

Mission and Vision (Urbana 81) - Articles - God's Word

Acts 13:1-4; Acts 16 Exposition

by Eric J. Alexander

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Worship and mission are so bound together in the economy of God that you really cannot have one without the other. The reason for this is that true worship is rendering to God the glory which is due his holy name. ... There is nothing beyond this for us: it is the terminus of everything in the universe. And that is why worship is the highest employment of our faculties: it focuses on the glory of God.

There are two passages in the second half of Acts which deal particularly with the missionary expansion of the early church: Acts 13:1-4 and Acts 16. These two passages are particularly significant as the beginning of the fulfillment of Jesus' command and promise that they would witness to him not only in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria but to the ends of the earth.

In these two passages there are three principles for all missionary endeavor which I want to draw out and expound. They could be put in this form:

- the motive for missionary endeavor lies in the glory of God
- the responsibility for missionary endeavor lies with the church of God
- the strategy for missionary endeavor lies with the Spirit of God

First then we will look at Acts 13:1-3. Howard Marshall in his commentary on Acts says this about this passage:

The importance of the present narrative is that it describes the first piece of "Planned" overseas mission carried out by representatives of a particular church, rather than by solitary individuals, and begun by a deliberate decision, inspired by the Spirit, rather than somewhat more casually as a result of

persecution. Luke thus describes in solemn detail how the missionaries were appointed at a church meeting, under the guidance of the Spirit. He is well aware that he is describing a crucial event in the history of the church.

That crucial event is also something of a pattern for every missionary venture in any church which seeks to be biblical in its thinking and practice. There are two principles embedded in these verses to which I want to give attention.

The Motive for Missionary Endeavor: the Glory of God

I think it is of central importance that when this missionary endeavor was first conceived, the church at Antioch was worshiping with such a seriousness of purpose that they abstained from food (v. 2). It was while they were worshiping that the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."

Worship and mission are so bound together in the economy of God that you really cannot have one without the other. The reason for this is that true worship is rendering to God the glory which is due his holy name. And this is the great end and purpose for which all things exist. God created the world as a theater in which to display his glory. He created man and woman in order that they might reflect the image of his glory. He sent Jesus in order that the glory of God might be seen in the face of Jesus Christ. He redeemed sinners in order that they may be changed into the image of his glory. There is nothing beyond this for us: it is the terminus of everything in the universe. And that is why worship is the highest employment of our faculties: it focuses on the glory of God.

But when we come to know God, we discover that he is jealous for his glory. He will not give it to another, nor his praise to graven images. He desires his glory to be declared among the heathen (Ps 96:3). Do you see the logical corollary which must be drawn from these premises? No Christian man or woman worshiping God and desiring his glory can be unmoved by the fact that there are areas of the world and nations where God is being robbed of his glory. That is why true worship and true mission always go together, and it is why the glory of God is the only ultimate missionary motive. There are, of course, others: compassion for the lost, obedience to the Great Commission and so on. But these are not the ultimate motive. The ultimate

motive is the glory of God.

Do you remember how Paul displayed this in Acts 17 when he arrived in Athens? He saw the city full of idols, and the New International Version says, rather weakly, that "he was greatly distressed." The Revised Standard Version says, "He was provoked in spirit." But the verb here is the one from which our word *paroxysm* is derived. There are suggestions that it was the medical term for a heart attack. It is certainly the word used in the Septuagint of God's being provoked by Israel's idolatry. And what provoked God in Israel and Paul in Athens was the same thing: idols were being worshiped in place of God and, the Lord was being robbed of his glory.

Do you know the story of Henry Martyn? He was a Cambridge scholar of the last century who turned his back on academic glory to go to India, and he died as a young man. In India he watched people prostrating themselves before pagan images and heard someone tell of a vision of Jesus bowing before Mahomet. Martyn wrote: "I was cut to the soul at this blasphemy. I could not endure existence if Jesus was not glorified: it would be hell to me if He were also thus dishonoured."

I think you and I would have to confess that in the contemporary church and in our own hearts there is little of this deeply felt emotion of a burning jealousy for the glory of God. And I am persuaded that this is the root cause of our relative indifference to the missionary task.

It is in this sense that we need to remind ourselves again and again that worship without a missionary burden is humbug. "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." It is of great significance that the China Inland Mission, now the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, was born out of the agony in the heart of Hudson Taylor over worship divorced from mission. In June 1865 he was in Brighton one Sunday morning worshipping in church when he suddenly seized his hat and left. He explained in his diary what happened to him: "Unable to bear the sight of a congregation of a thousand or more Christian people rejoicing in their own security while millions were perishing for lack of knowledge, I wandered out on the sands alone in great spiritual agony." And there on Brighton beach he prayed for twenty-four willing, skillful laborers, and the China Inland Mission was born.

Mission and worship belong together. No one can truly worship God and at the same time have an apparently total indifference to whether anyone else is worshiping him or not. This is the answer to the foolish questions which so often arise: "Is your church interested in missions?" or "Are you a missionary-minded church?" or "Are you a missionary-minded Christian?" The question is preposterous. You might as well ask: "Are you interested in the glory of God? Do you care about that?" When a church has no deep care for mission, its true sickness is that it has no vision of the glory of God and no jealous regard for the honor of his name.

The motive for missionary endeavor is the glory of God. When I was ordained, one of the questions I had to answer in our Presbyterian ordination service, was: "Are not zeal for the glory of God and a desire for the salvation of men, so far as you know your own heart, your great motives and chief inducements in seeking this ministry?" That question puts things in the right order, as zeal for God's glory is the great motive of all missionary endeavor. It is the one thing that will keep you on track.

Give yourself today to learning something of the glory of God and of his jealousy for the honor of his name.

The Responsibility for Missionary Endeavor: the Church of God

In Acts 13:2-4, the Holy Spirit is clearly laying the responsibility for missions on the church at Antioch and particularly on its leaders. There are four stages in this commissioning of Barnabas and Saul to a missionary task.

First, the Holy Spirit calls them (v. 2). That may have been an individual and private experience for Barnabas and Saul. They may have had God open their eyes to the needs of the gentile world. And they may have heard him say, as he did to Isaiah, "Whom shall I send and who will go?" They responded, "Lord send me." What they were saying to God was this: because we care for your glory in the gentile world, because we desire the honor of your name, we have given ourselves to your lordship and want to hearken to your voice. Send us that the Gentiles might glorify God.

But then the next stage was that the Holy Spirit came to a worshiping church and said, "I have called these men; now you set them apart for this work to which I have called them." From the tense that is used here, we might assume that the Holy Spirit called these men personally prior to his approach to the church. In verse 3 the church

responded with great seriousness to this responsibility. They fasted and prayed before they did anything. And I do not think they were just praying for the blessing of God for their two brothers. I think they were also doing something else. They were saying, "Lord, we are really serious in bringing this issue before you, and as a token of that we abstain from food. We want you to confirm to us their call."

Let me spell out how I think this should affect practically a church's response. When men or women believe they are called by the Holy Spirit to a particular service, their next question should be, "Does the church where I worship, and of which I am part, recognize that call so that the Holy Spirit is placing upon them the responsibility of setting me apart for this work?" And the church should take that person's sense of call with the utmost seriousness, and the leaders of the church should come together and wait upon God to know his will, so that they may take the responsibility for this missionary and be able to say, "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to set apart this person for this ministry."

Let me illustrate this from our own experience in Glasgow. We have a large number of students and other young people in the church in which I have the privilege of serving. Many of them have been called to the Lord's service at home and overseas. But in our board of elders we became troubled by the fact that many of these young people would go off to Bible college and then come back after three years and tell us of a call to a certain missionary situation and suggest that we have a commissioning service. But we had no confirmation of that call. We had not been involved in the student's life for three years. So we realized that the church ought to have been involved from the early stages of the receipt of that call.

The result is that now, before people go to Bible college, a group of our elders spend most of an evening interviewing them and praying with them. A report is then made out and discussed by the board. If necessary the person is seen again and only after that are we able to say, "At this stage we can discern the Lord's call and will be ready to take responsibility for this servant of his." This seems to be an important biblical pattern.

The third stage in this commissioning is that, once the Holy Spirit has called and communicated that call to the church, the church now lays hands upon Barnabas and Saul. The laying on of hands is not an ordination or a conferring of gifts, since Paul

and Barnabas have already exercised a ministry and displayed the necessary gifts. Instead F.F. Bruce explains its significance in this way in his commentary on Acts:

It is evident that the laying on of hands in this instance imparted no qualification to Barnabas and Saul which they did not already possess. But by this means, the church at Antioch through its leaders expressed its fellowship with Barnabas and Saul and recognized them as its delegates.

In other words, the church was accepting responsibility for them. That was the responsibility to support the missionary spiritually by prayer, emotionally and psychologically by continuing encouragement, and financially by money. The fourth stage in the commissioning is when the church sends Saul and Barnabas out (v. 3). You will notice that it is really the Holy Spirit who does this: "sent on their way by the Holy Spirit" (v. 4). But he commits the execution of the task to the church.

So the biblical pattern is that the church is the sending agent, not the missionary society. The missionary society is the servicing agent of the churches at home and overseas, but the sending should be done by the church. And in Acts 14:26-27 it was to the church that they reported back when they returned from this first missionary journey.

Before we leave this issue of the church's responsibility, let us look briefly at who these men were that were sent. William Arnott, a Scottish scholar of last century, pointed out in his *Studies in Acts*:

The men chosen for foreign work in accordance with the mind of the Spirit, were the mightiest men. They did not send out some persons who had turned out useless at home. The foreign field always needs, and in the age actually obtained, the ablest labourers. I suspect the chief obstacle to the success of modern missions lies here. The church at Antioch sent the cream of the ministry abroad; if they had sent the grounds, their success would have corresponded to their effort. Here and there in our own time, when the Spirit has descended in power, some men mighty in word and deed have taken the field, and the result has been a gain corresponding to the outlay, but it is the grief and the weakness of the church at the present day that her chiefs are for the most part occupied at home.

So we need a new vision of the church.

The Strategy for Missionary Endeavor: The Spirit of God

Finally, we also need a new vision of the strategy of God. The strategy for missionary endeavor lies with the Spirit of God. I want to draw some conclusions about the divine strategy in missionary endeavor as illustrated in the ministry of the apostles, especially Paul. The strategy that matters is God's strategy. The thing that should really matter to us is God's strategy., God's will, God's perfect purpose.

When I was in a little rural church in Ayrshire for fifteen years, I would often get letters when things were difficult and discouraging, and these letters would make things worse. I was in an area which was spiritually barren - a place desperately in need of ministry. But people would write and say, "Isn't it time for you to be in a more strategic place? Isn't it time that you got a strategic situation somewhere else?" I used to respond, sometimes with a fair bit of vigor, "Whose strategy is it that we are talking about? God has set me down in this place, and he has given me no liberty to leave it."

So whose strategy are you talking about? Whose strategy are you interested in? The vital thing is that your life as God has created it and redeemed and-prepared it should be in God's will. That's what matters.

From the apostolic teachings and experience we can draw out three things about missionary evangelism: the preparation, the pattern and the goal. The preparation for missionary evangelism as seen in the book of Acts relates God's providence to our evangelism. The apostles clearly had a deep sense of being caught up in the purpose of God, and they found themselves being sent not so much to people they had chosen as to people God had chosen for them. Again and again their own inclinations were corrected either by direct, divine intervention or by providential circumstances. Persecution was a providential circumstance used by God to reveal the divine strategy for evangelism. Phillip went to Samaria, and Paul and his band frequently left one city to go to another because they were harried out. But in these persecutions the purposes of God were working out the strategy for evangelism.

At other times there was direct, divine intervention, such as that which took Philip from a situation of great blessing in Samaria to meet a solitary Ethiopian statesman in

the Gaza road. Or again there was God's action in removing Peter's prejudices against bringing the gospel to the Roman centurion Cornelius. Time and again in Acts we see the right hand of God bringing the person with the need and with the prepared heart, such as the Ethiopian. The left hand of God brings the person with the answer, and they are brought together for salvation. That is the glorious providence of God working in the strategy of God in evangelism.

Perhaps nowhere is this principle illustrated more vividly than in Acts 16 where Paul and his company experience frustration after frustration. In Acts 16:6-8 you will remember that doors were closing against them rather than opening, frustrating their plans rather than fulfilling them. And I think in those days they were learning how vital it was to be wedded to the divine strategy and to be ready to die to their own plans for the sake of God's plans, to die to their own timetable in order to live by God's. Have you learned that lesson? Are you wedded not only to the will of God but to the timetable of God?

In Acts 16 as God was opening up an amazing new door into Europe the apostles were experiencing frustration. This of course does not mean that God does not want us to have plans, but that there is a deeply rooted biblical principle imbedded in apostolic history. It is the principle of divine initiative. Do you remember how Joshua had to learn this? In chapter 5 Joshua is preparing to assault Jericho, and he sees a man in mighty armor standing before him. He did not realize that it was the living God coming to meet with him. But he says to the figure, Now whose side are you on? Are you for us or for our enemies? (v. 13).

And the man gives him a very unhelpful reply. He says, "Neither."

And Joshua wonders, "Now which side is this man on? Can we really trust him?"

And the man says, "As commander of the army of the LORD I have now come."

So the vital question the Lord asks is not, "Am I on your side or on their side?" but "Are you on mine?" That is the question.

When you have this vision of God's sovereignty in evangelism, what a transformation it brings! What a glorious thing to think of the living God not only preparing you for a people, but preparing a people for you. This was a vital element in Paul's ministry. The sovereignty of God is what made evangelism possible even when Paul was discouraged. When Paul had just about given up on the Corinthians (Acts 18), God came to him and said, "Go on, Paul. Carry on preaching the gospel here because I

have many people in this city." But those people hadn't yet been converted! But God said, "I have many people here. You go on preaching." And Paul stayed there eighteen months and many came to Christ. God prepares hearts for the message of the gospel.

But God also offers a pattern for missionary evangelism. This pattern has two features. One: it was a presentation of truth. That is the inescapable conclusion one must draw from Paul's ministry. For example in Acts 17 in Thessalonica even the vocabulary Paul uses proclaims this. In Acts 17:2 he reasons with them out of the Scriptures, explaining and proving that the Christ is to suffer and rise from the dead. And the result was that some of the Jews were persuaded. This is the characteristic of apostolic evangelism: truth presented to the mind. But the apostles were not aiming merely at an intellectual conquest. They were aiming for a conquest of the will and the emotions, too, but through the mind.

It is a very significant thing that the old order of sin makes its appeal through the senses - a tree desired for food, arousing the appetite, and so on. By the new order of grace in Christ, however, the appeal is made to the mind - be transformed by the renewing of your mind. So the apostles spoke the truth to the mind.

The second element in the pattern was the proclamation of the whole counsel of God from Scripture. This is how Paul describes his ministry as he meets the Ephesian elders at Miletus. In Acts 20:27 he says, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." When you listen to apostolic preaching - whether of Peter or Paul or Stephen - the amazing thing is how much there is in it, a wide presentation of doctrine covering God, man and Christ.

People often ask these days about the irreducible minimum of the truth that we must present: What is the irreducible minimum of the gospel that we need to present to people? I find that the apostles were not concerned with the irreducible minimum but with the indispensable maximum. That is what they were interested in. And we must go to a needy world with a whole Christ from the whole Bible for the whole person in these days.

Finally, the goal of missionary evangelism in Acts is the goal that Paul speaks of in his letter to the Colossians (1:28-29). He says that our concern is to present every man

mature in Christ. This is why Paul stayed eighteen months in Corinth and two years in Ephesus. This is why he retraced his steps on his first missionary journey back through Lystra and Iconium and Antioch (Acts 14), strengthening and encouraging the disciples. This is why he planted churches and ordained elders to care for the flock. It was so that he could bring people to maturity in Christ. That is our great concern.

This brings us back to the whole issue of the goal of missionary evangelism, which is the glory of God. The great concern of God is for his own glory - and this is what salvation is all about. God wants to take people who are broken and shattered by sin, in whom the image of God is defaced, and he wants to mold and form and recreate them so that on the day of glory we can go into God's presence and say, "Here I am, and the children you have given me, changed from glory into glory." That is the goal of missionary evangelism. And God knows how much we need to learn it in our day.

So, to conclude, we need to ask God to give us a vision: a new vision of the glory of God as the motive of mission; a new vision of the church of God as the agent of mission; and a new vision of the strategy of God the Holy Spirit as the sovereign director of mission. May God make us fruitful for his great glory.

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