to go next. But all that was based on getting involved. That decision was made based on where he already was and what he was already doing.

All of what was happening in Paul's life was based on getting involved in the work. It was based on being obedient to God's call. Paul's life is an example to us of what it means to go where God wants us to go. We need to:

1. Be obedient to God's call – we don't need a special training to be obedient
2. Get involved – We don't need to wait for specific directions to get involved
3. Watching for God's directions along the way – We do need to be in the right place to receive directions for specific places and types of ministry.

A car does not turn until someone takes the wheel and starts the car in motion. You will not eat until you go and obtain the food you need and then put the food in your mouth. A plane will not take off until it is moving down the runway. Likewise we have to be living lives of obedience for God to direct us where He wants us to go. Until that happens then God cannot show us what He wants us to do specifically for Him in carrying the gospel to the world. Until we start moving toward the world, we cannot move in any direction.

Until my friend went looking for our food, we would have no food. If he hadn't been willing to go farther down the road, he would not have obtained it. Until he spent the time and funds necessary for travel, he would not have gotten there and back with the food.

Until we start getting involved in missions we will not understand where the gospel is needed. Until we are willing to leave our homes, our family, our comfort zone; we will not be able to reach those who need the gospel. Until we are willing to invest our lives and resources, we will not get to the place God is preparing for us to go to. And we will not receive the blessings that come from going and sharing the gospel with the world.

It is not about what we have in mind, but about what God has in mind. It is about growing, it is about working, it is about being where we should be so that God can lead us farther into His mission.

It is interesting to note that Paul never actually went to Asia, but as a result of his work, of his obedience to go to Macedonia and beyond, those he preached to and taught eventually carried the gospel to Asia. Don't worry about where you will go. Pray about getting started. Once you are involved, God will lead you. He will take you much farther than you ever dreamed of going.

Read 1 Kings 19:19-21; 2 Kings 2:1-13. These scriptures deal with the call of Elisha and how he replaced of Elijah. Many years passed between his call, given by Elijah and actually taking Elijah's place. What do you think he was doing during those years of waiting? Why did he refuse to leave Elijah during this time? What was the result of his willingness to follow Elijah and be part of his ministry?

We all want a special call, special direction from God. The question is what are we doing so that God would be willing to answer our prayer for direction?

## Mission 26

## Acts 16:1-6

### No waiting permitted

It has been only a short time since Paul was in Lystra and Derbe. Remember these towns? It was here that the people stoned him after he had healed a lame man. They left him for dead.

It was just after this incident that Paul proclaimed he would go to the Gentiles. He would call them brother. Since then he returned to Antioch and then Jerusalem for the great Council to decide on the role of Jewish law in relation to Gentile believers. In this passage he is now revisiting the churches of this area to share with the Gentile believers that they will not be required to follow Jewish law. They are welcome in the new church.

The beginning of the work in Lystra and Derbe began on shaky ground and faced opposition from two sources: 1. Jealous and angry Jews, 2. Disgruntled worshippers of Zeus and Apollo who thought they had been privileged to receive a visit from the gods and were severely disappointed. This group had not had any further contact from Paul, Barnabas or any other leader. In spite of this, the church was growing.

When Paul returned he found a vibrant group of believers. They had been diligent in sharing their faith and others had joined the group. One of those was Timothy, a believer, who had grown in his faith and service. The local church has a high regard for him and Paul saw something special and decided that he should become part of his team.

This young man, committed to God, now becomes a missionary. This young man, from a very young, yet committed, church is sent out by his church. This young church, from a difficult location, responds to Paul's request and sends out Timothy as a missionary.

This church had only recently been planted and had only been involved in ministry for a very short time, probably less than three years. Yet they were ready to become involved in the mission. Their teaching was complete and one of their young people responded. He began to serve and God blessed his service. And when the call came to send Timothy, there was no hesitation, no second guessing.

Why?

The teaching of Paul and Barnabas and the witness of their lives left a very clear message. It apparently left a profound impression as well. They healed a person and gave all the glory to God. Paul was attacked severely and left for dead. Yet he got up and returned to the group and continued to share the gospel with them. They then tell the people of Lystra and Derbe that they must travel to the next town to continue sharing the gospel with others who have not heard.

The message of Paul and Barnabas was clear. We have to tell others the gospel. We have been sent by God to you. The people of Derby and Lystra received the whole message and saw the need to tell others. They began a ministry that included the towns of Lystra and Iconium, Timothy was a part of this ministry. God was speaking, they were listening, and when Paul returned they were ready to send Timothy into the mission.

And so the mission grew. Not because of years of training, years of preparation, years of organizing. It grew because those who heard the message also heard the need to carry the message to others. So a young church, with a young ministry, sent a young man to work in the mission. The need to tell others was an essential part of the message and still is.

The age of our church, the years of existence and ministry are not what determines when and how we will become involved. What determines when we get involved is how well we are listening to the message. Do we hear the message, all of it? It is salvation, but not just for us. It is salvation for us and for everyone we can reach.

It does not take a degree in theology or a doctorate in missiology to understand the message. It doesn't take advanced courses in evangelism to be able to share the message. Nor does it take special training in leadership and organization to carry out the plan. What is required is a person, a church who hears the message and sees the need for others to hear the message.

This church knew the truth. They instilled the truth in their members. This church sought opportunities to minister and were ready to send those called to missions. All this without a bible school, seminary or specialized training. God spoke, they got involved, and did the teaching needed so that when the time came they would have people prepared to go.

So what are you waiting for?

Read the stories of Samuel in 1 Samuel 2-3, David in 1 Samuel 17 and Daniel in Daniel 1.

Consider how old each of these individuals were when they had to make key decisions about serving God. What do you think would have happened if they had decided they were too young, or not ready for what they were asked to do? What if they had decided that the task was just too big and decided to quit or tell God to wait?

Doubt is not a new issue. Lack of confidence will always be an area we will have to deal with. Moses felt inadequate. Elijah was discouraged by the response of the people after the events on the mountain. Gideon considered himself unworthy. Yet in all of these cases, when they yielded to God's will and direction, God used them in great ways.

Will you choose to allow God to use you today to carry out his mission? Will you commit yourself to the work in the same way as the churches in Derbe, Lystra and Iconium did? Will you let God lead you into His mission as He did Timothy?

## The debate begins

Do you know why you believe? Do you know what you believe? Are you disturbed by what others believe and what it will cost them to continue in that belief? Presenting the gospel is not about doing something carelessly. It is about doing something that makes sense and can be defended as right no matter whom we talk to and where we meet them.

When Jesus came to earth he entered a specific culture and a specific time. One of the things that made His ministry so effective was His ability to understand the people He was ministering to and communicate in a way that made sense to those people. His teaching, his lifestyle was drawn from the lives of the people around Him.

It was similar when Paul entered into his ministry. He was a Jew from outside of Palestine who knew the Scriptures well. He understood the people around him and knew what they were thinking and how to communicate with them. He also knew the life and beliefs of the gentiles around him. He grew up in Tarshish and was living in Tarshish when Barnabas invited him to join the work.

In these verses Paul is in Athens. He is disturbed by the idol worship he sees around him. He begins to reason with the Jews in the synagogue and the God-fearing Gentiles. He discusses what he saw and shares his knowledge with those

he meets in the marketplace. His discussions and presentations are filled with clarity and insight.

Why do I say this?

From the information given in this story it becomes clear that Paul had been observing the people he was talking to. He had taken time to discover what was important to them. He knew they were very concerned about the reality of the gods. They were concerned that the gods provide what they need and that the gods not be offended by them and so cause them problems. As a result there were many shrines with images to all the known gods and one to an unknown god. This shrine was there to be sure no god was forgotten or dishonored.

He knew about their literature and their beliefs. He had taken time to talk with people about their history, their views of life and even found time to explore their literature to better understand them. He used a quote from one of their philosophers to show them that their search for truth was a worthy activity. In this way he showed his respect for them as individuals. He had taken time to get to know them.

His discussions and arguments were such that they attracted the attention of the philosophers. They were interested in what he had to say. It was not like the religious talk of other groups, filled with mystic ideas and mythological stories. Nor was it like the latest philosophical concept, filled with hypothesis and complicated concepts. It had clarity and allowed for a clear discussion of the ideas. It had connection

to the world in which they lived and how they lived. It had substance and suggested another way of dealing with the key questions of life. It was honest and worthy of examination.

Paul was given the chance to present his faith in a public setting for all to hear, all to question and discuss. They were interested and listened attentively. The only point of concern was the idea of the resurrection and which caused some to dismiss what he had to say. Others saw the logic, the truth and wished to know more. Even a member of the Areopagus, Dionysius became a follower.

Our faith is not an emotional and senseless concept. It is based on the reality of God and His creation. It is a defensible faith. It is not empty teaching void of reality. It involves a clear understanding of the world, of man and what needs to be done. It is not based on wild fanaticism. It is based on clear and verifiable truth and a relationship with God.

People want to know the truth. The problem is they don't know where to find the truth. They are looking for what makes sense, what can be defended, what relates to their world and gives substance to their lives. But to make it possible for them to hear the truth and know that it is truth means understanding what they already know, what they already accept as truth. It means understanding their world so that they can hear the truth in terms and forms they understand.

Missions is not based on an emotional response to God. It is much like love. Love is much more than an emotion. It is a choice based on real knowledge of a person that opens the doors for a future relationship. Real love is what is left after all the emotion has died down. Missions is a commitment to truth and action with or without emotions.

Emotion may be great to get us moving in the right direction, but we need much more than emotion to keep us going. We need clarity, we need understanding and we need substance. That is what missions is all about. It is not about the excitement, the emotion of going somewhere exotic or exciting. It is about going where the message needs to be heard, understanding what needs to be done for the message to be heard, and being people of substance and clarity so the message will be heard.

Missions, successful missions, is a thoughtful response to God's call, which involves a thoughtful plan to respond to those who need to hear.

Read Acts 4:13; 6:9-10; 8:34-35; 14:1-4. Each of these passages indicates that those proclaiming the gospel were well instructed in the Word and able to clearly communicate the message and support their belief.

Isaiah 54:17; Jeremiah 1:18-19; Luke 21:15. Each of these includes a promise from God that He would provide the needed words and insight to effectively defend ourselves and our faith.

What should we be doing so that our involvement in missions is more effective: before we go and once we arrive at the place God calls us to serve?

Missions 28

Acts 18:1-4

### Tentmakers Anonymous

Paul arrives in Corinth and shortly after he meets a couple (Aquila and Priscilla) who will become lifelong partners with him in missions. He joins them in their tent making business. They help support Paul and the ongoing expansion of the mission in the region. They become key people in this work as they willingly relocate on several occasions to help in supporting and promoting the mission. Even after Paul moves on they continue their work, first in Ephesus (Acts 18:19) and later back in Rome (Romans 16:3-5). They represent a new aspect of doing missions.

Aquila and Priscilla use their skills and business to finance both their lives and missions. They represent a unique way of thinking about careers and missions. In their minds their career, their business provided them a means of becoming actively involved in missions. They discovered that they could move from where they were to another city, even another country and set up their business. This allowed them to support the work in that location and be actively involved in missions.

They also provided income and finances for Paul.

This is an interesting idea. Aquilla and Priscilla saw their business, their career as the means to support missions. This was probably not their original reason for getting involved in tentmaking. They probably became tentmakers because someone in one of their families was a tentmaker, or they saw the profitability of such a business. They, like everyone else, wanted the means to provide for their needs and their wants.

Meeting Paul brought new purpose to their business and career. It became a means to another much broader goal. They now saw that their occupation could be used to help further the mission of God in the world. They began to understand that having a job was not just about taking care of themselves but could also provide the means for reaching out to the lost. It became a place where they could do evangelism in relation to their employees, coworkers, business associates and clients. They also began to understand that their business could be used to fund missions.

They went with Paul to Ephesus.

Paul spent a short time in Ephesus and then went on to Antioch (18:18-22). While he was gone Aquilla and Priscilla began to disciple those who had responded to Paul's message. They helped in the training of Apollos who became a teacher and missionary. They used their business to make it

possible to join in the mission work with Paul and act as a base to continue the ministry.

They now took the idea of supporting missions to a new level. They relocated their business to a new city or country so that they could use it as a base to share in the work being done in that location. Today we call this type of missions work “tentmaking.” It involves people who look for job opportunities or business opportunities in other countries as a means of carrying the gospel to them.

This concept has further expanded to include people who have retired or who are able to support themselves, who give themselves for short periods of time to mission work. They help in key areas of ministry related to skills and knowledge that they possess. My mother and my step-dad served in this manner for a number of years. They traveled to several countries to be teachers for missionary children. They also visited various types of ministries at in the United States to provide maintenance and other services as needed. We applaud these people and are thankful for the service they give and the support they provide in critical areas of ministry.

At this point I want to review the first aspect of what happened in the lives of Aquilla and Priscilla. When they arrived in Corinth they were not thinking about missions. They were not thinking about what they could do and had no idea of how they could use their business to support and promote missions. They were like many people in the

church. They were faithful in attending service, faithful in studying God's word and living life like everyone else.

Then Paul came and shared the gospel with them.. They now saw life very differently. They became less attached to this world and became attached to God. They began to see the reality of what it meant to store up treasures in heaven. They first became tent makers in relation to their life here on earth. This changed and they began to understand how to use what they had to refocus their goals and activities in service for God.

If we truly understand all of Jesus' teaching in this area then everyone who is a member of the kingdom of God is a tentmaker. We are all living in temporary dwellings and need to focus on helping others join us in the journey to our permanent residence in heaven. When we begin to understand this then the purpose of our jobs, our careers, become refocused.

This refocus should result in a new understanding that our lives are the tools God wants to use to carry out His mission. The skills we have, the talents we have, all become the means to a much greater purpose than merely providing for our daily bread and a few extras, none of which will last beyond the point of our death. This new focus allows us to become less attached to things and more attached to God.

What a challenging concept - to look at our career goals and work situations as opportunities to help expand the mission to others. It will help us do better work and be able to give to

God what is due to him, honor and praise. Instead of searching for any type of work, we search for work with the desire that it will provide for our needs, allow us to share our faith, and be able to help in the work of missions.

For some, their career choices will open up other doors of involvement in missions. It will allow them to travel to another country where their skills are needed, which in turn can open doors to sharing the gospel that might otherwise not be available. Or it may mean helping those called to missions in key areas that will free them to focus on the work they have been called to do.

We all need to rethink the reasons for what we do. We need to think about the job we have, the career we have, the work we do, and how it can become a source for supporting missions. We need to become members of Tentmakers Anonymous, a group that is seeking to follow the steps involved in becoming world class Christians. A group that is seeking to follow the steps involved in learning how to lay up treasures in heaven. A group that is learning how to provide the means for others to hear the gospel. A group that is learning how to become less attached to this world and more involved in the kingdom of God.

Yes, we need to become part of Tentmakers Anonymous so that we can gain a better understanding of what God has done. He did some tentmaking of his own. He left heaven to live here for awhile. He used his skills, his abilities to carry the message of salvation to a group of people and helped them see beyond themselves to the world. His tentmaking

opened the door so that we could go to the world and reap a reward that we could not have known, except as we began to copy his example of Tent Making.

Will you join? Will you use your skills, your careers to support the goal of reaching the lost with the gospel? Will you become a true Tentmaker?

Read Deuteronomy 8:10-14; 1 Chronicles 29:14-17; Proverbs 3:6; Luke 20:25; Romans 14:6-8. These Scriptures deal with different aspects of why we should be ready to give to the Lord.

Consider why all of who you are, what you do, and what you have should be used to honor God. Consider how you can use who you are, what you do, and what you have to help others know the God who loves them and has provided so much.

Mission 29

Acts 19:8-10

## Long Haul Preparation

The Gbendembu Wesleyan Bible School was originally opened as a non-resident program and was relocated three times before it finally arrived in the village of Gbendembu, in Sierra Leone, West Africa. The missionaries and national church leaders all agreed that it should become a permanent part of the ministry of the growing church. So they built a multipurpose building out of mud. They built it well with the

hope that the school would serve the church for many years. That building is still in use over 80 years later.

This school became the center of growth for the church. It trained pastors, sent out evangelistic teams and provided training for the leaders of the church. Its program has been restructured three times to adapt to the continuing needs of the church. Even today it is the heart of the Wesleyan Church's growth and expansion in the area. The campus was expanded to meet the growing needs and in 1995 added new classrooms, dormitories, and library.

The vision of providing training to expand the work of missions and the church is not a new concept. It became a key part of Paul's missions plan when he returned to Ephesus. Within a short time, he realized that the most effective way to expand the work was to set up a training program and training center. To accomplish this he rented a hall and provided classes and training each day to all who would come. He used the teaching techniques of his time to train others to carry the mission farther than he could do it on his own.

Acts 19:10 states that Paul continued this ministry for two years. It was so effective that Luke reported that all of the Jews and Greeks living in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord. Originally God had prevented Paul from entering this area, but He used Paul to teach others to go. The result was much more effective than if he alone had gone.

It is not clear what Paul's curriculum was. He probably didn't have a program of training like we have today with courses in ministry, Bible and other areas. He probably didn't assign specific time periods and credits to different classes in order to complete a program in pastoral ministry, missions or Christian education. In fact, His teaching may have looked more like a something of an extended Sunday school program or night school seminars. Whatever the structure was, it clearly had three results:

1. Those who came heard the gospel. This school was unique in that it probably was an open-forum setting. Those who were being disciplined were in the center listening and interacting with the teacher. Around them there was probably space for others to sit and listen. Remember this was a public hall and open debates and discussion were common. Those on the fringe would be able to listen and so receive the gospel. This setting allowed them to make a decision and then become part of the inner group quite naturally.
2. Discipleship and training were made available. As mentioned above those making a commitment to become Christians would be able to receive instruction and mentoring. They could come and present their questions and receive answers. They would also learn about their responsibilities as Christians and learn more about their new found faith and how to live it in the world around them.

3. Missions would have been a key part of the training. It is not hard to make this assumption. The fact that the gospel spread until (not just some) but all of the Jews and Greeks of the province of Asia heard indicates that missions was a key part of the teaching that was occurring. People were being trained to carry the gospel to the next city, the next county, and next region as part of the process of being disciplined.

The training center and its program in Ephesus became a key part of the continued expansion of God's mission to the world. People heard the message in the worship times and could receive training throughout the week. Of those who were being disciplined many received the training needed to carry the gospel to other areas.

Gbendembu Wesleyan Bible School functioned in the same way. People were trained and the church expanded. It expanded to other villages, other districts, and other tribes. Those early missionaries and church leaders made a wise decision to provide training so that the work could expand.

We have the same responsibility today. Part of the mandate for missions is the mandate to make disciples (Mt 28:19-20), disciples who will be able to teach others all that Jesus taught and repeat the process in other places. They are expected to go, to teach, to baptize and to disciple.

So how do we compare ourselves to what was happening in Ephesus and in Gbendembu. Do we have training in several

key areas that help people understand missions and how they can be involved.

1. Worship – Is there opportunity for people to learn about missions as part of our weekly times of worship? This could be through prayer times for missions, short reports on missions and messages from the pastor on missions. Our times of gathering as a church should make people aware of missions, what it is and what they can do to be involved.
2. Sunday School – We study many topics related to Scripture and our life as Christians. Do we include missions as a topic of study for our people? Our children, our youth, our adults need the chance to study the scriptures and understand the importance of missions in God's plan for the salvation of all who will believe.
3. Training Programs – Do we have discipleship and mentoring programs that help prepare people for active ministry? Do these programs include training in cross-cultural ministry among other ethnic groups? Our world has become very small and every day we have the opportunity to interact with people of other ethnicities and cultures. We need to help people understand the need to carry the gospel to these groups whether they are near or far. Our discipleship training should include the challenge to hear God's call to missions and help prepare them to go.
4. Other training outside of the local church – Do we, as a church, encourage the development of programs to

train people in ministry? (Seminaries, Bible Colleges, Seminars in key areas of ministry) Does that include training that will provide needed skills to carry the gospel to the world? This type of training is as critical today as it was in Paul's day. According to Paul in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 the ability to understand and adapt to other cultures was a critical aspect of being able to communicate the gospel. We need to provide the training for those called to go to other cultures so they will have the skills needed to effectively communicate the gospel.

While the story of Paul's ministry in Ephesus and the training program at the Hall of Tyrannus contains very few details, it is clear that all of the above was occurring. Paul was providing teaching for the general church. He was providing opportunity for extended study in key areas. He was deeply committed to a plan of discipleship. It is also very clear that a central part of his program was providing needed skills to go to other regions.

Paul was thinking beyond this day and this moment. He was thinking of the "long haul," of how to keep the mission going and how to expand it. One person can do a great deal, but if that one person trains even two more then the work that can be accomplished will be tripled. In Paul's case, it expanded exponentially.

None of that will occur for us until we start thinking through what it is we are teaching at all levels in our

church. We need to think beyond today and this moment and what we are doing. We need to think about how to train others to get involved so that we can do more and go farther.

Think about what Luke said about Paul's ministry in Ephesus. "Within two years all of the province of Asia had heard." Not in general, but every Jew and every Greek. What can be said about your church? How many have heard about Jesus through your teaching and how far has the message extended?

If we are truly listening to Jesus' words, as was Paul, then our teaching should lead us and others into the mission, not just for today but for tomorrow as well.

Read Exodus 12:26-27; 13:14-15; Deuteronomy 4:9-10; 6:2; 11:19; Psalms 78:1-6.

Over and over the people of Israel were told to instruct their children regarding the reasons for various events and for the law they had received from God. Why were they told to do this? What would the children and others gain from such instruction?

Did anyone ever teach you something that has changed your life? Do you keep that information a secret or do you share it with someone else?

Think about what you have received. Think about the part that missions played in making it possible for you to

hear the gospel. How has missions affected your life? Share this with your child, with a friend, or with someone who does not know Jesus as their Savior. Did this help them understand better the importance of missions?

Mission 30

Acts 20: 25-35

### Exit Strategy

We are the parents of three children. All of them are now 21 or older. They all believe they are mature individuals who can live independent of their parents. They make most of their own decisions, handle their own finances and deal with life without our presence or input. Yet each of them has their own way of expressing their continued reliance on and relationship with us.

They share with us information about their daily lives. They often ask our opinions about key decisions they will be making. They consult us about purchasing a house or a car, their plans for future education and other areas. Our youngest is telling us about her plans to find a job and apply to graduate school. But when all the sharing and discussion is done they are the ones who make the decisions.

This was the way we planned to raise our children. We believed that part of our job was to help them come to the point where they could live independently of us. As a result of this belief, we taught them key principles that would help

them have the skills needed to function independently. We also sought to instill our beliefs and standards into their lives. In this area as well we had to keep in focus the reality that they could choose to deny what we taught them and choose something else. Even so the goal was to help them develop a system of belief and structures that would help them live on their own.

This does not exclude them from our lives, or us from their lives. If we have been effective in our teaching then they will be open to sharing what is happening in their lives and be willing to ask for our thoughts and input. They are willing to do so because they know we will not seek to take control and make the decision for them. Likewise, we share with them what we are doing and ask for their thoughts and ideas about various decisions we will be making.

We feel that, in general, our children are able to take care of themselves well and they are happy about what they have received from us. They do not appear to be afraid that we may try to meddle in their lives or try to regain control. They are in control and yet know that we are there if needed.

Paul too, had a long range plan for his ministry. He lived and taught with a key purpose in mind, that those who received God's word would understand what was involved in the mission and also be able to continue that work without him. Paul did not hesitate to tell them the whole will of God. He gave guidance to the leaders so that they could care for the church. He gave them critical information so that they could be prepared for the attacks and problems that would come.

He lived his life in such a way that they would have a clear example of what was involved in being a servant of God.

From the beginning, Paul had in mind providing what they would need so that they could continue the work without him. He taught the truth, he disciplined them in needed skills and he selected leaders from among them to continue the process after he left. As needed, he would return to encourage them, or in some cases, send one of his assistants to help them at critical times. But always the focus was to help them come to a point of independence where they could make the decisions needed to maintain the work and continue its expansion.

So what kind of parents are we in regards to missions? When we get involved in missions do we know where we are going and what the goal is? Are we providing everything so that one day those we are reaching can function without us?

It is an issue we need to keep in focus. We need to avoid the parenting style that creates restrictions on freedom and maintains dependence on the parents. There are parents who always want to control their children. This causes one of two problems: the children never gain the ability to make their own decisions and are always dependent on their parents. Or, the children become angry about their parents' control and this results in a lack of trust and even alienation of the two from each other.

Some parents never teach the needed skills to live independently. This means that the children don't learn how

to make decisions and always go back to their parents for help. Or, if they decide not to seek their parents help, then they have many struggles as they try to learn how to live and manage their lives without previous teaching.

There are also parents who try to force their children to be independent before they are ready. They have unreal expectations of what the child can do or fail to provide critical information when the child needs it. It may also be that the parents are trying to regain their freedom as quickly as possible so as to do what they want without the burden of caring for their children. This often creates gaps in the training and support needed and teaches the children that they cannot expect any help from their parents. They are on their own.

Missions has the same kind of issues. We, as a church, are the parents and we have certain responsibilities towards those who respond to us as we carry the gospel to them. Paul thought of himself as a father to the people who responded to the work he was doing (1 Co 4:14-15; Ga 4:19). He is an example to us of how to carry out the work of mission.

We need to realize that there are stages in the development of a ministry. Initially we will need to do almost everything for others. Then slowly, as they become capable of doing the work, we hand over the work. In time, we will need to step back and let them take control. Missions is about developing healthy offspring who know how to care for themselves.

We need to duplicate in them what God is creating in us; a healthy church, capable of serving its Creator. As we go out into the world we need to go, not just with the gospel, but with the idea of developing a healthy church in that place. A church that one day will be able to function without us. A church where we will be able to share the work together as equals, as adults. As we get involved we need to keep in mind our exit strategy. A strategy that respects those who respond, allows them to grow, and recognizes that someday we will need to yield control to them.

That is how missions grows. That is what Paul did and was doing as he prepared his coworkers for the possibility that he might never return. The church grows when we are acting like good parents, raising our children to be all they can be, knowing that one day we will need to let them go.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:5-15; 1 Thessalonians 2:10-14,

As a parent, what is your goal for your children? What are you doing to help them reach that goal? What part do they have in reaching the goal?

As a church, do we have a goal for our involvement in missions? Do we know what we need to do so that our involvement will result in a mature church or body of believers? What part do those that we are ministry to have in making this possible?

It takes a significant decision, (it should) to decide to give birth to a child. It involved commitments, responsibilities

and an awareness of the outcome of such a decision. The same is true of missions. It is a purposeful decision to give birth to the church in a new location. Are we aware of our responsibilities of such a decision? Are we ready to make the commitments necessary for that church to fully mature?

Paul was ready to die so that the church would be planted and grow in other cities, other countries. What price are we willing to pay to give birth to the mission of God in our lives and raise up a body of believers in the location where God sends us?

## Mission 31

## Acts 28:28-31

### Escaping the Prison

I was 21 years old and in the highlands of Kenya working at a mission hospital. My task was to help out with a number of projects, from digging footings for a new hospital building to cutting down trees for firewood and other general labor projects. I was there to help free the missionaries so that they could focus on their medical work and ministry.

One day one of the missionaries asked me if I would be willing to speak to the students of the mission's secondary school. Each day I watched as they walked to school. They knew who I was and wanted to learn more about me and why I was there in Kenya. It would have been a great opportunity

to share what God was doing in my life and be an encouragement to them. It would have been, but I said no.

I said no because I was afraid. I didn't know what to say. I forgot God's promise about helping me. I was afraid of what they might think of. I forgot that about what God thought of me. I was afraid to put myself in a place of risk. I forgot all that Christ risked and suffered for me. This was somewhat ironic, since I had already taken the risk of leaving my home to go to another country and serve. The truth is I was only thinking of myself.

I allowed myself to be imprisoned by my fears and so denied myself from receiving what God had for me. I also denied those students anything that God could have given them through me. I also denied the other missionaries and workers. I refused their advice and encouragement and so restricted the nature of my service to them.

Even though I had traveled thousands of miles and gave of my life at one level I became a prisoner at another level. My decision restricted my freedom to serve others and restricted my ability to grow in key areas.

In the last chapters of Acts we are told the story of Paul's time of imprisonment, first in Caesarea and later in Rome. He was warned of the danger being imprisoned, but believed in God's promise to protect him and use him. He did everything he could to avoid imprisonment without sacrificing his testimony and the gospel. He placed his life in jeopardy on several occasions by his willingness to state

clearly his beliefs; first at the temple, then before Felix, Festus and finally Agrippa. At each point he could have let his fear take control and so imprison the truth, but he did not.

Paul had reason to be afraid. He had suffered much at the hands of the Jews and Gentiles who opposed the gospel. He had risked much in his travels to proclaim the gospel. Once again, he faced the possibility of prison and assassination. He had to choose which prison he preferred to live in. The prison of his own fear which would also imprison the gospel and discourage others in their proclamation of the gospel, or he could speak out and risk being incarcerated for his faith. If he chooses the latter he would risk the dangers of the Roman prison and further punishment to his body.

It would have been easy for Paul to decide to be silent at this moment. To wait for a time of less risk. He could have believed that being free would be better; it would allow him to travel to other places to preach. He could have believed that being imprisoned might bring an end to his opportunity to preach and teach. He could have chosen to be silent and wait for a better time, a safer place to begin again the ministry rather than risk ending up in prison with the real possibility of execution. It might have been logical to make these assumptions.

But that is not how it works. Missions is not about finding the easy way, the safe way. It is not about avoiding the risks. It is about facing our fears and trusting in God's promises to us. If those called to missions only went when it was convenient and safe, only spoke when there was no threat or

danger, only acted when they were not afraid, then no one would hear the gospel.

Missions began because Jesus placed His life at risk for us. The apostles proclaimed the gospel even though they were threatened by the Sanhedrin and warned to be silent. The death of Stephen resulted in a greater expansion of the gospel. Paul, Barnabas and the others constantly faced their fears, put their lives at risk and proclaimed the gospel. Paul risked life in prison and potential execution to proclaim the truth. The record says that this decision allowed him many opportunities to share his faith with kings and rulers. Instead of locking the truth away, the prison became a door to more opportunities to proclaim the gospel in Jerusalem, on the trip to Rome, and for two years in Rome while he waited for his trial. Going to prison actually allowed the gospel to spread further. By escaping the prison of his own fear, Paul was freed to do more.

In Kenya I gave in to my fear that day and imprisoned whatever work God wanted to do through me in proclaiming the gospel to those students. I regretted that decision and promised God it would not happen again. Two years later I was in the Philippines and was asked to be involved in a student ministry at the University of Luzon. This time I accepted the challenge and learned how God helps us deal with our fear and uses us to carry out His mission.

We all have to face the reality of our fears. It is not easy to go to a foreign land and learn a new language. It is not easy to put our own life at risk or as a church, to send one of our

own to a place of risk. Fear of prison and suffering are real issues. Fear of pain and death are issues we must deal with. Avoiding them will result in being imprisoned by our fear, and so, imprison the truth. It will prevent us from going where God wants us to go.

There is a prison out there. Avoiding the possibility of being imprisoned for our faith only traps us in the prison of our fear. Overcoming the prison of our fear allows God's power to be released.

What fear are you allowing to imprison you today as an individual or as a church? Who is being affected by your fear and what are they losing as a result of your fear? What will you need to do to overcome your fear?

Read Philippians 1:12; 2 Timothy 8-13

Reflect on the following idea. When you refuse to share your faith, you imprison God's word in your fear. But when you are imprisoned for your faith, nothing can imprison the faith you have shared.

## Conclusion – Missions is the church's LIFE

By now it should be very clear that missions was not just another ministry of the early church. It was the center of the church's ministry. The church taught the word of God so they could understand why the gospel had been given to them. So they could understand the nature of God's love for all mankind. They were being discipled so they could grow in their relationship to God and become full members of the family of God. This status brought with it the responsibility to become involved in the mission and carry the gospel to those who had not heard.

In the beginning, the church did not fully grasp what Jesus meant when He told them they would be His witnesses to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the world. But they would soon learn. God Himself would take the steps necessary to move them, step by step, from their concept of who could believe, to His concept of reaching all the peoples of the world.

From the beginning they would learn that it was not just the responsibility of a select few but of everyone. It was not only the disciples that were present at the ascension of Jesus and so received the command to be witnesses and go to the world. Actually it is possible that over 500 people were present to hear the command based on Paul's comment in 1 Co 15:6. Of those, we are told that at least 120 participated in the time of prayer waiting on the promise of God (Acts 1:15). The apostles would begin the process and soon others

would be actively involved, Stephen, Philip, Barnabas, and many more.

They would learn that the only restriction, the only limit on their ability to go to the world was their willingness to go; their willingness to overcome their fears, overcome their limitations and trust God to care for them and to supply what was needed, when it was needed. They would learn that the key to going was just that, going. Getting up from where they were, emotionally, spiritually, and physically and going to another place. Giving up their dislike for others, giving up their concept of who could be part of God's family, and giving up their concept of where their true home was located.

While there have been great changes in the world since the days of the early church, these issues have not changed. We are still the church of God and we still are commanded to go. Missions is not to be an option it is to be our LIFE.