

In Debt to Barbarians

The Roman army had conquered the pagan tribes north of Italy, and Rome then demanded tribute from them. Those barbarians thus were in debt to Rome. Paul reversed the indebtedness: He understood that it was he who was in debt to the barbarians. Let's read:

"I am in debt to...barbarians...[because] the Gospel...is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Romans 1:14-16).

Because Paul knew what the Gospel was, because he knew that *everyone* had to have the opportunity to believe it and thereby escape condemnation due to sin, because he knew that someone had to take the Gospel to everyone so that they could hear it, he considered himself in debt to those people, barbarians, in the expectation that they too would embrace it.

Paul was no parochial Jew, concerned only about himself and the people in his locality. He understood from the Scriptures (Zechariah 14, Habakkuk 2, and Isaiah 60-66, for example) that God intended a great in-gathering of all the Gentile nations of the world, and that it was to be centered on the Jewish Messiah. He knew from Isaiah's Servant passages (40 to 55) that believers, identifying with Christ, were to participate in or continue the work that the Servant came to do. The Christ had come and had made both forgiveness of all sin and eternal life possible by His blood and resurrection from the dead. So all that remained was to take that good news to all the world. That was God's great, over-encompassing will for Paul and for the Church. That's all that remains for us today to do.

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). **"Christ is the propitiation ...for the sins of the whole world"** (1 John 2:2). Christ is the lamb of God who took away **"the sin of the world"** (John 1:29). **"For God so loved the world that He gave...God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Him might be saved"** (John 3:16-17) What God has done in Christ is so marvelous, so huge, so all-encompassing, that it's for the benefit of all humanity, everywhere and throughout all time.

We believers are also in debt to barbarians. Attending church on Sunday mornings doesn't substitute for or satisfy fulfilling the debt. Involvement in church activities doesn't expunge the debt. Nor does the church supporting certain sent missionaries excuse believers in the pews from involvement. Being occupied with family issues, employment or advanced age or frailty or chronic illness or whatever – none of these excuse us from the obligation to take the Gospel to people around the world who haven't yet heard it.

We can't simply toss a five or ten-dollar bill onto the plate or into the box on Sunday and hope that some of it gets to professionals who will fulfill the debt. That's cheating, it's trying to weasel out of the debt. We need to be personally involved. It's our role and mission, it's why we're here. It's what church is all about.

What I mean by missions is being involved in sending the Gospel of Christ Jesus out beyond the walls of the church, beyond the sphere of influence of the church, to areas where the Gospel hasn't been heard so that people can respond with faith and be converted and bear fruit for God. It's irrelevant to the task that some countries are "closed" or that they have their own national religions. People in communist countries or Buddhist or Hindu or Muslim countries need to hear the Gospel. People in dangerous areas such as the drug-gang-infested regions of Latin America need to hear it. People in difficult to reach places, such as the Siberian wastelands, or the dense jungles of the Congo or the heights of the Himalayans also need to hear it. People in our own inner cities whose culture and language differ from ours need to hear it. We believers who safely attend church on Sunday mornings and hope to enjoy being in heaven some future day are in debt to all of these people. We have a responsibility that cannot be avoided. There's no way to void the debt.

Missions is not one of many church activities. It's not peripheral to the church's main function of Sunday worship. It's not a work of the church. It's *the* work of the church. It's not the work of certain sending agencies which churches may support financially and maybe occasionally with personnel. The church was founded in the course of missions and it exists to do missions. Missions *defines* a church. An organized body of believers meeting regularly but not actively participating in missions isn't a church, it's a club. **"As the Father has sent me, I am sending you"** (John 20:21). The verb

used in this verse indicates that the sending didn't end with the death of the Apostles, but it continues on all thru the Church Age. To the extent that Jesus was sent into the world on mission, so are we, those of us who are believers who make up the church.

Now, let's think. What does doing missions, or being involved in missions, actually mean? Five suggestions (apart from actually going to some distant land to do cross-cultural missions).

It means first of all grasping the vision. I refer to the vision of the Gospel powerfully penetrating into dark and sin-saturated places and changing lives so people there love God and enjoy His love and blessing. It's a vision of people from all cultures and races singing Hallelujah to the One who by His blood rescued them from hell. It means letting that vision so grip us that we cannot conceive of anything else in life that's more significant. It's a vision that can, that should, consume us, motivate us, and thrill us.

Second, it means we read missionary stories. We read the biographies of missionaries, and learn how they coped, how they worked, how they lived, what they accomplished . . . and we fill our mind with the great thing that God is doing in the world. What will happen is, we'll say to ourselves, "I can do something like that too. I need to be more involved."

Third, it means prayer. Lots of prayer. Prayer for the believers in those places who are doing evangelism. Indigenous evangelists need protection from Satan. They need funding. They need wisdom. They need a lot! Prayer is powerfully instrumental in making missions happen. Professional (sent) missionaries need prayer. Prayer especially to be able to carry out mission in a foreign culture. Prayer also for those people lost in sin for God to open their hearts as He did the heart of Lydia in Philippi. Prayer for lots more believers to go in faith to dark places to evangelize and teach. Prayer for yourself, that God may enlarge your horizons and be more involved in His work. Prayer for your children and grandchildren, that they too might devote themselves to God's great missionary work. I'm referring not just to a pastor's prayers on Sunday mornings, but to each of us praying, every day perhaps, for Christ to be formed in people around the world as they encounter the Gospel.

Fourth, it means giving money. Paul needed funds for his missionary work. So does doing missions today. Many mission agencies exist in the West, and they are doing good work. But they need financial support. Church leaders may or may not be willing to send church funds to such agencies, but individual believers can. Being involved in missions may consist of sacrificial giving of our money to those already doing the work. Why else did God entrust money to us?

And fifth, it means doing outreach ourselves. Our neighbors, people on the sidewalks, people in parking lots, they all need to know the Gospel. It's still legal in America to hand out gospel tracts. It may be something you've never done before, but you certainly can do it. It's an easily available way to share Christ's love. When Bob Klaus was in his late eighties and wheelchair-bound, he nevertheless would go daily to a nearby WalMart parking lot – *in his wheelchair!* – to give out gospel tracts. No excuse exists for any of us not to do it.

Sadly, Christians in America have bought the lie that religion exists only in the mind. ("I have Christ in my heart." Or, "What I believe is my business.") Christianity therefore has become an intensely personal matter. There may be limited public expression of it inside the walls of a church building, but apart from that, it's entirely a private matter. That's not merely foolish and unbiblical, it's downright demonic. If our Christian religion isn't fully public, able to be seen and heard by anyone at any time, it isn't Christianity but some other pagan religion. Christianity, *by necessity*, concerns everyone! The public expression that God expects is Gospel outreach.

Dear reader, the challenge to us in this new tumultuous era is to break out of our parochialness. There's more to be concerned about than issues with our family, our neighbors, or our friends at church. The daily routines of life can be stultifying. Christians whose religion consists only of Sunday morning church services are spiritually impoverished. And the days of enjoying peace and prosperity in America are over. We need now to become more universal in outlook, in vision, in understanding what God's will is for us. And I can state with certainty, based on the macro-theme of the Bible and the myriad particulars that support it, that God's will is missions. He's a God of missions, and He commands missions. He *demand*s it. And He has given us the Spirit to make it possible. No greater imperative exists than that every believer be involved in missions.