

VIII. The Church in Biblical Perspective
The Ekklesia: God's Church for the Ages
"His Strategy—Our Commitment"
Acts 14:19-23
Dr. Harry Reeder
March 27, 2010 – Morning Sermon

We're going to look at Acts 14 which is a summation of the first missionary journey. These are the last two cities of the first missionary journey of the Apostle Paul and Barnabas. Acts 14:19-23 says **19** *But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead. 20* *But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe. 21* *When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22* *strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23* *And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

The grass withers and the flower fades. This is God's Word and it abides forever, by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

We're in the midst of a series that has been put together very pointedly and purposefully. We have just sung that He has given us His Spirit to be with us until the work is done. Now what is the work we are to do? We know our message. We have our mission which is to make disciples of all the nations but what is the work that God has called us to do as Christians and as the church?

When Cindy and I were living in Miami, Florida our children were young and our parents were a long ways away. It's a long way from Miami, Florida to Charlotte, North Carolina so they didn't make all of the holidays, even Christmas which meant that they sent presents to us. That was the era of the day of something called the 'Big Wheel.' It was kind of the plastic version of the tricycle that I had when I was growing up. It would come in a box that jokingly said "easy to assemble." I am not very mechanical and I would try to put it together. I would get to the end of it and the wheels would be a little wobbly, the stirring wasn't quite right. In other words, no self respecting father would send his child out on this big wheel but I still thought it was great. I even said to Cindy, "Honey look they put some extra parts in here." That's when she would make the comment to me very gently and quietly, "Honey why don't we read the directions first?" I'm a card carrying man and we do not read directions first. We read directions last to find out what we did wrong.

I believe we have a mission as a church. Now we have celebrated this past year this church being on message, on mission and in ministry for fifty years. We have given God praise for that while trying to encourage those whom God has used. Now we move into the future, the next fifty years or until Jesus comes again and we've asked God to keep us on message, on mission and in ministry until He comes again. So instead of coming up with some sophisticated idea about how to accomplish what God has called us to do, we have taken the time and this is our eighth study with a couple more, to go back

to the Bible and to see what the Bible says the church is to be and to do. What is our message? What is our means? What is our mission? What is our vision? We have attempted to go back to make sure we are on target Biblically, faithful to God's Word.

So as we have gone back to take a look at that we have found out that we are to be Christ centered, Gospel driven and reminded that we are to be Spirit filled. We have also reminded ourselves that we are to be prayer led and Word fed which is our life line to the Word of God in prayer. Those two things must stay in place. We also have a mission where we have gone to the passages of Scripture and here is the way we have attempted at Briarwood to sum up our mission. For God's glory, Briarwood is committed to **EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS** to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ. Who are we? We are Briarwood. What do we do? We worship God and reach people. How do we do this? We do this by equipping Christians. Where do we do this? We do this in Birmingham and throughout the world. Then why do we do this? We do this for God's glory.

Those things come from various passages. That mission statement that God has given us we didn't think it up, we just word-smithed it from God's Word. We took it from Matthew 28, Colossians 1, Ephesians 4 and Acts 1. Four days ago I stood on the Mount of Olives and I read Acts 1. I love that passage where He reminds us of the mission. In Acts 1 this is the last appearance that Jesus gives to His disciples until He ascends to the right hand of the Father. As He is there they ask Him, "When are you going to deliver up the Kingdom to Israel?" and He says "Listen, it's not for you to know the times or the epochs, here's what's for you. I want you to go back to that upper room, go to prayer and wait until the Holy Spirit has come upon you. When the Holy Spirit has come upon you, you shall receive power to be My witnesses." The power is to be Spirit filled. To be Gospel driven is to be My witnesses. Christ centered is what God has called us to. Then He said, "I want you to be My witnesses to Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the utter most parts of the world" so we just kind of down loaded that, from Birmingham, to the South, to North America and to the world. This is our mission that God has called us to. This is what God has laid before us in His Word. This is what God has commanded us to go and do.

Do you remember how that passage ends? I am standing on the Mount of Olives with the folks I took from the church this year. I wish I could take all of you with me but I can only take 50 and I'm not sure how long I can keep that pace up. We had to be at least 200 yards from where that happened over 2,000 years ago and as we were standing there I reminded them that they looked up as they saw Him longingly and the angel said to them, "Why do you gaze into heaven O men? This same Jesus who has been with you and has now been taken up from you will return in like manner." According to Zachariah 14:4 He'll come back to the same place He went up, the Mount of Olives and He'll split it wide open when He comes back and we'll usher in a new heavens and a new earth.

When is He going to come back? He'll come back when the work is done. That is what I had the chance to share with them there and I'm sharing it with you here. When we have made disciples of all the nations, the praise of God covers the earth as the waters cover the sea, when the Gospel has been preached to all the nations, then shall come the end. Right now, aren't you feeling the birth pangs all around us? The birth pangs are earthquakes, famines, wars, rumors of wars. It's unbelievable the intensity of it, just like a woman giving birth as the intensity of the birth pangs continue. It's not the sign. The

sign of His coming is all of the elect will be gathered in and the Gospel will go to all the nations of the world and that's our mission until then. That's what God has called us to do.

The book of Acts unfolds that. After Acts 1 it talks about the Gospel in Jerusalem all the way through Acts 8. Then it talks about the Gospel in Acts 9 through Acts 12 to Judea and Samaria. Then in Acts 13 to the end of the book it talks about the Gospel to the ends of the world. Packed away is this profound, impacting statement uttered by an opponent of the Gospel on the border of Europe, less than 25 years after the ascension of Jesus in Acts 17:6 which says "*These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.*" These men went back the upper room, the Spirit of God was upon them, they came out and preached the Word of God. In prayer and in preaching they lifted up Christ. They proclaimed the Gospel, 3,000 every day, the Gospel went to Judea and Samaria. The first place they are called Christians is at Antioch. Then the Gospel goes to the whole world and then we hear that profound statement from that pagan, which actually was turning the world right side up. They have come here also.

I know who turned the world upside down in those 25 years and that was the Holy Spirit through His church. I know what turned the world upside down and that was the power of the Gospel. The Gospel takes dead sinners and brings them to life, changes their life, their marriages, their families and everything they do. It changes everything as they are on this journey of grace growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ. So the Spirit of God through His people turned the world upside down and the Gospel of Jesus Christ turns the world upside down. I know why they turned the world upside down and it was because they love Jesus.

Let's look back at the Acts 14 passage. Acts 14:19-20 says **19** *But Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having persuaded the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing that he was dead.* **20** *But when the disciples gathered about him, he rose up and entered the city, and on the next day he went on with Barnabas to Derbe.* As you read the book of Acts and you see the Gospel and this radiating power moving out from Jerusalem to Judea to Samaria and to the utter most parts of the world and they have gone on the first missionary journey, it's unmistakable that every time Paul went to a city five dynamics always occurred.

Here are the five things that always occurred every time Paul went to a city. Number one was there was an amazing response to the Gospel. Jews and Gentiles began to believe in Jesus every time he went to a city. As soon as people started getting saved and coming to Christ obviously Satan is going to flee, right? Oh no!

The second thing that would happen would be fierce opposition. They would get arrested, stoned, jailed, thrown over walls, flogged and all kinds of things would happen to them.

The third thing that would happen would be Divine intervention. God intervenes for His people.

The fourth thing that would happen is they would get right back up and go do it again after they were rescued. They would start over.

The fifth thing that happened is they would have an even bigger response. An even greater response happens.

What is interesting is they will go with the Gospel, being Christ centered, Spirit filled, Gospel driven and God will bless with amazing response and fierce opposition.

Then they will be stoned, flogged, imprisoned and then God intervenes with things like earthquakes and jails opening up. Paul gets stoned and he stands up. What if that had been you or me? If that had been me and they had stoned me, left me for dead and I stood up, I would say “Praise the Lord I’m still breathing” and I would get out of there. Paul gets up and goes right back in the city and starts preaching again. When Peter and John were freed from jail they go back and start preaching about Jesus which was why they were put in the jail to begin with.

Why do people do that? They do it because they love Jesus Christ. The love of Christ compels them. They want to stay on mission, on message, and on ministry because they love Christ who first loved them. Therefore they are willing to count themselves as sheep to be slaughtered but the work is to be done, not working for my salvation but working for my Savior. So they go and proclaim that love of Christ. The love of Christ constrains them. So I know who turned the world upside down. I know what turns the world upside down – the power of the Gospel. I know why they turned the world upside down – the love of Christ. They were Christ centered, Spirit filled and Gospel driven but I am always intrigued as to how they turned the world upside down.

Jesus, I pray this all the time. “Please keep Briarwood in the game.” One guy said recently who used to go to this church and has gone to be with the Lord, to his kids, “Don’t put the bat back in the rack. If you put the bat back in the rack you don’t get to hit.” I don’t want us to put the bat back in the rack. I want us to stay at the plate and keep swinging. I don’t know how God will bless us but I want us to stay in the game. How do you stay in the game?

Is God’s Word inspired, inerrant and infallible? Do you think when He gives us a mission He would tell us how to do it? Right here in this summation is the how. Here’s how we put it. Here’s our vision. For Coming Generations, Briarwood desires to be a Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, Spirit-filled **EQUIPPING CENTER** (church) where every member is a minister and a missionary. We are prayerfully implementing the Biblical strategy to fulfill the mission. I don’t think we need to reinvent the church and its strategy. I know when you land in different places there are dynamics to it that are different but I believe if we are to fulfill the Great Commission and to stay on mission, on message and in ministry God’s Word tells us what we do.

In other words, we just finished a mission’s conference. Our elders and deacons have said we’re going to take 50 percent of what comes in to fulfill the Great Commission for the work of the Gospel in the South, North America, and around the world. Part of that 50 percent comes through this Faith Promise giving that we’re not yet finished with and it comes with our commitment to prayer and to send. In other words, we are saying as a church that we want to go, give, pray and send. By the way, we don’t want to be a donut church that is sending all of this out here while there is a hole in the middle here. I’m so excited about our youth ministry this summer because their mission’s trip is right to the city, our city, which desperately needs the work of the Gospel. I love what some of you are doing in the public schools, with Daniel’s ministry, with Lois’ ministry and I can’t name them all but there are so many ministries that you’ve generated to make sure we’re not just a mission’s church that is sending out there but we’re actually doing it right here. I’m grateful for that and committed to that but whether it’s Birmingham, the South, or North America or the world I believe the Bible tells us what to do and how to do it.

He's not only telling us who with those who are Spirit filled, Christ centered, Gospel driven churches but He's telling us how to do it. In other words, where should those Faith Promise commitments go? What should we be praying for? Who is it that comes here that we're going to take into our missionary family and send out? Who is it from our own sons and daughters? What are we going to send them out to do? What would be the right investments of God's resources, the finances? What would be the right direction of intercessory prayer? Where should we invest our members, our sons and our daughters for the cause of the Gospel and to do what? I believe the Bible is clear about this. What is it that we're supposed to do, as well as what we're to say and where we're supposed to go? What is it that we're supposed to do?

Here is what I think the Biblical strategy is and it's right in this text and throughout the book of Acts. I have chosen this text to point it out. The Christ centered, Spirit filled, Gospel driven ministry is first of all is committed to evangelism and discipleship. Let's look back at Acts 14. Paul goes from Lystra onto to Derbe and this is the last city they will go to on the first missionary journey. They do there what they have done at Iconium, Lystra and Antioch. Acts 14:21 says "*When they **had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch...***" They went from city to city preaching the Gospel, evangelizing people so that these people might come to Christ. They not only did Gospel evangelism but they did disciple making also. They brought people to Christ then trained them as followers of Christ, so all of our resources, prayers, finances and ministries have to be committed to Gospel evangelism and discipleship.

There are two things I want to say here. One, is whenever I'm doing a sermon like this that's in house as to how we're to function as a church I'm always cognizant of the fact that we may have visitors here that have come and are searching for something and you thought maybe its religion or maybe it's the church. I want you to tell you if there's that emptiness in your soul or in your heart that the answer is not religion or the church but the church is here to tell you what the answer is. The answer is Jesus Christ. I beg you not to leave here today without Him. Don't leave here today looking at any one or any thing else as if there is hope that is there. Everything under the sun is vanity if you don't have Christ. He is ready to receive you. He doesn't say "Go get religious and then I'll save you. Religion isn't your answer it's part of your problem. The answer is Me." We have a Redeemer and He is our Rock, Jesus Christ. He welcomes anybody and everybody who will come to Him.

There is a second thing that I think is very important here. It is that you and I understand that evangelism and disciple making are inseparable. When Jesus called people to salvation He didn't call them to salvation and then would you consider disciple making. Every time He evangelized someone how did He do it? He would say "Come follow Me." Being a disciple and follower of Jesus Christ was not an add-on on the a la carte menu. It was coming to Christ. You come to Him to follow Him. I know you may think I'm crazy but I do believe every single one of us needs to be discipled in a small group and we need to have some people that we're discipling.

One might say "Harry I'm just a new Christian." There are some newer ones and what you're learning give away to them and what you're learning that you give away, you'll learn that much more so that we're absolutely committed to evangelism and disciple making. Who are we going to send to the Middle East, to Asia and out there?

We're going to send people to do out there what we're doing right here. What are we going to send people out there to do? We are going to send them out to evangelize and make disciples.

I believe in a moment like this when I share the Gospel and invite people to Jesus Christ is a vital part of this congregation's ministry but I don't believe that will make us effective as an evangelistic church. I believe what will make us effective is that if each and every one of us love Christ enough to love people enough to tell them about Christ. It's when we scatter from this meeting into our relationships that we are sharing Christ with people. So my other plea is would you consider Bridge to Life, EE, or some way to get effective in your sharing Christ? If nothing else, how do I tell people my testimony? How can I be a witness for Jesus Christ and what He has done in my life? Lord, teach me how to do that.

The second strategy is that they then planted churches. Acts 14:23 says "*And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*" They had elders in every church because they had planted churches. Acts 14:21-22a says **21** *When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples...* They not only did church planting but they did church revitalization. They went back and strengthened churches. The Apostle Paul was so committed to this that became a primary thing in his second missionary journey.

Let's look at Acts 15. Paul gets back from the first missionary journey and he decides to go on a second missionary journey. Acts 15:36 says *And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."* In other words, let's go back and see how they are. Let's revitalize the church that we planted. Acts 15:41 says *And he went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.* Acts 16:5 says *So the churches were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.* So they not only planted churches but they revitalized churches.

I just got back from a trip to Israel. The Gospel came to us from Israel and then we've sent missionaries to Israel because we're supposed to take the Gospel to the Jew first. In other words, the Gospel came to us through them and it's supposed to circle back through us back to them. Would you like to know how many churches I walked into while in Israel that today are nothing more than a place for tourists to visit because those churches that were planted that at one time were alive died and nobody went back to revitalize them.

The third strategy is they did Gospel deeds of love, mercy and justice. They healed people. They took care of widows. They took up offerings for the famine. They helped one another. They appointed deacons to lead the church in mercy ministry, deeds of love, mercy and justice. When we take the Gospel it strengthens the souls of men and women and we can't walk past the needs of brokenness in their lives. If they are hungry or thirsty we need to reach out and feed them. If their marriages are broken, here's a Gospel discovery workshop. If they have children with special needs, here is a ministry to serve you. If they have children that need a home whether it's an adoption or foster care, here is how we can help. We need to do those deeds of love, mercy and justice that mirror the love that God had. He didn't send a religion to tell us how to get to heaven.

He sent His Son where we were and broken and He laid down His life for us. So we go to where people are broken and minister to them in the city, around our neighborhood and all around us.

The fourth strategy is that they developed leaders. Let's look back at Acts 14. Do you know how excited I am about Birmingham Theological Seminary with its extensions all over Alabama, the South and Uganda with third millennium? Do you know how many times people pull up stakes and come to America to get trained and they never get back home? Now we can send training with the technology of today and through academic apprenticeship train people where they are. Acts 14:23 says "*they had appointed elders for them in every church...*" They made sure there were Gospel leaders indigenous and equipped in every church because no church goes beyond its leadership.

So let me just sum it up for you. Here's where we are going. We are going forward. We are on mission and on message. What is it that we're going to use the Faith Promise resources, the intercessory prayer and our sons and daughters to do? We are going to send them out to do those four things – Gospel evangelism and disciple making, Gospel church planting and revitalization, Gospel deeds of love, mercy and justice and indigenous and equipped leaders. Don't you love hearing the reports when our young people go to places like Nicaragua and they come back and share how many came to know Christ? But they came back. What if we had healthy churches planted there because they are there 52 weeks out of the year. So evangelism and disciple making is not a one week enterprise. Not only can we go into a situation where there is this crisis moment but we can have healthy churches that are there so that when we come home from a mission's trip they are there doing deeds of love, mercy and justice.

I was so excited when I received a phone call two days after the tsunami hit Japan. The phone call was from one of our sister churches that had a complete disaster relief team in place and asked if we'd like to partner with them. It was a done deal. Then we reached out and grabbed a hold of the Southern Baptists and held hands together in ministry and they are all over there ministering right now. Do you know how many open doors for the Gospel are taking place right now because of that? It is absolutely phenomenal. It is so wonderful to see it. So we need to be committed to doing those four things and we need to make sure we're training indigenous leaders that live there and rise up in the community that lead their church forward. That is what we are focused to do.

So how do we need to do this? Here are the takeaways. Number one we need to be personally engaged. Lord, here are my prayers, here are my faith promises, here are my spiritual gifts and here is my engagement. I am engaged in this ministry and I'm going to avoid the arrogance of individualism while I'm personally engaged. You have to personally come to Christ. You have to personally be engaged but we don't live in isolation and independence. My family is not an island and I am not an island. I am connected to the family of God and Briarwood has to be the same way as the church. We are connected to other churches of like precious faith to serve the Lord together. The synergy that comes from being personally engaged yet not engaged in the arrogance of individualism is how we work together.

Years ago I had someone come to me and say "Pastor, the Lord is leading us to another church." I said, "Okay let me pray with you." We prayed together and after the prayer I guess they were feeling guilty or something and said "Now Pastor I just want you to know that we may be back in a couple of years." I said, "I hope not." They said

“Pastor are you mad?” I said, “No, I understand theological or personal reasons where the Lord is leading people to other churches, but don’t go to that church with one hand tied behind your back thinking about where you’re going to go in two years. When you take these vows you really mean it.” I am personally engaged to the body of Christ. I am a member of the body of Christ. I may be a hand but I can’t function without that arm. I’m not going to live in the arrogance of individualism. I want to be connected to the body of Christ and personally engaged with my resources, my prayers and my ministry of my spiritual gifts.

Number two is that we are therefore developing community and redemptive relationships while avoiding tribalism. We can’t treat Jesus as our tribal God. Briarwood is connected and we enjoy relationships but it’s not us for no more close the door. We are constantly with an open heart saying “come to my small group, my congregational community, my church and by the way we are open to working with other churches.” Let’s do the stadium fest together with all these other churches in Birmingham this year. So we just connect up with one another as well.

Here is my final takeaway. This all boils down to people coming to Christ, then taking the Gospel out, evangelize, plant a church that evangelizes and disciples, plant a church that does deeds of love, mercy and justice in places where people don’t want to go and confront things that people don’t want to see, and raise up indigenous leaders. I want to conclude with this illustration.

Once a quarter I do a conference of some type in another church on behalf of Briarwood’s ministry so I did a mission’s conference at a sister church at First Presbyterian Augusta and it was great for me to be able to go there two weeks ago because my family is five generations from Augusta, Georgia. I was actually put up in a hotel across the street from where I used to spend my summers growing up. When I was there I went to Westview Cemetery where my granddaddy and grandmother are buried. I was standing there looking at the tombstone and I was remembering the time my granddaddy said to me right before he died, “I don’t think I have much longer son so I want you to preach my funeral.” I said, “I don’t think I could preach your funeral.” He said, “I didn’t ask if you could preach my funeral, I said ‘preach my funeral.’” I said, “Okay I’ll preach your funeral.” He said, “I got my church and for the last ten years the Gospel hasn’t been preached. I’ve been beating my head up against the wall.” He was a leader in the church but he was beating his head up against the wall because the denomination had left the preaching of the Gospel. If I have to die to get the Gospel preached in that pulpit one more time then I’m going to die and you will preach it.” I said, “Okay, but you said two things.” He said, “The second thing is on my tombstone don’t write anything but one word.” I said, “What is it?” He said, “Forgiven, is all I want you to write.”

So I stood in front of that tombstone two weeks ago and I looked and read ‘forgiven’ because my granddaddy was brought to Christ as a little boy in a church that had led his mother to Christ in a mill village that nobody would want to go into and the reason that church was there to lead my great grandmother and him to Christ was because First Presbyterian Church where I was preaching, had sent missionaries to the mill village to plant a church where nobody else would go.

There are people all around this world that are lost and headed to a Christ less eternity so let’s take the Gospel, evangelize and disciple, plant Gospel churches, do

Gospel deeds of love, mercy and justice and Gospel leaders to lead those churches forward, so that we might stand with many who have the privilege to lead this world and come into the presence of God, forgiven because we sent Christ to them. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together. Thank You that we need not wonder about what You have called us to do nor how to do it. You have made it clear to us so Father please allow us as a congregation to keep the bat out of the rack, to stay in the game and to send the Gospel with evangelism and disciple making, church planting and church revitalization, deeds of love, mercy and justice and Gospel leaders that are equipped and come right up out of those churches. I am amazed that You have allowed us to be a part of this so precious Redeemer come quickly and thank You for Your Spirit who will be with us to get the work done and when it's done come O Savior for I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

The Briarwood Mission

“Our Purpose”

For God's glory, Briarwood is committed to **EQUIPPING CHRISTIANS** to worship God and reach Birmingham to reach the world for Christ.

The Briarwood Vision

“Our Passion”

For Coming Generations, Briarwood desires to be a Christ-centered, Gospel-driven, Spirit-filled **EQUIPPING CENTER** where every member is a minister and a missionary.

The Briarwood Strategy

“Our Ministry”

For Coming Generations, Briarwood will prayerfully seek to Implement the Biblical strategy of:

1. Gospel Evangelism and Disciple-making
2. Gospel Church Planting and Church Revitalization
3. Gospel Deeds of Love, Mercy and Justice
4. Gospel Leaders Developed and Deployed