

Who Gets Priority? by Weston Leibee

Throughout the years, I've heard various questions asked about foreign missions. In fact, I've had to work through some of them myself? For me personally as a missionary, and for us collectively as a mission-minded church, there are real and legitimate questions that we need to answer if we are going to keep focusing on world missions. Here are a few...

- ? Isn't all Christian outreach really 'missions'?
- ? Is there any difference between 'unsaved and 'unreached', aren't they all simply lost?
- ? Is it reasonable or advisable for people to pull up stakes and move across the world, to raise their family in less-than-ideal circumstances for the sake of missions?
- ? Is it good stewardship to spend so much of God's money on missions?
- ? Should we focus on the needs of the world if we haven't met all the needs of our own church or community?
- ? Every soul is equally precious to God, so how can we put priority on any group of souls?

In essence, these 6 questions (and others like them) are addressing the same issue. So, as this article doesn't give us space or time to answer them individually, let's attempt to consolidate them into one...

When there is so much to do here at home, and all souls are equal, and it is much more cost-effective and safe to do 'home missions', why should we put priority on foreign missions?

I guess this article is really a follow-up to a message/article I shared 5 years ago entitled, "The Priority of the Unreached". As the title implies, I suggested that those who have never heard the gospel should receive priority in our ministry focus (based on Rom. 15:20-21).

But how can any soul have 'priority'? "*God is no respecter of persons,*" (Acts 10:34) and we know that it is not his will that any should perish but "*that all should come to repentance.*" (2 Pet 3:9) So can we use the word 'priority' with regard to souls?

Let's bring the whole dilemma right down to where we live in the following hypothetical, but very real-to-life scenario...

John is a great blessing in his home church and its local ministries. He will likely be ordained in the near future as a minister. Then John hears about an unreached tribe, the Naba people of North Africa. There are no known Christians among them. Shy should he sell his possessions, ask his church to financially support him, spend 3 years

learning another language, raise his family in difficult circumstances, and risk everything spending 10-15 years just to see a handful of Naba tribesmen converted? How can he justify that? If he stays 'home', he will likely be more 'effective' and certainly more cost-efficient in his ministry. So why should any certain group of souls (in this case the Naba) get priority over any other souls (in this case John's home area/local church)?

We need to know the will of God on this vitally important subject. Whom should we focus on? How do we prioritize? What is God's will for his church in ministering to the needs of the world?

"2 Wills" of God

I believe God's will is revealed to us in 2 ways – His *desire* and His *directive*. For now, we'll call them His "2 wills." This might not be a theologically correct term, but bear with me as I try to explain what I mean. It's really not that difficult, because we have "2 wills" ourselves.

For example, it may be your will (*desire*) to see all of your sons become carpenters. However, you may have another kind of will (*directive*) that orders how your inheritance will be divided among those same sons if you were to die.

Your first will, your *desire* for your sons to choose carpentry as an occupation, is dependent upon many outside factors including your sons' inclinations, other people's input in their lives, and so on; though you can certainly have some effect on it. Your second will, your *directive* as to what happens with your inheritance, is not dependant on or even subject to other people's input or decisions, but *must* be carried out as you directed in your will.

Now let's look at God's "2 wills" in reference to the priority of souls.

God's Desire

The oft-quoted and very precious passage of scripture from 2 Pet. 3:9 says that "*God is not willing that any should perish but (He is willing) that all should come to repentance.*"

God wants all people to be saved! This holy *desire* of God must be one of the most beautiful aspects of His character. It's overwhelming to think that out of billions of souls, God is personally and passionately interested in each and every one. As fellow-workers together with God, we share His passionate desire. We can reduce this *desire* to a very simple statement – *God wants as many people as possible to be saved.*

So, does any soul or group of souls have 'priority'? If we were to answer that question based on God's *desire* in 2 Pet 3:9 alone, we would have to come to the following conclusion: *To leave a known area of fruitful ministry and go half way across the globe, putting priority on an unknown area where the result may or may not be fruitful is not in keeping with God's desire for as many people as possible to be saved.*

But, we must remember that 2 Pet 3:9 is God's *desire*, not his *directive*. We understand from many other passages in scripture that **all** will not come to repentance, but some, tragically, will refuse and be lost for eternity.

God's Directive

On the other hand, Mark 13:10 give us God's *directive* or the second part of His will. This is something to which He is steadfastly committed. It is unalterable. Here it is – “*And the gospel **must** first be published among **all nations**.*” The same *directive* is re-worded in Matt 24:14 – “*And this gospel of the kingdom **shall** be preached in all the world for a witness **unto all nations**; and then shall the end come.*” To top it all off, we even get a sneak-preview into the culmination of the world and the beginning of eternity in heaven and we find that this second part of God's will, His *directive*, absolutely WILL be fulfilled! “*After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of **all nations**, and **kindreds**, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb...*” (Rev 7:9)

But perhaps nowhere in Scripture is the is great *directive* of God more unmistakable than in the Great Commission. “*Go ye therefore and make disciples **of all nations**.*” That is not poetry or literature; it is a piercing command – a very clear directive. The Komkoba Bible reads like this – “*Go! **To every clan** and make them my followers.*” If you hosted a five-course dinner for a visiting dignitary, and he stated that he wanted to sample everything, you would not fulfill his wishes until you had given him at least a spoonful of each and every dish, right? That may be a crude illustration, but God's *directive* is just that simple – we must enlist disciples of Jesus from each and every nation, each and every tribe. (The Greek word for 'nation' is *ETHNOS* = a race, a tribe, nation, people)

Now we can summarize the “2 wills” of God:

- God's *desire* is for as many souls as possible to be saved.
- God's *directive* is that souls from every nation must be saved.

Let's pause for a minute. Those 2 sentences are easy to read, but profoundly sobering to consider. Please read them again.

Now, based on God's revealed will, his *desire* and *directive*, let us re-examine our original question and our hypothetical scenario. Do the Naba people get priority? Should a brother like John move out to an unreached field even if it is not as cost-effective or efficient when there is plenty to do 'at home'?

The answer may be a bit complex. One local church cannot meet the needs of **all** the unreached people groups in the world. But the local church *can* and *must* embrace the obligation of God's *directive* and prioritize those groups. The over-arching theme and focus of the church's ministry strategy should be guided by God's some-souls-from-every-nation

mandate. Our ministry choices must be based, not solely on efficiency or close proximity – but on *the directive*.

This means that those nations (tribes/ethnic groups) like the Naba of North Africa in which there are few or NO disciples represent not only a pitiful situation, but an emergency condition directly opposed to God's *directive* to the Church. At best this is a tragedy, at worst it is *disobedience* on our part as God's Church to carry out his *directive*. These ethnic groups with few to no disciples (also called 'unreached people groups') must move front and center in our agenda, both individually and collectively as churches. We have to renovate and re-evaluate our entire lives as we prioritize this emergency condition. Our response to these 'unreached' groups must move beyond "Oh, that's a pity!" to "God, forgive us! We will do whatever it takes to fulfill Your directive!" Only in that state of mind will be ready to do something about the thousands of unreached ethnic groups still in the world today.

My dearly beloved brothers and sisters, let us be of one heart! I do not consider myself to have apprehended this issue (see Phil 3:12). My being a "missionary" really doesn't change anything. We all must face the facts – those unreached people are still out there. My "Jerusalem" might have changed from Ephrata, PA to Katani, Ghana, but there are still a lot of "uttermost parts of the earth" with no disciples. I am standing with you, hand-in-hand, as we look at this awesome reality. Together, we must answer some serious questions and come to grips with what those answers mean to us as individuals and churches.

? Is the directive fulfilled yet – are there disciples of Jesus in every ethnic group? No.

? Then who is responsible for the unfinished job? We are.

? Should this unfinished directive get priority in our lives and ministries? _____ (you decide)

? What is our part, and what is *my* part in fulfilling this *directive*?

Will you get on your knees with me to find the answer to that last question?