

Tyranny of the Immediate: Another view of Acts 1:8

by Steve Hawthorne

"Why would you want to go to Asia when there are so many needy people right around here?" So reasoned my non-Christian friend as I explained that I would be going to Thailand soon to do missions work. This was some years back, but I still remember watching the concerned expression on his face. He really thought he'd made a tremendous point.

He went on in a fatherly tone, trying to calm what he felt was the farthest degree of fanaticism. He was trying to reason with me on my level and spare me years of life wasted in what he thought was the "Christian Foreign Legion."

I remember listening to his words with shock. It wasn't his condescending attitude that bugged me. What really bothered me was that I realized I'd recently heard a Christian leader offer roughly the same argument for people to stay at home, at least for a while, until the neighborhood was well evangelized. It was scary to think about how many people have gotten waylaid from pursuing missions work because of supposed greater needs at home.

I suppose many get sidetracked out of confusion. Some are even convinced that the biblical pattern directs people overseas only after they have taken care of the needs of their home community. Their biblical warrant for this confusion is usually Acts 1:8, where Jesus tells his disciples:

...you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Acts 1:8 is commonly misunderstood when it's read as if it follows four stages. The idea is that these four stages serve as a priority scheme for any mission endeavor. It usually comes out "home now - nations later." The four-stage rendition goes like this:

First, reach "Jerusalem." That's taken to mean the city, neighborhood or campus. Anything local will do.

Second, reach "Judea," often understood as the larger city, or country, or people of the same culture.

Third, reach "Samaria." Samaria is commonly read as the Samaritans, the cultural outsiders or ethnic minorities on the other side of town.

Fourth, reach the "ends of the earth," which is understood as anywhere outside America.

This "home now - nations later" interpretation of Acts 1:8 doesn't work for many reasons. One starkly clear reason should keep us from using this verse as a blanket principle to delay ourselves and others from going overseas: Jerusalem was not these guys' home. Look at what the angels called them in verse 11: "men of Galilee." The disciples were way out of their element in Jerusalem. The local people picked them out right away on Pentecost as being Galileans, just by their accent (Acts 2:7, Matt. 26:73).

Jesus actually gave them clear instructions not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait (Acts 1:4). For this group of Galileans, that meant "Don't go home." Instead, they were to stay put in Jerusalem, a mission situation far from their home.

Second, Jerusalem was and is unique. We can't pretend our hometowns are anything close to being Jerusalem, the holy city of God and the hinge point of all God's dealings with His people. Jesus said Jerusalem was the geographic center of God's plan throughout Scripture and down throughout the ages: "Forgiveness of sins will be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

Finally, Acts 1:8 doesn't come to us as a command or a priority principle. It simply states how God's purposes will be accomplished down through history, we can find ourselves in this verse, but we aren't in Jerusalem and we aren't in the first century. That special place and time in God's plan is long past. We are now in the "ends of the earth." The "ends of the earth" aren't found at the farthest distance from Wheaton, IL. or Atlanta, GA. Jesus is speaking of places far away from Jerusalem. (By the way, all points in the United States are farther from Jerusalem than any place in Africa or Asia.)

It's important to note that when Jesus uttered the words of Acts 1:8 He had just reviewed for his disciples God's entire plan for the world; He traced through the Old Testament and onward through history until the very end. He pictured the spread of the kingdom of God, specifying that it all had to start from Jerusalem (Luke 24:44-47). In light of the big sweep of all that God was doing for all time and for all the world, Jesus commanded them, "through the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:2), to do the most strategic thing, which was, at that time, to launch the movement in Jerusalem.

Christ leads us in the same way. He gives us the big picture of all God is doing. We have a certain freedom in the great plan of the ages to attempt to do the most strategic thing we can. But we aren't left to our own notions of what's important. You and I can expect Jesus to give us specific guidance regarding our strategic part in the Great Commission in exactly the same way: "through the Holy Spirit."

Jesus' way of giving us commands can save us from two equally agonizing extremes. If someone is caught up in meeting the homeside needs when he ought to be exploring ways to serve overseas, he faces what I call the "tyranny of the immediate." Here's how it works: Close-up needs such as those in our family or home church, press in so demandingly that immediate needs begin molding life-shaping priorities. Certainly, the immediate needs are real and working to meet them is entirely legitimate. But too often, the close-up hurts and needs eclipse even greater ones an ocean away.

The other paralyzing extreme is what I call "global guilt." It's a vague but debilitating anxiety that makes you fear you really aren't doing enough or that you should be living in some dangerous, dreadful place overseas. World Christians sometimes fall prey to "global guilt" because they tend to be aware of the astounding need all over the world. Adrift without specific guidance, people suffering from "global guilt" just can't believe they're enduring enough hardship to please God. It's ridiculous, of course, to consider that a tougher or more strategic role in God's work would make us any more pleasing to God, but Christians have believed stranger things. In any case, "global guilt" is a set-up for burnout at the heart level.

There's a way to balance the two extremes of being caught up in local needs and being compulsively guilty about distant ones. We need to be aware of God's greater purposes and of a broad scope of needs, near and far, while striving to be in prayer so that we can best hear Jesus' specific commands for us "through the Holy Spirit." In light of God's will for the entire world, we can best sense God's will for us.

Beat the "Tyranny of the Immediate"

Of course, there are great needs all around you. What community was ever so fully saturated with gospel goodness that all Christian workers were out of business? There always seems to be more to do, but you can't assume that you're the one to do it. Here are some ways to beat the "tyranny of the immediate":

Inventory close-by needs. Just how extensive are the problems and opportunities? One thing is sure: they aren't infinite. Banish the myth of the infinite need along with the silly notion that you are all alone in serving God. Take stock of all God is doing locally. You could be pleasantly surprised to discover that God is doing more than anyone realized.

Keep informed about global realities. There really isn't any doubt that the needs are almost always greater overseas. Try to see any need you are meeting at home in light of an international counterpart. One lonely child in Chicago is matched by scores in Cairo. A confused university student in Denver has many like him in Singapore. A poor neighborhood near Boston looks clean and bright compared with the slums of Calcutta.

Mobilize others. This is the best way to climb out of the "tyranny of the immediate." By recruiting others to help you reach your own community, you are putting your contribution into perspective: you're one servant among many. Not the first and not the only.

Escape "Global Guilt"

How do you escape "global guilt"? Reestablish your spiritual identity in Christ's love. "Keep yourselves in God's love" (Jude 21) is a good word for those suffering from the cruel deception that full-time ministry is the only way to really please God - and that somehow you get extra credit from God for doing stuff overseas.

You might say that some of us are "needient" more than obedient. "Needient" people carry a lot of the weight of the world, thinking they have to overachieve meeting needs, both near and distant. Their lives are easily distorted into a compulsive frenzy of activity.

Christians who are oriented to obey the God they serve rather than to meet all the needs they see may also work very hard. They often work with great sacrifice, but in response to Christ's orders. They usually report that it's a joy to labor. Think of your part as a big gift from God. Don't unwrap someone else's gift. Do only what God gives you to do.

I love what the angels said: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

You would think a statement like that would have made them stand and stargaze all night, but it didn't. They began to act. That's what the rest of the book of Acts is all about - getting into action. The word about Jesus' return moved them because they knew they had a part to play in God's big plan for the entire world. They had the next step clearly in mind. They probably didn't understand too much of what Jesus meant about the "ends of the earth," but they bravely returned to the city instead of going home. And the world was never the same.