

Cover Section: The World at Our Doorstep



The CHURCH on MISSION

JESUS' ACTS 1:8 VISION FOR THE WORLD

BY NATE ADAMS

I have an unusual pair of eyes. To state it simply, my right eye is nearsighted and my left eye is farsighted. For years I didn't even know my vision needed correction, because each eye compensated for the other. When I was reading, my right eye was on duty, and when I was driving or watching a movie, my left eye did most of the work.

It wasn't until I had a vision test to update my driver's license that I discovered my two eyes were working independently rather than together. An optometrist advised me to get glasses or contacts, but I told him that seemed unnecessary. Although my eyes weren't cooperating with each other, each was performing its own specialized function, and that seemed good enough to me. The problem, the doctor pointed out, was that when the eyes aren't working together in the messages they send to the brain, over time one eye may tend to dominate, while the other becomes lazy.

I allowed the optometrist to prescribe a pair of glasses for me, but I rarely wore them. As he predicted, over time my nearsighted right eye began dominating what my brain saw. My distance vision got fuzzier and fuzzier. Gradually, my left eye was giving up.

The same thing that is true of my physical vision is too often true of my spiritual vision and of the spiritual vision of many churches. When we focus primarily on what is close to us in distance or near to us in time, God's perspective on the whole world and on all of history can grow fuzzy.

Nearsighted churches can be very busy with activities, fellowship, programs and even discipleship and ministry. But they often strain to see beyond their walls and miss God's perfect vision of all the people who haven't found their way into the church yet or

who don't even have a church in sight. The busy world of a local church can be wonderful. But God also wants a local church that's busy in the world.

Jesus frequently asked His disciples to raise their vision from the here-and-now to the bigger picture of His Father's eternal purposes. In His famous Sermon on the Mount He said it this way:

Don't collect for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But collect for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body.

If your eye is generous, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eye is stingy, your whole body will be full of darkness. So if the light within you is darkness—how deep is that darkness!¹

Jesus seems to be saying that living your life by eternal values begins with seeing things quite differently from a "stingy," earth-bound perspective. If I'm going to recognize real treasure and not waste my life on things that don't last or matter, I have to step out of the darkness of my selfishness and view the world in an enlightened way.

What is God's "big picture" of my life and my world from His perfect point of view? If God could be my optometrist and help me clearly see my life and my church—not only from my perspective but also from His broader, eternal view—what would that look like? Let's look to the first followers of Jesus and the early New Testament church to see how Jesus "corrected their vision."

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ACTS 1:8 — JESUS' LAST WORDS ON EARTH

Jesus' followers had so many opportunities to hear His words and see His point of view as they followed Him around Palestine. But their nearsightedness only allowed them to see the "Kingdom of God" as something political and temporal. Only after Jesus' resurrection did they begin to see how big are God's vision and love for the world, and how far-reaching the Kingdom of God was to be.

The Bible says *After He had suffered, He also presented Himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them during 40 days and speaking about the kingdom of God.*² Because Jesus' own apostles saw that "kingdom" as here-and-now, they eagerly asked, "Lord, at this time are you restoring the kingdom to Israel?"³ It was in response to this nearsighted question that Jesus uttered His famous "last words" before ascending into heaven.

Put yourself in the apostles' sandals for a moment and ponder how important you would consider Jesus' last words on earth to be. His parting thoughts, His final reminder, His lingering words of wisdom—what would they be?

I stumbled across a website the other day where someone had compiled the recorded "last words" of several famous people. According to this site, writer Oscar Wilde's last words before he died in 1900 were, "Either that wallpaper goes or I do." The reported last words of actor Douglas Fairbanks Sr. in 1939 were, "I've never felt better." And in 1864 General John Sedgwick, Union Commander during the Civil War, was reported by witnesses to have been killed immediately after saying, "They couldn't hit an elephant at this dist..."

Perhaps the most telling quote I found on that humorous and somewhat morbid website were the final words of Mexican revolutionary Pancho Villa, who just before his death in 1923 was reported to have said, "Don't let it end like this. Tell them I said something."

Unlike these men who could not choose the time of their death nor predict which words would be their last, Jesus very purposefully and memorably chose these as His final words on earth: "It is not for you to know times or periods that the Father has set by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁴

It's as if Jesus heard in His followers' last question their persistent nearsightedness. They were focused on "this time" and "Israel." They still struggled to see "eternity" and "the world."

So Jesus left them—and us—with a very clear picture of how the Kingdom of God would come

and, amazingly, what our role would be in it.

He said that God's Kingdom, God's rule in our lives and across the world, would come through the miracle of His own Holy Spirit coming upon us. He said His own presence and power would dwell inside us but that it would actually be us as "witnesses," telling our personal stories of His grace that would radiate throughout the world.

With the powerful Holy Spirit indwelling us, Jesus said that our lives can touch both eternity and the entire world. In other words, time and space are no longer limitations for the followers of Christ! When we help usher people into the Kingdom of God through the doorway of Jesus, we "collect a treasure" that lasts forever, and we participate in God's mission that spans the entire scope of human

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This is God's perfect perspective on my life and on my church's life. This is the corrected vision He longs for me to have.

In addition to a brand new view of my own life here and now, God through His word gives me a farsighted view of His mission that is worldwide and history-long. He says my life should be a witness, and my church should have a "radiating influence" both near and far.

Ten days after Jesus' "famous last words" about Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth, the day of Pentecost arrived.⁵ Filled with the Holy Spirit, the disciples were given both power and boldness, and the fledgling band of followers exploded into the world, following the corrected vision Jesus had given them even before they fully understood what He was talking about.

That same power is available to us and our churches today. Do you and your church yet see the world as Jesus longs for you to see it?

AND TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH.



YOUR CHURCH'S ENDS OF THE EARTH

As vast as the world seems to us today, we can only imagine how Jesus' Acts 1:8 vision of "the ends of the earth" appeared to the early church. Relative to the world's population there were only a few of them, and in reality the early Christians probably had little grasp of the number of people and cultures in places like China and India and no concept that a North America or South America even existed. The general consensus is

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that the world contained between 200 and 300 million people at the time of Christ, and the number of people who had witnessed the res-

urrection when Jesus spoke the words of Acts 1:8 numbered only a few hundred.

Think how encouraging the day of Pentecost must have been to those early believers. The Holy Spirit and the power they had been promised had come and with it the ability to speak in numerous languages.

This enabled them to immediately communicate with Jews who had come to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration from all over the world! After Peter's first sermon, approximately 3,000 people became followers of Christ.

In one day, God had demonstrated that the Holy Spirit and faithful believers would indeed carry the message of Christ to the ends of the earth. Not until later would they realize that the message was intended not only for Jews all over the world, but for non-Jews as well.

Today the "ends of the earth" is still a daunting assignment. Of the 6.2 billion people now on earth, an estimated 3.4 billion live in about 6,500 "unreached people groups," where the number of evangelical Christians totals less than 2 percent of the population. One and a half billion of these live in about 5,000 people groups the International Mission Board calls Last Frontier people groups, where there is little or no access to the gospel.

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International missionaries are now engaging more than 1,500 of those 5,000 Last Frontier people groups. From one Christian and one church the message can now spread there, just as it did from the Jerusalem church.

It's conceivable that within the next few years, the words of Jesus recorded by Matthew could come true: "This good news of the kingdom will be proclaimed in all the world as a testimony to all nations. And then the end will come."⁶

Does your church see the ends of the earth as Jesus sees them?

ACROSS OUR CONTINENT



YOUR CHURCH'S SAMARIA

As overwhelmed as the early church may have felt at the idea of being witnesses to the ends of the earth, the mention of Samaria—the region north of Jerusalem and Judea—must have aroused an entirely different set of emotions. Samaritans were the descendants of the northern tribes of Israel who had been conquered by Assyria several hundred years earlier and who, after generations of intermarriage, now represented both mixed race and mixed religion to the devout Jew.

Remember that at this time the early church would have assumed that the good news about the Messiah was only for Jewish people. They must have been a little puzzled at Jesus' mention of Samaria, because Samaria was known as the place where you couldn't find a purebred, devoted Jew. Earlier it had puzzled Jesus' disciples when He deliberately chose to go through Samaria (they usually walked around it when traveling between Judea and Galilee) and even stayed there a couple of days, teaching a sinful Samaritan woman and her village about true worship of the true God.⁷ It had also puzzled all Jesus' listeners when He made "the Good Samaritan" the hero of His famous parable.⁸ In fact, when Jesus' Jewish enemies really wanted to discredit and insult Him, they called Him two despicable names: demon-possessed and a Samaritan.⁹

For today's church, as for the early church, Samaria is "a close-by place that we rarely visit," and Samaritans are "those who live near us, but who are not like us." We can legitimately think of our

Samaria geographically, racially, ethnically, culturally or religiously. And from all those perspectives, there is no better parallel for the church today than our own nation and North American continent. Here in our "post-Christian" culture, it's estimated that 228 million—about 7 out of 10—don't have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Many of the lost—almost 60 percent—live in the 50 largest metropolitan areas where our churches are often fewest and smallest. The "breadth" of lostness around the world is staggering. But so is the "depth" of lostness in our diverse homeland where so many assume they know Christianity but have never known Christ.

Since much of this issue of *On Mission* is devoted to focusing on the "Samaria" of the North American mission field, I won't go into a great deal of detail here about the many ways that the United States, its territories and Canada bring to your church the same challenges that Samaria did to the early church. But think about the circles in which you and your church normally travel. Are you intentionally engaging your Samaria, or are you walking around it and in your heart even scorning it a little? Does your church see your Samaria as Jesus sees it?

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THROUGHOUT OUR STATE AND PROVINCE



YOUR CHURCH'S JUDEA

Of all the places Jesus said his disciples would be witnesses, Judea must have seemed the most inviting. Unlike Samaria to the north, which was the remnant of the “northern kingdom” of Israel, the region of Judea represented the remnant of the “southern kingdom” of Judah. Judah had survived the Assyrian assault to which the northern kingdom had succumbed in 721 B.C., but later the Babylonians conquered even Judah, destroying Jerusalem in 586 B.C. and leaving Solomon’s magnificent temple in ruins. Most of the population was deported to Babylon, but the Jewish race and culture were allowed to remain largely intact. Years later when Cyrus established his Medo-Persian empire, Nehemiah and Ezra were permitted to return with thousands of Jews to what was then the Persian province of “Judea.” There they were allowed to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and to reestablish Jewish culture and worship.

So when the early church looked around in its home region of Judea, it saw many familiar people and familiar practices. Certainly generations of conquest and resettlement meant there was some diversity in the people who lived there and their customs. But more than any place on earth, Judea was “home country” for the loyal people of God who had protected their race, their religious practices and the traditions of their culture.

How surprising it must have been for the early church to find the most resistance to the good news about Jesus the Messiah among the devout Jewish people around them! Certainly many Judean Jews became Christ-followers as the gospel was proclaimed to them. And we don’t read nearly as much in the book of Acts about Judea as distinct from Jerusalem (its capital) or even as much as we read about Samaria or the ends of the earth. But in town after town we do see evidence of the most devout Jewish leaders being the most resistant to the gospel message, even to the point of persecuting the apostles and early Christians. And

those Jewish leaders were most numerous and influential in Judea.

Churches today still live in places of definite regional or state affinities. There are Hoosiers and Gators and Yankees and Razorbacks. There are Texans and Californians who gladly wear those badges all their lives, no matter where they live, as do Midwesterners and Southerners. Sometimes one affinity will pull people together who have little else in common. For example, I haven’t found a place on earth where my Wrigley Field T-shirt can’t help me discover another die-hard Chicago Cubs fan, sometimes from another language or part of the world! No doubt you and your church have certain alma matters or hobbies or passions that link you to many like-minded people from your Judea.

The people of your Judea probably aren’t far from you or your church culturally, or even geographically. They may be easy to relate to and easy to talk to—until you talk about spiritual things.

Then you may actually find familiarity to be an obstacle, just as the early church found that the Judean people of their day thought they knew everything they needed to about a carpenter’s son from Nazareth, who had died a criminal’s death on a cross.

Are the people in your region or state just like you, because they go to the same schools, drive the same roads, shop at the same stores or cheer for the same team? Or are they as different from you as a goat is from a sheep? Does your church see your Judea as Jesus sees it?

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IN OUR COMMUNITY



GIBBS FRAZEUR

YOUR CHURCH'S JERUSALEM

Jerusalem is the first place you “go” when you step out the door of your church. It’s the people you drive by on your way home from worship. It’s the people next door to where you live and with whom you work and play.

Jerusalem is mentioned in the Bible more than any other city, and there is no single place more significant and central to the purposes of God than this “holy city.” It became the capital of Israel under David’s United Kingdom and the sacred place where Solomon built the magnificent, long-awaited Temple as the resting place for the Ark of the Covenant. Jerusalem was the center of Jewish worship and culture, a “destination point” for devoted Jewish families, who visited Jerusalem several times a year for various religious festivals.

Only five miles from Jesus’ birthplace of Bethlehem, Jerusalem was also where Jesus taught, ministered, suffered, died and was buried. It was from Jerusalem that Jesus ascended into heaven and in Jerusalem that Jesus first sent the Holy Spirit and established His church. One day Jesus will return to Jerusalem. And one day we will live together with Him in the New Jerusalem.¹⁰

For the disciples to whom Jesus spoke before ascending into heaven, Jerusalem was also simply their current location. It was where they were to stay and wait for the promised Holy Spirit.

Whatever was going to happen was going to start right where they were. And when the day of Pentecost came,

Jerusalem became “ground zero” for the mushrooming power of the Spirit-filled, New Testament church.

The experience of the first century Christians reminds us that even today the mission of God radiates from a local church, an “upper room” where the vision of Jesus for the world becomes clear and the power of the Holy Spirit to go to the world becomes real. The early church didn’t stay in the upper room but spilled out into the streets and public places of its community.

A church that’s intent on reaching its Jerusalem today is focused on people who might never darken the door of their own church building. It’s active out in the schools and apartment complexes and shopping malls and neighborhoods. It knows that missions is local, and that barriers of language, culture, social class or age can be as large as the barriers of oceans or mountain ranges.

Jerusalem is the first place you “go” when you step out the door of your church. It’s the people you drive by on your way home from worship. It’s the people next door to where you live and with whom you work and play and shop. Does your church see your Jerusalem as Jesus sees it?

YOUR CHURCH'S UNIQUE, URGENT PURPOSE

There are many important activities that take place within the walls of a church. But the church's mission—its unique, urgent purpose—is beyond those walls. It's out in the Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria and ends of the earth that Jesus saw so clearly and loved so dearly. Churches that are nearsighted will continue to have meaningful worship services and gifted pastors. They will take good care of your children and provide you with encouraging Christian friends. There are a number of "benefits" to being part of a nearsighted church. But a church with corrected vision from Jesus will see beyond those things. A church enlightened by Jesus' Acts 1:8 vision of the world will help you give your life away.

A few years ago the world was shocked to hear that actor Christopher Reeve, famous for playing Superman, had been thrown from a horse and was paralyzed. Though over the years Reeve has courageously fought to overcome his physical challenges, each time I see his atrophied body wheeled to a microphone to speak a few strained words I can't help but feel sad as I remember the virile images from his Superman movies.

I wonder if Jesus looks at some local churches with that same sadness. With Superman-like power available to them, some churches appear to be mere shells of the purpose for which they were established.

Does your church have a personal vision that reaches from your Jerusalem to the ends of the earth? With today's missionary force, today's technology and travel resources, the affluence and education of today's North American church, and today's mission boards and other Great Commission partners, there's no reason your church can't be personally involved in reaching the ends of the earth. You can "adopt" and pray for a specific unreached people group. You can give generously to send missionaries and resources. And you can send people from your own congregation. Every church should be a worldwide mission center.

Fortunately, no church has to do it alone. One hallmark of mission-minded churches is cooperation, and in the New Testament you see churches helping one another by sending offerings, sharing key leaders and teachers and writing letters of encouragement and instruction.

Today, SBC churches cooperate in an even more organized fashion. With 1,200 local associations of churches, all of them can be more effective in reaching their "Jerusalem" by working together. More than 40 state and regional conventions bring together hundreds of churches, each to cooperate in reaching that "Judea mission field." In partnership with the North American Mission Board (the publisher of

On Mission), the 45,000 congregations of the SBC join together in sending missionaries, starting churches and sharing the gospel throughout the "Samaria" of North America. And those same churches partner with the International Mission Board in Richmond, Virginia, to take the gospel literally to the ends of the earth.

Southern Baptists are uniquely organized and positioned to take Jesus' last words on earth and run with them. With the assistance of their mission boards, state conventions and local associations, each church with Jesus' Acts 1:8 vision for the world can have radiating circles of influence, like a raindrop whose effect on water spreads in wider and wider circles. And when those raindrops combine and overlap and begin stirring the waters in which they fall, the mighty flood of God's redemptive mission begins to flow around the world.

THE MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Thousands of years ago God "scattered" sinful mankind at the tower of Babel and confounded their language so they couldn't cooperate for sinful, self-aggrandizing purposes. Today, through the sacrificial death of Jesus, God is calling a people unto Himself who will cooperate for the noblest, most God-honoring purpose: gathering people from around the world to worship and serve Him forever.

With a clearer vision of His love for His world, we see that God invites us to join Him *on mission*. And there will be a day when the history-long, worldwide mission of God through His people will be fulfilled. John described it this way: *After this I looked, and there was a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were robed in white with palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: Salvation belongs to our God, who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!*¹¹

God deserves nothing less than the praise and adoration of every nation, tribe, people and language. And this is exactly what He will receive for eternity. In the meantime, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the mission is ours. As Paul wrote to the Corinthian church during that exciting first century: *All this newness of life is from God, who brought us back to Himself through what Christ did. And God has given us the task of reconciling people to Him.*¹² @



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