

Daniel L. Akin's Convention Message

WILL SOUTHERN BAPTISTS BE GREAT COMMISSION BAPTISTS? (SIX MARKS OF A GREAT COMMISSION PEOPLE)

Convention Sermon – 2013 Southern Baptist Convention

Romans 15:14-24

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Romans 15:14-24: *"I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. But on some points I have written to you very boldly by way of reminder, because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. In Christ Jesus, then, I have reason to be proud of my work for God. For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ; and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written,*

'Those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.'

This is the reason why I have so often been hindered from coming to you. But now, since I no longer have any room for work in these regions, and since I have longed for many years to come to you, I hope to see you in passing as I go to Spain, and to be helped on my journey there by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a while."

At the Southern Baptist Convention in New Orleans in 2012, messengers approved by a slim 53% margin using the name "Great Commission Baptists" as an alternative or complementary designation for our convention of churches. The recommendation came from a blue-ribbon committee and inspired spirited debate on the convention floor. Some saw this decision as helpful for describing who we have become and hope to be in the future. Others felt the whole issue was an unnecessary waste of time. For them, the name "Southern Baptist Convention" has served us well in the past, and it will serve us well in the future.

For me, the issue is not will we be *called* Great Commission Baptists. The real issue is will we *be* Great Commission Baptists. Will we, as we move forward in the 21st century, be a convention of churches that bears the marks of a Great Commission people, serving faithfully King Jesus as He reclaims that which rightly belongs to Him? Or will we find ourselves sitting on the sidelines, fading off the scene in distraction, division, and disobedience? Will we pine for better days in the past, or will we plead with our God to give us our best days in the future for His glory and for our good?

The great missionary to the Lisu people group of China, James Fraser, was moved to hope and work for a better day after reading a small booklet entitled *Do Not Say*. It inspired him to forego a promising career as an engineer and concert pianist, and to give his life to see an unreached and unengaged people group hear the name of Jesus. What were the words that changed the course of his and the Lisu people forever? They are simple and clear: "A command has been given: 'Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature.' It has not been obeyed. More than half the people in the world have never yet heard the Gospel. What are we to say

to this? Surely it concerns us Christians very seriously. For we are the people who are responsible....If our Master returned today to find millions of people un-evangelized, and looked as of course He would look, to us for an explanation, I cannot imagine what explanation we should have to give....Of one thing I am certain – that most of the excuses we are accustomed to make with such good conscience now, we should be wholly ashamed of then." These words, written by a missionary in China, compelled James Fraser to leave England and run to China where he gave the rest of his life in order that the Lisu people might exalt the Lamb, the Lord Jesus, who redeemed us to God by his blood. They scarred him for life with the marks of the Great Commission, marks I want in my life, marks I want for the people I love called Southern Baptists.

Paul puts before us six identifiable marks of such people in Romans 15:14-24. I will quickly highlight them for our careful consideration. What are the undeniable marks of a Great Commission people?

I. They keep their focus on the most important things while still doing many good things. (15:14-16)

Paul was confident that the church at Rome was doing many good things. He notes in verse 14 that they were 1) full of goodness, 2) filled with knowledge, and 3) able to instruct (or "admonish") one another. They had good lives and good theology. What they believed and how they lived mattered and matched up, and if either got off course, they were able to instruct, admonish, and correct one another.

"But" ("Nevertheless," *HCSB*), Paul could write them "very boldly by way of reminder." I think Paul knew "the good" is always the greatest danger to "the best" or "the most important." So in grace he reminds them of that which they already knew: his and our calling to be "ministers of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles." "Gentiles" is an inadequate translation in this context. The word is *ethne*, the same Greek word translated "nations" in Matthew 28:19. It does not mean political or national boundaries. It means "peoples" or "people groups," persons with a distinct language, culture, and identity.

Today we know there are almost 16,600 distinctive people groups in the world. We also know according to the "Joshua Project" that over 7,100 are unreached. The International Mission Board tells us of the almost 7 billion people on planet earth, 3.7 billion do not have adequate access to the gospel; 1.27 billion have never and will never hear the name of Jesus in their lifetime as things now stand. That means most of them will be born, live, die and go to hell, and they never even one time will hear a clear presentation of the gospel. That means there are places in the world where you and I could be dropped by helicopter or parachute in, and we could walk days, weeks, and months, and we would never encounter a church, and we would never meet a Christian.

Southern Baptists do many good things, and we should. But we must keep the focus on the most important thing. After all, the Baptist theologian Carl F.H. Henry was right: "The Gospel is only good news if it gets there in time." Missionary John Falconer would add, "I have but one candle of life to burn, and I would rather burn out in a land filled with darkness than in a land flooded with light." Southern Baptists must keep their focus on lands filled with darkness.

II. They see the ministry of bringing the nations to Jesus as an offering of worship to the triune God. (15:16, 19)

I believe missions and theology must always be seen together. They must stay "joined at the hip." There are several reasons I believe this. First, the greatest missionary who ever lived was also the greatest theologian who ever lived. His name was Jesus. Second, the greatest Christian theologian who ever lived was also the greatest Christian missionary who ever lived. His name was Paul. And he was a missionary before he became a writing theologian! His theology is

missionary theology! In fact, it could be argued that Paul was a theologian because he was a missionary. Indeed a major purpose of Paul writing Romans was to get them to help him get the gospel to Spain. It is clear the early church's theology arose out of missions. The epistles were written in the midst of church planting. Missions gives birth to theology, and good theology gives birth to more missions. Third, you cannot be a good missionary, then, without also being a good theologian. And you cannot be a good theologian without also being a good missionary. Missions and theology are mutually reinforcing. And any theology that does not issue forth in a passion for missions is not a truly Christian theology. Fourth, keeping missions and theology together will help us see that the proper motivation for doing missions is "gospel gratitude" and not "legalistic guilt." Fifth, keeping missions and theology together will help us see missions as a service of worship to our triune God. Listen to Paul's argument.

Because of the grace of God given to me by God (the Father), I am a minister of Christ Jesus (the Son) to the nations "serving as a priest of God's good news" (*HCSB*). I serve as a priest in this act of worship so that the offering of the nations may be acceptable to Christ, an offering made acceptable and sanctified (made holy) by the Holy Spirit. Missions is a work of worship started by God and accomplished by God through his believer-priests.

Missionary service is like priests bringing offerings to God in worship, all for his glory. This is why John Stott says,

"The highest of missionary motives is neither obedience to the Great Commission (important as that is), nor love for sinners who are alienated and perishing (strong as that incentive is, especially when we contemplate the wrath of God...), but rather zeal – burning and passionate zeal – for the glory of Jesus Christ.... Only one imperialism is Christian.... and that is concern for His Imperial Majesty Jesus Christ, and for the glory of his empire."

The triune God is made supreme in our offerings of the nations in worship because each member of the Godhead is exalted in His role of salvation. The Father in grace initiated it, the Son in the gospel provided it, and the Holy Spirit in power (v. 19) has accomplished it.

Missions is worship, and worship provides a motivation and power no amount of guilt could ever provide. World missions is God's work and our worship. John Piper says it best:

"Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever.

Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal of missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God.... Missions begins and ends in worship."

III. They are a Christ-centered people who boast only in Jesus and not in themselves. (15:17-19)

In Galatians 6:14 Paul said, "But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." In this missions manifesto in Romans 15, Paul says very much the same thing. He can be proud of his work for God, but only in Christ Jesus (v. 17). He will only speak of "what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the nations to obedience – by word and deed" (v. 18). This was accomplished by the "power" of signs and wonders [as the Gospel advanced into new territories] by the power of the Spirit of God, which enabled him to fulfill "the ministry of the gospel of Christ" (v. 19).

Paul knew that a Great Commission people would be a J. C. people, a Jesus Christ people. In Romans 15 alone he will refer to Christ 12 times. Paul knew that being Christ-centered would radically impact how we *think*, how we *speak*, how we *act*, how we *live*. He knew it would implant the missionary spirit in our soul and infect us with a Great Commission germ!

Henry Martyn was a missionary to India and Persia. In God's mysterious providence, the Lord took him at age 31. A prolific writer, Martyn well said, "The Spirit of Christ is the spirit of missions. The nearer we get to Him, the more intensely missionary we become."

Count Nicolaus Ludwig Von Zinzendorf, a great Moravian missionary, would add in this context, "I have but one passion: it is Christ. It is Christ alone. The world is the field and the field is the world; and henceforth that country shall be my home where I can be most used in winning souls for Christ."

Could it be, by God's grace and work of the Spirit, that Southern Baptists would become so Christ-centered and passionate for Jesus that we might actually become known as the "Jesus people," the "Christ Convention." Now that is a name worth having! There is a people known in America and around the world who sound like Jesus, act like Jesus, and love like Jesus. It is as if they were intoxicated with Christ and an extension of His very life! That is a reputation I would gladly bear. That is a reputation we should aspire to have.

IV. They never lose sight of the centrality and nature of the gospel. (15:16, 19-20)

The book of Romans is a gospel book. Indeed its theme is captured in Romans 1:16-17, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Here in our text Paul mentions the gospel three times, calling it the "gospel of God" (v. 16), "the gospel of Christ" (v. 19), and simply "the gospel" (v. 20). Paul knew the power of salvation was not in him or any man. The power of salvation is in the gospel made real in the lives of sinners by the Spirit of God (vv. 16, 19).

This fact raises the question: "What is the gospel?" Is it something similar to what Mark Twain said about the church: "The church is good people standing in front of good people telling them how to be good." Unfortunately and tragically, I fear too many people, even in our churches, have a definition not too far from this.

Several years ago, my wife Charlotte and I had the wonderful privilege of going to the home of Billy Graham and spending several hours with him. It was a blessing in every way. During our visit I told him that I had heard him say on a number of occasions that he believed on any given Sunday, 50% of those attending church were lost. I asked him if he still believed that. His answer startled me. He said, "No. I think the number is much higher than that." When I asked him why this was the case, he simply said, "Because they have not believed the gospel."

So again I ask, "What is the gospel?" Let me answer the question from several complementary perspectives.

A Twitter summary: "The gospel is the good news that King Jesus died and paid the full penalty of sin, rose from the dead and saves all who repent of sin and trust Him."

A clear contrast: Every religion in the world can be located under one of two words: do or done. Christianity is a done religion; we are saved by what Christ has done for us.

A striking declaration: "The gospel is the good news that God killed His Son so He would not have to kill you" (Isa 53:10).

A wonderful promise: "The gospel is the good news that the person who has Jesus plus nothing actually has everything." And "the person who has everything minus Jesus actually has nothing" (Mark 8:36).

Charlotte and I met a pastor named Sam a couple of years ago when we visited South Sudan. His parents and siblings had been murdered when he was a boy, but by God's grace he had come to Christ. He pastored a church plant that met under three mango trees. He only owned two sets of clothes, a pair of sandals, and a Bible. We purchased for him two oxen, a plow, and the hut he now lives in. By our standards he is very poor. By God's standards he is very rich! That is the nature and the power of the gospel!

V. They are consumed with getting the gospel to those who have never heard the name of Jesus. (15:20-24)

It is not uncommon among well-meaning believers to hear things like, "The light that shines farthest shines brightest at home," or "Missions begins with our Jerusalem and then moves to the ends of the earth," or "People are just as lost in Arkansas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana as they are in Algeria, Oman, and Laos." Such statements, though well intended, reveal a fundamental flaw theologically and missiologically. Missiologically the issue is not one of lostness but access to the gospel. Theologically, it misses the clearly laid out strategy of the apostle Paul and is a misreading of the Great Commission text of Acts 1:8.

Paul says in verse 19 that he has fulfilled his gospel ministry from Jerusalem to Illyricum (modern Albania). In verse 20 he says it is his ambition to preach the gospel where the name of Jesus is unknown, fulfilling a prophecy found in Isaiah 52:15. Then in verses 23-24 he makes an amazing statement. He will now head to Spain, passing through Rome on the way, because "I no longer have any room for work in these regions." The HCSB reads in verse 23, "But now I no longer have any work to do in these provinces."

Paul, are you saying everyone who needs to hear the gospel in these areas has heard? Response: "I'm not saying that." Paul, are you saying all the churches that need to be planted in these areas have been planted? Response: "I'm not saying that either. What I am saying is there is now a gospel witness there but there is not a gospel witness everywhere, and I, we, must be consumed with a passion to get the gospel to the 'elsewheres,' to those places where the name of Christ is not known." Here is a divine blueprint for global evangelism and world conquest. Here is a missions strategy that should guide and direct Southern Baptists.

Now, if this vision is to move forward, I believe without any doubt at all it will be because men step up and pastors lead out. In 2009 I discovered that in our "Journeyman" program, there were 331 journeygirls and 126 journeymen serving overseas. In West Africa there were 50 journey-men total: 48 females and 2 males. And in 2012 I discovered that among all IMB personnel who were single, there were 533 females and 167 males serving our Lord overseas. This is shameful, men. This is unacceptable, pastors. We who lead the body of Christ must chart a different course that sees each local church as an outpost for Great Commission advance; as a Camp Lejeune for training missionary marines! The gospel demands this! Christ deserves this!

VI. They see themselves as a missionary people, with each one doing their part to see the mission completed. (15:24)

Charles Spurgeon said, "Every Christian is either a missionary or an imposter." Wrongly understood, this statement can send us on a spiritual guilt trip. Rightly understood, it can be liberating.

Paul wants to go to Spain to take the gospel to those who have never heard the name of Jesus. What does he want from the church in Rome? "To be helped" ("assisted," *HCSB*). He wanted them, as William Carey asked British Baptists in 1792, "to hold the ropes." Paul knew, Carey knew, and we should know, that not everyone goes to the nations. But, we are all called to pray, give, and go if called. We are all called to help. We are all called to do our part. Getting church planters, evangelists, and missionaries to the underserved areas and unreached peoples is the holy responsibility of us all. No exceptions. No exemptions. However, given our drop from

5,600 missionaries to less than 5,000 in recent years, it appears that instead of "holding the ropes" back home, we have "let go of the ropes," and the consequences are being felt around the world.

Oswald Smith (1889-1986) was blunt and to the point: "If God wills the evangelization of the world, and you refuse to support missions, then you are opposed to the will of God."

At Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary we have a motto and a vision. It goes like this: "Every professor a Great Commission professor. Every classroom a Great Commission classroom. Every student a Great Commission student. Every graduate a Great Commission graduate. Every pastor a Great Commission pastor. Every church a Great Commission church. Every Christian a Great Commission Christian. Each one doing their part until the mission is complete."

Some practical questions to consider:

Do I model Great Commission Christianity before my children and grandchildren?

Do I pray that God would call my children and grandchildren to be international missionaries?

Do I have a missions savings account for my children/grandchildren?

Do I have the work of my Lord in my will?

Am I generous, even sacrificial, in giving to my church, the Cooperative Program, Annie Armstrong, Lottie Moon?

Have I adopted a people group, international and here in North America?

Have I gone on a short-term trip to see just how lost the world is?

Am I involved in church planting?

Do I pray regularly for the nations?

In a recent edition of *Revive* magazine of LifeAction ministries, Tom Elliff, president of the IMB, expressed the dire need for God to send revival in order to "get the job done." He said,

"So what is the answer? It's for God's people to respond to the Great Commission. It is here that we find the utter necessity of revival. During periods of revival, there is a resurgence of interest in missions, and willingness to commit a lifetime to mission service. Every great missions movement in Christian history was born out of some type of spiritual awakening among believers.

Today, we see evidence that God is stirring hearts. A new generation has interest in going to the ends of the earth, giving their lives to reach the most remote corners of the world. But the sad fact that is so distressing to me is that there are now far more people who are willing to go than there are resources being made available to send them. God must stir not only those willing to go, but also the hearts of those who will help them go financially, as well as the hearts of moms and dads who will let them go, and the passions of people who will pray for those who are going.

In my own organization alone, we ended last year with over 600 very qualified individuals who applied to give their lives to global missions, that we could not resource to send. Here's the simple truth: Apart from revival in the church, the pool of people willing to be sent and the pool of people willing to send them is insufficient and shrinking. Only the Holy Spirit can stir up the supply needed in our churches to meet these great needs.

What a tragedy it would be if we lost our opportunity to play a significant role in God's plan to save! How tragic to forfeit such vast opportunity because of our unwillingness to surrender to the lordship of Christ."

Conclusion

Just a few months before he died, I had lunch with my spiritual hero Adrian Rogers. He shared with me his concerns that Southern Baptists had become distracted and even divisive over petty and non-important issues. When I asked him what the problem was, as he saw it, he used a striking analogy that I will always remember.

He said that during the Conservative Resurgence those of us who believed the Bible to be the infallible and inerrant Word of God were on the battlefield shoulder to shoulder fighting a common enemy. We won that battle but then retreated to the barracks. Now we are no longer shoulder to shoulder but face to face. And since we are used to fighting, we are no longer fighting the enemy on the battlefield, we are now fighting our brother in the barracks. We have turned our brothers into our enemies.

He then said what Southern Baptists need to do is get out of the barracks and back on the battlefield where the real enemy is, the real enemies of sin, Satan, death and hell. I believe Adrian Rogers was right. Our real enemies are not Calvinists or Traditionalists, those with different worship styles or dress codes, those who prefer Southern Baptist or Great Commission Baptists. No, our real enemies are sin, Satan, death and hell. Southern Baptists must be Great Commission Baptists taking the battlefield under the bloodstained banner of a crucified and resurrected King whose marching orders are clear and whose promise to be with us as we go is certain. Let's once more declare war on the evil, satanic empire whose doom is certain, answering the call to arms of the Captain of our Salvation.

The Great Commission is not an option to be considered. It is a "war-time gospel command" to be obeyed. By His grace and for His glory alone may Southern Baptists be an obedient people. May Southern Baptists be Great Commission Baptists until the day we see coming in heaven a rider on a white horse! Then and only then will we know our mission is over.

— From the office of Dr. Daniel L. Akin

— All Scripture quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.