

Postmodernism & Missions

Heavenly Father, we thank You for this day. We thank You that You come to us with Your commitment and with Your love to call us to Yourself, to build us up in our faith, and to enable us to walk in Your ways. And Father, we pray with David that You will help us to be those who are humble, because You delight to instruct the humble in Your ways and direct the humble in Your paths. So Lord, humble us before You today, and teach us in Your Word. We pray for Jesus' sake. Amen.

In our last session we were talking about the way evangelism takes time, and I looked at the example of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch recorded for us in Acts 8. And what we observed there were several things. First, this was the work of God primarily rather than Philip, though he certainly had a part to play in it. And second, whenever anyone comes to faith there is a history behind that. And I urged you that when God has called you to ministry He is going to prosper and bless your ministry. So when you have the privilege of seeing people come to faith or of leading people to faith, it is important for you to say, "Tell me what God has been doing in your life. Why are you paying attention to what I have said to you today? How did you come to respond to this sermon?" Because you know that it was not that you preached the best sermon in the world or were the best evangelist that this person has come to faith. You know that God has been at work in his or her life, and you want to know what God has been doing. So it is very helpful to ask that question, and you will find it very instructive when you do, because you will discover that God has been at work in the person's life, often for many years in all sorts of ways. It is an important question to ask because it helps us to see what part God has to play in the conversion of someone and what part we have to play. And our part is often a very small one, and it is appropriate to recognize that so that we give honor and glory where honor and glory are due. And that is to the Lord Himself.

Now, in speaking about that, I want to turn on to our next point. Some of you may wonder that we are not getting very far in one sense. We are still, in one sense, on our first section of postmodernism, and we are progressing rapidly through these sessions. The reason for that is that I am constantly adding new things into what I want to say, which I hope is to your benefit because it means that you do not just get to hear the same thing year after year, if you were to take this class over and over again. My outlines, which start out being brief outlines, end up extending to all sorts of things and that is why we appear to be going slowly. Hopefully we actually are not. I have been adding a lot more in as we go along. But now we come to our next point. The emphasis of the New Testament is on sowing and on personal relationships when it teaches us about the task of evangelism. Much of what we usually teach when we teach about evangelism is how to reap, that is, how to lead somebody to explicit faith in Jesus Christ. And of course it is important and helpful to know how to do that, so again please do not take this as a criticism of particular methods of evangelism. It is not intended to be. We need to know how to reap, how to help people to see those fundamental things that it is necessary for them to believe and respond to in order to come to saving faith in Jesus Christ. But, when you read the New Testament epistles, they do not teach us how to reap, actually. Most of what they say about evangelism is about our lives, and we have noted some of those passages already. In 1 Peter 2:11-12, Peter urges us to live such good lives among the pagans that they will glorify God on the day He visits us. And 1 Peter 3:15 does speak about what to say, but it does not so much teach us how to reap. The context of Peter's words in 1 Peter 3:15 is of you being criticized unjustly for your life. And in that context, Peter urges us to be always be prepared to give an account, to give an answer, a defense of what we believe, to anyone who asks us the reason for the hope that we have. And again, the point is that the person has observed that there is a hope in your life and that there is something about you that is different, and they are saying, "What is it? What is the reason for this hope in your life?" And then you give an account of your faith and of why you

believe. See, even there, where it is one of the most explicit passages about verbal evangelism in the letters in the New Testament, it is calling you to tell the person why you are a Christian, not to simply summarize what the central points of Christianity are that the person needs to respond to, but why you are a Christian. Colossians 4:6 is very similar; Paul urges us to make the most of every opportunity we have to share the Gospel, and he speaks there about our whole way of life and the way we speak. “Let your conversation always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.” And again the focus is on answering when the opportunity arises in a conversation with someone. Or in Titus 2:11-12, he urges people in the workplace to work in such a way that they may make the teaching about God our Savior attractive.

Now, my point in saying this is not that it is wrong to learn how to reap and not that it is wrong to seek to have conversations with people about the Gospel. That is not my point at all. But my point is this: in the New Testament we see most opportunities for verbal evangelism arising out of personal contact with unbelievers. They arise out of relationships and situations in which we are living before people in our places of work, in our neighborhoods, in our families, and in our communities. And as we get to know people, as they get to see our lives, we are urged to pray that God will open doors for us and will give us opportunities to share the faith that we have, because people see that there is something different about us. But a lot of what the New Testament teaches us is about sowing rather than reaping. You remember the two examples we have looked at in the Gospels where Jesus talks to the expert in the law who came to Him with the explicit question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And the rich young leader of the synagogue came to Him with the same question, asking, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Now the one was sincere and the other was not. But with both of them, Jesus is sowing rather than reaping. He is taking them where they are and seeking to move them further along the path, to sow a seed of God’s truth in their heart and to nurture it there, rather than immediately bringing the person to faith in Himself. You remember I pointed out that with neither of them does Jesus share the Gospel, because they were not ready for it yet. They actually both needed to hear the law, to understand that they were sinners before God, before they were ready to hear the Gospel. So Jesus was sowing. And of course, the New Testament itself uses this language. In John 4 after His encounter with the Samaritan woman, one of the things that Jesus says to the disciples as they see the Samaritans coming across the field toward them, and they wore white clothes, involves this image of sowing and reaping. He says, “Others have sowed and you are going to reap the harvest, even now the fields are white with the harvest.” Well, these people are coming because of what Jesus has sown and reaped in the life of the Samaritan woman, and then what she sows in the village when she goes back. And then the people come to meet Jesus, and Jesus and the disciples are now going to have the opportunity to reap a harvest over the next few days in this village, but after some sowing has already taken place. Now, of course, the New Testament, as I said, uses this language.

And if you turn to 1 Corinthians 3, Paul talks about sowing, watering, planting, and making things grow. He uses the image of giving growth there rather than reaping. And in the context, he is speaking about the way the Corinthian church had divided into groups following the various different teachers—Peter, Paul, Apollos, and so on. And then Paul, in responding to this problem, asks in verse 5, “What after all is Apollos and what is Paul?” What is our place in this that you should say that you are a disciple of Paul or you are disciple of Apollos; what is our place? It is a very important question. Earlier in 1 Corinthians 1, and this is going to be a challenge to some of you who are already pastors, Paul addresses the fact that he did not baptize many of them, even though he was responsible under God’s providence for leading many of them to faith. And one of the temptations for a pastor is that whenever we see somebody coming to faith, we want to baptize them, kind of as a seal of the fruitfulness of our ministry. But Paul says very carefully, “I did not baptize many of you,” and then he gives a list of just a couple of people he baptized, and he tells us the reason why he did not. He did not want them to follow him or to think that

they owed their salvation to him, but to recognize that they owe their salvation to Christ and to God. These are very challenging words, because it is very easy to develop a kind of sense of ownership of people, especially where God has used you to help them come to faith. But Paul consciously worked against that in not letting people look at him that way, because he knew the weakness of his own heart. He did not want to think that way about himself, and he did not want other people to think that way about him. So he asks the question, “What, after all, is Apollos, and what is Paul? Only servants, only servants through whom you came to believe.” That is indeed true. “But as the Lord has assigned to each his task,”—God gives us different tasks in this work of evangelism, of communicating the Gospel—“I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow.” And notice how strongly Paul puts that. He is not saying that he and Apollos are literally nothing. He is saying, in comparison with what God does, we are nothing, because He is the one who gives life. He is the one who makes His Word grow. We may sow it, plant it, tend it, and water it, but God is the one who gives life. “So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose,” and then he says, of course, that we are not nothing. We indeed have a responsible task, “and each one will be rewarded according to his own labor.” What we do does matter. Paul is not saying that his task of sowing or watering is meaningless, but it is genuinely significant; it is so significant that God is going to reward him. Daniel talks about those who turn many to righteousness shining like stars in the kingdom of God. The Scripture does not hesitate to speak that way, and the apostle Paul himself, speaking about himself, says this, “What is my crown of joy or of boasting on the day of the Lord Jesus? Is it not you, for you are my glory and joy?” God, when we stand before Him, in His kindness, in His mercy, even though we are nothing in comparison to what He does in saving people, is going to reward us. Paul says that. And so he knows that when he stands before the Lord, and the Philippian believers are going to be there, many of whom came to faith partly through his ministry, they are going to be his crown of joy or of boasting. He is going to see the fruit of his labors when he stands before the Lord, and that is going to be a wonderful reward. So he is not saying what we do is insignificant. God takes it seriously. He, in His love and wonderful kindness, will reward it. “For we are God’s fellow workers.” That is a responsible task; we are God’s fellow workers. God has given us the privilege of calling us to be His fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building. God is the one who owns the whole thing. This is His field, and He gives life to the plants that are growing in it. This is His building, and He is the one who builds the building and who designed it, and He calls us to be laborers along with Him in the task. So we need to have a broader view of evangelism. First, we must see the great part that God plays, which is so much greater than our part, and then we must think about what it means for us to learn to sow and water and not just simply reap. So we have a wider understanding.

Now, what I want us to do here is to think about God’s commitment to the work of salvation, and I want to look at some examples of how God actually saves us, how He saves people. Let me approach it this way. One of the questions that unbelievers, but also many Christians, often ask is this one: What about people who have not heard the Gospel? And when we ask such a question (and I am sure most of you have asked that question at some point, or questions like it), what is behind that question is this): why are more people not Christians, where is God, what is He doing, why are so many people judged, why does He not get the Gospel out, is He truly a God of love, and is He fair and just in His judgment? Now when we ask such questions, whether we recognize it or not, we are giving the impression that we care more about people’s salvation than God does. That is the impression that we are giving. And sometimes maybe, if you are going to be honest with your own heart, you have even thought that way when you think about people around the world. We give the impression sometimes that we would do anything to make sure lost people are saved, whereas God, we think, is perhaps too laid back about the whole problem and the destiny of unbelievers. And so what I want us to think about is really the question of

whether God is truly reluctant to save people. Or actually, who is it who is really reluctant to be involved in the task of evangelism? Now, if you study the history of missions, one of the things that you will discover very quickly is that the church has actually always been exceedingly reluctant to go out and proclaim the Gospel. I do not have time to give you a history of missions right here, but you can look at all sorts of examples throughout the history of the past 2,000 years, or longer than that, to see how reluctant people are. Just think of the story of Jonah. There is a reluctant missionary. God sends him to Nineveh; Jonah refuses to go. In fact, he goes in the other direction. He is so desperately anxious that the Ninevites might not be saved that he does not want to go even when God commands him to. And when he gets there and proclaims God's truth and the people come to repentance, he is very disappointed. In fact, he is thoroughly miserable, saying, "I want to die." Think of that as an evangelist whose work has been successful and he says, "I want to die." This is because he does not want God to save people. Now, Jonah is an extreme example, but I wonder really how different we are. Remember the example of Jane Fonda? How many of you prayed for Jane Fonda's conversion—genuinely, sincerely, and eagerly? Is that how you respond to those who are the enemies of the Church, of the Gospel, and of Christ? I wonder how many people prayed for the conversion of Saul. The church is reluctant, very reluctant.

There are lots of examples from the early centuries of the Gospel spreading to great areas of the world, not because somebody went there intentionally, but because they got taken there as a captive, as a slave, or as a prisoner of war. That is how the Gospel went to India. There is a legend about it, which was thought to be entirely legendary until a few years ago when people started discovering all sorts of historical inscriptions where some of the details of those legends turn out to be historical fact. But the legend goes like this. Christ appeared to the apostle Thomas in a vision or a dream and commanded him to go to India, and he said no, just like Jonah. "I do not want to go there. It is too far away." And so he got captured, sent there as a slave, and eventually was martyred there, put to death by Hindu Brahmans. But while he was there the king of the part of southwest India he was in was converted, and the king's name was Gundaphorus. And other Hindus were converted, too, and the Church was started there. Now that was thought to be entirely legendary until they discovered inscriptions with that king's name on them. And the Mar Thoma Church in India is quite confident that this is the true history of their origins. But whether that one is legendary or not, there are dozens of examples of stories like that from the first 300 to 400 years of the church. That is how the Gospel went to Ethiopia, by two Christians who were shipwrecked on the shores of the Red Sea and were taken captive to the court in Ethiopia. Nobody sent a missionary there, but that is how the Gospel went there and the Church started there. It is the same with Ireland and Scandinavia. Nobody sent missionaries to the Vikings in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, and Iceland. They came dozens of times and attacked all around the coast of Britain and Ireland, and many of the places they attacked were monasteries where the Gospel was loved and revered. And they killed people, raped people, destroyed their property, burned their monasteries down, and took some of the monks back to Scandinavia as captives. That is how the Gospel went to Scandinavia. Nobody ever sent any missionaries there. There are dozens of accounts like that in the history of missions across the face of the whole earth, where God sends His people even though they are reluctant to go.

Let us look in the early chapters of Acts. You remember how explicit Jesus is with the Great Commission. If we look at Acts 1, and of course Jesus gives the Great Commission on many occasions, but on this account that we have here, His words are tremendously explicit. This is after the resurrection on one of the occasions Jesus appeared and was physically present with His disciples. Acts 1:4 says, "On one occasion while he was eating with them." Now this is a genuinely physical resurrection. He is sitting down there, or reclining, eating a meal with them, and "he gave them this command, 'Do not leave Jerusalem. Stay in Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'

So when they met together they asked him, ‘Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?’” They have an agenda for Christ despite all that He has taught them for three years and in the days after the resurrection. And He has already given them the Great Commission several times, that they are to go out into the whole world. It appears several times during the Gospels before His death, as well as after. But they have something quite different in mind. They have in mind that God is going to restore the kingdom to Israel right now, and they are going to sit on thrones ruling over Israel and over the world. And so that is what they are wanting to happen. They have an agenda, and it is the restoration of Israel immediately, with them in positions of authority. Remember, they kept asking Jesus about that, saying, “We want to sit on your right hand and your left hand when you establish your kingdom.” And that is what they want to happen. Drive out the Romans. They were temporarily disappointed because Jesus was put to death, and they thought everything they had hoped for from Him was destroyed. But now He is raised from the dead again, and they thought, “Well, now it is going to happen. We were disappointed for a while there, but now we are going to get what we want. Jesus is going to reign as king right away. So are You at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” And lots of us have our agendas for Christ, too. What is your agenda personally, in terms of what you think should happen in your life and what you would like Him to do for you, for your ministry, for your financial security, or perhaps for your nation? We want to make America a great Christian nation again. What is your agenda for Christ? What is it that you have on your heart that you want Him to do? And of course some of those desires may be appropriate, but what is your agenda for Christ?

Well, Jesus responded to the agenda the disciples had for Him. He said to them, “It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority.” In other words, this is no concern of yours; it is not for you to know. Now Christians find it so hard to take those words seriously. Think of all the speculation at the turn of the millennium by Christians. I had people saying to me seriously, as I traveled around the country and at home in St. Louis, this is obviously the beginning of the end, and people had an agenda for me. They said, “Jerram, have you sold your home and bought a place out in the country?” And I said, “Well, what for?” And they said, “Well, the millennium is coming, the end is approaching, and everything is going to break down. It is just the sign that Christ will be back soon.” So I said, “Well, why should I be going out to the country and buying a house out there?” And they said, “Well, you need to get out there and stock it with food and weapons.” And I said, “Well, what are the weapons for? Why would I, as a minister of the Gospel, need to stock my home with weapons and food?” And I had several Christians say this to me, seriously, “So that when starvation starts happening, you can shoot the people who are trying to steal your food.” Now, I was flabbergasted. Is this what it means to be a minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ? And we may laugh, and I laughed, but this is just so shocking. That is worse than Jonah. Let us just kill the hungry people, never mind going and burying oneself in the countryside so that I can be secure as society breaks down. Jesus looked at people, and He had compassion on them. And He fed the hungry; He did not shoot them when they came to Him for food. People were so sure they knew the times and the seasons, but Jesus said, “It is not for you to know.” Actually on another occasion He said, “The angels in heaven do not know.” And if that is not enough for us, He said, “The Son does not know.” Christ said that He did not know when He was coming back to establish His kingdom. This is in the Father’s authority. If Christ does not know, you can be quite sure that you will not. It is as simple as that. God is not going to reveal something to you that He has hidden from His son. The times and the seasons are in the Father’s hand. But of course people respond to me and say, “Well it is the exact moment to the day that Jesus is talking about. We can know the approximate time, the season, and maybe the year.” Well, no. That is just playing with words. It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by His own authority. So what are they to know? “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Wait in Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost, and then get going. Do not wait there any longer. Get going.

Now, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus is so clear, is He not? “Wait in Jerusalem and then go.” That is your task. It is not sitting around waiting for God to bring the kingdom in, but going out and proclaiming the Gospel in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. And Jesus says that over and over again. Right before His ascension, and it is recorded in Matthew 28 (you probably know the passage because it is the version of the Great Commission that we look at most frequently). Here Jesus tells them that they are to go out into all the world, proclaim the Gospel, and make disciples of all the nations, and that He is going to have all authority in heaven and on earth so they can do that. So He gives them an absolutely explicit command. He gives them a promise. You are going to have the power of the Holy Spirit to go and do this task; He is the primary witness. Jesus had already taught them that in that long discourse He had with them on the night before His death. He said, “You are to be my witnesses, but the Holy Spirit is the great witness. He is the one who is going to go out and convict the unbelieving world of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.” You all know the passage in John 16. You are going to go in the power of the Spirit. The Spirit is going to be at work in the hearts of people, convicting them. The Spirit is going to empower you to go, to live faithfully, and to proclaim the truth powerfully and courageously. The Spirit is going to go before you and open doors for you into people’s lives. And Jesus says this in that passage in Matthew 28: “All authority is given to me in heaven and on earth. Therefore go...” Jesus is going to have authority over the heavens, that is, over the power of Satan, who keeps people in unbelief and darkness. But Christ has authority to rule over the nations that they might come to faith in Him and the power of Satan might be restrained. And Jesus has authority on earth. He is the one who rules the nations so that the Gospel may go into the nations. He is the only superpower. And a lot of what we read in the history of missions is God ruling the nations. Just think of the recent example in the last 12 years with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the opening up of vast sections of the former Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, Mongolia, and other places to the Gospel in a completely new way. Christ is ruling the nations so that the Gospel may go out into all the world. This is what Jesus promises the disciples. He could not possibly be clearer both in His command and in the great encouragement He gives them: “Wait in Jerusalem and then go.”

And then if we turn to Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost, as if His command was not explicit enough, Jesus gives them a wonderful kind of foretaste of what He has in mind in terms of the harvest from the nations. Look how strongly Luke puts it in Acts 2:5: “Now they were staying in Jerusalem, God-fearing Jews”—and he adds that there were Gentiles as well—“from every nation under heaven.”—He tries to be as clear as he can; people from all over the world are there in Jerusalem—when they heard this sound...” A crowd gathers together and they all hear the Gospel being proclaimed in their own language, and then Luke gives a list of some of these people: “How is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites, residents of Mesopotamia, Judea, and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene, visitors from Rome, both Jews and converts to Judaism, Cretes and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongue.” Now, I do not know if you have ever done a careful study of this, but if you look at what Luke says here, what he does is quite remarkable. He gives you a list of people from every point of the compass, from every direction out from Jerusalem, going out to all the nations, to all the world to proclaim the Gospel. There are people from way up to the far northeast in Parthia and Elam, and the Medes and residents of Mesopotamia. This is very far away. The Roman Empire is one of the biggest empires the world has ever seen, but some of these people are from way beyond its borders. Parthia is over toward Afghanistan, and that is a long way away. You can go right around the compass. You may have a picture of this in your Bible, and you see places off to the far west like Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire. It is a long, long way away over on the west coast of Italy. There are people from out in the islands of the Mediterranean Sea, like Crete, and people from way down in the southwest off into Africa. They are there too. There are people up to the north, up into Europe, into the parts of what was

several years ago the Soviet Union. There are people from all around, including Arabs and Saudis down to the south and to the desert. And so from every point of the compass there are people from all over the Roman Empire and beyond its borders. And these people are from all the different kinds of humanity. If you look at this list carefully, you will see that there are people who are descendents, in terms of where they come from, from the different sons of Noah. And these are people with every possible kind of language. Luke is telling us, and even more, God is doing something; God is saying, “I have in mind the conversion of people from every tribe and tongue and nation on the face of the earth. That is what I have in mind, and I am just going to give you a little picture of it today, on the day of Pentecost, of what your task is and what I want to do.” Of course it is a wonderful providential act of God that their Pentecost is the Jewish Feast of First Fruits, the first fruits of the harvest. Now the Jews themselves, long before the coming of Christ, saw the Feast of Harvest as being a picture, symbolic of God’s harvest from the nations. They understood that themselves, and God is doing that on this day. If you look at the prayers from those feasts that the Jews used, they talk about God bringing a harvest of the nations coming to faith in Him and coming to worship and serve Him. So here is God’s harvest, His first fruits from the nations. It is literally a feast of first fruits. And this vast number of people believed.

So Jesus is giving them a foretaste, but He tells them that after that day they are to stay in Jerusalem. After He shows them what He has in mind, He then says, go. But in fact, they just simply stayed. And it is not until Acts 8 that we read of how they begin to go out to the other horizons to which Christ called them, to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. And what is fascinating about this is Saul, even before his conversion, is used by Christ for the spreading of the Gospel. At the beginning of Acts 8 Saul was there giving approval to Stephen’s death. “On that day a great persecution broke out against the Church at Jerusalem.” Notice these words. Luke is a very good writer and he chooses his words very carefully. He is an excellent historian. “And all except the apostles,” now the apostles were the ones who were repeatedly told to go, personally, by Christ saying, “Stay in Jerusalem until the day of Pentecost, and then go.” Acts 8:1 says, “All except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.” There is your second and third horizon, Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria. “Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him, but Saul began to destroy the Church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison. Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.”

Luke also talks about Philip, one of the deacons appointed to oversee the distribution of food, going down to Samaria and people being converted there. And then later in chapter 8 you have Philip being used by God to bring salvation to this Ethiopian. But, when the people do not go, God sends them. They get sent by persecution. Now again, there are hundreds of examples of this in the history of the Church. The Gospel is being proclaimed as a result of persecution of the Church, which sat still, and as a result of captivity and enslavement. It spread by all sorts of means except the Church saying, “Let us plan a mission. Let us go out to the world to those who have not heard the Gospel and take this wonderful news of Christ with us.” And later we will read about what God had to do to get Peter to go and speak to a Gentile. We will look at Acts 10 very carefully. That is an extraordinary account of a reluctant apostle and an eager God committed to saving the household of Cornelius. But notice how the Gospel first began to go to Gentiles, who were pagans, in any significant numbers. See, Cornelius and the Ethiopian eunuch are already God fearers; they already worshipped the God of Israel. They are fairly easy Gentiles. But look at Acts 11:19, and here Luke picks up what he has been saying at the beginning of chapter 8: “Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen”—so he is picking up right from the beginning of chapter 8—“traveled as far as Phoenicia”—that is in North Africa—“Cyprus,”—out in the Mediterranean—“and Antioch,”—up in Syria—“telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however,”—and of course this is the real problem, and we will look at this in detail later, how hard it is to go beyond your own people. That is what they were struggling with.

“men from Cyprus and Cyrene...”—So these are not part of the original Church in Jerusalem. It is not the apostles, the ones given the Great Commission. These are converts from Cyprus, presumably people perhaps converted on the Day of Pentecost, and Cyrenes, from North Africa.—“went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the Good News about the Lord Jesus. The Lord’s hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.” Now, when the apostles hear about it they do not go themselves, rather they send Barnabas, who again is one of the deacons. They stayed in Jerusalem; they did not obey the Great Commission. They did not start planning mission trips across Judea, across Samaria, to the nations, and to the ends of the earth. The Church went when it was scattered by persecution, and then the apostles did not go. And when the Gospel did begin to be proclaimed to the nations, it was proclaimed by people who were from the nations themselves, from Cyprus and North Africa.

And if you turn to the beginning of Acts 13, we find the first account of a planned mission where the Church says, “Actually, we have a responsibility to go. Let us do something about it.” Now again, it is not the church in Jerusalem with the original apostles that is planning this. Acts 13:1 says, “In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers,” and it begins to list them. It is a fascinating church. Frances Schaeffer used to say about this church that this was his favorite church in the New Testament because of its intercultural and interracial mixture of leaders and congregation. There is Barnabas, Simeon, who is black, Lucius, who is also from North Africa—from Cyrene—Manaen, who is a Jew like Barnabas, and Saul, the persecutor of the church, who is now converted. And then they send Saul and Barnabas off on the first missionary journey, and then the Church is actively going out to proclaim the Gospel. But as you look at church history, what you find repeatedly is the church sinking back into just staying in its own Jerusalem, if we may use that word. It stays in the place in which they were converted, where they belonged, and that they regarded as kind of a home base. And the whole history of missions is about God pushing the church out. The Church is reluctant; God is not reluctant. God is sending the church out, even up until very recently.

You see, it is only in the 1790s, that is just over 200 years ago, that Protestant churches seriously became involved in missions. From the time of the Reformation in the early 1500s until the 1790s, that is almost 300 years, there was very little concerted effort to go out beyond the borders of what was thought of as Christendom. I am not saying that the Reformers were not interested in proclaiming the Gospel. No, it is wonderful to read, for example, the account of Calvin, who was basically training masses of missionaries in Geneva and sending them primarily back into France, which was the country from which he came. And during his own lifetime perhaps two million people were converted in France due to those missionaries. They sent lots of missionaries, and it was very dangerous to go. A lot of them were killed. What they were doing was against the law; they had to hide constantly from people. Perhaps you have read the accounts of the period; the courage of people is just remarkable. So it is not that they did not proclaim the Gospel; they did all over Europe. They re-evangelized Europe. Now there are a few exceptions. Here in North America there are a few very tiny attempts to reach out to Native Americans. Mostly the church did not do that. It just joined with everybody else in slaughtering them, sending them away, and packing them off to a reservation somewhere out of our way, rather than proclaiming the Gospel.

There are a few other examples. There are small examples of missionaries being sent to India—just a very few from Denmark in particular. And the Moravians were committed to mission work; they had a few missionaries in Greenland. But it was not until the 1790s that the modern missionary movement as we know it really got going. And it started with William Carey. He was a British cobbler; he was not one of the leaders of the church. He wrote a little book because he read the New Testament and thought, “Well actually, we are supposed to go.” And it was a revolutionary idea. You may think that is strange,

because we take this so much for granted that this is part of the responsibility of the Church, that we are supposed to go. But do you really think that? Let me ask you, what is your purpose in taking these classes? Are you actually saying to God, “Lord, here am I, send me. You are the Lord of the harvest; send me out to whatever part of Your harvest to which You want to send me”? Or are you saying to the Lord, “Lord, I am here to train, but I am heading back home as soon as I can possibly get away from here, back to my Jerusalem”? Is that what you are saying? You need to be open to God to send you wherever He wants you to go. You have no right to say to God, “I insist on going back to my Jerusalem, because that is where I am comfortable, that is where my wife’s family is, that is where my family is, and I want to be there for the rest of my life, because that is where I feel secure, where I know people, and where I know the culture.” God has brought you to study with Covenant Seminary so that you might be prepared to pray and to fast, like the people at the church in Antioch, and say, “Holy Spirit, send us where you want us to go, and make us willing to go there, wherever it is.” That is God’s calling for us.

William Carey wrote a little booklet called “An Inquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.” That was his title. This little booklet he wrote is still a classic. It is “An inquiry into the obligation,” the responsibility, the necessity, the duty of Christians to use means for the conversion of the heathen. Now, it is such a strange title, is it not? “To use means,” well of course we have got to preach the Gospel to them! But people responded to Carey by basically saying, “No we do not. If God wants to save them He will. That is His business, not ours. Let us just stay at home.” And when he went, he had so little support. That is the beginning of modern missions. In the United States, it is just the same. Around the same time, just a couple of years after Carey went to India, there was a group of college students who were praying together, the Haystack Prayer Meetings they are called, and felt constrained by God to go out and do foreign missions, to go into all the world and proclaim the Gospel. But those college students saw that the churches, all these great strong churches with wonderful doctrine, great teaching, solid community, and so on, were not saying, “Well, let us go.” They just wanted to stay right where they were in their own Jerusalem. And you know, even today the overwhelming majority of evangelical, Bible believing, faithful churches have absolutely no involvement in missions except in their own Jerusalem. The great majority of churches that are committed to the Gospel of Christ have no involvement in either praying for, giving to, supporting, or sending out missionaries to proclaim the Gospel to those other horizons: Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth. That is the practical reality. The Church is reluctant, but God is not, and if we study the history of missions, we do not find an eager church.

And before you judge past Christians too harshly you need to examine your own heart and say, “Lord, am I prepared to say, ‘Here am I, send me?’ Or am I only saying to the Lord, ‘I will go, but I am going to tell you where I am going to go, and it is where I feel comfortable.’”? It is not that you should not love your own people from your nation, state, or hometown. That is not the point. We do not need to start despising our own nation, people, race, culture, context, or our own family, to see the call to go somewhere else. Think of what the apostle Paul said, and he is the apostle to the Gentiles. These are absolutely wonderful words in Romans 9:1-3. Paul is talking about his concern for his fellow Jews. He says, “I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel.” Paul is the apostle to the Gentiles; he devotes his life to going across the face of the earth to preach the Gospel in places where it has not yet been preached. That is his intention; that is his longing. But at the same time, he cared very deeply for his own people—so deeply for them that he can say these astonishing words: “I could wish that I were accursed, cut off from Christ if it would bring about their salvation.” Who else said exactly the same thing? Moses says exactly the same words. It is on the occasion after the golden calf when the Israelites have been idolatrous and worshipped the golden calf, calling it the lord that

delivered them. And God threatens to destroy the nation completely and raise up for Moses a new nation to take their place because of their wickedness. And what Moses says is “No, Lord, do not do that. I would rather you cut my name out of the Book of Life than that you did this to Your people.” That is how much Moses loved the people of Israel, and this is how much Paul loves his fellow Jews. Do not be ashamed of loving your family, of loving the place you came from, of loving your people, or of loving your race. That is not a problem to love your brothers. But God calls us to have a bigger heart than that. He calls us to be prepared to go where He wants us to go.

You need to get on your face before the Lord and say, “Lord, make me willing to go wherever You want me to go, to whomever You want me to go.” Because the Great Commission stands before every one of us individually, as well as before the whole Church and before any particular congregation of which you are a part. These are the marching orders for the Church for the whole of this age. Jesus says, “I am with you always to the very end of the age.” It is not a temporary commandment; it is the marching orders for the Church for the whole age. It is the marching orders for every congregation of which you and I are a part, to be praying for missions. It is what Jesus challenges His disciples with at the end of Matthew 9. Matthew 9:35-38 says, “Jesus went through all the towns and villages teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field.’” That is where you have to start, and that is where every one of our churches starts. That is, it is where you and I are to start saying, “Lord, send out harvesters into you harvest field, across the nations of the earth, across the whole earth. Send them out, Lord.” But when you pray such a prayer, you have got to be prepared to add, “And send me, Lord, if that is what you want. Send me.”

So we need to be praying for this task of the Church. We need to be supporting the mission of the Church. One of the things you see as you read through the epistles is that whenever the apostle Paul plants a church, he immediately urges that church to start supporting the missionary proclamation of the Gospel. These are brand new churches. When he is in Corinth, Paul is first working as a tent maker when he goes there. When he goes to plant a church in a new place, he always starts off working, because he will not work to be paid when he is preaching the Gospel to unbelievers. But then it says after he has been there for a little while Silas and Timothy come, and Paul is able to devote himself to full-time preaching of the Gospel, to use our expression today, though it is a thoroughly unbiblical expression. Nobody can be a part-time Christian. But Paul is able to devote himself exclusively, the book of Acts says, to preaching, teaching, and testifying about Christ. And why is he able to do that? Because they bring a gift from the church in Philippi, which is only just recently planted. And Paul happily receives gifts from already planted churches to do the work of proclaiming the Gospel. In fact, that is what he encourages them to do. So as soon as a church is established they start supporting missions. And as soon as churches are established, they start sending missionaries. That is what Paul has in mind. He goes around and finds a few likely looking men and women, and he takes them along with him to be involved as fellow laborers with him in the proclamation of the Gospel. That is what he does everywhere. So with every new church you look at the list of people that Paul has going with him. There is Timothy and Titus, Gaius and Aristarchus, and so on—all these people. And they are coming from all these different churches. They immediately get involved in supporting and sending missionaries out. So it is the task of the whole Church; it is the task of every one of our churches. No church today can say that it is being faithful to Jesus Christ if it is not involved in the missionary outreach of the Gospel to its own Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. We have our own equivalents to those, of course. But God calls us to go. And He calls each one of us, as well as our churches, to have an open

heart to this task, to pray for it, support it, give to it, send, and be ready to go ourselves. The Church is reluctant, but God is not.

What has God done for our salvation? He has done several things. First, the Scripture teaches us that God planned for our salvation before the foundation of the world. The Scripture is quite plain about that. This is not some late event that happens in God's purposes. He plans for our salvation. Second, He prepares all the way through. I may not be able to follow my lecture outline all the way through, but He plans. And then He prepares the people, the nation of Israel, through whom the Messiah is going to come. He prepares them for thousands of years. And then He sends His Son. God is committed to our salvation—so committed that He gives His own Son. The apostle Paul and Moses could say, "Lord, block me out of the Book of Life, let me be accursed that they might be saved," but they could not do that, for Christ did that. That is exactly what He did. He was accursed for our salvation. He experienced hell, being cast out and forsaken by His Father, that we might be saved. But even with that objective fact of Christ's death in history just by itself, nobody is going to be saved. Now that may sound like a blasphemous thing to say, but it is not, because God also sends His Holy Spirit to draw people to faith in Christ. Jesus Himself says in John 6, "No one will come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." You know, the world is not filled with people who are desperately seeking to become Christians. Paul says in Romans 3, "No one seeks after God." The human race is not filled with people anxious to be converted. It is filled with people who are rebels against God, who God draws to faith in Jesus Christ, who God pursues, woos, and calls out to all day long. That is how the scripture speaks. C. S. Lewis expresses it accurately. He wrote this about his own conversion. He says, "Finally I was dragged, reluctant, kicking and screaming, the most reluctant convert into the kingdom." That is you, too. You were not eager to be saved, but God was eager to save you. You do not have to be a hyper-Calvinist to believe this. You have just got to know your own heart and the hearts of other people and take the Scripture seriously when it says, "No one comes to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." You do not write those words off. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, no one will become a Christian. You see, God has committed to salvation; He prepared for it, He planned for it, He sent His Son, and He sends His Spirit to draw us. God is not reluctant, rather He is committed to save. We are the ones who are reluctant if anybody is.