

The Glory of God in Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God

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sermonaudio.com

Preached on: Sunday, February 21, 2010

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One of the great joys in my 30 years here is to know that we got to get in on planning a church there in that little...actually it's a dying village. Brother Chad H. had a lot to do with that work and so many others. I got to go one time and does it not do something for your heart to know that as we're meeting here because I think they're on the exact same time zone or within an hour, there's probably a worship service in the mountains of Peru where there was not a church 7-8 years ago. There might have been a believer or two, that was questionable. And I remember preaching in the square there as cattle would come through and livestock or goats and lambs and people would gather around after we got through preaching and I think there were three different people who came up and talked about the sensing of the Lord working in their lives and what a joy. What a joy.

Our strategy statement for World Missions reads as follows:

The entire local church family personally and strategically involved in world missions (and for us that's chiefly church planting, planting new churches,) mobilizing laborers, prayer and finances to the end of glorifying God among all people.

Now we have an overarching purpose statement for our church that we have gleaned from Scripture and we have three strategy statements: one strategy statement for congregational worship; one strategy statement for every member ministry through small groups; and then this strategy statement for world missions. And God just led me to do some significant revision of this and, again, I was going to preach it two weeks ago and the Lord didn't allow that and I'm going to share it with you today.

First of all, let's take it a phrase at a time and let this meld back into our souls what we want to be about as God's local New Testament church. I. The entire local church family. We want to see the whole family of God have a heart for world missions and that's because that's what we see in the Scriptures. Let me give you some subpoints here. A. The first missions movement was birthed in a local church. It wasn't birthed in an individual unless you would say Christ was that individual and obviously that's true, but beyond Christ and in the movement of God as recorded in the New Testament, the first missions movement came out of not a board, not an agency, not a society, as good and

helpful as those are but a church and I'm here to tell you today that a lot of parachurch ministries and I like a lot of them, we support some of them, they exist because the church is deficient. The church drops the ball and other organizations pick it up and that's good but it's bad because sometimes when other types of organizations other than the biblically defined organization picks the ball up, the biblically defined organization keeps letting them carry the ball and anything that's less than God's ideal is not the best most effective or does not give him the glory he deserves. Don't misunderstand me: I'm very thankful for the boards and agencies we support but these boards and agencies should exist to the end of assisting the church and never replacing the church.

Let's look at this together in Acts 13. This should be on your screen. Here we are at a new church plant in the city of Antioch. I mean, this thing has just started. Pentecost hadn't been over hardly a few days, I guess you'd say, I don't know exact chronology, I don't know that anybody does but it's close to the birthing of the church movement in the early chapters of Acts. Here we come to Acts 13, the church at Antioch, and look at what the Bible says, "Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" Let me stop right there before I read the last verse. Is it not interesting in a new church with lots of needs and a great community who had yet to be saved, God takes the two best and sends them out to missions? Now logically, that doesn't make sense but in God's mind it does. Then the last verse, verse 3, "Then, when they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them out."

Now, this is the first missionary journey recorded in the New Testament. We do know that from Jerusalem Peter and Philip and the scattered believers had already gone out but in a real sense, that first group or first wave that went out from Jerusalem to spread the gospel were more forced out than sent out. The persecution dispersed them. But here we have this group going out because, first of all, in prayer they sensed the Spirit of God saying, "Set apart Paul and Barnabas for this mission's work." And then the Bible says in verse 3, "They sent them out." Who is the "they"? It's the church. Brother Steve is exactly right, the church is God's missions agency to the world. I want to thank God that we've got good societies and mission boards and organizations to assist the church but the church is God's sending agency.

So one of the old commentary writers talking about this sending out of Paul and Barnabas from Antioch and he called it "the double call." The Spirit said, "Set them apart," then the church said, "We're setting them apart." And I would submit to you any young man, any woman, any person that goes out into ministry or missions needs a double call. The Spirit of God and their local church coming together to say, "We believe this is of God," because every now and then you have a young man and he's just sure God has told him this and that and this and that and we happen to know his life and we know he's not out of the oven yet, he's not done, and he needs a little more time or he needs a little more

training or needs a little more maturity so there are reasons that the Bible shows us the church is foundational.

Well, that's the first missions movement being birthed in that local church which was a church plant itself of Jerusalem at Antioch. Being in our outline, the first missionaries were accountable to the local church. The first episode we have of this is in Acts 11 and the whole story takes about the whole chapter so why not look there, but actually Peter has gone out. As I said earlier, they were sort of scattered out and Peter being the main preacher of the church in Jerusalem, goes out preaching and lo and behold God begins saving Gentiles. That doesn't mean much to you but if you were a Jew 2,000 years ago and you had to some degree embraced Christ as the Messiah, that was a quantum leap but it was a further leap to think that God might include Gentiles in this salvation. So Peter reports back to the local church at Jerusalem and they have a meeting to discuss his missions work and they're having a real problem with the fact that he's saying Gentiles are getting saved. Well now, that's not my point. We all understand the gospel is for all people of all nations, all the time, all that we can get it there, however, my point is Peter going back to the local church at Jerusalem to resolve and fix this problem.

Then you go forward to Acts 14 and the Bible tells us in Acts 14 beginning in verse 24 that they, we're talking here about Paul and Barnabas, they passed through Pisidia and came into Pamphylia. They go to Attalia, Perga and then in verse 26 and, "From there they sailed to Antioch," that's the local church that sent them out, "from which they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had accomplished." Verse 27, "When they had arrived and gathered the church together, they began to report," it means to give an account of their mission's work, "report all things that God had done with them and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. And they spent a long time with the disciples." They've gone Seleucia, Cyprus, Salamis, Perga, the Galatia region which is Iconium, Lystra, Derbe and back to Antioch which is a part of the Galatia region. They saw good fruit for their labor and so the Bible gives us the very first world missions conference, Paul and Barnabas coming back to report what God had done in their mission journeys. Is that not what we've done this week? Have you not heard report after report after report of what God is doing in missions around the world? But the point I want to make to you: who were they accountable to? Did they have an independent board or agency they answered to? As good as that is, no. They went to the local church. The first missions movement was birthed in the local church. The first missions movement was sent out from the local church.

Another example of this: Acts 15. We have now a problem in the church plant at Antioch. Some Judaizers, some people begin to teach that if you're going to be really saved, you place your faith in Jesus plus you have to be circumcised, you have to add something on. And so this was a real problem and the disciples don't know what to do about this so here we have an autonomous local church at Antioch, a quite new church, with a theological dilemma on their hands, "What about these Jews who are so zealous to say, 'Now we'll take Jesus but don't leave off Moses.'" which we all know is heresy. That's false doctrine. How are they going to fix it? They go back to the mother church at Jerusalem, the church that had been responsible for birthing them and resolved the issue there.

As a matter of fact, look at Acts 15 real quick. I think this is so interesting and it's amazing how clear the Scriptures are on this very principle. Acts 15 and we'll just start in verse 1. "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church," again, the local church exercising the authority and oversight of how to fix this problem, sends them back all the way to Jerusalem. Then go down to verse 7, "After there had been much debate," now here they are in Jerusalem, they're talking this thing out, "Peter stood up and said to them, 'Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe.'" Now the point I want to point out here is: Paul is not in Jerusalem straightening this thing out, he's a missionary; Barnabas, the missionary, is not back in Jerusalem straightening this thing out; Peter, one of the elders and apostles of the local church takes the lead in straightening this problem out.

Now go down to verse 13, if you will, "After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, 'Brethren, listen to me,'" and James begins to speak. Now, who's James? Most theologians would tell you that James was the local church pastor, the preaching pastor of that local church in Jerusalem because Peter was a little more of an itinerant though he was a part of the pastoral team there. So in solving the mission church plant problem in Antioch, the biblical example is they go back to the mother church, the church at Jerusalem, and the pastors and elders there take the lead in resolving that issue.

Now go to Acts 15:22-23. "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders," that's the whole church at Jerusalem, "with the whole church," at this point the leaders brought the decisions they made to the whole church and the church gave their affirmation, "This is how we're going to fix this problem down in Antioch with our mission's church down there." "To choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas." So Paul and Barnabas can't even go back to Antioch in their own authority and say, "Here's how it's going to be fixed." They send some men with Paul and Barnabas to back them up because their position is right. You can't begin to teach that circumcision of Moses adds onto Jesus. We've got to get that fixed in the church at Antioch. Verse 23, they sent a letter and they sent it back from the church at Jerusalem, "Go to Antioch and get this issue resolved." So what I want to say to you is this: while this may not be the most absolute and binding command of Scripture, if you hold to the sufficiency of Scripture, we have to believe there's a reason why God gave these examples. It's about the local church.

The first mission's movement was birthed in the local church, the first mission's movement was accountable to the local church. A third one, C. in this, the first missions movement or the first missionaries in this case whole task was to plant more churches. Now, I thank God for brothers and sisters who are doing a lot of work around the world. We support some brothers and sisters who do things other than directly helping in church

plants but honestly in my heart I would urge and encourage anyone led to any kind of ministry to find out how is this going to help or assist or complement, come under the authority of, a missions movement that is actually winning souls and starting churches. Winning souls, starting churches. Winning souls, starting churches. And there may be times when the church elders sit down with a brother or a sister and commend them and affirm them always with compassion and always with a shepherding spirit but say, "You know, for the money that we have available, I thank you for your interest but it ought to go to more church planting rather than some of the involvements many have on their hearts." That's why we have Scripture. It helps us work through these kind of issues when maybe you don't have the funds to support everyone and everybody you would like to, well then, how do you decide what the priority is? Let's let God decide the priority. The first missionaries' whole task was to plant new churches.

In Acts 14:23, this is made very clear because as Paul and Barnabas go about their mission's work, what are they doing? Well, Acts 14:23 simply says, "When they had appointed elders for them in every church." As a side note, notice "elders" is plural and "church" is singular. The first churches had a plurality of pastors or elders. Early Baptists did too and some people wonder, "How did we get away from just having one pastor and deacons?" By the way, I think that's acceptable; I don't think it's the strongest system; I don't think it's evil or sinful to have one pastor. We changed that years ago basically because I wanted accountability and I wanted a team of men to work with me in leading this thing. I didn't want to be a benevolent dictator. While that may be okay and acceptable, I think the Scriptural example is to have a plurality of men and some have said that during the early days of America when Baptists were growing so fast, often it wasn't that you could have a plurality of pastors in a church, they were lucky to have one pastor on a circuit preaching to several churches. That may be how it just kind of fell in that the churches were glad to get one pastor, much less blessed like we are. I want to tell you, we are blessed to have the men on our staff who are good men of God and now that God has raised up Brother Matt and brought Brother Steve as pastoring shepherds alongside me, I am thrilled to death about the help. Thank God. It's so helpful. I know that if I'm out helping a church plant somewhere, this pulpit is manned well. Amen? It's not about me anyway. I'm thrilled and thankful I get to be the lead preaching pastor here but it's not about me. It's about the glory of God and it's good to have that. I'm chasing rabbits and we don't have time to do that.

Notice their whole task. They didn't start this ministry and that ministry and this sideline thing and this organization and that organization. They started churches. Brothers and sisters, biblical missions is of, by and through local churches. Biblical missions' primary task is to plant and strengthen local churches. Let me say something about the International Mission Board, one of the many missions agencies that we support, of the Southern Baptist Convention. Yes, I have problems because Southern Baptists are so extremely varied and broad and quite honestly, a lot of it is clearly unbiblical error and so when you have this huge organization that we have today, 40,000 churches, the Missions Board is somewhat obligated to serve all of those churches. And if they serve some churches who believe some unbiblical doctrines, it means they have a hard time serving us sometimes with more biblical doctrines though I would commend the leadership of the

International Mission Board of doing a good job of trying to keep it as solid as they can. But you understand, when somebody else pays your salary and appoints your trustees, sometimes you have to defer to them a little bit.

So yeah, there's weaknesses and there's things we're not real comfortable with but I'm going to tell you what, I am very comfortable and thankful for the people in the Ukraine who work the International Mission Board and I'm thrilled to give my faith commitment dollars in a check to them to help cover their ministry there. I'm thrilled about the family in Paraguay who are also out of our church and I'm thrilled about making my faith commitment and giving some to the International Mission Board. Do you know what we've learned? We've learned that you don't throw out the baby with the bath water. There are weaknesses and challenges and problems but there are some good men and women of God that we're going to stand with as long as they're on the mission field. Amen?

But one good thing and principle about the International Mission Board is this: their overseeing board comes out of local churches. That's good. I mean, the overseeing authority of that board comes from the churches of the Southern Baptist Convention and that's a good way to do it. It's just that in church history, there's not many parallels of when something gets so gargantuan large and becomes very broad in doctrine, what do you do with that beast? I don't know. It's just a part of living in an imperfect world and having fallen people and doing the best you can with what you've got sometimes. But from the time Dr. Bob Pittman was our pastor and led us here, we have always supported the Southern Baptist Convention as well as we could with the convictions that we have as long as we didn't feel we were compromising. We're going to continue to do that unless God does something real different in the next few years. But we also have always had direct personal individual missionaries and boards and agencies we've been involved with.

Well, that's our strategy, the whole entire local church family, because missions was birthed out of a local church, missions was accountable to the local church, missions' primary end was to plant local churches. Real quickly, well, how much of a priority is missions to be? Boy, I wish I had time. Psalm 67:1, 2 and 7, one of those Psalms we put in our accountability notebook prayer section 20 years ago, maybe more than 20 years ago. Some of you like me have prayed this prayer for our ministry thousands of times, "God be gracious to us and bless us. Cause your face to shine upon us." Now, why would we say, "God bless Muscle Shoals and Grace Life Church in Muscle Shoals?" This is why, "That your way might be known on the earth and your salvation among all nations." God bless us here locally so that we might impact the ends of the earth.

Psalm 96:3, "Tell of his glory among the nations, his wonderful deeds among all the peoples." And there is only one command that I know of that I've ever heard of that our Lord gave in five books of the New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts. It's worded differently but one command occurs in five books: go into all the world. Go into all the world. Go into all the world. Five times: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and Acts. So it ought to be our priority and we ought to want to do well in Muscle Shoals and prosper

here to the end that God would bless us here so that we might be an agent, a tool in his hands to impact the world for his glory. Not just Muscle Shoals. That's important. But Muscle Shoals and at the same time our Judea and at the same time our Samaria and at the same time the uttermost parts of the world. But it's clear in the Bible that there was no existence of anything like an agency, a board, a society. What they did was start local churches and that's to whom the commission to go into the world is given.

Let's hurry and go to the second point: The entire local church family personally and strategically involved in world missions. This is an important word to us; it's something that we put our arms and hearts around years ago and that's subpoint A: personally or you might say personalization. What do we mean by personalization? It means that we as a local church want to take ownership and responsibility for missions. Why did years ago when the International Mission Board said we located...and it's actually a dying community in the mountains of Peru, the Hakaru people, and said, "Would you guys take it on as your job and go up there and preach the gospel and start a church?" Why did we do that? Because we had learned based on the Bible, we want to take ownership. An institutionalized approach to missions is throwing money at an agency or board and saying, "Y'all go get em. We're throwing the money out there, y'all." Now obviously, we all can't go but we ought to have a personalized approach here to where we are praying for and we are going back there and we are preaching the gospel and we are trusting the Spirit of God to birth faith in their souls and we are constituting a church there in the mountains.

We were honestly shocked and alarmed when the International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention contacted us four or so years ago and said, "We wanted you to know that as far as our records show, the church that you started in the mountains of Peru is the only church started in an unreached people group by a local Baptist church in America without the aid of a career missionary." The first one ever. Is that not shocking? That's shocking to me. I want to say, "What have we been doing?" It's pitiful that we only have one. It's pitiful. Let's get number two and let's get number three and let's get number ten and let's go to heaven and say, "Lord, I didn't get to go but God blessed my business and I can pay for somebody to go. I didn't go but my small group prayed and we sent some gifts and some supplies to that missionary in that church plant. Maybe I didn't get to go but my son went some. He was young enough to hike in those mountains and, Lord, we got to be a part of seeing you get glory among a number of peoples who didn't even know your name until we went back there and shared the gospel." Why doesn't that stir you up? It ought to stir us.

Imagine how the church at Jerusalem felt when Peter came back and started saying, "God is saving Gentiles." Well, we know there's a negative to that but I don't mean the negative part of it. Imagine how the church at Antioch felt when Paul and Barnabas come in and start naming the cities they've been in and said, "Hey, there are believers in every city now." Do you know how they felt? Personally involved because that was their Peter that went out. They knew Peter personally. That was their own Paul and Barnabas in Antioch. They knew them personally so it wasn't a distant agency that got the work done, it was out of their own body, their local church that they were seeing missions taking place.

Unfortunately, in many professing Christian's lives today, missions is more associated with an institution or an organization than with a person or a place.

Now, let me just quickly give you some things that we have been doing through the years and I'm kind of fired up this morning because some pieces of the puzzle are in place and I've been working on this for years and it's like God is just letting us turn a corner and having a new birth and a new beginning and I'm just fired up about it. I've been here 30 years and I'm fired up about it. O, God is good. Do you know what he's taught us? You've got to be faithful and labor when it's not fun. You've got to be faithful and work when you don't get your way. You've got to be faithful and keep going when people disappoint you. I hope I'm not sinning but, man, to pastor a church and try to be biblical is one continuous mountain range of disappointment. Person after person after family after family. You pour your life into them, often you counsel them, you help them, you help raise their children and one day they turn their back and walk out the door and can't find anything positive to say about you. But if you focus on that, you'll never get back to the work of God. You've just got to go on for God and say, "It's for the glory of God. It's for the spreading of the kingdom. It's to bring fame to his Son and anybody that wants to go, let's go. Let's go for the glory of God." By the way, there have been families and individuals who have left that way and since then have very lovingly been reconciled in fellowship and we love each other and hug each other's neck, isn't that good? Because I haven't always handled myself right all the time either.

How do we intentionalize, personalize missions? I mean, if missions is going to be personalized in the church, first of all, it's like moving a concrete truck full of concrete that sets up. I mean, church is going to do this usually. It's kind of like, "It's challenging and that stirs me and that gets me out of my comfort zone and you're going to want some of my money." No, I want a lot of your money. You can check my giving record. If you do what I've done for the last 30 years, we'll be fine. I mean percentage wise. I'm not challenging you in any way that I haven't walked it and my family has walked it. But how we intentionally get missions personalized? Well, we've talked a lot about it but the first one, 1. Unreached people groups. Through the years, we've adopted unreached people groups. For a short time the people in China, Randy and Linda P., bless their hearts, got rid of everything and went to China and we supported them, prayed for them, loved them. You know, I felt like a part of myself was there when they were there. It was personalized and Randy and Linda, we don't know all that God's doing but you planted some precious seeds of truth and God may be doing some stuff we can't even imagine. Praise the Lord. You see, I felt a part of that people group.

The people in India. We have Bobby G. with the Hindustan Bible Institute in Madras, India and by training the faculty there, we are a part of them training the pastors to go and reach the Kooveri, an unreached people group in that region of India. Then, of course, the Sootoo of South Africa. They weren't technically unreached but you could say they were largely unreached and trip after trip after year after year and trip after trip and thousands and thousands, tens of thousands, probably a few hundred thousand dollars but I can tell you, I still get the reports. I see those church buildings and I see them full of people all over the northern region of South Africa meeting and worshiping and singing and serving

Jesus Christ. Then, of course, the Hakaru of Peru. It makes it personal to us. That's the way it ought to be. So many of you have gone and so many of you have prayed and so many of you have been a part of these.

Well, another way it's personalized is when God calls our own. Boy, that gets personal, doesn't it? You know, for so many years, we talked so much about missions when Katy Lee and Katy Lee is 21. When Kay Lee was a little girl she had just been around missions and missionaries and you could ask her, "What do you want to do?" She'd say, "I want to be a missionary." She was a little girl. That's pretty good, though. Don't you want your kids thinking that way? Like that's one of the things that real people do. It just personalizes it when God touches your own. Hey, she hadn't made an adult commitment to that and she's married and has a boy and who knows what he'll do. I'm teasing. I'm teasing. I'm terribly thrilled and delighted in the young man that God has brought our way. He loves God. He discipleable and teachable and we are thankful but he needs to stay humble and so we have to say things like that every now and then.

But think about it: I'm just going to throw some names out there. Do you remember Greg Thornhill? Do you remember Greg and Cheryl Moore? Do you remember Brett and Vance Pittman? Do you remember Fred Boone? Do you remember Scott Ferris? Nate P.? You've seen him this week. Carlo S., Leland Johnson, Zack T., Keenan and Lena P., S. Haygood? And there are many more that have gone out from us to minister. It gets personal when it's our own, doesn't it? Then of course, folks, we were having a regular and abiding supporting relationship and now the P. and others, Kevin and E. Miller there in Brazil and Tim and Donna who are here today in the Ukraine and Steven and Cindy in Paraguay. What am I saying? It just makes it personal. We feel a part of it.

3. The annual Missions Conference. We won't spend long here but doesn't it help you when you go out there and you pick a card up to pray for somebody. You talk to the folks in that church plant this week and it's personal. It's not just a cold institution out there, it's a part of what we are, a part of what we're doing. So, this conference goes a long way toward making it personalized.

Then, of course, these brothers and sisters who come, I don't know, close to 500 who are here this week and just the chance to hang out with you guys and it really is an iron sharp to sharpen each other in this warfare. And it's warfare to strive to build true churches for the glory of God but we've gotten to know a lot of them and it's personal. And missions becomes personalized when you have a Missions Conference. There is a lot of inspiration from the preaching of the word and the testimonies of the missionaries and that inspiration of the word and other things and in the fellowship all makes it more personal.

Let me hurry on. I won't be long but let's go to the second thing. It's not only personalized but strategic. In other words, we don't want to just perhaps different than the way we started 23 years ago, we don't want to just run out and do missions. We've learned we don't respond and react and support the first thing that comes along. We want to be prayerful, biblically strategic in how we spend our time and our energies at Grace Life Church and world missions. Strategically. This is a key, key aspect of what we're about

and if you've only been a member here 2-3 years, there is no way you can grasp all of this. There is no way and I would just encourage you in love but be patient, keep learning. Maybe things bother you at times, you don't understand, be patient and keep learning and understanding because we're on a 30 year journey here together so far and a lot has been developed and we're still growing and learning and tweaking and correcting and developing but a lot of this hasn't been at the forefront in the last 2-3 years and God's reviving it and putting us back to work in some of these areas and I'm fired up about it. Fired up about it.

Well strategically, one of the things that sits right at the top of the list biblically and certainly for us is training leadership. Training leadership. Doesn't it just go to reason if I can help other pastors know, treasure and walk in biblical truth, through that pastor I'll impact multiplied more people than if I just did mission work somewhere. Do you see what I'm saying? Leadership training, equipping leaders and I'll just be honest, Grace Life Church members, the more I train pastors, the more they really train me and I'm a better pastor here. It's always reciprocal. I mean, some of these younger guys that come and we try to teach them how we approach things, never with a dogmatic spirit. The only thing we're dogmatic about is what's clear in here. Everything else we can be flexible on. And Bill writes something and puts something together and I'll get it back and say, "That's a thousand times better than mine," and I tell them that. Give me a copy of what you're developing as we have these relationships because it's helping us at Grace Life Church.

There are so many things I'd like to mention. We went to Jamaica several years in a row. They want us to bring kids over there and help them do Vacation Bible Schools and reach the children in the mountains of Jamaica and we said on one condition: if we can come and train your leadership to do the work instead of us coming to do it. They said, "Sure, we'll let you train our leadership," so we went two years and I went to train the church leaders and they didn't halfway show up so at the end of two years, I said, "We won't be back because we didn't come to do it for you, we came to equip you so you can do it when we're gone." That's strategic. If God wanted us to be involved in Jamaica, he would have raised up enough men hungry to be taught to do it themselves. Amen? Do you see how that's strategic and it's the best use of our dollars? Look, you can go and do mission work everywhere and do all kinds of stuff and feel wonderful about it but it may not be very effective or strategic. You may be actually hurting the national work because you're propping it up when God wants them to get all the way down and get right with God and begin to do more of it themselves. South Africa, we built those churches but every time we built a church and every time we preached the gospel, we trained the leadership. It didn't do any good to get a lot of people to pray a prayer and receive Christ if they don't have pastors to disciple and lead them when you're gone. And on and on and on we could go.

Well, the other side of this same coin is strengthening existing churches. The Apostle Paul makes this very clear in his missionary journey. Acts 15:36, Paul says, "After some days Paul said to Barnabas, 'Let us return and visit the brethren in every city in which we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are.'" So here's Paul, the very

evangelist church planter, and now he's become a discipler. He's just going back to where there are already believers and strengthening them, as the Bible says. Acts 15:41, "And he was traveling through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches." Listen to me, get this: mature churches produce true missions. If we can help churches get...they're never perfect but if churches could get right on the basic irreducible minimums of what healthy church life is according to Scripture, if churches will get right, missions will do better. And sometimes the best missions work we can do is by not going to the missions field but by strengthening American churches. I cannot tell you and I have been in many, many places around the world, I can't tell you how many times I've gone into remote villages and looked at what they're doing in their ministry and think, "That is the most worldly, shallow, fleshly stuff. Where did this come from?" America. Over and over I ran into the gimmicky, shallow, worldly, whoop-it-up stuff that didn't have a thimble full of Bible in it all over the world. In the bush of Africa and somehow they had learned it. Brother, when we sneeze, the world catches a cold, you know that? And I came back home realizing we're exporting garbage in the name of missions. These folks don't even know what the gospel is. It's half gospel, half superstition, half witchcraft, half whatever.

So sometimes not going to the field does the most for the field. Paul didn't go to new fields at this point, he went back and strengthened the churches. Of course, that's what a vast amount of Anchored in Truth Ministries is all about and that's what we come to next: doors of providence. Providentially opened doors that we weren't really looking for. God just opens a door. In 1 Corinthians 6:9, the Apostle Paul makes a statement that is so powerful. He says there is a wide door for effective service opened to me. There is a wide door for effective service open to me. I looked the Greek words up on "wide door" and "effective" and it's a powerful picture. The wide door means literally slung wide open. Have you ever come home like I have and the door was wide open? It makes you mad. The bugs and everything. I mean, an elephant could come through. Just wide open. That's what it means, it's just slung wide open. Paul said, "I'm sitting here and this opportunity is so glaringly obvious." What was it, I put this on my desk years ago: "Sometimes opportunity knocks, sometimes it crashes through the door, runs across the room, knocks you down, jumps on your chest and stares you straight in the face." That's what this verse means. Paul said, "I can't miss this. God has given me an opportunity here to advance his ministry, his gospel and his cause." Now he said, "A wide door for effective service." The word "effective service" is the word they used in the Koine Greek for a meal that was fine-tuned and ready to cut the lumber just perfectly. In other words, it's ready to go. Usually you put a board on it and get your cutting started. It's also a word used for a field that has been well tilled. You just need to go and put the seed in there, brother, and wait for the rain.

And I think that's where Grace Life Church is right now and I want to say this to you in love but with conviction: brothers and sisters, if you can yawn at this and go home and watch a ballgame and it not stir you to say, "Lord, help us to take advantage of these open doors," then I just don't know what I'm going to do with you. I mean, the Lord has just flung this thing in front of us. First of all, the ministry of the word, just a wide door of effective service. Now I know there are guys around the world that are a lot more gifted than I am and better at their preaching than I am but I would never dream through

internet and television and radio that we can actually chronicle 35-40,000 a week that are receiving our ministry of the word. Radio, television and the internet is the real thing that's exploded and these brothers who are here, a great number of them will say, "We found you on the internet and that's why we're here." It just happened. It just started. I don't know, God may stop it tomorrow, he may explode it but I think it's a wide door of opportunity and we ought to go through it until he stops this.

There was a couple here that I met last night and you dear folks may still be here and they said, "We're here because we watched you on television in North Carolina." I said, "Ma'am, we're not on television in North Carolina." She said, "Yes you are. We watched you." I don't know how it's on. I don't know. I just don't know. It's mysterious. God beamed it down from heaven. I don't know but we're not on nation-wide anymore because we couldn't afford it so we quit doing it but they're getting it in North Carolina.

Number 2: a wide door for effective service. The church plants. These fellowship groups around the country. We've talked a lot about this. I'm not going to belabor it any longer but Grace Life Fellowship in Dallas, Grace Life Fellowship in Naples, Florida, the Cross Fellowship in Pensacola, Grace Life Fellowship, Hastings, Nebraska and Ankeny Fellowship, Ankeny, Iowa which is perspective and we've got a couple of others that have contacted us. It's just a wide door for effective service. I think we ought to walk through that door the best we know how. I don't know exactly how. Do you want to be just a typical Southern Baptist Church and we can grow old and pray for each other and go to heaven or get in on something?

You know, I've been here a long time. I don't get excited about everything anymore because I've gotten excited about a lot of stuff in the past and it was flesh and it wasn't of God. One dear brother, Jackie Shelton, I'll never forget he told me years ago and he helped me as a young pastor. He had done meetings and gone through the motions and he said, "God wasn't on it." He taught me a little bit about knowing when God was on something. That's huge. I believe God's on this.

The church partnerships. Now the partnerships are different than the plants. These are churches that are either new churches or revitalized churches that want to be more biblical and sound. They've asked us to come alongside and give them guidance and oversight and just fellowship in this. Grace Baptist Church, Selmer, Tennessee, Grace Bible Church in Mississippi, Live Oak Church, Florida, Northbrook Baptist, Cedar Rapids, Iowa, Grace Baptist, Manitoba, Canada, Cornerstone Baptist, Chicago, Illinois, Grace Community Baptist Church, Toledo, Ohio, Grace Covenant Fellowship, Alabama, Indian Heights Baptist Church, Kokomo, Indiana and there are others who have asked about that. Just a great door of opportunity for us.

Then the pastor's network. We have 230 and growing churches around the country. It's a very different kind of ministry. It just gives us an association and a connection and probably every two months, if we find some literature, a message, something that deals with pastoring a healthy church, we send it free of charge and try to minister to them and bless them and we've also heard a lot of these churches have gained members because

they found out they were on our network. Somebody in their city would find, "Hey, there's a church that believes the way that we believe in our area," and they'll find that church. An open door of unusual opportunity for effective service.

Then the fifth thing that we've been throwing around for years. God hadn't let us move forward and just to be honest, every bit of this is about money. We have one full-time secretary and one part-time girl and Brother Steve and I give our time and the rest of the staff as they can. I mean, we run a shoestring budget at Anchored in Truth really. But to go forward, it's just about money. We don't have the money. You're not giving the money. We don't have the money. That's up to God but that's just where we are. That's just where we are. Some others from outside of our church have started supporting these works more. Maybe God will grow that group, I don't know. But the Pastoral Mentoring Institute is something we have thought for years God would want to do here and I'm not dying to division but I've learned I'm different than I was at 30. At 30 I would have gotten it done if I had to kill everybody to get it done and I'm not doing that anymore because I found out it was killing me and it wasn't pleasing to God.

So we're going to keep the dream alive and the vision alive and take a step at a time but it was very interesting to me as I was sitting on the platform with Dr. Michael H., professor of church history and spirituality at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was sitting right here beside me last night and the very last word that he said to me was, he looked at me and he said, "Have you all considered having an extension of Southern Seminary here at your church?" That's pretty interesting, isn't it? As best I can tell, they pay for all of that. Amen? Wouldn't you like to have a school somebody else is paying for? Now, I don't know, he's not in the administration, he's a professor but it made me think that we're not the only ones thinking that way. Wouldn't it be exciting to have a dozen, two dozen, three dozen, 50 guys here at all times and discipling them, making them live it out here. A lot of guys don't like that, well, they can go somewhere else. You're going to have to live it in the body here before we're going to send you out to pastor there. You've not just going to go to class. You've got to live it in the body here because if it's not real here, it's not going to be real when you get there. So classroom, yes, but they're going to have to model and live it out in the body here. Then, wouldn't it be neat to start putting these guys in these church plants around the country? I don't know. Just an idea. Just a thought. Maybe God's doing that. Open doors for effective service.

Well, I'm just going to mention this and we'll go. III. The end of our strategy statement, all of this is to the end that God would keep mobilizing laborers, prayer and finances. We see this again in the New Testament in Acts 8. The church is not going to the mission field like God wanted them to so he sends persecution and the people are scattered everywhere. Not just preachers, the church members and the Bible says that they're scattered everywhere and they went out preaching the word. So God said, "If I have to, I'll just scatter you to get the word out." But God is mobilizing laborers in doing that. Then we have the church at Antioch in verse 13 and we've looked at that a lot today, where they are praying and God mobilizes, "Send Paul and Barnabas out." Acts 5, we have finances mobilized. Remember in Acts 5, the Jerusalem church there, they're not

doing very well financially. That encourages me because here's probably the most solid work of the Spirit of God ever in recorded history and financially they're in a tough place. Now, we've had seasons where our finances were so rich and good but I don't know if those were our best seasons for God. Then God places us through seasons where it's tight and not as good and they could be our better seasons for God. Anyway, the Jerusalem church is having a tough time and God starts working on people's hearts and they've been selling everything they have and giving it to the work. Now, that's not God's pattern for all time but in that move of God, that was God mobilizing finances.

Brothers and sisters, this final Roman numeral, the end of our strategy statement is the most important part: to the end of glorifying God among all peoples. Listen to me now. This is not a business. This is not about success. It's not about doing things in an excellent way though we work hard to do that. It's not about having a clear vision and strategy. I think that's biblical and we're trying to do that but it's not about that. Your heart and your heart and your heart and your heart and yours and yours and yours and all of you in the balcony, your heart must be, "O God, bless this that you might get glory." That's what it's all about. Listen to me: you're not going to make it if you don't get there. If you don't get there, you're not going to make it. I'm going to look around and some day you're going to be gone chasing another thrill and another church. But if you can get it anchored in your heart, "God, let me get in on your fame and your glory being spread among the nations," then maybe God will let us grow old and die together doing something for the kingdom of God. But the glory of God has got to grip you and I'm going to tell you that's the only way I've made it 30 years. The only way. There are just those times when you want to quit, it's not working, they don't get it, there's opposition, warfare after warfare and you just lay in your bed and you toss and you turn and say, "O God, for your glory I'm going to get up in the morning and we're going to try it again and we're going to keep going." And sometimes in our weakest moments, in our biggest failures, God does his greatest work. His greatest work.

I'll just end with Revelation 5:9-12, "And they sang a new song, saying, 'Worthy are You to take the book and to break its seals; for You were slain, and purchased for God with Your blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation.'" I have to pause there. That means that God's already purchased people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation. We just need to get the gospel to them. "You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth. Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, 'Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing.'" He's the worthy one. He's the one to be consumed with. He's the one to make much of. He's the one to be glorified. He's the one to be treasured. And that's what we're about.

The entire local church family personally and strategically involved in world missions, specifically church planting, increasingly mobilizing laborers, more prayer and more finances to the end of the glory of God among all peoples. I believe there's going to be a test at the Judgment Seat of Christ and God's going to say, "What kind of leadership did

you have in your church? Did they biblically guide you to be about my glory among the nations?" You must say, Grace Life Shoals, "Yes Lord, our pastors did." "Did you support it? Did you pray for it? Did you get in on it? Did you encourage it?" I'm confident based on the authority of this book that you can say, "Yes Lord, I did," and he'll say, "Well done good and faithful servant."