

May 31, 2020

SOME BASIC COMPONENTS IN THE CHURCH'S MISSION

Acts 15:36-18:23

(13 of 17 in a series through Acts)

Every once in a while I try to make myself read a historical account of a church or institution losing its way. This week I read a bit about Harvard. Though it is hard to believe, Harvard's logo used to read, "Truth for Christ and church." The "Rules and Precepts" of the school in 1646 declared, "The maine end [of a student's] life and studies is, to know God and Jesus Christ which is eternal life ... the only foundation of all sound knowledge and Learning."¹ Again, it's astounding to consider how far that institution has drifted from its founding.

The reason I make myself read about such institutions or churches losing their way is because it serves as a reminder that we can never take things for granted or simply assume that things will stay the same even if we make no real effort to keep ourselves anchored in truth. And I mention it this morning because I once again want us to take note of some basic elements in our mission as a church. We've done this a few times already in the book of Acts, but I want to do it again for two reasons. The first is simply because as I read over our text this week (Acts 15:36-18:23) and made notes, these were the truths that I kept noticing in the passage. In other words, I want to hold up for you not necessarily what I've come up with to say from my own mind but what the text dictates I say as I preach. And a second reason I want to remind us once more of some basic elements in our mission as a church is stated well by Paul when he wrote to the Philippians, "To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you" (Phil. 3:1). If I adjust Paul's saying a bit, I think I can say that to say the same things is no trouble for me and is safe for us. And the reason it is indeed *safe* to explicitly return to some basic elements of what we do as a church is because we could tell stories about institutions like Harvard all day long. Perhaps we might say it is not only *safe* for us to return to these things again and again but that it is *dangerous* not to return to them.

Therefore, this morning, I want to remind us of some basic elements in the church's work and mission. But before I do, let me orient us to what's going on in our text, especially because this is one of the larger sections of text we've looked at in the book of Acts. Acts 15:36-18:23 contains the section in Luke's writing where we find Paul's second missionary journey. He'd taken the first missionary journey with Barnabas in chapters 13-14 as the Spirit had directed the church at Antioch to send these two out. The second missionary journey begins with Paul and Barnabas splitting apart and forming two missionary teams because of a disagreement over how to handle John Mark. In the first missionary journey John Mark had left them early on and returned to Jerusalem, and now that they were starting the second missionary journey Barnabas wanted to take John Mark with them again while Paul thought it best not to take him in light of

¹ <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2006/3/8/harvards-secularization-harvard-has-never-been/>.
Accessed on May 28, 2020.

him having withdrawn the previous journey. So, Paul and Barnabas part ways. Barnabas took John Mark and went to Cyprus, and Paul took Silas and went on his third missionary journey. In the end, Mark did become a valuable laborer. Paul acknowledged that. But perhaps Paul and Barnabas both were affirming right things in this debate.

Regardless, Paul goes back and visits the places where he had preached and planted churches on his first missionary journey. There are sixteen cities he goes to on this trip, and they include some notable places to whom he writes letters, including: Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, and Ephesus. The journey itself includes some stories we may well be familiar with. In 16:1-5, Paul picks up Timothy and takes him with him—the very Timothy who will become like a son to him. In 16:6-10 we read that Paul had a vision of a man in Macedonia calling him to come there, and they conclude it's the direction of the Spirit. We refer to this sometimes as the "Macedonian call." In 16:11-15, we read of the conversion of Lydia. In 16:16-40 we see Paul and Silas miraculously freed from their shackles in prison and the conversion of the Philippians jailer and his family. In Acts 17 we see Paul ministering to Jews in the synagogue and to Gentiles at the Areopagus before we see Paul in Corinth in Acts 18 before returning to his home base at Antioch. So, what are the basic elements of our mission that we're reminded of as we look at Paul's second missionary journey? Let me name four.

We bear witness to the crucified and risen Lord Jesus

At the core of what Paul is doing is the proclamation of the gospel. This might be obvious, but this is what Paul is doing again and again as we drop in on him in the second missionary journey. As he has the vision of the man from Macedonia calling him to come over there, Luke writes in 16:10, "And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us *to preach the gospel to them.*" He preached the gospel to some women, including Lydia, while in Philippi. And we find the same thing throughout chapter 17 before reading in 18:5, "When Silas and Timothy arrived from Macedonia, Paul was occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus."

Before Jesus ascended, he told his church that they were to be his witnesses in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That's at the core of our mission as a church. We tell people about Jesus—who he is and what he has done in living, dying, being raised, and commanding all people everywhere to repent and believe in him. We can't lose sight of that. Let's not be more eager to open our mouths and try to convince our neighbor of the right policy on how a state should handle a pandemic, or what economic policy is best, or what athlete is superior than we are to open our mouths and tell him about Jesus. This is what Christ has charged us to do—bear witness to him.

Now, as I woke up early on Friday to finish my writing on this sermon, I woke up to news of riots—not in some place on the other side of the planet but in Louisville, KY—a place where I lived and where some of my dearest friends live. That morning there had already been reports of seven people who'd been shot. And Louisville is simply one of several places with this kind of

activity. Much of it was sparked by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota who used his knee to choke the life out of a man who was handcuffed and lying face down on the ground.

And as I prayed on Friday morning—for justice and peace and grace and mercy—I prayed that the people of God would be ever more vigilant to speak the gospel, asking the Lord for converted police officers who would see every citizen as made in the image of God, repentant citizens who would protect the vulnerable in the midst of chaos, saved legislators who would pass laws that demonstrated fear of God and love of neighbor, and on and on. I pray that we would take the gospel to men who have ruthlessly murdered others and tell them that the good news is that though they deserve death and hell—like all of us apart from Christ—they can have forgiveness of their sins through faith in the crucified and risen Lord.

Brothers and sisters, we do not live in a time and place where gospel proclamation is needed less but more. I do not have to testify to you this morning that the gospel transforms hearts. The very one we read about in our text—Paul—went from being a persecutor of the church to the apostle to the Gentiles. Imagine our just outrage if we'd seen the unjust murder of Stephen on video, which would show Paul not only sitting idly by doing nothing but actually approving of this ruthless murder of one made in God's image. And yet because of the transforming power of our Lord through the proclamation of his gospel, this very Paul would lay down his life so that you and I might know Jesus. The gospel powerfully brings forgiveness of sins and radically alters the hearts of men. So let's not lose sight of the need to speak the gospel—to preach Jesus. This is at the core of our mission as followers of Christ.

Now with this said, we are taking the gospel to many different kinds of people in many different kinds of settings as we seek to make disciples of all nations, so let me note another basic element concerning the church's mission.

We contextualize the gospel without altering the gospel

Now, I'm sure that the word "contextualize" probably has some kind of connotation that I don't intend, so let me simply explain what I mean. Look at Paul's situation in Acts 17. Here's what we read in 17:1-4, "Now when they had passed through Amphipolis and Apollonia, they came to Thessalonica, where there was a synagogue of the Jews. And Paul went in, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explain and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, 'This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.'"

So as Paul comes to this context in which there are Jews who would have studied the OT Scriptures and been looking for the Messiah, probably thinking that no true Messiah would die on a Roman cross as Jesus had, Paul comes to them understanding their context. And so what does he do? He reasons with them from the Scripture. He makes arguments, illustrating that it was indeed necessary for the Messiah to suffer, die, and rise. He argues that the Christ has come, and he is none other than Jesus of Nazareth.

On the other hand, when we come to Acts 17:16-34, Paul finds some philosophers who had overheard his teaching, and they said to Paul, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears” (17:19-20). In other words, they don’t even have categories for understanding a Messiah. So what does Paul do? He takes a completely different approach. On the one hand, he provides for them an understanding of world history to provide for them categories to understand the gospel. He tells them that God not only made the world but needs nothing. Rather, it is he who is not only the creator but the sustainer of all life. He tells them that God made every person of every nation, bringing them about through one man—Adam. Do you see what he’s doing? He’s providing them an understanding that God is judge, that they are accountable to him, that men are sinners—in Adam—and condemned before God in need of his saving work, etc. He’s providing a context for understanding the importance of the gospel. They are ignorant of this God, and this is where Paul brings his climactic declaration, saying in verses 30-31, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

Now as you take these two approaches, they’re quite different. To the Jews at the synagogue in Thessalonica, Paul doesn’t give anything like his explanation that God doesn’t live in temples made by hands, that he doesn’t need man’s provision, and that he provides life. He doesn’t tell them that God made all men from one man. They knew all of that. They may well have memorized portions if not all of the Old Testament. Whereas with the pagan philosophers, he doesn’t try to convince them that the Old Testament really did foretell of the Messiah’s suffering and resurrection. They would have been oblivious to the debate itself. But in both cases, he goes at what they need to see and understand before proclaiming that Jesus Christ lived, died for our sins, was raised from the dead, and commands all people everywhere to repent and believe before he comes in judgment.

In other words, Paul keeps in mind the context in which he is speaking, and he adjusts his approach accordingly. But he doesn’t alter the gospel in any way. Everything builds to the clear articulation of the gospel. So it may well be that you utilize the need for justice in one conversation and the topic of people being distrustful in another conversation to move us toward a proclamation of the gospel. The context can change and the person’s situation kept in mind, but we don’t alter the gospel. We tell all men everywhere—in every setting—that Jesus Christ lived a perfect life, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and now commands all men everywhere to repent and believe in him for the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. And let me add a third and brief element before moving on to the last.

We proclaim the gospel, strengthened and encouraged by the sovereign working of God

I mentioned this a few weeks ago when we looked at Paul’s first missionary journey in Acts 13-14, but it keeps coming up, so I don’t want to ignore it. Luke tells us that as Paul was preaching to a group of women in Philippi, one of them named Lydia became a believer. But here’s precisely what he says. He writes in 16:14, “One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from

the city of Thyatira, a seller of purpose goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul,” and then Luke tells us she was baptized.

Then we read in Acts 18 that while Paul was in Corinth, he was the object of persecution, opposition, and reviling. But the Lord appeared to him one night in a vision, saying, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are my people” (18:9-10).

In other words, Paul wasn’t alone in this task of gospel proclamation. The Lord Jesus Christ assured Paul that he was with him. Imagine the Lord saying to you, “I am with you” in this task, as he said to Paul! And not only that, but the Lord was working. He opened Lydia’s heart, and he assured Paul that he had people in Corinth whom he was going to call to himself.

Brothers and sisters, Paul’s position *is* our position. The Lord actually *has* said to us, “I am with you.” He said it to all us in Matthew 28:18-20. He’s with us till the end of the age. And he’s working to bring people to himself. We simply get the privilege of being his witnesses. Who would hesitate to run a race if you were told by an all-powerful being, I am with you and will strengthen you to run? Why then would we hesitate to bear witness to Christ when he has told us that he is with us, will strengthen us, and will bring his people to himself from every tongue, tribe, and nation? And finally, let me remind us of one other basic element in our mission.

We baptize those who believe

Again, this is perhaps obvious, but it’s not only explicitly stated in the Great Commission, but Luke seems to go out of his way to stress it here. After Lydia believed, we read in 16:15, “And after she was baptized, and her household as well.” In the latter half of chapter 16 there is a miracle. Paul casts a demon out of a girl—bringing economic consequence to some devious men—and so Paul and Silas are put in prison. And here is where the miraculous happened. About midnight, as Paul and Silas were in prison, praying and singing, there was an earthquake, and the prison doors were opened and their bonds were unfastened. And when the jailer saw what happened, he assumed all had escaped and decided to take his own life, thinking no doubt that death was coming either way. However, Paul cried out latter him know that none of the prisoners had escaped, to which the jailer responded by asking, “What must I do to be saved?” And Paul responded, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (16:32). But Luke also adds in 16:33, “And he took them the same hour of the night and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family.” And finally in 18:8 we read, “Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.”

Do you see the constant refrain? They believed and were baptized. The Bible makes clear that the means by which we profess our faith in Christ is by being baptized. This is the prescription Jesus has given us—believe and be baptized. Now, some fellow believers argue that we should baptize infants or other members of our households who have not believed, and they’ll even point to texts like these household baptisms as evidence. But not only do we never see evidence

of an infant being baptized in the Scripture, we can also add that the household baptisms demonstrate that those being baptized are believers.

In the text with the Philippian jailer we are told in 16:32 that Paul and Silas spoke the word to all who were in his household. In other words, the household was baptized because they responded to this word in faith. Similarly with Crispus, we were explicitly told that he “believed in the Lord, *together with his entire household*” (18:8). Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 1:16 Paul speaks of baptizing the entire household of Stephanas, but then he speaks in 1 Corinthians 16:15 of the household of Stephanas being the first converts in Achaia. In other words, he baptized the entire household because the entire household believed. The only time we don’t explicitly hear this kind of language of the household hearing the gospel and believing before being baptized is with Lydia’s household. We are simply told that Lydia’s heart was open and she was baptized “and her household as well” (16:15). However, in a book where we only find evidence of people who have believed being baptized, even entire households only being baptized after believing, is it more reasonable that Luke meant for us to assume that Lydia’s household contained baptized infants or that—like every other case—the entire household believed and was therefore baptized? Clearly, I think the answer is the latter.

And so, I want to call on anyone this morning who doesn’t know Christ as Lord to believe. You’ve heard the gospel. Repent and believe. And then come and let us know that you want to make your faith public through baptism and become part of the church, beginning the process of learning to obey all that Christ commands.

And I want to call all of us to be faithful in bearing witness to others of who Jesus is and what he has done, knowing that the Lord is with us, strengthening us, and opening people’s hearts so that they might be baptized and the Lord continue to grow his church. And may we express thanksgiving and the obedience of our faith as we now come to the table. Amen.