

Word, Works, Signs...

BY GREG PARSONS

Greg Parsons has been on the staff of Frontier Ventures (formerly USCWM) since 1982, and currently serves as Director of Global Connections. He and his wife, Kathleen, have two children and three grandchildren.

I've been thinking a lot lately about some of the things that shaped my life. I guess I'm at that age where you reflect and focus more on passing things on to those who will follow you.

One "shaping" element that I am very thankful for is that I grew up under leaders in a church who loved God's Word. They studied it diligently, taught it well and passed a love for it to me.

I wouldn't change any of that.

But I fear that in my living out of what I learned, I focus on the Word – sometimes with pridefulness – and minimize "works." When I teach, I emphasize the need to "do good works" based on Ephesians 2:10. We all know and memorize Eph. 2:8-9 but verse 10 is as important: *"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* (ESV, here and below.)

There is, of course, the long-running debate on this issue from the 1930s if not before. Perhaps the best (or worst?) characterization of that debate is between the *social gospel* and *evangelism*. I've always thought it was a false dichotomy. I understand some concerns from both "sides," and I've tended towards the importance of sharing the Word – hopefully flowing from good works.

Paul wrote about both, as Eph. 2 suggests. He also wrote about this in Romans 15, where he is explaining what he has been doing. Remember most of those involved in the Roman fellowships (there are several, see chapter 16) haven't met Paul. He is on his way to visit and raise money! (See 15:24) In 15:16 he describes the idea of "priesting" the gospel and boasts of what Christ has done. Then, in Romans 15:18-19, he uses an idea from Romans 1:5, which says: *"...to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations..."* Verses 18–19 says, "For I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to **bring the Gentiles to obedience—by word and deed, by the power of signs and wonders**, by the power of the Spirit of God—so that from Jerusalem and all the way around to Illyricum I have fulfilled the ministry of the gospel of Christ..."

« We know that the reaching of these cultures is dependent on God's timing and the work of the Holy Spirit. »

When I preach on this missional passage, I focus on that last phrase and explain what I believe Paul meant by having "fulfilled the ministry." I don't usually talk about HOW he did that. Do you see it?

- Word • deed • by signs & wonders
- by the power of the Spirit....

It is clear that the Spirit of God is the one doing it. We all know that neither Paul nor you nor I could anyway. But still, somehow, in my desire not to debate issues related to

gifts and the Holy Spirit, I avoided the "signs and wonders" part. It may be that today, signs and wonders have little if anything to do with spiritual gifts. Yes, some of the N.T. gifts included things which were "signs" to point to the Son and the work of God. The key thing I need to relearn and live out is that the Holy Spirit can work in any time and in any way He wants. We need to pursue God, moment by moment listen to His Spirit, and then watch Him work through us everywhere, especially in and among the unreached.

Many have said the unreached are unreached because they are the harder to reach. Others say that "great religions" of the world don't see our western Christianity as a great improvement. Both are generalizations. Perhaps it is because we haven't actually *sent* anyone to try and connect with the people and communicate gospel truth in a way that they can understand. Others say we haven't prayed enough, but as I see huge prayer movements globally with many focused on the remaining unreached, I am encouraged that we may be close to breakthrough. Many efforts are increasing prayer for and engagement with Frontier People Groups – these are Unreached People Groups with no known movements with less than one in a thousand being a Christian of any kind.

We know that the reaching of these cultures is dependent on God's timing and the work of the Holy Spirit. Are we listening to Him as we reach out to people of other, very different perspectives? 