

September 7, 2008
 Matthew 13:1-9 / Matthew 28:16-20 / Acts 20:17-31
 If It All Depended On You

A few months back, after I got home one Sunday afternoon, I was thinking about the many "commissions" Jesus gives His disciples in the Gospels — commissions that come in the form of PROPHECIES of what they will do, and COMMANDS of what they must do in relation to reaching out with the Gospel.

In terms of a commission given in the form of a prophecy, Matthew 24:14 says: ***"And this Gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world, as a testimony to all nations and then the end will come."*** It will happen, and the obvious implication is that they will be the one's doing it. A commission in the form of a prophecy.

In terms of a commission given in the form of a command Matthew 28:18-19 says: ***"All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me, go therefore and make disciples of all nations... baptizing them... and teaching them everything I have commanded you..."*** It's in the imperative.... "GO, therefore and make disciples..."

In terms of a prophecy, Luke 24:47 says: ***"Jesus told them, 'This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.'" "Repentance and forgiveness will be preached to all nations..."*** and He means "by you!"

And last, we come to Acts 1:8, where Jesus commissions them in the form of both a prophecy and a command: ***"And you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and Judea and Samaria and to the uttermost ends of the earth."***

And as I was thinking about those commissions which Jesus gave to His disciples (and vicariously to us through them), I was struck by the thought ***"What if it all depended on me."***

And I don't mean depended on me doing it apart from God. I mean it in this sense: What if I were the only Christian in this whole part of the state — in all Bucks County or Eastern PA?

How much would the population in this area know of Jesus / or His kingdom / or His commands / of repentance and the forgiveness of sins / or baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit / or Jesus life, miracles, death, resurrection, ascension and promised return at the end of the age to judge the world?

Ask yourself: If it all depended on me (just like it all depended on those individual apostles who headed off into areas like Asia Minor, or Mesopotamia, India, or Egypt, or Ethiopia, where they were often the only Christian witness in that whole country!) — if it all depended on what I have done, or am doing, in planting seeds and sharing the Gospel, and reaching out in Jesus name, and training converts and equipping leaders and planting churches that likewise plant other churches — how well would the Christian enterprise be doing in this area if its propagation depended solely on you?

And I'm serious. It's not just a rhetorical device to try and get you into the message. I want you to feel the weight of the commission God has given to all believers to devote themselves to the propagation of the Gospel, and the saving of souls and the furtherance of God's kingdom purposes on earth — to build up the Body of Christ on earth, by gathering Christ's sheep (or His elect) into the fold of God.

So I ask you again: If it depended on you alone, how well would it be doing? As I asked the people at Menlo Park two Sunday evenings ago as I preached out of Matthew 13 there in the park: How many people have you introduced or led to Christ? Jesus says that when seed falls on good soil, it produces a ***"crop 30, 60, 100 times what was sown."*** How big a crop have you produced? How many people know of Jesus or know Jesus because you took the time to point them in His direction?

How many people will look back, when they give their testimony to others, and mention your name as being one of the people who was instrumental, in the providence of God, in leading them to Christ? Will your name ever be mentioned in such a context?

Seriously: How many people have you personally told the message of repentance and forgiveness that God calls us to proclaim in all nations, starting in our own home town? How many people know, because of your words, and your efforts at speaking the truth in love, that they must be born again, or what it means to be born again; what they must do to become a Christian and be put right with God, have their sins forgiven and receive the Holy Spirit?

You see, 2000 years ago 12 Apostles and 108 other disciples took that commission very seriously—so seriously that within 50 years there were churches planted all over the Middle East, and Turkey, and Asia Minor, and Southern Europe, and North Africa, and Ethiopia, and even as far away as India!

Churches established by individual Christian disciples or apostles who were often the ONLY Christian witness in that whole geographic area — the whole responsibility for reaching that area with the Gospel falling on their shoulders alone (not apart from God's empowering presence and assistance, obviously, but apart from the help of any other believer).

You see, they took the commission of Jesus to heart, and understood that the responsibility for its fulfillment rested squarely on their shoulders! They didn't say (because they couldn't say) "If I don't someone else will. If our church doesn't First Baptist or Calvary Church of Souderton, or Providence Presbyterian Church will."

They couldn't say that because there were no other churches, and often no other Christian witness anywhere around for hundreds of miles. And thus they knew that if they didn't do it, it wouldn't get done.

That's why the church grew so quickly those first few decades. Because they knew that if the message was to spread and people were to come to Christ, and obey all that Jesus had commanded— it was in many ways all up to them, as individuals, because there was no one else in the places they went that would do it if they didn't.

But you know what has happened down through the ages after Christians have become successful in their evangelistic endeavors? The next generation comes along, and sees that there is a Christian witness established in that geographic area — sometimes two or three or more! Sometimes a different church on every street corner!

And what happens? They begin to lose the sense of urgency and personal responsibility that Jesus has laid upon their shoulders in terms of reaching every last person with the Gospel message.

We tend to forget that just because many have heard the message (or been converted) in one geographical area, it doesn't mean all have. And even if all in one generation have, we tend to forget that each new generation needs to be evangelized all over again!

That's what happened here in the states. We mistakenly assumed that America had been "Christianized," and that "there were enough churches doing the job" (or enough evangelists like Billy Graham and Luis Palau, and others having mass meetings) that we as individual Christians

were relieved of the responsibility, could sit back and let them fulfill the commission for us, or simply focus on growing in the faith and reaching people on the foreign mission field.

And because we did, more and more and more people failed to have the Gospel shared with them in a personal and intimate way, by people who knew them and loved them and cared for them.

And it DOES make a difference! Having someone share with an audience generically and somewhat impersonally from a TV set, as opposed to having someone who knows me come to me and look me in the eye, and take time out of their day, and care enough to address my questions and concerns, makes a big difference!

And don't hear me wrong! I thank God for evangelists, and big rallies, even for the ability to reach into people's homes with the Gospel message through TV. But IF THOSE THINGS make the average Christian feel that because of them we are relieved from the responsibility and task of sharing the Gospel one on one, then, in the long run they have done more harm than good.

I've said it before, and I'll say it again: If each Christian would only reach one other person each year (and that's not a big or unrealistic goal) — if each Christian would only reach one person for Christ each year, it would do more to bring others to salvation and further the growth of the Christian church than all the Christian TV broadcasts and massive evangelistic rallies could ever do combined!

CONSIDER THIS: If even 1000 people were converted at each of 8 major Franklin Graham crusades over the next two years, 8000 people be added to the ranks of the church in America by the end of next year.

But if each individual Christian would reach only one other person in two years (just one in two years!) the church in America would grow by at least 120,000,000 people (if the 35% figure of American population being Christian is anywhere near accurate)!

***8000 or 120,000,000? Which will it be? Which would Christ have us do?
What did He commission us or command us to do?***

You see, that's what the church has failed to see over and over and over again! Christ calls US to do it, not the Tele-evangelists to do it for us. He calls US to do it, not the Franklin Graham's and Luis Palau's and Rick Warren's of the world to do it for us!

They are to do it because Jesus has called them as individuals to do it. But no more than He's called us to do it as well. They do it in different ways, and reach a larger audience, but that in no way means we're somehow exempted from sharing the truth, or planting the seeds of the Gospel in people's lives.

No! That's a mutant mindset that's somehow crept into the church over the years and has led to the very obvious decline in evangelistic effectiveness of the average local Christian or church.

What all three of our texts assure us of today is that the responsibility for evangelizing the lost is laid upon ALL OF US! It's laid upon each and every individual Christian and not simply pastors or preachers or evangelists who happen to have "the gift," or some perceived "special calling."

To do it on a large scale maybe one does need a special calling. But to do it as Christ intended, with each individual Christian carrying the responsibility to reach out to those within their sphere of relationship, merely takes His command or commission and not a special calling.

Which causes me to ask you again: How well are you doing? How many know something more about Jesus because you shared with them? How many seeds have you planted? How many people have you introduced to Christ? How many disciples have you made, who can look back to you as the human instrument in God's hands that led them to Christ?

Indeed, if you were the only one furthering the cause of Christ in this area, how many people would have a basic understanding of the Gospel, know Jesus, and be joining with you to reach and disciple others in the faith?

In the "Parable of the Sower" in Matthew 13, which we had read for us this morning, Jesus essentially tells us that our task in evangelism is to plant seeds. To sprinkle the lives of people with seeds of Gospel truth. It is not up to us to make it grow, but simply to spread the seed, like a farmer, far and wide—not even being concerned about the soil it lands on.

That's not our concern! It's not up to me or you to think: "Would this person make a good Christian." It's not up to us to see if the soil is shallow, or thorns are growing in it which will choke out the seeds once they start to grow. We are not called to be soil testers but seed spreaders—and leave the results to God.

Paul picks up on the same imagery in I Corinthians 3: 9, where he says of himself and Apollos – the two who did the work of planting the church in Corinth:

“What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe — as the Lord has assigned each his task. I planted the seed (Paul was the first to arrive on the scene and share the Gospel), Apollos watered it (he came next and affirmed what Paul had said and done), but God made it grow. So, neither he who plants or 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 each will be rewarded according to his own labor. For we are God’s workers, you are God’s field...”

What then is the believers task or commission? Is it to convert people? NO! It’s to plant seeds or water the seeds that others have planted — depending on who spoke into a person’s life first.

In fact, in that regard let me share a somewhat humorous story with you!

When I arrived at my first church in Westport, two of the deacons were converted within the first year. And not only that, but one elderly lady whose name was Ruth, called me up one Tuesday after I preached a sermon on the need to be born again. “I need you to come over to my house right away,” she said. She was obviously distraught and tearful, so I asked: “Why?” “Because I need to be born again,” she responded.

So I hurried over to her apartment at the elderly housing complex, only to find her still in tears. “Tell me how to be born again,” she said as I entered the apartment. She was so anxious and had such a concern for the lost state of her soul (she was under such conviction) that she couldn’t stand to wait one more minute!

“My son has been telling me for years that if I’m not born again I’ll go to hell,” she said, “and Sunday in your message you seemed to be saying that was true. Is it?” “Yes,” I said, “it is. Jesus tells us we must be born again. It’s not an optional extra.”

So right there in her living room, with tears flowing down her face, I led this precious lady to put her trust in Jesus, humbled by the fact that the seeds of the Gospel that led her to that place had been planted by her son, I had simply watered them in my sermon, and God brought forth the fruit of her conversion.

Her son planted, I watered, but God made it grow. *“So, neither he who plants or he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow.”* In fact, I’ve found that most of the people who have come to Christ through my ministry had already had someone else plant the seeds at some point earlier in their lives. All I did was water seeds that another had planted.

That seems to be my calling in life!

But it tells us something else about the task of evangelism: It's a group effort. God works through our efforts as each person does their work — the key being "each person."

God brings about the fruit of conversion as each believer does the work of planting seeds, or watering the seeds that someone else has planted. God could, and has converted people apart from any human agency—through dreams or immediate divine intervention. But most commonly He chooses to work through us, not apart from us. Using our efforts and not apart from our efforts.

That's what I want to assure you of today. ***"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ."*** It isn't enough to simply try and be a good example or a nice neighbor. It isn't enough to be a silent witness, because Paul tells us: "Faith comes by hearing the message about Jesus!"

We must at some point use words! Someone must at some point share the truth. Verbal seeds have to be planted. They can be watered through our actions, and the silent part of our witness, but since faith is the fruit of Gospel witness, we must at some point speak of His life and miracles and death and resurrection. We must at some point tell people He is ***"the Way and the Truth and the Life, and no one comes to the Father but by Him."***

They must at some point be led to understand that they ***"must be born again."*** They must be made new! They must repent of their sins and turn to Christ to receive the forgiveness of their sins through faith in Jesus Christ or be eternally lost, ***"storing up wrath upon themselves for the Day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed."***

We must care enough to tell people the truth, in love — out of concern for their eternal souls. Hudson Taylor (the great missionary to China) told the story of a Chinese man, who after he shared the Gospel with him, asked him why none of the other Englishmen he knew had told him this. (Or maybe we could say, ***"cared enough*** to tell him this.")

Do your friends and neighbors know? Do your family and relatives know? Are you hoping someone else tells them, or will you take that responsibility upon yourself, like Paul who could say in Acts 20:26: ***"I am innocent of the blood of all men, because I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God."***

Or again, in that same passage: *“I have not hesitated to preach (and by preach he simply means share or declare and not preach in the formal sense) anything that would be helpful to you, but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.”*

God, my friends, is the One who sovereignly converts people. But that does not release us from the responsibility of sharing Gospel truth or planting seeds in the soil of others lives.

If Paul were not, like us, somehow responsible for the task of evangelizing the lost, he could never have said he was “free from the blood of all men” as a result of the fact that he *“had not hesitated to proclaim to them the whole will (or counsel) of God.”*

To fail to warn someone of impending danger, is, according to Ezekiel, to have their blood (or the responsibility for their doom) at least to some degree placed squarely upon our shoulders.

So I ask you again: If it all depended on you; if you were the only Christian witness in this whole area (and in the lives of some people you may indeed be) how many people would know about Jesus because of you?

How many seeds have you planted (seeds being words that convey Gospel truths)?
How many seeds planted by others have you watered?

I don't usually get so pointed, but I do need to say it today: We've all been given a commission to reach out to the lost with the Gospel. Jesus commands us to do it, and none of us is exempt from that responsibility (though we will all do it differently).

And I can't say exactly what Paul means when he implies that somehow “the blood of people remained on his hands until he had proclaimed to them the whole counsel of God,” at which point he was freed from it.

But this much I can say: It surely signified that God somehow held him responsible to some degree for their continuation in their lost state if he had the chance to tell people about Jesus and didn't do it. That seems clear regardless of how one interprets his words!