

“God’s Work in Church Planting”
Acts 16:6-15
August 31, 2008

INTRODUCTION:

I want us to look today at the topic of church planting, which is what Paul and Silas are doing in this passage. This is a topic especially relevant to us, since it is likely, if God so wills, that we will plant a daughter church sometime next year in the Pelham/Helena area. We have been planning and praying toward this end for quite a few years now, and it looks now that next year will be the time when we act.

One of the questions I get sometimes on this topic of church planting is the question of why we are bothering to do this. “Aren’t there enough churches already in Birmingham?” people will sometimes ask. Consider the following statistics.

- There are 195 million non-churched people in America, making America one of the top four largest “unchurched” nations in the world.
- No county in America has a greater percentage of churched people today than ten years ago. In other words, there is not a county in our entire nation where the church is gaining ground.
- Each year 3,500 to 4,000 churches close their doors forever; yet only 1,500 new churches are started.
- In the last ten years, all Protestant churches combined lost 4.5 million members, while the national population increased by 24 million.
- The number of churches per 10,000 Americans has dropped by 60 percent since 1920. In 1920 there were 27 churches for every 10,000 Americans, while in 1996 there were 11 churches for every 10,000 Americans.
- It is a widely accepted fact that new churches are more effective at evangelism than older churches. One denomination recently found that 80% of its converts came to Christ in churches less than two years old. Peter Wagner has said, “The single most effective evangelistic methodology under heaven is planting new churches.”

Acts 16 reports the planting of a church in the Macedonian city of Philippi. This is actually the very first church planted on what is today European soil. Europe was the first continent upon which Christianity took hold continent-wide. It is interesting to note how many significant events are almost always missed at the time. If someone in Paul’s day had been asked to list the most important events of this year as the year was ending, I don’t think anyone would have said, “A Jewish rabbi from Tarsus started a church in Philippi.” Yet it turned out to be of great significance, because Europe would become a beachhead from which the

gospel would spread throughout the world. When we undertake the planting of a church, only the Lord knows of the eternal effect of this act.

It is of great comfort to us to see in this passage how God is the one who enables the planting of this church. His role is the critical one as he brings the converts, guides and comforts the church planters and builds his church. Let's look more specifically at God's work in planting this church in Philippi.

I. God's Work with the Missionaries

The work of planting a church in Philippi did not begin in that city, but in the lives of the church planters God had appointed to go there. He guides them and he empowers them. The church planter has always been a key to the planting of a church. As we undertake the planting of a church, we can make many mistakes and still be successful in the planting of a church, as long as we have the right church planter. On the other hand, we could resource this work with everything necessary, but if the church planter is not prepared, it's probably not going to work. We can see this principle with God's work in the lives of this church planting team, which consisted of Paul, Silas, Timothy, and now for the first time, Luke. The most likely explanation for the change of pronouns in verse 10 is the presence of Luke at that verse. Notice how he had been describing the movements of these missionaries by using the pronoun "they." **"So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas"** (v. 8). Then in verse 10, the pronoun changes to "we." **"Immediately, we sought to go on into Macedonia."**

The first thing we see God doing in the lives of these church planters is guiding them. I notice four things in this passage about the way God led these missionaries, which is the way I believe he still leads us today.

1. God's guidance is both negative and positive.
 - a. Twice, God led this missionary team in a negative way, through closing a door of opportunity. It happened once when they tried to enter Asia to the southwest and once when they tried to enter Bithynia to the north. We're not told exactly what happened, only that the Holy Spirit prevented them from entering these places. If I had to guess, I would say that he prevented them through circumstances. That is usually the method God uses when closing a door.

When God leads in this manner, through the closing of a door, it is easy to be disappointed. I'm sure Paul and Silas were in a state of perplexity here, wondering what God was up to. They had walked across this entire peninsula, from the southeast all the way to the northwest, twice attempting to enter a new region in order to preach the gospel. But God had said no and blocked their way. At a time like this, their need was to trust God.

Application: Perhaps God has closed a door in your life recently. Maybe it was a job offer that fell through, or a ministry that you really wanted to be a part of. Whatever the disappointment, receive it as guidance from God, trusting in his wisdom.

- b. God also guided in a positive way through a vision given to Paul. After being prevented from preaching the gospel these two times and wondering what God wanted them to do, Paul received a vision that provided him with a positive leading from God. God had guided them to know what not to do. Now he guides them so they can know what to do.

The vision was of a man from Macedonia standing and begging Paul, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." The thing of interest I notice about this is that God guided Paul by laying a need on his heart. Through his vision, he saw a need of a group of people for the gospel.

2. God's guidance is both circumstantial and rational. It was circumstantial through the closed doors they experienced, but rational in the fact that they sat down and thought about what they should do. We are told that they "concluded" God had called them to preach in Macedonia.
3. God's guidance is both personal and corporate. God gave Paul the vision, but apparently he shared the data with all of his companions, and together they concluded that God was calling them to Macedonia. One of the key ways God guides today is through the counsel of others.
4. God's guidance is not for the purpose of living an easy, comfortable life. One of the problems we often have in this area of guidance is that we have a different goal in mind for ourselves than God does. Our goal is often just to be comfortable and have an easy life. We want God to guide us because we think he knows the easiest way. Note that God led Paul and Silas to Philippi, a city where they were beaten and thrown into jail. God had certainly made a mistake if his goal was to guide them into a life of comfort and ease. But God's goal was different than that. God wants to guide us into that which is truly good, and that is usefulness for the sake of the gospel.

We see in this passage that our duty is to be ready to follow the Lord wherever he might lead. I notice in this passage how Paul and his companions responded when God did guide them. We are told that they **"got ready at once to leave for Macedonia."**

The second thing God does with this church planting team is to empower them for suffering, with the result that they have great joy. Luke tells us that Paul

and Silas were joyfully worshiping the Lord in spite of their painful circumstances. They had been beaten with rods until their backs were bloody and bruised. The Jews limited this punishment to 39 strokes, but no such limitation existed among the Romans. So they had been brutally treated. Then they were locked in the inner cell of the prison, something like solitary confinement—probably deep underground with no windows. Furthermore, their feet were fastened in stocks. But instead of cursing men, they blessed God. How could they have such joy amidst their painful suffering? I think it was just God’s work to make Jesus so real to them that they were filled with joy.

Illustration: From 1660 to 1672, John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, was imprisoned in the Bedford jail for preaching the gospel. He could have been released at any time if he had simply agreed not to preach the gospel. His greatest pain in his imprisonment was knowing the difficulties it brought to his family, especially his daughter Mary, who was blind and only ten years old when he was put in jail. Bunyan later wrote these words to describe his sufferings:

The parting with my Wife and poor children hath often been to me in this place as the pulling of the Flesh from my bones..., because I often brought to my mind the many hardships, miseries and wants that my poor Family was like to meet with should I be taken from them, especially my poor blind child, who lay nearer my heart than all I had besides; Of the thoughts of the hardship I thought my Blind one might go under, would break my heart to pieces.

But then he went on to describe what God did for him in prison.

I never had in all my life so great an inlet into the Word of God as now. The Scriptures that I saw nothing in before are made in this place to shine upon me. Jesus Christ also was never more real and apparent than now. Here I have seen him and felt him indeed... I have seen [such things] here that I am persuaded I shall never while in this world be able to express... Were it lawful I could pray for greater trouble for the greater comfort’s sake.

One of the reasons we often fail to serve God is our fear of the hardships that will ensue if we do. Make no mistake about it—there will be hardships. But the testimony of those who have been in these hardships is exactly the same as Bunyan’s. “Were it lawful I could pray for greater trouble for the greater comfort’s sake.

II. God’s Work with the Unsaved

New church plants are built upon conversions, and Luke gives us three conversion stories in this chapter. There were other conversions in Philippi, but he selects three to describe to us: Lydia, a slave girl and the jailer. Let me mention just three things we learn from these conversions.

We learn first that God is the author of conversions. They are not due to the skill of the missionaries. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to pay attention to what Paul was saying (v. 14). The demon was cast out of the slave girl "in the name of Jesus Christ," which means that it was by his power and authority. And when Paul and Silas were in the jail, God sent a **"great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken"** (v. 26). This ended up being the decisive factor in the jailer coming to faith in Christ. God used Paul and Silas in each case, but God was the one who made it happen. We can't make converts. Our need is to trust God and pray for his work, and then be ready, as Paul and Silas were when the jailer asked them **"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"** (v. 30). By the way, next week we will begin an evangelism class in our Sunday School hour that has as one of its primary purposes to train those who attend in being able to answer that question.

The second thing we learn through the conversion of these three is that when God saves someone, it changes their lives and their values. After Lydia's conversion, she urged the missionaries to come and stay with her. John Stott says it like this: "Lydia then invited Paul and his companions into her house... for once the heart is opened, the home is opened too." We see the same thing with the jailer, as he took Paul and Silas into his house, washing their wounds and feeding them. Luke often connects faith with the willingness to be generous with our possessions and our time, and we see that in this passage.

The third thing we learn from these three conversions is the unique ability of the gospel to unite very diverse people. These three were very different economically, with Lydia likely being a wealthy woman and the slave girl having nothing. The jailer was thoroughly middle class. They were also different in their personal needs, with Lydia having an intellectual need and the slave girl an emotional need. One of the things they have in common is that all three are in categories despised by Jewish men. According to John Stott, "The head of a Jewish household would use the same prayer every morning, giving thanks that God had not made him a Gentile, a woman or a slave."

CONCLUSION:

When Paul had his vision of the man from Macedonia saying "Come and help us," they concluded that the way to bring help was by bringing the gospel. That is because they knew something we often forget. That which truly helps us is to have our faith in the gospel strengthened. That is what we celebrate now in the Lord's Supper. Perhaps you need the help of the gospel to become more of a servant of the Lord, like Paul and Silas, who were willing to suffer in their service of the Lord. Or maybe you need the help of the gospel to address an intellectual need or an emotional need. We all need the help of the gospel to cleanse our souls from sin and to heal our guilty consciences. Receive by faith the help of the gospel, shown for us in the Lord's Supper.