

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Next Steps

Obeying the Command NOT Given

(Acts 13-14)

Study #4

Introduction: Unintended consequences...

You know how it is. You try to do something nice - and it backfires. Your noble gesture gets misinterpreted. Your good deed gets you punished.

Social scientists refer to this unfortunate phenomenon as an “unintended consequence”.

When talking about unintended consequences, we are often talking about the world of policies and regulations. That’s because when a rule is made to regulate behavior - be it in business or government, the church or the home - that rule will very often have an impact (and very often a negative impact) the rule-maker had never thought about.

For instance...

Back in the days when Great Britain ruled over the colony of India, the British government was concerned about the number of cobras in the city of Delhi. So, they offered a reward for every dead cobra that was brought in.

Enterprising Indian citizens knew a good deal when they saw one, bred the snakes for slaughter, and made lots of money.

The British saw what was happening and stopped offering the reward, which prompted the Indians to release the snakes, thus increasing the number of cobras. Unintended consequence.

We could give lots and lots of examples of the law of unintended consequences, and lots of them are tragic or hilarious, or hilariously tragic.

Found in the category, “*No good deed goes unpunished*”, unintended consequences are normally negative results from an attempt to do good. Sometimes, though, as we will see today, there are unexpected dividends to our noble efforts that are very, very good!

Review and preview...

This morning, we are building on what we have seen in recent weeks as our church’s strategy for fulfilling our mission: We help you take next steps with Jesus, so that you can help others take next steps with Jesus.

To the list of *making disciples, developing leaders, and deploying Christians into service*, we now add **PLANTING CHURCHES**.

The association of churches to which we belong (The Evangelical Free Church of America) has this as its motto: We exist to glorify God by multiplying transformational churches among all people.

Likewise, we believe that part of Northwest’s mission is to help establish Christ-honoring churches, here in San Antonio and elsewhere.

Thus far in this series of messages, there have been direct challenges from the Bible *to be* and *to make* disciples, to pass the torch of the faith to those behind us, and to be fully deployed in Great Commission ministry.

This morning’s message will be a bit different.

As I’ll try to make clear, the task of “*planting churches*” is, of necessity, different than “*make disciples*” (Matthew 28:18-20) and “*fulfill your ministry*” (2 Timothy 4:5).

So, this morning, you'll hear my attempt at thinking biblically about the whole idea of church-planting. Today, I'm inviting you to think with me, pray with me, and dream with me.

To start off, if we're going to think about planting / starting / establishing churches, we have to think about "church", generally. And that will require us to think about something we may - or may not - REALLY understand all that well because we often don't understand things we think we understand as well as we think we do. (?)

Understanding Church

Things We [may not really] Know

In 1961, Vince Lombardi, the legendary coach of the Green Bay Packers, started training camp by gathering the team around him and holding up a football. He said, "*Gentlemen, this is a football.*"

Coach Lombardi was saying that these professional football players didn't know the game as well as they thought they did. He was going to take them back to the basics.

The San Antonio Spurs organization is famous for focusing on the fundamentals of the game. The nickname of the team's best player ever, Tim Duncan, was, "The Big Fundamental."

"Pounding the rock" is Coach Pop's way of saying, "*Gentlemen, this is a basketball. You don't know the game as well as you think you do. We're going to focus on basics.*"

Today, we may "know" but not REALLY know football, basketball, computers, politics, investing...and maybe church. So, let's think about church...

Knowing Church

Dictionary definitions

I found an interesting primary definition of *church* when I looked at different dictionaries, both in print and on-line.

Here is the definition of *church* I found most frequently: "A building for public Christian worship."

To which we say, "*Hmmm...*"

That definition may capture what lots of people in our culture think of when they hear the word *church*. But it certainly doesn't pass the biblical sniff test. A *church* is not, first and foremost, a building.

So, try this one, from the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Free Church of America.

The EFCA

"We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer."

Now I agree with this statement. It's a bit wordy and unwieldy, but it certainly passes the biblical sniff test. But, of course, it's the Bible that gives us our definitive understanding of church. So, to the Bible we now turn.

Scripture

The word we translate "church"

The word we translate "church" is the Greek word "ekklesia" (*εκκλησια*).¹

¹ The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament (Kittel's massive ten volume work) has a 35-page long, very technical article on *εκκλησια*.

It's a combination of two words, "*ek*", a preposition meaning "out of" + "*kaleo*", a verb meaning "to call". Thus, a "church" is a group of "called out" people. It is a "called-out" community.

But, *ekklesia* is not at all a strictly Christian word.

Secular and Jewish

Stephen, the first Christian to be killed for his faith, in a sermon recorded in Acts 7 (v. 38), referred to the Jews who wandered around in the desert in Old Testament times as an "*ekklesia*/church."

In Acts 19, Luke describes the mob that was organized against Paul in the city of Ephesus as an "*ekklesia*/church". It was a group that had a purpose - "*Get Paul!*"

At the time that the New Testament was written, the word referred to any assembly of people called together for any purpose.

But, in the New Testament, it does normally refer to gatherings of Christ-followers.² And, as with many words, *ekklesia* has a pretty wide range of meaning.

Christian

It can refer to the universal "body" of believers in Jesus all over the world (Ephesians 1:22) and to a small house church (Romans 16:5). It can refer to churches that are made up of Jews only (Acts 5:11), to churches made up of Samaritans (Acts 9:31), and to multi-ethnic churches (Acts 13:1).

The word is used broadly in the New Testament.

I assume that it can be used to describe today's multi-site churches, mega-churches and other flavors of churches, including churches that meet under trees, under cover of night, and in prisons.

² The word, while widely used in the New Testament, doesn't occur in the Gospels of Mark and Luke nor in the following letters: 2 Timothy and Titus, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 and 2 John, Jude.

We believe that we - Northwest - are to be about the business of helping to establish churches. So, it will be helpful for us to see an extended passage in the New Testament that describes the establishment of some churches.

We'll look to Acts 13-14, which follows what we refer to as the First Missionary Journey.

It is widely accepted that on the First Missionary Journey, Paul and Barnabas established several churches. So, stay with me for a couple of minutes as we, first, simply walk through the trip's itinerary.

Establishing Churches (Acts 13-14)

Itinerary

Leaving from the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1ff...)

Paul, Barnabas, and their helper, John Mark, left the church in the city of Antioch, the church that had sent them out on this trip, and sailed south on the Mediterranean to the island of Cyprus.

They traveled the length of the island, spreading the Gospel in the Jewish synagogues in all the cities.

Then, after some good response to the message, they sailed north to Asia Minor and headed inland to tell people who had never heard the good news about Jesus.

First, they stopped off in the city of **Pisidian Antioch**.³ Now, the people of Pisidia Antioch were notoriously tough and rugged, but Paul and Barnabas (John Mark, their helper, had unhelpfully left them by this point) tossed caution to the wind to tell them about Jesus.

³ We know that these two had been sent out from a city called Antioch. THAT Antioch was in the region of present-day Syria. THIS Antioch (Acts 13:14) was a Roman colony located far off the coast in the rugged Taurus Mountain range. The region was home to independent mountain tribesmen who had successfully resisted the attempts of the Persians to subdue them, and, centuries later, the Greeks.

But it wasn't long before they overstayed their welcome, left Antioch and traveled east to **Iconium**.⁴

They stayed in Iconium only a short time and then kept on moving along on the trade route to the next city - **Lystra**.

Lystra brought trouble quickly, which led to Paul and Barnabas leaving for the (hopefully) greener pastures of **Derbe**.

Derbe was the end of the line, the last city they would visit. And from Derbe they headed back to Antioch, retracing their steps back through Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.

That's the trip. It involved a couple of years of travel through the hard country of Galatia.

Now, having seen the bare bones map of this trip, let's move through the First Missionary Journey one more time. This time, noticing what Paul and Barnabas did on the trip.

Again, the first stop was at Pisidian Antioch. And when they rolled into town, the missionaries stopped off, first, at the Jewish synagogue to share Jesus.

Activities

In Pisidian Antioch

[14b]...and on the Sabbath day they went into the synagogue and sat down. [15] After the reading of the Law and the Prophets, the synagogue officials sent to them, saying, "Brethren, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, say it."

It made sense to go to the Jews first, since the Jews had been awaiting the arrival of the Messiah for centuries. Paul's message was, "*Messiah has come, and His name is Jesus!*"

⁴ In the first century Iconium was the chief city of Lycaonia, a district of Phrygia. It was about a sixty mile walk from Antioch. (Easily said. When was the last time any of us walked sixty miles...?)

The message was very well received by those in attendance. So well received, in fact, that they were invited back to speak again on the following Sabbath.

But the synagogue leaders, jealous because the synagogue members were believing in Jesus, began to oppose Paul and Barnabas.

Paul and Barnabas responded by turning their attention to the Gentiles, who were delighted and embraced the message of the Gospel.

The upshot of their time in Pisidian Antioch was that lots of people came to faith in Jesus, ***[49] And the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region.***

But the Jews in town who had been "dissed" weren't happy at all and they drove the apostles out of the district. (v. 50)

The final report from Antioch shows the apostles shaking ***[51]...off the dust of their feet⁵ in protest against them and*** leaving Antioch - while the new converts were smiling from ear to ear.

So, leaving Antioch, they headed to Iconium.

In Iconium

Paul and Barnabas followed the pattern set at Pisidian Antioch and went straight to the synagogue to take the message of Jesus to the Jews first.

There was a great response of both Jews and Gentiles. Many of them believed.

But, those who didn't believe stirred up the crowds and caused trouble for the apostles. Opposition was fierce and, again, Paul and Barnabas were run out of town on a rail.

Next stop on this journey was the city of Lystra.

⁵ Jesus told His disciples to "***shake off the dust from your feet***" if a town did not receive their message. (Matthew 10:14; Mark 6:11; Luke 9:5; 10:11)

In Lystra

Luke tells us that the first thing they did upon hitting town was preach the Gospel. (14:7)

Then, Paul healed a man who had been born lame. And the unintended consequence of this was that the crowds of Lystra began to worship Paul (Hermes) and Barnabas (Zeus) as gods.

Obviously, our two missionaries were appalled at this. They made it clear that the miracle had been performed by the power of Jesus, not their own power.

But, while they were sharing the Gospel, the opposition from the cities of Pisidian Antioch and Iconium showed up at Lystra, to oppose the progress of the Jesus movement.

Working behind the scenes, these opponents convinced the crowds at Lystra that the apostles were dangerous men with a dangerous message.

They “**won over the multitudes**”⁶ and, just like that, Paul and Barnabas were viewed, no longer as gods, but as villains in Lystra.

And what do you do with villains who visit your city? You punish them.

So, **[19]...they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead. [20a] But while the disciples stood around him, he arose and entered the city.**

After being stoned nearly to death, Paul went back to Lystra to recuperate for nearly a whole day. (!!) And then - are you ready for this?

⁶ This is the second of five times a crowd was incited because of Paul’s ministry as recorded in the book of Acts.

In Derbe

[20b]...THE NEXT DAY (emphasis added) **he went away with Barnabas to Derbe. [21a] After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples...**

They **[21a] made MANY disciples**. And no mention is made of any opposition.

Neither of the missionaries were pelted with rocks. They weren’t arrested. They weren’t harassed. Things went great in Derbe and there was powerful Gospel impact.

Summary:

So, to sum up, in Pisidian Antioch and Iconium, they went to the Jews first. In Pisidian Antioch, Iconium, and Lystra, they were persecuted. In Lystra, they performed a miraculous healing.

Different things happened in each city. What was consistent was that in all four of the cities Paul and Barnabas visited on the First Missionary Journey, they proclaimed Jesus and made disciples.

Then, after a short period of time in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas decided that their time there had come to an end.

As well, by some means, they determined that their travels on this First Missionary Journey had come to an end. It was time to go back home to their sending church.⁷

They went back exactly the way they had come.

⁷ I find the route that they chose to travel to be remarkable. Tarsus, Paul’s hometown was scarcely one hundred and sixty miles away from Derbe. And their home church of Antioch was just beyond that. Real refreshment and recuperation were close at hand. But instead, they chose to go back the way they came to help the disciples grow. Impressive.

Backtracking (in a good way)

[21b]...they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch

- What courage it would have taken to have returned to Lystra! Paul had just been stoned there!
- And what courage it would have taken to return to Iconium. There had been an assassination attempt there on both of them!
- And what courage it would have taken to return to Pisidian Antioch. They were actively opposed while there - and some of the opposition had made it all the way to Lystra to take part in Paul's stoning!

But they went back. Why? Because of love for the new Christians and because of their passion for the Great Commission.

...to strengthen disciples' souls (v. 22)

As they met with each of the groups of new converts, they were intent on **[22a] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith...**

They gave them promises of great blessing, and fair warning: **[22b]...“through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”**

There is great joy in following Jesus and there will be great challenges. It's not a walk in the park, but whatever hardships there are will be completely worth it.

And the story of the First Missionary Journey ends with a tale of the long trip back to Syrian Antioch, the welcome they received when they arrived, and the report they gave to their brothers and sisters there. (Acts 14:26-28)

But, before reading of that trip home, we hear about this one thing that Paul and Barnabas did in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Pisidian Antioch.

...to establish and to mature the community (v. 23)

[23] When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

This is the first time we find the word “church” (ekklesia) in the entire episode. We are finally told that Paul and Barnabas left behind churches in Galatia.

Now, a question.

When Churches Become Churches

The Birth of a Church

At what point did the groups of disciples, these collections of new believers in each city, become churches?

The question makes me think back to my time in seminary when we students would wrestle in class with what defined a church.

Do all real churches take the Lord's Supper and practice baptism? Do they necessarily meet on the first day of the week? Must they be organized in this or that way, or to this degree?

Interesting questions. But listen carefully as I read verse 23 again.

[23] When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

What is clear from that verse is that the collections of disciples in each city were churches BEFORE elders were appointed.

The appointment of elders didn't legitimize these gatherings of disciples. They were already churches.

Paul and Barnabas just stopped off to give a hand to these new churches (ekklesias) with some organizational direction, appointing elders to shepherd and to lead.

They were churches, but without a whole lot of items we might consider essential today when it comes to “doing church.”

Simplest Church

What these churches DID NOT have

On one of the nights of the “Perspectives on the World Christian Movement” class that Kathy and I, and the Jacobsons, and the Olsons took last year, we were asked to list important ingredients of “church”.

We class members were off to the races, rattling off building, nursery, staff, praise team, sound system, chairs, website, missions outreach, budget, Sunday School, small groups, and more.

It was a good list - and there’s not a thing wrong with any of the items in that list. But, you won’t find any of those listed anywhere in the New Testament. And you wouldn’t have found any of them in the first churches of Galatia.

Sure, they needed a place to gather, but they definitely didn’t have a dedicated facility.⁸ And they certainly didn’t have paid staff - either a senior pastor or associate pastor, administrative assistant, or worship leader.

All of which means that they also didn’t have an annual budget they had to meet.

They didn’t have formal membership, and, at least at first, they didn’t have elders or deacons or ministry coordinators. They didn’t have Sunday School or ABF’s. And while they likely sang and danced, they probably didn’t have a praise team.

Most of these items are considered pretty important to church in America, 2018. And most church-planters in 2018 America would want to have most of these items in place before launching and before the first “pre-view” service.

Now, I would never say that there is anything anti-biblical about having these things in place before launch or in the way church-planting is often done today. But you sure can’t say that having those elements fits a biblical model.

And significantly, without any of it, Paul and Barnabas successfully planted churches from brand-new converts in areas where no one had ever heard about Jesus.

So, if they didn’t have much in the way of what we consider elements of church, what did they have?

What these churches DID have

In each city, where there had not been disciples of Jesus, there were now disciples of Jesus. These disciples met together to worship, grow (take next steps), and serve Jesus’ mission. And Luke (the author of Acts) calls the groups in those cities “**churches**” (14:23).

Question: What does a church have to have to be a church?

Answer: Disciples who regularly gather to worship and grow and serve Jesus’ mission.

So, how are churches planted? Make disciples.

Conclusion:

The First Missionary Journey was not a church-planting mission. Paul and Barnabas went on a disciple-making mission. Jesus’ Great Commission was not a command to plant churches. It was a command to make disciples.

⁸ There is no record of a “church building” prior to AD 300.

In fact, it has only recently dawned on me - duh! - that there is no command anywhere in the New Testament that tells us we are to plant churches.

And yet, our stated Mission Strategy is “make disciples” (Matthew 28:18-20), “develop leaders” (2 Timothy 2:1-6), “deploy Christians into service” (Colossians 4:17), and “plant churches” (...).

Hmmm...

The legitimacy of church-planting

Did we (meaning me, the Elders) make a mistake when we added this last element to our mission strategy?

I’ll argue, “No!”

The Great Commission tells us to “**Go**” and make disciples in areas where there is not a Jesus presence. The assumption is that disciples in any area will gather in groups.

The UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCE of making disciples who gather to worship, grow, and serve Jesus’ mission, is that we have, by doing this, by definition, planted churches.⁹

Church-planting and us...

Church-planting (or, the long version, “establishing groups of disciples to worship, growth, and serve Jesus’ mission”) is something that we want to be a part of here at Northwest. And there are several ways in which we can pursue this.

⁹ A church in any given area will organize itself to do mission in ways that make sense to the people who are a part of that group. Thus, I see the New Testament pictures of churches as less *prescriptive*, and more *descriptive*. Planting a church of a particular organizational scheme is not a bad thing at all. But the irreducible minimum of the Great Commission is to make disciples.

- Nurture and replicate Encuentro

We can continue to nurture our relationship with Encuentro. Encuentro’s continued development is a great win for the Gospel in San Antonio. As well, to have one church in two languages is a great growth experience for all of us here at Northwest.

In addition, we can offer the model of a Spanish-speaking congregation to other English-speaking congregations as a way to increase impact for the Gospel in our city.

- Offer our site to other groups

There are other groups of people in our city we could welcome to become a part of Northwest, much as we have done with Encuentro.

I’m thinking of less-reached language groups and ethnicities, some of whom have significant populations right here in our part of town.

Can you imagine with me the possibility of groups that speak languages other than English or Spanish calling our church “home”? Can you imagine a joint worship service of several different ethnicities?

- Plant a church in another part of town

Not that we would ever want to do this, but from where our church is located, we could throw a rock and hit other solid churches from here. You and I both know that there are parts of San Antonio that are not as Gospel-wealthy as this area.

Can you imagine sending a team from Northwest to a Gospel-poor part of town, making disciples, and then helping them organize to worship, grow, and serve Jesus’ mission? Me, too.

- Plant internationally

And let’s not forget that last year we entered into a ministry partnership with an association of churches in Chile, South America.

Helping these existing churches thrive and then helping others get established will be an important part of our partnership.

And there are very fruitful disciple-making works going on in some of the most Gospel-starved regions of the world with which we may be able to partner in the years ahead.

And what about church-planting and you?

Church-planting and you...

To call you to church-planting is nothing more than to call you to disciple-making.

Picture this...

You decide to approach a friend and invite her/him to join you in a “next step” journey with Jesus. You start pouring your life into your friend’s life. You press Jesus into your friend’s life.

Your friend starts taking those next steps. She discovers how rich life is with Jesus. And she wonders if she could invite a friend or two to join in the fun.

You say, “*Sure*” - and all of a sudden, there is traction in reaching a group of people who had not been reached for Jesus before: your friends’ friends!

Unintended consequence? A gathering of disciples who are worshipping, growing, and serving Jesus’ mission together. (i.e. - an ekklesia)

Or you know a group of people who don’t know much about Jesus - but you are all friends. You do Crossfit or Brazilian Jiu Jitsu or origami together. Or you work together or do recovery or ESL together. You offer a short Bible study or discussion group about life and God.

Pretty soon, there is a group of disciples gathering regularly for worship, growth, and serving Jesus’ mission.

Church-planting need not be a multi-year effort that involves multiple staff and gobs of money to begin. It can start really small, thoroughly organic, and have impact way out of proportion to its size.

This is how a city is reached for Jesus and this is a mission worthy of our prayers, our dreams, and our labors.¹⁰

¹⁰ The working document that the Elders have put together says, “We will direct prayer, energy, and financial resources to developing healthy congregations, focusing on less-reached language groups and ethnicities in San Antonio and on unreached people groups outside of San Antonio. (Acts 13-14)”