

STUDIES IN ACTS

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1. PENTECOSTAL POWER Based on Acts 2:1-21

One of the oldest festival days in history is the Festival of Pentecost. It was one of the favorites of the Jews for centuries before Christ, and it has been a significant day in the church for two thousand years. It became the third great Christian feast after Christmas and Easter. It marks the anniversary of the coming of the Holy Spirit. Liturgical churches call it Whitsunday because of the early custom of wearing white clothes on this day to symbolize the illumination which the Holy Spirit brought.

Welcome, white day, a thousand suns,
Though seen at once, were black to thee;
For after their light, darkness comes,
But thine shines to eternity.

In spite of the importance of this day it has been greatly neglected by many Christians. Most of us would not even know it was Pentecost Sunday, which means 50 days after the resurrection of Christ. The early church celebrated this day long before they did Christmas. If we are unaware of this day it is due to the lack of understanding of the place of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church. Dr. Norman Maclean was teaching the Apostle's Creed to some students, and he had them stand in a row and each repeat a line. One morning they began and the first student said, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." The next said, "I believe in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord." This went on through all the doctrines, and then there was silence. The boy who was next in line said, "Please sir, the boy who believes in the Holy Ghost is absent today." Dr. Maclean remarked, "Lots of folks are absent when it comes to that clause."

E. Stanley Jones referring to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit said, "It is the undiscovered country of Christianity, the dark continent of the Christian life. The land where our spiritual resources lie but undeveloped." The great need of the church, and of each individual Christian, is the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the power to do the task for which we exist, and so we want to look at this first Pentecostal experience of the disciples in the light of their reception of power.

I. THE SECRET OF THEIR RECEPTION OF POWER. v. 1

Jesus had commissioned His disciples to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, but He told them that they must first tarry in Jerusalem until they were endued with power from on high. For 10 days after Jesus ascended they waited in obedience to His command. Peter had finally learned to wait on the Lord. He had finally learned to take orders and obey them with perfect confidence that Jesus knew what He was doing. Ordinarily Peter's nature would have caused him to say, "Wait! What do you mean wait! We know Christ is alive now, for we have seen Him with our own eyes. Why wait? Let's go tell the world right now." He would have gone out and instead of turning the world upside down, would have become an utter failure trying to do a supernatural work in his own natural powers. But Peter knew better now. He had tried his own power and discovered it was weakness. He learned that you can have natural powers around you and behind you, but without supernatural power from above you, you can do nothing. Like his Lord, he learned obedience by the things which he suffered.

This was the secret of their reception of power. They were all with one accord in one place. There was unity in obedience to Christ. No longer were the 12 anxious about who was going to set where in the kingdom. All they knew was that Jesus had promised them power, and so in perfect harmony and in complete confidence they waited. They were on the launching pad of preparation

waiting for God's countdown to reach the zero hour and send them soaring out into all the world with the Gospel. After 10 days you would think that some division would arise. It would have been easy for some to get impatient and begin to doubt the promise. It is not easy to wait.

Themistocles, the famous Athenian general, once kept his men waiting during a naval battle. At sunrise they were all ready to advance, but the order did not come. As the hours passed the men became impatient. Talk spread that he was not going to fight because he was afraid. Themistocles knew what he was doing. He knew there was a wind that came up in that region at a certain time of the day. He waited for it to give the command so that he did not need as many men at the oars, but could have them in arms to fight. He was waiting for greater power. This is what the church was doing on that first Christian Pentecost. They did so without questioning the wisdom of their Lord. They obeyed because they had learned to take Him at His word with complete trust. They made themselves available to receive the promised power.

Someone has said that it is not only your ability, but your availability that Jesus needs if He is to use you with power, and here we see them being available for the Master's use. If the church is to have power in any age, it must have these characteristics. It must be united in allegiance to Jesus, and completely confident that He is able to do all things, and they must be available to be used as He sees fit. This means every local church must ask itself constantly, why do we exist? What does God want us to do, and are we making ourselves available to be used? A proper response to these questions will lead us, like the first believers, to the discovery of the secret of receiving power from on high.

II. THE SIGNS OF THEIR RECEPTION OF POWER. v. 2-3

God always gives signs when He performs a mighty act in history on behalf of men. He appeals to the ears and eyes that men might know the work is of a divine and supernatural nature. When God gave the law to Moses there was a loud voice of thunder and the terror of consuming fire. When Jesus comes again there will be the blast of the trumpet, the great shout of the archangel, and the terrible fire that will melt the elements with fervent heat. Sound and sight play a role in these great events, and so also in the Pentecostal event. Pay careful attention to the language here. The sound of the wind and the sight of the fire were real but not actual. They were signs of the reality of the power they had received. In verse 2 came a sound as of a rushing mighty wind. In verse 3 appeared tongues like as fire. There was no actual wind or fire, but the sound and the sight were real, and they symbolized the presence of God in power.

What could be a better symbol of the Holy Spirit than wind? What else in the material world is present with such power, and yet it is invisible? Jesus used wind as an illustration of the Spirit when He was talking to Nicodemus. He said that you hear the sound of it but you cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes, and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit. If God had not given this sign of the sound of wind, the Holy Spirit could have entered the believers in silence, and there would not have been this great outward evidence. It was given here that the church might always trace its source of power to the Holy Spirit, and not to some psychological emotion within. The wind symbolizes a power beyond man. When God spoke to Job He spoke out of a whirlwind, and when God gave life to the dry bones in Ezekiel He did it with a wind. Now at Pentecost He fills the house with the sound of a rushing mighty wind, but the filling of the house with sound is only a sign of the greater fact that He filled their hearts with the Spirit. Now that the Spirit has come to abide

with the church there can be the filling without the sign.

Fire is also a common sign of the presence of God. He appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and He led Israel at night by a pillar of fire. To the believer God is a cleansing fire, and to the unbeliever God is a consuming fire. Fire is also a sign of God's glory. Why do the heavens declare the glory of God? It is because of fire. If the stars were cold masses of stone, and if the sun was but a flickering candle that kept us in perpetual gloom, where would be the glory? It is the power of the blazing blinding brilliance of those fires in the sky that bring wonder into hearts and awe into our minds. They kindle the flame of praise on our tongues. It is when we see God's power throughout the universe in the marvelous fires in the heavens that we sing My God How Great Thou Art.

Fire ought to characterize the church in the sense that it is filled with enthusiasm. When we say a man is on fire, we mean that he is excited and enthused about what he is doing. That is the picture of the church at Pentecost, and that is a sign of the power and presence of the Holy Spirit. When the Spirit is present the church is on fire. There is a story about two men watching a church burn. The one who was a member says to the other, "I have never seen you at church before." The other man replies, "I never saw this church on fire before." When the church is on fire spiritually it attracts people just as it does if it is physically on fire. Enthusiasm is essential for attraction. If believers are not excited about what they believe, why should anyone else be?

Emerson once said, "Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm." The very word comes from the Greek which means God within. When God is within we are enthused. This is a sign of a Spirit filled church and believers. Put the two signs of wind and fire together and you get a picture of the early church spreading like wildfire. Someone wrote a history of the early church and called it The Spreading Flame. The church that is enthused about its message is a church with power, and so our prayer ought to be,

Grant us thy truth to make us free,
And kindling hearts that burn for thee,
Till all thy living altars claim
One holy light, one heavenly flame.

III. THE SUCCESS OF THEIR RECEPTION OF POWER.

When Jesus gave the promise that they would receive power in Acts 1:8, He made it clear that the power was for the specific purpose of being witnesses of Him. The power was given not to glorify the Spirit, or the believer, but to glorify Jesus Christ and make Him known to all peoples. The test of whether or not a church is successful in receiving the power of God is whether or not it accomplishes the task for which the power is given. If this group at Pentecost would have ran out and sold all they had, and bought material to build a large church in Jerusalem, that would have been a display of dedication, but Pentecost would have been a failure. So it is with the church today. No matter how impressive a church is, if it does not accomplish the task of the church, which is to be a witness for Jesus, then all of its show of power is in vain. It is only natural power, and the supernatural is missing.

The church on Pentecost did not fail. It had tremendous success, for it was noised aboard that something unusual had happened. The Jews visiting Jerusalem out of every nation gathered where

the disciples were. People were amazed for they heard them speaking of the wonderful works of God in their own language. For 3 years the disciples had listened to Jesus proclaim the wonderful works of God, but now they are carrying on in His place by the power which He sent to indwell His new body the church. No longer were they afraid to take a public stand for Jesus. Peter, who a month before did not have the courage to admit he knew Jesus, now without a tinge of fear stands in this great crowd and proclaims Jesus as Lord.

The success of Pentecost was due to the fact that the disciples were now under new management. They were not self-centered and worried about power, possessions and position, but they were Christ-centered, and His will alone is all that mattered. For 10 days they had patiently waited with their focus on Jesus, and now they could be trusted with power because they were aimed right. If they had followed their own wills for their own ends, God could not have given the power, for this would be like pushing on the gas pedal when the car is aimed toward the ditch. Success came because they were on the right path of obedience and submission to the will of God. They were ready to come under the Spirit's control. With such an attitude they overcame all fear.

Diognetius was brought before a heathen king, and the tyrant said, "Do you know what I can do for you?" The saints said, "You cannot harm me my life is hid with Christ in God." The king said, "I will strip you of all your possessions. The saint replied, "You cannot reach them, my treasure is in heaven." The king said, "I will exile you to a barren island." The saint replied, "Nothing can separate me from the love of God in Christ Jesus my Lord." The king said, "Then I will kill you." The saint responded, "You will but send me to be with Christ which is far better." With such a faith as this there is no room for fear.

It was with this kind of fearlessness that the early church witnessed and had such success. Peter preached a sermon that day that exalted Jesus and bore more fruit than all the sermons that Jesus himself had preached. Jesus said they would do greater things than he, and here at Pentecost that saying was fulfilled. The power of the Holy Spirit was successfully applied because Jesus was made central. Three thousand souls found him as their Savior, and that was the purpose for which the power was given.

A Welsh miner who was converted in the 1959 revival said, "When I was a boy we dug coal out with chisels. After that came dynamite, and with this we could mine a much bigger quantity of coal. Till this week I have seen nothing but chisel work in religion, but now here is God's dynamite at work." The Gospel is the dynamite of God said Paul. Why should we try to reach the world on the chisel level when the promise of the Pentecostal power is available to all believers? If we make the task of being witnesses to Jesus the primary goal of our lives, as did these first believers, we too could make a great impact by the power of the Spirit.

2. THE THRONE OF DAVID Based on Act 2:22-36

A. M. Fairbairn said, "The task of reason is to make impossible all religion save the best." This was the attitude of Peter and Paul the great evangelists of the early church. They were determined to use all the reason and logic at their disposal to persuade men to see that Jesus Christ was the only

hope. We do not find them using force or any subtle tricks to win people. They use the Scripture and contemporary historical facts to cause men to see the truth. Just to give you a picture of how consistently Paul persuaded men, let me read several passages.

In Acts 13:43 we read, “Now when the congregation was broken up many of the Jews and religious proselytes followed Paul and Barnabas, who speaking to them, persuaded them to continue in the grace of God.” In Acts 18:4 we read, “And he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and persuaded the Jews and Greeks.” In Acts 19:8, “And he went into the synagogue, and spake boldly for the space of three months, disputing and persuading the things concerning the kingdom of God.” In the last reference we see that Paul sought to persuade men to his dying day. In Acts 28:23 we read, “...there came many to him unto his lodging; to whom he expounded and testified the kingdom of God, persuading them concerning Jesus, both out of the law of Moses, and out of the prophets, from morning til evening.”

Try and visualize what this means. Paul was constantly going over the Old Testament and showing how it was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Hours and hours he spent with the Jews who knew the Old Testament. It was for 3 months in one place. Imagine how they covered every conceivable Messianic passage. The Jews would seek to show how they were not yet fulfilled, and Paul would show them how Jesus did fulfill them, just as Peter is doing at Pentecost. Now to make the picture perfect let me read to you the words of Jesus as He rebuked the two on the road to Emmaus. In Luke 24:25-27 we read, “..O fools, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken: ought not Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory? And beginning at Moses and all the prophets, He expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

Nothing is more clearly taught in the New Testament than the fact that Jesus was the focus point of all the Old Testament prophecies, and that the New Testament church used fulfilled prophecy as the greatest method of persuading Jews to receive Jesus as their Messiah. The tragedy is that this method of evangelism was laid aside in favor of force, and the result was that the church became the biggest wall between Jews and Jesus. The church began to force Jews to be baptized. The Inquisition in Spain had a demonic scheme whereby they could eliminate Jews. They were forced to be baptized and become Christians, and then they were tried for being heretical Christians, and the penalty was death. Then all the property of heretics went to the church.

Jacob Jocz in *The Jewish People And Jesus Christ* records the whole shocking history of this abuse of power right up to modern times. He writes, “The compulsory hearing of sermons by Jews in Christian churches was already practiced in the 13th century. Two centuries later it became a general custom, especially in Italy. Abrahams records the comic situation that the ears of the Jews use to be examined on entering the churches for they were suspected of stopping them with cotton. Overseers were appointed to ensure that the Jews remained awake during the 2 hour sermon delivered to them...the Bull of Benedict XIII of 1415 decreed that 3 public sermons were to be preached to the Jews annually and that all above 12 years of age should be compelled to attend to hear these sermons.”

It was not until the 18th century that the church got back to the New Testament method of persuasion, and Jews again began to receive Jesus as their Messiah. History demonstrates that Peter was led of the Holy Spirit in his sermon at Pentecost, for the only way devout Jews could be won would be by a persuasive demonstration that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the messianic prophecies.

Peter had made it clear that as Jews they were guilty for the death of Jesus, whom they admitted who was a worker of miracles and a man of God. Now in verse 24 he states that God raised him up. God did not accept the judgment of the Jews. Their court gave Him up to death, but the supreme court, which was God himself, raised Him up to life. He was loosed from death, for it was impossible for Jesus to remain bound by its cords. It had no power over Him in the first place, but He submitted to it for our sakes. He knew it could not hold Him, and to say that of Jesus is to say that He was God. George Matheson says, "There is no miracle in the resurrection of Christ. There would have been a miracle if He had not risen." It was just not possible for Him to remain in the grip of death, and so the resurrection was natural from God's point of view. His body was transformed, however, and this made it a miracle.

In verse 25 to 28 Peter supports his statement that it was not possible for Jesus to be held by death by appealing to the words of David in Psa. 16:8-11. Peter says that it applies to Jesus, for He was confident in going to the cross, and He died voluntarily because He was assured of God's presence and promise that He would not forsake His body or soul but would be preserved through death. In verse 29 He says men and brethren let me speak frankly. That is, do not be offended by what I say, for I reverence David also, but let's face the facts. David is dead and buried, and his tomb is with us yet today. David could not have been speaking of himself, for just the opposite happened to him. His body did see corruption, and so David spoke of another, or else his hope was false.

In verse 30 we see David was writing about one whom he knew would come because God had promised that a Messiah would set on his throne. This promise can be read in II Sam. 7:11-16, where it is clear that Solomon was the literal fulfillment, but where the emphasis on the kingdom being forever implies a future fulfillment. The emphasis on the sworn oath of God in this promise is found in Psa. 89:3-4 where read, "...I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant: I will establish your descendants forever, and build your throne for all generations." Then in verse 36 we read, "His line shall endure forever, his throne as long as the sun before me."

In verse 31 Peter says that David saw ahead and knew this promise was to be fulfilled by Christ in the resurrection. David was a Christian before Christ, for he believed in the resurrection and confessed Christ as Lord. He foresaw that Messiah must die and conquer death, for he was to be an immortal king who would take the throne of David and never again depart. The Jews did not see this in Old Testament prophecy. They apparently never thought deeply enough about how Messiah could live forever without first conquering death, and the sin that causes death. David knew Messiah must be raised from death, and Peter goes on in verse 32 to say that this Jesus of whom we have been speaking was raised by God just as David said would happen to Messiah, and we are witnesses to this fact. There was no reason to doubt these 120 respectable Jewish citizens.

In verse 33 he goes on to say that Jesus is by the right hand of God and having received the promise of the Holy Spirit, He is the author of what you now see and hear. In verse 34 he says that it is not David on the throne in heaven fulfilling his own words, for he said, "The Lord said unto my Lord set thou on my right hand." It was Jehovah saying this to Christ. David calls Jesus his Lord. Jesus used this passage to confuse the Pharisees in Matt. 22:41-46. He asked them how Messiah could be the son of David when David calls Him Lord? It was a contradiction they could not answer. How could the Christ be the son of David and also the Lord of David? The only way

would be by being both God and man. He would have to be born of a woman and yet be deity. This is precisely how Jesus fulfilled both concepts, and how He ascended to the throne of David as the seed of David in the flesh. He was both the son of David and the Son of God.

In verse 36 Peter concludes that all the house of Israel should know for sure that God has made that same Jesus whom you crucified to be both Lord and Christ. He is on David's throne and will be so forever. But what about the postponed kingdom that prophecy experts are always talking about? Didn't the Jews reject Jesus and cause Him to postpone taking the throne? I don't read anything about such a postponement. All that is clear is that Christ took the throne and nothing was postponed. All the prophecies of Moses and the prophets were fulfilled in Him. The New Testament is consistent and insistent on the fact that Jesus now reigns as Lord supreme with all power in heaven and on earth.

When Gabriel announced the birth of Jesus to the virgin Mary he said in Luke 1:32-33, "He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest, and the Lord God shall give Him the throne of His father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there shall be no end." When was this fulfilled? Peter and all the New Testament writers say it was fulfilled at the ascension of Christ to the right hand of the Father. No prophecies could be more completely fulfilled than those concerning Jesus ascending to the throne of David.

3. PROPHECY FULFILLED Based on Acts 2:22f

In no area of biblical studies have Christians been more often deceived than in the area of prophecy. The early church fathers got caught up in wild spiritualizing of the Old Testament. They found profound revelations where there were none. It became so subjective that you could make Scripture mean anything you wanted it to mean, and this abuse led to reaction which went to the other extreme of literalism. This led to just as foolish conclusions as the other extreme. A cult in East Africa, for example, says you must have 2, 4, 6 or 8 wives because the Bible says, "Do not be unequally yoked together."

This an extreme example, but it is not isolated. When a freshman at Bethel, I and my roommate ran on to a book by a well known evangelical that found predictions in the prophets of all kinds of modern inventions such as cars, planes and bombs. We were excited and thought this was proof of the Bible's inspiration, and many Christians think the same way today because they think the Bible foretells everything that is going on in the world. This is a totally erroneous view of Revelation that ignores the basic truth that the Bible is a revelation of God's redemptive plan, and not to be used to satisfy the curiosity of people by seeming to predict modern inventions. This degrades the Bible and puts it in the same category with those who pretend to predict the future today.

Prophecy is also perverted in every generation by those who feel it was all written for just their day. There is a whole graveyard full of old prophecy books that died along with the people who are suppose to be the anti-Christ. Many Popes, kings, and rulers, like Napoleon, and more recently Hitler and Mussolini, were all thought to be the fulfillment of prophecy. Men who can pinpoint

God's plan, and even name names, always draw good crowds, but so far they have never been right. Those who name him when the real anti-Christ appears are bound to at last be right, but then no one will need a book to tell them, for it will be obvious.

Meanwhile the dangers of self-appointed prophets are great. They often cause division and get Christian people to be lopsided in their view of God's plan. They try and make you think that figuring out which ten rulers or nations are the ten heads of the beasts is the real goal of Bible study. Andrew Murray once led a group of people who would not come to hear him preach because the notes in their Bible said the ten heads of the beasts were kings of Europe, one of which was the king of England, and since Murray was a salaried servant of the British Empire he was considered to be a servant of anti-Christ. Murray said he hardly knew whether to weep or smile at some of their explanations of the prophecies.

In every age the cults major on prophecy. The Jehovah Witnesses have volume after volume on prophecy, and they do an amazing amount of research in this area. I have read some and find it is usually no more wild in its speculations than are those of evangelicals who consider themselves to be authorities in this area. It seems that no one can tolerate a mystery, and so everyone must have definite answers no matter how subjective they may be. Louis H. Evans in his book *Life's Hidden Power* writes, "Some people have placed too much emphasis on prophecy; their minds have run rampant on the subject, and they have given themselves over to an unregenerate form of "guessing" to weird predictions and prophetic fantasies. Taking advantage of a natural desire to look around the corner of the day after tomorrow, many "prophets" have become profiteers. This abuse of prophecy has arisen out of a disuse of prophecy; so many teachers and preachers have shied away from the subject that they have left their poor congregations without any standards of interpretation that are either sane, scholarly or scriptural, and their people have become easy prey to those wild cults of prophecy which have spawned in a vacuum existing only because the church has not been willing to deal with the problem in a sensible and scholarly fashion."

Before we look then at Peter's interpretation of prophecy let me share with you 3 basic rules of interpretation, which if followed will keep you from many perversions of God's Word.

1. The New Testament interprets the Old Testament. Then New Testament fulfills, modifies and eliminates much of the Old Testament. Nothing in the Old Testament is now applicable that contradicts the New Testament, or is incompatible with God's final revelation in Christ.
2. Systematic passages interpret the incidental. It is by neglecting this principle that the Pharisees perverted God's Word. They exaggerated the incidental and ignored the essential. They were preoccupied with triviality. God's Word deals with great themes, and so it is poor stewardship of time and thought to major on minors.
3. Didactic passages interpret the symbolic. When an author is teaching and following a line of reasoning to bring you to a definite conclusion, that kind of passage is always superior to one where the symbolism may be mysterious, and where the author is conveying an impression by poetic language and verbal picture drawing. This principle is basic in Peter's sermon, for he is using prophecy to show a very specific teaching. He is following a logical pattern, and what he is saying is so clear that his conclusions must be followed in the interpretation of any other passage where the same theme is covered.

All of the passages about the Messiah setting on the throne of David are to be seen in the light

of Peter's sermon. If Peter is right and the prophecies were literally fulfilled in Christ's ascension, then it follows that we do not look for this in the future, for Jesus has already taken the throne and reigns now. If we argue that there is to be a second fulfillment then we minimize the central theme of the Gospel. We then minor on a theme that none of the New Testament writers say anything about. Peter's appeal to Jews was that Christ is on the throne now, and that He is Lord and Messiah. He never spoke of any future taking of the throne, for that would negate his whole argument that all was now fulfilled. In other words, to appeal to a Jew with the hope that some day Jesus will reign in Jerusalem is to ignore the greater fact that He reigns now, and that they need to bow to Him now or not be a part of the messianic kingdom. Let's follow Peter's argument to this conclusion.

In verse 22 Peter addresses the men of Israel with respect, and he does not begin by asserting his conclusion as he would have before Pentecost. The Holy Spirit has given Peter wisdom, and so now he knows that devout Jews can only be won by clear and well founded explanations of Scripture. Let's remember this group to whom Peter spoke was not a group of pagans and skeptics, but devout men out of every nation who accepted the Old Testament as the Word of God. They were already believers, but had just not yet accepted Jesus as their Messiah. Peter's task was to show them that He was indeed the Messiah, and if he could convince them they would certainly believe. Peter knew now that in fishing for men the net of the Word was essential and must be used not to coerce and compel, but to convince. He starts, therefore, on a level where all can agree, which is one of the basic principles of persuasion.

Peter refers to Jesus of Nazareth, a man approved of God among you. He does not start by declaring Him to be the Son of God from glory, but that man from Nazareth, which they all knew had done marvelous miracles. Being devout men they were likely of the same opinion as Nicodemus who came to Jesus and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God, for no man can do these miracles that you do except God be with him." These men at Pentecost were also believers in Christ's miracles, for it was impossible to deny them, and Peter says that it was God doing these miracles through him, as you yourselves know.

In verse 23, having brought them to an awareness of just how obvious it was that this man Jesus was a man of God, he goes on to shock them concerning their treatment of him. He declares before hand, however, that God's plan was not ruined by their folly. On the contrary, it was all a part of God's plan. Nothing is lost, for God used their evil to accomplish His goal, but that does not in any way justify their evil, and they are still guilty. Peter says everything took place by the definite plan and foreknowledge of God. It was no accident or after-thought in God's plan. Gordon in his Quiet Talks On Jesus says that if the Jews would have accepted Jesus as the Messiah the cross would not have been necessary. This is rather meaningless, for it is like saying if the world was flat it wouldn't be round. God foresaw the cross from the beginning, and it is less than useless to speculate on what would be if what was, was not. Jesus came to die, for God foresaw that the false expectations of the Jews would lead to His crucifixion. Jesus knew also, and He submitted to their folly knowing that by this means He could redeem all who would otherwise be lost.

God's foreknowledge is the key to understanding everything. If you could know exactly what move your opponent was going to make on a checkerboard you could so plan your strategy so that all of his moves would be to your advantage. You could also force him at gunpoint to make the moves that would be to your advantage, but this would be meaningless to win that way. God does not use the method of force and compel men to do evil, and then damn them for doing so. He

foresees the evil and then acts so as to use it for His plan. Men are still held accountable for their evil, for they did it voluntarily and not by force. God knew that Judas was going to betray His Son, but God did not force him to do so. It was his own evil motive that made him do it, and he was held responsible, even though it accomplished what God wanted to accomplish. In Luke 22:22 we read, “And truly the Son of man goes as it was determined, but woe unto that man by who he is betrayed.” God can use the evil of men for His ends, but they are still guilty of evil, for they were not forced to do it, but chose to do it freely.

These devout men that Peter spoke to did not kill Jesus directly, but their leaders used the Romans to do their dirty work. The Romans were not under the law, and in this sense they are called lawless men. The Romans drove the actual nails that killed Christ, but Peter says they were only used by the Jews. Modern Jewish writers often try to put most of the blame on the Romans, but the facts of the New Testament are clear, and the burden of guilt falls on Israel. God goes to the cause. If you bribe a man to do a crime for you, the law holds you as guilty as the one you bribed. God sees that the Roman soldiers never would have crucified Jesus if they were not compelled by the mob of Jews who pressured Pilate.

None of this justifies any anti-Semitism, since these Jews accepted Christ as Messiah and were forgiven. This is the message of the church to the Jews. It is not bad news that you are condemned because of the cross, but it is good news that prophecy has been fulfilled and that Christ is the Messiah. No Jew is held accountable today for the death of Jesus. All people are equally guilty, but also, all are equally free to receive the forgiveness of sin which He purchased on the cross.

4. PENTECOSTAL RESULTS Based on Acts 2:37f

A pastor was telling his visiting grandchildren a fascinating bedtime story. They listened to him breathlessly, but when he was finished one of them took a deep breath and said, “Grandpa, was that a true story, or were you just preaching?” This attitude could be learned by a child in contemporary Christianity because preaching has been degraded as being powerless today. Many churches have played down the preaching ministry and have increased the role of liturgy. The intelligent unbeliever finds this hard to distinguish from paganism, and so they dismiss the organized church as irrelevant in our society. It is hard to argue with them, for they are right. If the church does not have anything to offer but form, it will never change lives. God has ordained that the power of the church would come through proclamation of truth and not performance of rights.

Right from the first we see that the Word of God was the center of attraction, and it was through the foolishness of preaching that the church multiplied and spread. Peter at Pentecost preached a persuasive sermon on how Jesus had fulfilled Old Testament prophecy, and of how He now reigned on the throne of David as Lord and Christ. The logic and eyewitness testimony of the 120 was more evidence than any Jew could ignore, and so when Peter finished they responded in great number with belief.

Several weeks earlier Peter wielded a metal sword and succeeded in cutting off a man’s ear, but now by the Sword of the Spirit he had penetrated thousands of ears and caused them to respond to God. Here is the power of truth over the power of force. Our primary task is to persuade men by the power of truth. The situation at Pentecost was unique and the opportunity it presented. We can

see why God planned for the Holy Spirit to come upon them in power just at this time. The cross was fresh in everyone's mind. The news of the resurrection would have spread everywhere. Jews would have many questions as to the meaning of recent history. When Peter explained the meaning of it all, they were stricken in their conscience. They stood self-condemned as guilty of high treason against God.

Peter didn't even give an invitation. There does not appear to be an invitation given anywhere in the early church. People were so moved by the Holy Spirit that they cried out for conversion. When men saw the power of God, as did the Philippian jailer, they cried out, "What must I do to be saved?" So it was at Pentecost, and there was no need for singing 5 stanzas of a hymn as they were being urged to come. They believed and stood guilty for killing their own Messiah. We cannot imagine the mixed emotions that must have gone through the crowd that day. They had fear at what they had done, and yet great joy because of the offer of forgiveness in Christ.

In verse 38 Peter did not say that you cannot do anything, but that it is all by faith. Just by faith never implies an inactive part played by the justified. Man does need to respond to God in obedience. Action is essential, and so Peter gives them instructions. First they were to repent. This means that repentance is an act of the will. It is not just the emotion of feeling sorry. A Sunday School teacher asked what repent meant, and a little boy said, "Feeling sorry for your sins." A little girl responded, "No, its being sorry enough to quit." She was right, for repentance can never be fulfilled by an emotion alone. There must be an act of the will by which one turns from course of action or attitude to another, which they recognize to be God's will. The action Peter urges them to take is to be baptized. Some of these may have already been baptized by John the Baptist, but here it is to be in the name of Jesus Christ. In other words, prove your belief in Jesus as Lord and Messiah by a public baptism in His name.

In this unique historical situation the repentance and act of baptism was really necessary for the forgiveness of their sins. They could only be released from the guilt of killing their Messiah by a commitment of their lives to Him. Baptism was the required method of making that commitment, and breaking with the Jewish official position which rejected Jesus as Messiah. We can see how the act of baptism was essential to forgiveness, for to refuse would be to doubt that He was the Messiah. It would be an unwillingness to identify yourself as His servant. The symbol and the reality were so close here as to be inseparable. One could not really repent and accept Christ and yet refuse to be baptized, for baptism was a sign of the sincerity of your faith. It was a definite mark of distinction between the believing and unbelieving Jews.

Under a similar setting today the same pattern ought to be followed, but usually it is not. On the mission field people are often instructed for a year or two before they are baptized. We also have a brief waiting period for training. Is this a departure from the New Testament pattern? Not at all, for we just do not have the same setting. The Jews that Peter spoke to were devout Jews who believed the Bible to be the Word of God. They were trained and prepared to live a godly life. They already loved the Word, and they had an established life of prayer and worship. It was logical and natural for them to be baptized and accepted as members of the church in the very hour that they believed in Christ and accepted Him as Lord.

No one can be so blind as to suppose the same thing makes sense when dealing with those who know nothing of the Word of God, and who have lived in sin and corruption. To baptize them on

the spot just as these devout Jews were would be to forsake reason. If a person comes to me and reveals he has a mature faith and wants to take a stand for Christ, I do not hesitate to baptize them. But if they come out of a background with no knowledge and no experience of living a godly life, they need instruction before they are baptized. To apply all that happened in the New Testament today with no regard to the changes in circumstances leads to unreasonable practices. These people were already committed to the one true God and living in obedience to His revelation. That is just not the case with many who come to Christ in our day, and so our practice must fit the new situation.

Peter concludes this verse about them receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. This is what was lacking to them as devout people of God. By receiving Christ as their Messiah, and by being baptized in His name, they would enter into the new covenant of God, which was not just external law, but internal, and written on the heart. There is no greater illustration anywhere in the Bible of how old Israel became the New Israel. Call it spiritualizing, or whatever you will, here we have God's children of the Old Testament becoming His children of the New Testament. To make this doubly clear let us keep in mind that these devout Jews were already saved people. They were not hell bound sinners storing up the wrath of God for the day of judgment. They were the cream of the crop of God's faithful children gathered on Pentecost in obedience to God, and to worship God.

If you assume that all of these devout Jews were lost people, then you are denying that God had a plan of salvation for the Old Testament saints. Friends and relatives of these very people had been dying as devout Jews all through the life of Jesus. Are we to suppose that they all died and were lost, or are we to suppose that, like all the faithful of the past, they were saved by God's grace? I do not doubt for a minute that they were saved. Joseph died before the cross, and we cannot doubt that he was saved. Many devout Jews may have never heard of the cross and the resurrection, but they would be saved as God's children under the Old Testament covenant. The reason I stress this is so that we might see clearly that these first converts to the church were already God's people of Israel. It was the faithful of the old covenant becoming, along with the 120 Christian Jews, the children of the New Covenant. If anyone can look at this and deny that the church is the New Israel by calling it spiritualizing, then no amount of evidence would convince them.

If the church is not New Israel, then what did these Jews do by accepting Christ? Since they were already children of Israel, and they were already God's covenant people, did they forsake that distinction, and cease to be Israel? God's chosen were receiving His final and ultimate revelation to Israel. They became the rejuvenated Israel with Christ as their Messiah king on the throne of David. They fulfilled God's intention for Israel all along, and they became the people through whom He would bring good news to all the world. The Great Commission was given to Jews, and it was carried out by the Jews of the early church. This view is rejected by some in order to maintain a system which separates Jews and Gentiles, and has two distinct goals for them in God's plan. I see three thousand children of Israel becoming three thousand Christians, and by receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit they became the New Israel under the New Covenant.

In verse 39 Peter says the promise was for them and their children. What could be more obvious? They were God's people receiving God's promise. The promise of God to make a New Covenant with Israel is fulfilled. Peter is addressing Jews and is thinking of Jews, for he has not yet been persuaded himself that Gentiles are equally included as heirs of this promise. God had to teach him this, and so we can assume that Peter is here referring to Israel. Peter did not doubt that Gentiles could be saved, for that was true even in the Old Testament, but he doubted if they could be

saved without first becoming Jews.

In verse 40 we see that Peter's sermon was not over, but he was already getting a response. He had much more to say. Here was a layman and a fisherman instructing devout Jews, some of whom had been far better students of the Word than he had been. We see how the Holy Spirit had given him enlightenment. Peter is persuading them to come apart from Judaism, which had become corrupted. The Old Israel was about to collapse, and they are to get out before they go down with it.

In verse 41 we see that those who received were baptized. This implies that some did not, and they would continue to trust in the Old Covenant. There is much debate over this baptism. Was it immersion, sprinkling or pouring? Many scholars argue that there was not enough water in Jerusalem to immerse 3000 people in one day. I just assume they were immersed, but there is no evidence of it except the meaning of the Greek word. I see no reason to question it, for those who doubt it have no evidence in their favor either. We do not know how it was done that day. In one day Peter persuaded more Jews to believe in Jesus as the Messiah than Jesus himself convinced in 3 years of preaching. Jesus said His disciples would do greater things than He did, and here is the fulfillment of that. The results of Pentecost were amazing, and it had lasting effects for the rest of history. That was a unique and unrepeatable event of history. We cannot duplicate it, but we do need the same power of the Holy Spirit to work effectively in our new circumstances to produce the same Pentecostal results.

5. LAYMAN AND EVANGELISM Based on Acts 8:1-13

Sirhan Sirhan, the convicted slayer of senator Robert Kennedy, had considerable opportunity to be saved. From the time when he was 12 years old he went to Protestant, fundamental, evangelical Baptist Sunday Schools and churches in Pasadena. He was not impressed with the Gospel, however, but was impressed rather with the indifference of Christians. They were thoughtless, careless, irreverent, and clearly did not take their Christianity seriously. So this Jordanian boy said to himself, "It can't be very important," and so he dropped out. History is filled with notorious criminals, dictators, and kings of evil who once were youth in the church where they could have been redeemed and molded for the glory of God. Some examples of this are Marx, Hitler, and Mussolini.

In a very literal sense the church can be a curse to mankind by failing to do its task. When the church is careless and indifferent to the task of evangelism, which includes bringing people, not just to a decision for Christ, but to discipleship and loyalty to His church, it can do more harm than good. Arthur C. Archibald in his book *New Testament Evangelism* writes, "In America, when 5 thousand Southern Baptist churches, 4 thousand Southern Methodist churches, 3 thousand Northern Methodist churches, 2 thousand Northern Baptist churches, 3 thousand Presbyterian churches, report that in a whole year they did not have a single convert, is it not time for all leaders of Christianity to arouse and search for the cause of sterility?"

There is a problem, not just in the world, but in the church. All of the changes in the world would not hinder the church if it was responding in obedience to Christ. Jesus is not so inadequate that He cannot cope with the world's developments. The problem is that His people are not open to receiving His wisdom and power. Some years back the Archbishop of Canterbury sent a letter to his clergy suggesting that they meet him for a quiet day in London. One of them replied, "Your grace, in my church we do not need a quiet day, but an earthquake."

Sometimes it takes an earthquake to get Christians broken loose from their rigid rut of non-involvement. This is what happened to the early church. Chapter 8 of Acts begins with an earthquake of persecution. It proved to be an example of, "Blessed are the persecuted," however. For as verse 4 says, "They who were scattered went preaching the Word." The detail that is of great interest here is that verse 1 says they were all scattered except the Apostles. Why they could stay and not have to flee I am not sure, but the value of this was that the lay Christians had to be witnesses. It was a matter of sink or swim, and they began to swim and spread the good news wherever they went.

It is one of the most agreed upon factors in the world today among Christian leaders that layman must get into the act of evangelism for the show to go on. The church dies whenever it fails to stimulate an adequate birth rate through evangelism. Whenever the church gets leadership centered it tends to become a mechanical institution rather than a vital living organism. The church is the body of Christ, and not the machine of Christ. To put it plainly, a clergy centered church tends to lose its evangelistic nature. In the early church every Christian was a witness, and they considered it a duty to win others to Christ. The sheep gave birth to sheep, and no one expected the shepherds to give birth to all the sheep. Men who have been successful in evangelism have had one common factor, and that is a group of layman who were soul-winners.

Protestants are plagued with the idea which has carried over from the Catholic church where all authority centers in one man, and all worship centers around the man at the altar. Salvation, forgiveness, etc., all come from the ministry of the one man. The Reformation helped men to recover the Priesthood of all believers, but most Protestants do not take it seriously. They still feel that the professional pastor or evangelist is the key to evangelism. To be effective we must decentralize our concept of the church and go back to the democratic view in which every member is of equal standing before God, and has equal responsibility to be a soul-winner.

Leighton Ford, vice president and associate evangelist of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, has written one of the best books on evangelism called *The Christian Persuader*. In it he confirms what we have been saying, and he backs it up with facts. Here is one of his paragraphs: "The Latin American Mission made a study of the fastest-growing movements in their field and found them to be three: The Communists, the Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Pentecostal Churches. Then they analyzed these movements to find their common denominator. Was it their message? Obviously not.....Finally they came up with this proposition: The growth of any movement is in direct proportion to its ability to mobilize its entire membership for continuous evangelistic action."

No movement, Christian or non-Christian, can endure and make progress with professionals only. Layman must be scattered everywhere sharing the Gospel as was the case in the early church. Harnack, the historian, says, "When the church won its greatest victories in the early days in the Roman Empire, it did so not by teachers or preachers or Apostles, but by informal missionaries."

This is the only way the church can ever fulfill the Great Commission. Leighton Ford has figured out that just to stay even at the rate the world population is growing we must win 57 thousand to Christ everyday. That is about 2,400 every hour, or 40 every minute. This means that if every professional were doing even fair in soul winning we would be losing. The hope of the world is Christ, but whether or not the world hears of this hope depends to a large extent upon the witnessing of the average Christian.

Notice in verse 5 the message of evangelism. Philip proclaimed to them Christ. Later in verse 35 when talking to the Ethiopian we read that he preached unto him Jesus. The unique message of Christian evangelism is the good news of Jesus Christ. If we know of His coming, His life, His death for man's sin, His resurrection, and His coming again, we have all the good news that all the greatest preachers in history have had. This is the power of God unto salvation to all who believe. It is our responsibility to see that people become aware of what God has done in Christ, and that He offers them forgiveness and pardon for their sin. Some poet has put it-

Pardon-from an offended God!
Pardon-for sins of deepest dye!
Pardon-bestowed through Jesus's blood!
Pardon-that brings the rebel nigh!

It is no wonder that such good news would be heeded by the Samaritans, as we read in verse 6. The wonder is why it is not heeded by so many today. If this is the power of God unto salvation, we can only conclude that if you are being saved, it is because so few are coming under its power. The vast majority of Gospel preaching goes into the ears of those who already know Jesus. The vast majority of Gospel literature is read by Christians. For those who do hear it, it is often not seen as good news, but as nonsense. Even as a Christian I hear the Gospel presented in such a distasteful way that it makes me glad there is more than one conception of what it is to be a Christian. It no doubt makes some glad they are not Christians at all.

Many youth leave the church because the Gospel is not good news to them, but a burden and a kill-joy. Many find the Bible dull, boring, and irrelevant. The problem is not with the Gospel and the Bible, for both are exciting and as relevant to life as oxygen is to fire. The problem is that Christians today do not have the kind of authority that Philip had. Philip could command attention when he preached the Gospel. He had power, and he demonstrated it in love, compassion, and healing. The authority he had was obvious. It was visible and practical. That is what it takes to reach people in any age.

We live in a day when all authority is suspect. People have heard so much propaganda that unbelief is a part of everyone's makeup. There are so many gospels that I disbelieve. The fantastic claims of what certain products will do for your life, hair, clothes, or carpet are so unrealistic, and everyone knows it. The result is a general skepticism about all claims to something really great. There are a multitude of miracle products available, and so many spectacular events that supernatural claims of the Gospel hardly even stand out anymore. When the non-Christian does hear the claims of the Gospel he is already hardened because he has had a half dozen miracle products fail to do the job they claim they can do. It is not good news, but questionable news. He will have to see the Gospel in life before he will consider it as authentic. This means the Christian witness is under more pressure than ever to be truly Christ-like. We are epistles read of all men, and

if we read poorly we will be as ineffective as a bald man trying to sell miracles hair growing tonic.

To be effective witnesses we must go deeper ourselves into the experience of the grace of God. We are uncomfortable when confronted with our duty to be evangelists. It is because it calls for spirituality, and nothing is harder for people than the effort to be truly spiritual. Henry Drummond in his book *The New Evangelism* wrote, "All formal religions are efforts to escape spirituality. It matters not what the form is-ritual, idols or doctrines, the essence of all is the same-they are devices to escape spiritual worship." He gave the example of the moods we get in where we would rather walk 20 miles than have family worship. It is so hard to really be spiritual. It calls for such dedication and nearness to Christ that the average Christian just doesn't feel he can do it. They look for another and easier way, but they don't work.

Verse 9 tells of Philip's contact with Simon the Sorcerer who was very impressed with the power of Philip, and that of Peter and John. He wanted this power also and he offered money for it, but was sharply rebuked. We need to be rebuked also if we think we can be powerful witnesses by means of some mechanical shortcut. It will cost us much to be soul-winners, but the return is a hundred fold more precious. Let us, therefore, be determined that whatever other do we will pay the price it cost to be personally prepared to witness to someone for Christ.

As a young person Charles Darwin believed in the authority of the Bible, but he was never brought to a personal commitment to Christ. In later life he said, "Disbelief crept over me at a very slow rate, but was at last complete." The result was that a whole branch of science developed in opposition to the biblical revelation. Carl Marx went to a Christian school for 5 years. At age 17 he wrote, "The history of the nation teaches us the necessity of union with Christ." He was never brought to experience this union for himself, however, and was slowly led into atheism. The result was that half the world came under the godless system of Communism. The failure of the church is the curse of the world.

When a ship that had been in the moth balls for 15 years was being cut up for scrap, to the surprise of many, and to the embarrassment of many, workmen found in the hull 522 mail bags containing thousands of undelivered letters. No doubt, many contained messages of value, words of love and comfort, and messages that could have changed the course of many lives. But all these years they remained undelivered. How many of God's messages to a needy world get locked up in the church. There are messages that brings hope, love, health and wealth to a desperate and dying world, and yet the church often becomes a dead letter office filled with undelivered mail.

How can we be more effective in witnessing? We must first of all be honest and face up to the fact that the excuses we give are not valid. We say that we have not been trained. Most people have never been trained to testify in court either, but if they see a crime or accident they become a witness. A witness is not a trained person, but one who is qualified on the basis of their personal experience. As John said, "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you." If Jesus has forgiven us and given us assurance of salvation, then let us bare witness to the fact. "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so."

All the training and knowledge you can get is an asset in persuading people, but the essence of Christian witnessing is telling others what Christ has done for you. Paul did this three times in the book of Acts. His own experience was his primary witnessing tool. No one can refute it. It gives

the stamp of reality and validity to your concern for the person you confront. No one can train you to use your best tool, for only you can share your own experience. Because the average Christian seldom does share their own testimony, they seldom see anyone else touched for Christ.

We share everything else in life without training. Most women have not been trained to share recipes, but they get the job done quite effectively. Few are trained to give reports on travel or hunting adventures, but they can be quite effective in sharing their own experiences. We share many things that we find to be interesting. Our problem is not lack of training, but lack of faith that what we share can be effective. What we need is boldness and courage to share what we know and have experienced.

We need to realize that the layman has an advantage over a pastor when it comes to witnessing. The average layman has far more contact with the unsaved than does the average pastor. The pastors primary task is working with believers. Preaching is not the best means of evangelism, for most of the people in the church are already believers, and their need is for edification. The average layman just needs the boldness to begin.

Winston Churchill wrote an article on the happiness he found late in life through painting. He said that when he had gathered his brushes and paints around him for the first time he was afraid. He was positively afraid of the canvas. The thought of making the first splash of color upon the clean face of the canvas appalled him. While he was hesitating a friend came to visit and seeing his plight said, "What are you hesitating about? Let me have the big brush." He took it and splashed into the paint and made several strokes on the canvas, and this broke the spell. The fear of the canvas was gone. The world is a canvas, and we are the painters with a message of beauty to spread over that canvas. We need to break that spell that keeps us in a state where we do not act. We need to take the plunge and make that stroke that frees us from the bondage of fear. May God help each of you to make that stroke by sharing your faith with someone in the very near future.

6. AN ACT OF OBEDIENCE Based on Acts 8:26-40

Some of the best things in life can be so bad. It is somewhat shocking, but Lewis B. Smedes in his book *Caring and Commitment* points out that even commitment can be a bad thing. The purpose of the book is to get Christians more committed, but he points out the negative side of this very positive virtue. Albert Speer in his memoirs, *Inside The Third Reich*, tells of how he made a commitment to Hitler and spent most of his life devoting his brilliant talents to the building of his evil empire. It was blind commitment, and he never repented until it fell and he was forced to face his folly.

Just being committed is not itself good, for evil people are often totally committed to their awful goals. Nebuchadnezzar was tricked into committing himself to throw Daniel in the lion's den. He kept that commitment even when he realized it was folly. Herod did the same thing when he was forced to cut off the head of John the Baptist. He regretted his commitment, but he went ahead and did it anyway. Here were men who were committed to their commitments, and they would not alter their path even though it was costly and agonizing for them. This should be noble, but it was not. It was stupid. They did evil and violated their own conscience because they could not see that doing

what is right and good and God's will is more important than keeping commitments.

If you take a fork in the road and discover 5 miles later that you made a mistake, you do not say, "I have made a commitment to this way, and I'll stay on it wherever it goes." This is what the followers of Jim Jones did, and they followed him in drinking poison and the mass suicide. That was commitment alright, but it was also stupid. The wise person says, "When I make a commitment to the wrong way, and I see it as wrong, I go back and find the right way and forget my commitment." Commitments made in ignorance are not more important than truth. Commitments to what is bad are not more important than what is good.

Commitment is a conditional virtue. It is only good when the goal one is committed too is good. If the goal is bad, then the commitment to it is also bad, and it is a vice. The world is filled with committed people who are all the more evil because of their commitment. They are committed to that which is out of the will of God. We want to focus our attention on one of the most committed people in the Bible whom God honored in a very special way because he was so committed to what was good, right, and the will of God. He made commitment a virtue that God was so pleased with that God by special providence saw to it that he was brought into the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus Christ. God is committed to seek and to save those who are committed to finding the Way.

The Ethiopian Eunuch was a long way from home because he was committed to finding out about the God of Israel. We don't know who told him about the God of the Jews, but he had come all the way across Africa and the vast desert wasteland in order to get to Jerusalem to hear and see for himself, and to worship this God of Israel. He had also invested a sizable chunk of cash in purchasing a copy of the book of Isaiah. There were no printing presses, and so copies were made by hand, and the cost a great deal of money to purchase. This man had a hunger to know the will of God, and so he bought this expensive portion of the Word of God. There was so much he did not know, but he was committed to learn all he could about God.

God was so impressed with this man's commitment that he called Philip a way from a great revival in Samaria to take the Gospel to this one man crossing the desert. Philip was seeing great crowds come to Christ, and so great was the fruit of his labor that the Apostles in Jerusalem sent their two big guns-Peter and John-to check it out. It was amazing what was happening there and it was all happening through the labor of one who was not even an Apostle. Philip was not even ordained as a Pastor. He was a layman who had been chosen as one of the first deacons of the church. He had the gift of preaching, however, and so when the problem with the widows being cared for had been solved, he took off preaching the Gospel, and God blest his ministry.

Then all of the sudden God called him out of the city to head for the barren desert. It does not make sense to the eye of man. Why leaves a thriving ministry to go to the wilderness? Philip was also a committed man, and so he did not question God. His goal was to obey God whether he could make sense of it or not, and so he just went. He had to act fast and obey immediately, for if he was not at the right place at the right time he would not ever meet this Ethiopian in his chariot. The whole thing called for precise timing, and it could never have happened without a committed layman like Philip who was committed to be where God wanted him to be, even if it looked more logical and important to be somewhere else.

The whole account is based on two people who are committed to knowing and doing the will of

God above all else. God can use such people to change lives and history. This passage is an ideal hunting ground for seeking New Testament insight into the significance of baptism. What do these two committed men teach us about baptism? First of all they teach us that it is an individual decision. The Ethiopian had obviously been told by Philip that after one receives Jesus as Savior they are to obey his command to be baptized. As soon as he saw water he said, "Why shouldn't I be baptized right here and now?" Philip could have said, "Because I am only one deacon. We have to get all the deacons together for a vote, or the Apostles must approve of it, or the church has to okay it. You can't just up and get baptized on the spur of the moment. There is a procedure that has to be followed. We have to wait to see if you are a sincere convert or not. We have to wait and see if your walk is as good as your talk."

Philip said none of these things. He simply went down into the water and baptized the man who had just been converted. Philip had no idea what kind of a life style this rich and powerful man had. He never asked if he had any plans to witness of his faith, or to send a tithe back to the church in Jerusalem. He just baptized him because the man wanted to obey Jesus. This is the New Testament pattern. Everybody in the New Testament who is baptized is baptized because they as individuals say that they want to obey Jesus as Lord. This is not a church decision, a deacon decision, or a board decision. It is an individual decision. It is a matter of freedom of choice.

Baptism is an act of obedience to Jesus who said to go into all the world and baptize in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was an act of obedience on Philip's part to baptize the Ethiopian and act of obedience on his part to be baptized. Because it is an individual choice there is no need for witnesses. When you get married you need witnesses, for it is not only a personal choice, but it has social implications and so society demands two witnesses. Baptism is between a man or woman and God. God alone is the witness, and so this Ethiopian was not asked to drive his chariot back to the nearest town where they could get a couple of witnesses. He never even got a baptism certificate. He got nothing but the personal satisfaction of obeying the final words of Jesus to his church before he ascended to heaven.

The next thing we see is that baptism is an informal experience. There was no special music, and no group gathered to put a stamp of approval on it. There was no special water heated to fit the bodies comfort. There was no special robe or any certificate to record the event. All of this has changed, and we have come along way from this day, but the fact remains that the Bible is our supreme authority for faith and practice. What we see in the book of Acts is to be our guide and not all of the traditions that we have attached to baptism. Every New Testament scene of baptism is one of informality. John the Baptist had people lined up by the hundreds as he dunked them in the Jordan. The Apostles and layman baptized 3000 on the day of Pentecost. It was on the spur of the moment as they responded to the Gospel. There was no preparation, but the people just entered the water as they were to be baptized.

Paul's conversion takes up many verses in Acts, but his baptism is only one line in Acts 9:18. It simply says that, "He got up and was baptized." There was no formal service called. It was just an act of obedience in an informal setting. There was no big deal made of it. It was his decision and it was a private matter that nobody else was asked to vote on. In Acts 10 Cornelius and his relatives and friends were baptized when Peter came to them. It was a spur of the moment act of obedience. When Lydia accepted Christ on the river bank she and her family were baptized right there. The Philippian jailer and his family were baptized in the middle of the night by Paul and Silas right after

his conversion. All the baptism we see were informal. They were not services, but just individual events where people made a choice to obey Jesus. There was never any official action or planning by any local church. It was all individual and informal.

The New Testament picture is like someone today visiting a family having fun in their backyard pool. The Gospel is shared and they say what hinders us from being baptized right now? According to the New Testament you should baptize them on the spot if that is what they choose to do. You don't have to be ordained to baptize another person. If you are a Christian you are under the orders of Jesus to go into all the world and baptize. It was not just the 12 who were to do this. This is the great commission to all Christians. The reason you never hear of lay people baptizing is because we have departed from the New Testament and have made baptism a church decision and a formal experience of conformity to the will of an organization. In the New Testament it could be done by anyone, anywhere, at any time, if that was their choice to obey Jesus.

I don't know how many hundreds of people I have baptized in my ministry, but I do know that only 4 of them were private and informal. They were individual choices carried out in very informal settings just like those of the New Testament. I am convinced that there would be many more people baptized if this was the rule and the exception. People would feel more free, and feel like it was an act of obedience to Christ. When it becomes a formal act of conformity to a church's policy, it is more like obedience to man rather than God. If people felt free, like the Ethiopian, just to say to any Christian they knew, "I feel like I ought to be baptized and obey Christ. Let's go to the river or lake, or to my pool in the back yard." And if Christian lay people felt more free to obey Christ and honor that request, we would very likely see more people obeying Christ.

I doubt if it can ever be changed back to New Testament days, for it is now so institutionalized. It would take a revolution to alter what is now tradition. It is not that tradition is all bad, or that the way we do it is in any way wrong. It is just not the way it was in the New Testament, and something has been lost of the individuality and the informality. Roger Williams founded the first Baptist church in America in Providence, Rhode Island in 1639. How did he become a Baptist in a land where there were no Baptist churches? He asked a Christian layman to baptize him. Then he baptized 10 others, and this began the Baptist church in America. The individuality and informality of the New Testament was still alive then.

By not following the biblical record the church has made a number of errors in their view of baptism. There was hardly any church that is fully biblical in their practice. Those who baptized babies neglect the fact that all the New Testament baptism were of people who made the choice to be baptized. It was an act of obedience, and not an act forced on them by others. A baby cannot make this choice, and so it has to be an act done for them by other wills than their own. This is not found in the Bible, but it is a tradition of men.

On the other hand, there were children baptized in the New Testament. You have the family of Cornelius, the family of Lydia, and the family of the Philippian jailer. We do not know how old any of them were, but they were old enough to say yes to Jesus and follow their parents in this act of obedience. Those who refused to let children be baptized for lack of maturity are not doing so with Scripture authority. All of these kids were baptized the very day they heard of Jesus. They had no class and no time to demonstrate their faith. All they had was belief, and on that basis alone they were baptized.

The church in the early centuries developed the idea that baptism was for only the very virtuous, and there was to be no sin in one's life after baptism. This led even famous Christians like Constantine to wait and be baptized on his death bed. It was fairly safe then that he could die without sinning. This foolish idea led to some tragic delays for youth. Augustine of Hippo begged to be baptized as boy, but his mother would not consent, for she felt he was immature and could certainly sin a great deal more in his life. She right, of course, and he became an awful sinner, for he reasoned that one should sin furiously in youth and get it out of the system, and then be baptized when he had his full. The church actually encouraged living a sinful youth by this false view of baptism. Augustine bitterly resented this when he became older and a committed Christian.

When I was a deacon in a Baptist church, we had a 4 year old girl come to us asking for baptism. She knew the Lord as her Savior, and she knew the Bible better than most. It was debated, but we did finally say okay. I am grateful we did, for the New Testament teaching makes this a principle: If a person is old enough to ask to be baptized, they are old enough to be baptized. It is not our job to figure out if they will be good Christians or not. In the New Testament we see people baptized who did not turn out to be good Christians. But that could not be the criteria for their being baptized or not. In this very chapter of our text we read of how Simon the Sorcerer was baptized in verse 13, and he followed Philip everywhere. Philip did not say follow me for a year, and if you are a good Christian I will baptize you. He baptized him on the basis of his profession of belief in Jesus with no other questions asked.

In the following verses we learn that he was a rotten Christian. He tried to buy the Holy Spirit with money, and Peter said to him, to the devil with you and your money." The English translation tones it down, but that is what Peter said in the Greek. In verse 21 Peter said to him, "You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God." In verse 23 he says, "You are full of bitterness and captive to sin." Why would Philip ever baptize a jerk like this? He was just using Christianity for what he could get out of it. He was wicked conniving man, and yet he was baptized. It was because he chose to be, and it was not anybody's right to say no to him and deny him baptism. It was not something that was evaluated and voted on. It was an individual choice, and if someone said they believe and want to be baptized, it was honored.

Obviously Simon was not benefitted by his choice. He had a lot of repenting and changing to do. But my point is, the New Testament does not reveal people being chosen for baptism. People chose it, for it is their individual decision. Once you depart from this principle you are out of New Testament territory and into man made tradition. You say it is harmless to have traditions, but the Christian church has often become a source of great evil by exalting their traditions over the Word of God. If you want to know why it is so hard to win Jews to Christ, just read the history of how the church forced hundreds of thousands of Jews to be baptized against their will. Gentiles by the millions have also been forced to be baptized against their will. One of the reasons Baptists came to America was because in Sweden they were forced to have their babies baptized by the state church.

Traditions have led to terrible abuses of baptism. It has been used by the church through history to control and manipulate people. In the Bible we see none of this. It is an individual choice, and an informal experience. This Ethiopian had no church to go to, and so it had nothing to do with church membership. He just got out of the water and headed home with no commitment to any church, but only to Christ as his Savior. His baptism was an end in itself as an act of obedience. It was not a means to some other end such as becoming a member of the church. He went on his way rejoicing,

for he had obeyed his new found Lord. It was an end in itself with no other goal but that of being obedient to Christ. That is what baptism is. It is an act of obedience to Christ.

Everything can become a tradition, and I don't know if we can ever get back to the biblical experience where people are saved and obey Christ in an informal setting. The woman of Samaria was saved by the well. The penitent thief was saved on the cross. Lydia was saved by the river bank. The Philippian jailer was saved in a jail. Paul was saved on the dusty road to Damascus, and this Ethiopian was saved in a chariot in the desert. People came to Christ in informal settings and they obeyed Christ in baptism in informal settings. Maybe we can never get back to New Testament practices completely, but we must always maintain the New Testament ideal which makes baptism a personal act of obedience.

7. DORCUS THE DOER Based on Acts 9:36-43

Grace Synder was born in 1885 and grew up on a lonely prairie in Nebraska. She lived in a sod house that cost about twelve dollars to build. Water was scarce, and so they used their Saturday night bath water to water the flowers. There was not much to do, and so Grace took up quilting. She started with a quilt for her doll. As a teenager she accepted Christ, and was baptized in a pond where the ice had been cleared away. She went on to become a teacher, and marry a cowboy, but she was always quilting. In fact, she became the Queen of the Quilters in her state, and one of the most skilled in all the world. Her quilts are featured in leading quilt magazines, and are flown to quilt fairs all over the country. A museum in Lincoln, Nebraska has a Grace Synder room where her handiwork is on display. She was a godly woman who became famous by means of her creative skill.

When it comes to winning prizes for creativity with thread and needle, women have it sewed up, and we want to focus our attention on a woman who sewed herself right into the fabric of biblical history. Dorcas is her name, and her needle was her fame. Here is a biblical woman who is so unusual because there is nothing unusual about her. Most of the women of the Bible got into its sacred pages because they were married to famous men, or because they had famous sons, or because they did some great and unusual deed. Dorcas is one of the few women who became famous for simply doing a womanly thing, which was sewing. She is also famous for being the only adult woman in the Bible who was raised from the dead, but this never would have happened had she not been so faithful in using her needle to meet the basic human need for clothing.

She was not a multi-talented female. She was just a simple loving woman who used the gift she had to be a blessing to others. There are three things that stand out in our text that I want to focus on. The first is-

I. THE GOOD WORKS OF HER LIFE.

She is not portrayed as a brilliant and learned woman who could speak before groups, and lead the women's Bible study. She is portrayed simply as one who is always doing good and helping the poor. "I was naked and you clothed me," is the testimony of the poor about Dorcas. Those who

otherwise would have been cold were kept warm because of her labor and generosity. The poor got a taste of God's grace through her, for none had any claim on her. She freely gave of her time and talent to meet their need for clothing. God was the first to provide clothing for sinners in the Garden of Eden. Dorcas was carrying on this ministry of grace.

Because of her example Dorcas societies are now world wide, and women by the thousands have provided clothing for the needy. Only in eternity will we ever begin to know the full impact of this one woman's good works. She is an outstanding example to both men and women of the importance of good works in the Christian life. For millions of Christians this is the only way they can make their lives count for the kingdom of God.

Everyone who knows the Gospel knows that we are saved, not by our own works, but by the work of Christ on the cross. Salvation comes by faith in His finished work for us. Good works are not a means for our salvation, but they are an expression of our salvation. If we truly trust in Christ, and love Him as Lord, then we will obey His command to love our neighbor as our self. This can only be obeyed in a meaningful way by good works. That is why Paul writes in Titus 3:8, "Affirm constantly, that they which have believed in God might be careful to maintain good works." Paul implies that it is easy for Christians to forget the importance of good works. We need to be constantly reminded not to become weary in well doing.

Arthur W. Pink, the famous Bible expositor, said, "This expression 'good works' is found in the New Testament in the singular or plural number no less than 30 times; yet from the rarity with which many preachers use, emphasize, and enlarge upon them, many of the hearers would conclude that these words occur but once or twice in all the Bible." The reason for this neglect is that they don't want people to think they can be saved by doing good. To avoid this the church has produced millions of Christians who feel they can be good Christians and not a thing. The poet rightly questions this emphasis.

If a man would be a soldier
He'd expect of course to fight;
And he couldn't be an author
If he didn't try to write.
So it isn't common logic,-
Doesn't have the right true ring-
That a man, to be a Christian,
Doesn't have to do a thing.

The lack of emphasis on good works is what leads Christianity to become a spectator religion. Jesus meant for all believers to be involved in the ministry of meeting human need. The good news about good works is that everybody can do them. Those who feel ungifted can still do many works of kindness. Vance Havner, the great American evangelist, wrote, "We ought not to belittle the do-gooders. Our Lord went about doing good. Good works are not enough, but any faith that is without good works is not enough either. Some of our ultra-conservative Bible students could mix in a little do-gooding to great profit. A cup of cold water in His name sometimes means more than a gallon of theology."

A college student who is late for class said, "I am sorry I am late, but my watch was wrong. I

guess I should not have faith in this watch." The professor replied, "What you need in that watch is not faith, but good works." That is what we need in the Christian life as well. Someone said that faith without works is about as powerful as a butterfly's hiccup. James went even further and said, "Faith without works is dead." It is true that we must warn the self-righteous who hope to pull themselves into heaven by their own works, that salvation is in trusting, and not in trying. But let's not keep telling this to those who are already saved by trusting, for to them good works and trying are the key to the growing Christian life and eternal reward.

The choice is not to either trust or to try, but rather, there is the third choice which is the uniting of the other two, and both trust and try. Depending on God to guide and the Holy Spirit to produce fruit, you'd give your life to deeds and actions that are beneficial to others. As Meg Woodson says in her attempt to get Christians back to the stream of good works, "Paul did not say I can't, but Christ can. He said, I can through Christ. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

She warns Christians to get away from the defeatism of constantly teaching Christians they can't do anything. This leaves them with the excuse when nothing is done that Christ must not have willed it. This is a cop out of our responsibility. Good works happen because we choose to obey Christ. They don't happen because we choose to wait and see if Christ will do them without our efforts. All we will learn is that He won't.

We are always in danger of taking the exception and making it the rule. In the Old Testament the Jews fought many battles. In one against Moab God said in II Chron. 20:17, "You will not need to fight in this battle; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the Lord on your behalf." God won that battle for them. Had they taken this as the pattern for all their battles, and just came to watch, they would have been destroyed. God in His sovereignty does much without us, but His basic pattern never changes. He expects us to put forth energy, and use all our gifts and talents to be channels of His grace in the world.

Without women who did good works the world would be without so much that has been the salt of the earth. Examples are near endless of widows who have devoted their lives to Christian service. Henrietta Feller lost her husband and child to death. She decided to leave Switzerland and go to Canada to be a missionary. She was robbed and persecuted, and suffered greatly, but she persisted in love. She started a school in 1836. A Baptist pastor in Montreal helped her raise funds for a building. It grew to over 300 people, and its graduates have gone into all the world as missionaries. Thank God for the Dorcas's of history who have been doers, and by their good works have made it a world with much good news to balance out the bad. Next let's consider-

II. THE GRIM WASTE OF HER DEATH.

We are obviously in early church history here, for no one on the scene, and not even Peter, came up with the modern thought that the Lord must have taken her because her work was done. This is a popular idea based on human feelings and speculation, and not on the revelation of God. The work of Dorcas is never done, and even when she died the second time and entered the eternal world for good, her work was not done. The work of doing good and helping the poor is a never ending task.

When Dorcas got so sick death came as an enemy, and not a friend. She still had so much

potential for service. This is what makes death an enemy. It robs us of life and the potential to do good. You cannot help but feel that it is such a waste when a young person, who is full of life and enthusiasm, is suddenly removed by death. It is a terrible waste, and the loss of Dorcas was just such an event. Her life was such a blessing to others, and now she is gone and the blessing of her hand will cease. Not everyone leaves a gap when they die. Some are ready to die, and their work really is done. They have given all they can give, and they are ready to depart and be with Christ. If this was the only role of death in life, to remove us when we are through with our tasks, then death would be a friend and servant, and not a negative thing at all. But death does not limit its role to those who are ready. It is constantly touching the unready as well, and taking those who have only begun to serve.

I knew a young 33 year old pilot for Mission Aviation Fellowship who died along with two other missionaries in a plane crash in Indonesia. He was a very talented and dedicated young man. He had many years of service for the kingdom in him yet, but he crashed and died. I thought of what a waste it was. Some might say the Lord called him home because his work was done, but this is superficial to me, for now they need another pilot to do what he was doing. There was nothing finished about his work at all. This type of thing has happened to many missionaries, and those in other kinds of Christian service.

Dorcas is dead, but she was not done with her task. Joppa was a seaport from which many sailors left never to return. Their ships would go down in storms, or be dashed to pieces on the rocks. The result was a city with many widows and children without support. Dorcas loved to serve them, and the need for this was endless. You don't hear Peter coming on the scene and saying her work was done. Instead, he does what he has never done before, and will never do again, as far as we have any record. He will pray that Dorcas be allowed to live again and continue her unfinished work. Peter must have said what a waste as he listened to the widows sharing how much Dorcas meant to them as they wept and showed him the garments she had made for them and their children. Peter was moved by this, like Jesus was moved by the scene at the tomb of Lazarus, and he vowed in his heart he would seek with all his might to reverse this tragic waste.

The lesson for us is not to pray for the dead to be raised. As we noted, that prayer has only been answered for a couple of deaths in all of biblical history. To call it a long shot is an understatement. The value I see in being honest about the wastefulness of death is that it makes us take the battles of good and evil more serious. Christians have a tendency to try and incorporate death into the family of God's servants. They try to pretend it is really no robber, but only a mysterious friend. This kind of thinking makes the enemies of the kingdom to be children of light. Those who killed James and Stephen were really doing the will of God then, for their work was supposedly over, and God was calling them home. If this was so, then there is no such thing as evil, for everything then is of God, and is good.

Such thinking as this makes the Christian very superficial and unrealistic about life, and about the real battle of good and evil. It is far better to face reality and recognize that death is an enemy, and that it is an enemy that sometimes wins a battle even if it cannot win the war. Christians are cut down before they have finished their work, and it is a tragic waste. Had Dorcas not been selected to be the one woman of history to illustrate the resurrection power of Jesus, there would have been blessings lost that never would have been. But the good news is that though her work for Christ was not finished, the work of Christ for her was finished.

She was ready to die anytime, however, untimely and wasteful it may seem from the human perspective. She would walk with Christ in a beautiful white garment provided by His finished work on the cross. She would not lose by her untimely death, but the world would. That is why the Christians were weeping. It was not for her, but for themselves, for they lost one so precious and helpful to them. Peter does not rebuke their tears, nor is there any hint that they are out of line, for the fact is, the death of one whose life is a blessing to others is a waste of what is good and valuable, and we have a right to mourn such loss. The consolation is in the fact that the dead in Christ are with Christ, and as Paul says, that is far better.

Every Christian needs to be like Dorcas, and regardless of there is to do, and all of the unfinished service to perform, we must be ever ready to depart and be with Christ. You can only be ready by trusting in Christ as Savior. Dorcas was a woman of faith that worked. That must be our faith as well. We must ask Christ to come into our lives and be our Savior, and then be doers of His will to be ready for death. Then the worst that death can do is waste time, for eternity is safe in the Savior. Next let's consider-

III. THE GLORIOUS WITNESS OF HER RESURRECTION

Dorcas belongs to that very exclusive group of people that God has permitted to come back from the dead. There are only 7 of them besides Christ in all of the Bible. Some think there are possibly 8. The majority of them were young people. Elijah and Elisha each raised up a young boy in the Old Testament. Jesus raised up the 12 year old daughter of Jairus, and the young man who was the only son of the widow of Nain. Paul raised up the young man Eutychus who fell from the window. That makes 5 out of the 7 as teenagers or less. That means Lazarus and Dorcas were the only two adults in all of Bible history to be raised from the dead. One man and one woman, and both of them noted for one thing, and that was their loving relationship to others.

The fact that there is only one adult of each sex to have been raised speaks loud and clear that nobody has any basis to expect such an experience. All of the great men and women of biblical history died and were not brought back to life. Just before Dorcas died James and Stephen, who were outstanding leaders of the church, were martyred, and nobody even prayed for their resurrection. Death was accepted as the end of earthly service. My point is, Dorcas like Lazarus, was a very unique individual. God used these two people to bear a special witness to the world. In both cases there were many who believed in Christ because of their resurrection. Great fruit came into the kingdom because of their unique experience.

People were deeply impressed by the fact that God would give Dorcas new life. It was a confirmation of the Gospel. It not only showed that Christ can conquer death, but also that God does love people. What could be greater proof than the restoring to life one who could go on ministering to those who so desperately needed her help. The skeptics and the doubters were overwhelmed. They said, the God who gives back a Dorcas is indeed a God of love, and they submitted to the Lord whom she loved and served. It was the witness of her life before she died that made the witness of her resurrection so powerful. Had she not been a loving person who reached out to touch the lives of those around her, her resurrection would just be a spectacular event like magic. People would talk about it, but it would have made no difference to anyone's life.

There is no escaping the conclusion. The miracle of resurrection only had the power to move

people to Christ because the good works of Dorcus had already pointed them in His direction. Good works evangelism is a biblical reality, and many people come to Christ because of the good works of believers. Believers found joy, and unbelievers found Jesus because Dorcus the Doer was alive and well again. The sickness that killed her was healed, and she was back to work meeting the needs of people. The witness of her resurrection goes on to this day, and every May 25th there is a festive celebration of the anniversary of Dorcus by the Christians in that part of the world.

Dorcus was her Greek name, and it, like Tabitha her Aramaic name, means gazelle-a beautiful animal. Joppa, the city she lived in, means beautiful in the Hebrew. God chose a beautiful place to do a beautiful miracle for a beautiful woman who had devoted her life to doing beautiful deeds. This tells us something about what God loves, and about what true beauty really is. Edgar Guest portrays for us in poetry the message of the life of Dorcus.

The beauty of a lily and the beauty of a face
Make bright a gloomy corner and exalt the common place;
But there's nothing shines so brightly in this world of human need,
As the beauty and glory of a kind and thoughtful deed.

There are lovely things to look at-there's the blue shy and the sun And the hilltops in the
distance, and the works that men have done
And the best of God's creations, in this world of joy and smart,
And the helping hand of service and the big and generous heart.

There is beauty in a lily, and there's beauty in the hills,
There is beauty in the blossoms wet with dew the morning spills;
But the richer, lasting beauty which this world forever needs,
Through its days of tribulation, is the beauty of our deeds.

Dorcus was single, and we do not know if she ever was married. Her only family was the family she formed for herself by her labors of love. No single person ever needs to feel secondary in God's plan, for the job of doing good works is open to all equally. History would be emptied of so much of its joy without single women like Dorcus, Jane Addams, Francis Willard, Florence Nightingale, and numerous others that we may not recognize, but who are known to God, and to the millions of individuals who have been richly blessed by their good works. May God motivate all of us to meet needs by good deeds like Dorcus the Doer.

8. RACISM Based on Acts 10:28

George W. Gradle, a German psychiatrist, said that it is truer that our lives live us than that we live our lives. What he meant was that repression, early loyalties and prejudices can get such a grip on one's life that they compel one to be what he is. Once the attitude of racism, for example, gets into a person's mind it takes an act of God to cleanse a person and set them free from its clutches. Benjamin E. Mays in his book *Seeking To Be Christian In Race Relations* wrote, "It is probably easier to be Christian in any other area of life than it is in the area of race. Here the practice of the

Christian religion seems to break down most completely.”

Since the killing of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. I have witnessed the power of prejudice in the Christian life. I have seen Christian people openly acknowledge that hate rather than love is the strongest factor in determining their racial attitudes. If I was a black Christian listening to some of the conversations of white Christians within the church, I would conclude that these people fail to bear witness to the power of Christ to change human hearts. This judgment would be true in part, but on the other hand the Bible makes it clear that even born again people are far from the ideal of all things becoming new. The old clings to us and will not dissolve apart from the direct action of the Holy Spirit. This is what we see in our text.

Peter had a wall of prejudice built up in him over the years of his training in Judaism. The Gentiles were unclean, and to associate with them intimately was to defile yourself. Peter was a leader of the church. He had spent 3 years with Jesus, and yet he still had a narrow racist attitude. It took a direct revelation from God to get Peter to change the pattern of racism in his life. This is recorded for the benefit of all ages to deal with believers who have a problem with prejudice. God made it clear to Peter that he was not to call any man common or unclean. The Gospel was a universal Gospel. It was to go to all people, which means that all people are equal before God. They are all equally sinners, and they are all equally free to become saints by faith in Christ, whose blood atoned for all people equally.

Peter said it was unlawful and against his conscience to enter into fellowship with Gentiles, but God broke through the barriers of both law and conscience to show him that all men were to be accepted as equals in the church. Revelation is superior to tradition, law or conscience. The Christian is to obey God's Word even if it means to break with all that you have been taught by your parents, church or society. This is what Peter did when he entered the home of Cornelius. God not only approved, but He demanded that Peter break with the traditions of Judaism. Christianity was to be inclusive of all peoples. In Christ there was to be no segregation, discrimination or class. Paul says that the citizens of the kingdom were to be treated as equals without distinction between Greek or Jew, circumcision or un-circumcision, barbarian, Sythian, bond or free, but all were to be one in equality.

This was the ideal within the kingdom that was to determine the attitude of Christians toward all lost peoples. The Gospel was to go to all people regardless of race or color. Phillip was led of the Holy Spirit to reach the Ethiopian Eunuch of the Negroid race as one of the first fruits of missions. Apparently the Holy Spirit considered them to be worthy of the Gospel just as he did the Jews. Unfortunately, not all Christians have agreed with the Holy Spirit. This was not the case in the early church or through the Middle Ages. Economic factors in the modern world have also led to problems of racism. By racism I mean what Webster's Dictionary defines as, "Assumption of inerrant racial superiority or the purity and superiority of certain races, and consequent discrimination against other races..."

The Christian cannot be a racist, for God's Word is clear that all men are sinners that fall short of the glory of God. One can be proud of one's race and its achievements, which may be superior to those of other races without being a racist. A racist is one who assumes that his superiority gives him the right to oppress or discriminate against another. This is where the evil comes in. This attitude developed in the white race toward the black race out of economic exploitation. Whenever

men choose mammon rather than God, great evil arises. Sugar planting in the West Indies required many slaves, and Europe exploited Africa to get them. Some of the leaders in Africa were glad to sell their own people into slavery for personal advantage. Every race has its Judases. On the other hand, there were others who wanted to stop the slave trading. When Manni ruled the Congo in 1526 he appealed to the West to send missionaries, but instead they sent slave traders. It has happened time and time again that when the door is open for evangelism the church holds back and exploiters move in.

There is no telling what Africa might be today if Christianity would have been prepared to fulfill the Great Commission. This happened during the time of the Reformation when the Catholic church was corrupt and the Protestants were too busy to get involved in missions. While the church did nothing the secular world busied itself in cashing in on the black gold of Africa. Slavery became big business, and out of it grew racism. Racism is a form of rationalization. Men had to promote race prejudice, and make the black out to be inferior in order to justify the cruelty of slavery. Racism became essential for good business.

In the 1660's the planter class in America drafted and passed laws that made blacks servants for life, and intermarriage was outlawed. Racism developed with the decision to ground the economic system on slavery. This was the beginning of one of the longest wars in history, which was the war between the blacks and the whites in America. It has been going on for over 400 years, and there has been great violence involved. Every period of peace was only a time for the volcano of hate to build up pressure for the next eruption. The blacks would put on their mask and pretend to accept the system, but only until another leader would come along fight for their freedom. Paul Dunbar has expressed how they felt in his poetry. He wrote,

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries
To Thee from tortured souls arise.
We sing but oh the clay is vile
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;
But let the world dream otherwise,
We wear the mask.

The very first response of the Negro to white power was black power. The direct violent resistance is not a technique that needs to be developed, for it is the natural response. The Negro began with sit-downs and hunger strikes on the slaves ships. They were shackled together and guards walked the decks with cutlasses. The blacks didn't stand a chance, but there were repeated uprisings. There are 55 documented mutinies between 1699 and 1845, and there are fragmentary references to 200 more. Many of revolts took place on land, and in some places the blacks encouraged Indians to rebel. The black man was always the loser, however, and it is estimated that in this 400 year battle 100 million blacks have perished, and 20 million have been scattered over the Western Hemisphere.

The Negro battle for freedom has been extremely frustrating up until modern times. When Dr. King had the inscription put on his grave: "Thank God I'm free at last," he was following a tradition. An old Negro spiritual goes,

Oh freedom; oh, freedom

Oh, Lord, freedom over me,
And before I'd be a slave
I'd be buried in my grave
An' go home to my Lord and be free.

Death was the only escape from bondage for centuries. The American slave was the absolute possession of his master, and he had no rights that white men were bound to respect. The old South was a totalitarian system dominated by the planter party. Human slavery was the party line and no deviation was permitted in the church, school or legislature. Everything bad you can say about the persecution of Christians you say about how the white Americans treated blacks. Freedom was against the law. It was un-American to even hint that all men were equal, or that they had rights. You can easily understand then why the majority of blacks were anti-Christian. Even those who were Christians were very negative toward the whites.

One of the ironies of the whole thing is that the Negro was made a slave because of his superiority. The planters tried to enslave the American Indians, but they tended to sicken and die laboring in the fields. The poor white slaves were more durable, but it was too easy for them to flee and get lost in the general population. It was the Negro alone that could hold up under the burden of enforced labor, and his color made it impossible for him to hide. Once it was determined that they were the best for slaves the rationalization for racism developed rapidly. Their fitness for slavery was considered to be providential to the slave holder. They considered it the law of God that the blacks be slaves to the whites. Theology and science were both used to support racism. The Christian church was in bondage to the economic system, and it ignored the revelation of God to Peter about calling no man common. They went right back to pre-New Testament days where Jews and Gentiles had a wall between them. Now it was white and black but the wall was there. With this background we can better understand why racism is still a problem in our day.

9. BARNABAS THE ENCOURAGER Based on Acts 11:19-30

Words are powerful tools of influence. All of us can speak words and so all of us have the power to encourage or discourage others. The life of Victor Sirebianca is a radical illustration of the power of words. His teacher said to him, "You are a dummy. You will never graduate. You will always be a dummy. Go get a vocation and stop wasting your time and everybody else's." Victor figured she should know what she was talking about, and so he dropped out of school. For the next 16 years he just bummed around the country working at different jobs.

He was 32 years old and going nowhere as a dummy. Then an acquaintance said to him, "You should go and get tested to see just what you potential is. You could amount to something." With this encouragement Victor went and got tested. He discovered that he had an IQ of 160. He was a genius. He decided to act like a genius and he began to invent things and get patents on them. Then he wrote a best seller book. He became the International Chairman of the Amenza Society where you have to have an IQ of 140 to be a member. Because somebody encouraged him to be what he

could be he stopped being a dummy and became the genius he was. He was always a genius, of course, but the fact is, he was also a dummy for believing the words of discouragement.

We believe what we tell ourselves about ourselves, and if we are influenced by negative people, we will have a negative self-image. If we believe the encourager we will have a positive self-image. That is why every person is truly blest if they have a Barnabas in their lives, for Barnabas was an encourager. He always saw the good side of people. He saw past their failures to their potential for good. It is amazing we do not know Barnabas better, for he is one of the most influential men in the New Testament. He played a major role in the early history of the church, and a major role in the lives of the men who wrote the New Testament. Yet he seems like an obscure person because we do not know much about him compared to Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul. He was a man behind the scenes who encouraged great men like them to be all they could be.

The first man he greatly encouraged was Paul. When Paul was first converted Christians were afraid of him. He had been a brutal enemy of the Christian faith. He had arrested many and had even aided in their deaths. The Christians in Jerusalem were fearful when he came. Acts 9:26 says, "When he came to Jerusalem, he tried to join the disciples, but they were afraid of him, not believing that he really was a disciple." This was a very strange situation for Paul. He wanted to be their friend, but they were suspicious. The next verse provided the solution. Verse 27 says, "But Barnabas took him and brought him to the Apostles." Barnabas took him right to the top and made it clear that Paul was truly converted and was a great messenger of the Gospel. After this Paul could move about freely and speak boldly in the name of Jesus. Barnabas was the friend that helped Paul overcome his bad image and become an accepted spokesman of the faith.

Barnabas went on to play a major role in the history of Paul. In Acts 11 we see the church at Jerusalem sending Barnabas to Antioch where many were coming to Christ. Verse 23 says that when he saw the great work he was glad and encouraged them to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Verse 24 describes Barnabas: "He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith..". People were coming to Christ under his ministry. He could have had all the glory of this great work, but verse 25 says that he went to Tarsus to look for Paul. He brought him back to Antioch, and for a year they taught the faith to great numbers of people.

It was there in Antioch that disciples were first called Christians. Paul never would have been there for that great experience had Barnabas not gone to get him. Barnabas was the great encourager of Paul. He was back in his hometown of Tarsus when Barnabas came to him. Who know what was going on in his mind at that time? Was he fading out of the picture? Was he going to settle down in his hometown and become a professor? We don't know what his plans were. All we know is that Barnabas went and got him and took him into active ministry that changed his life and the rest of history. Barnabas never wrote one word of the New Testament, but he was the encourager of the man who wrote nearly half of the New Testament.

In Acts 13 the Holy Spirit told the church to send Barnabas and Paul on the first missionary journey. We don't have time to follow them, but these two men started churches all over the world. In Acts 14 we have the account of their healing of a lame man in Lystra, and the people were so amazed that they began to worship Barnabas as Zeus and Paul as Hermes his chief messenger. Not too many men in history have been mistaken for gods, but these two were, and Barnabas was thought to be the chief god-Zeus. The implication is that he was a big man who was impressive in

his presence. Barnabas could have been a powerful man building up his own following, but he didn't do it. He was an encourager of others, but had no ambition to be a big shot himself.

Barnabas had the gift of encouragement and he used it. It even cost him his place in the New Testament that he might have had, but he was so set on encouraging one who needed it that it cost him much of his own reputation. When he and Paul were heading out to visit all the churches again, Barnabas said, "Let's take Mark with us again." Paul said that Mark had let them down the last time and he was not going to take a quitter with them. This led these two best friends, who had changed the course of history together, to go their separate ways. Barnabas took Mark anyway, and Paul went with Silas. Dr. Luke followed Paul and so the rest of the book of Acts is about him and Silas. It could have been about Paul and Barnabas, but Barnabas refused to dump his cousin Mark.

He paid a heavy price for Mark. He gave up a place in history for his sake, but he saved Mark for the kingdom of God by his act of encouragement. This young man went on to be a worthy servant of Christ, and even Paul later acknowledged this. He wrote in II Tim. 4:11, "Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry." This young man he did not want to give a second chance ends up as his faithful helper because of the encouragement of Barnabas. Mark went on to write the first Gospel that was written. Matthew and Luke copied a great deal from his Gospel. The man behind the scenes, who never wrote a word of the New Testament, was a key factor in much of the New Testament writings because of his encouragement.

Ivan Hagedorn in *Biblical Messengers Of Encouragement* writes, "No one comes any closer to reflecting the true spirit of the Gospel in the entire New Testament than does Barnabas." He was like Jesus in many ways. Jesus wrote none of the New Testament either, but he was the one who inspired it. Barnabas wrote none, but he was the encourager of those who did. You can be great for the kingdom of God, not just by what you do, but by what you encourage others to do.

Barnabas made people feel big when they were feeling small, and he made them feel hopeful when they had failed. He kept people going who otherwise might have given up. To be an encourager is a great honor in God's book, for he cared more about the fame and success of others than his own. The result was that most of his key friends are better known than he is. But the whole family of God is richer because of it.

We need to face this reality: Not everyone has this kind of personality. We can all strive to be like Barnabas, but we may not ever be just like him, for he was by his nature an encourager. Barnabas was not even his real name. His name was Joseph from Cyprus. But in Acts 4:36 we are told that the Apostles called him Barnabas because it means Son of Encouragement. This was his nick name and not the name on his birth certificate. This is not what his mother called him, but this is the name he got from the leaders of the Christian faith because of the kind of guy he was. He was an habitual encourager.

Every time you see him he is encouraging someone. He sold some of his property and brought it to the Apostles to encourage them in their work of building the church. He was generous and he gave to encourage. That is a great motive for giving. You give money, time, labor, hospitality, or words-whatever meets the needs of others because it encourages them. He did not give to get recognition, but did all he did to encourage others. He was the friend of everyone he met because his goal was to encourage everyone he met. He was fun to be with because he accepted you, warts and

all, and he loved you when others would let you down. He was a people person. Not all Christians can be this way completely, but he represents a goal toward which we are to be moving.

Paul was not like Barnabas all the time. He could not defend Mark and be as compassionate as Barnabas. Paul was more hard nosed, but that too was a needed characteristic in the church, for there were con-men galore deceiving Christians. Barnabas was the type that would be taken in, for he was too open to give everyone a chance. The church needed people like Paul to protect the church, and so we see that all kinds of personalities are needed for balance. But we can thank God for those who are like Barnabas, for encouragement is a universal need. Many feel that it was the character of Barnabas that led the Christians at Antioch to be first called Christians. It could very well be that we owe the very name Christian to this Christ-like man.

Gary Smalley in his book *The Blessing* tells of how one teacher gave him the encouragement he needed to change his life. When he was in grade school he could not get math, and it was still a problem for him in college. He had to repeat geometry in his senior year and it looked like he was going to fail again. The teacher reinforced the sense of failure by putting the failing students along the back wall. One Monday he dragged himself into the class room to be seated with all the other failures in the back row. Then his life was suddenly changed, for there was a substitute teacher. The regular teacher had been assigned to a different district. It is hard to believe that a teacher can make so much difference, but listen to the testimony in Smalley's own words, and you will feel the power of a Barnabas in action.

"Something that teacher said that morning literally changed my life. In fact, it motivated me so much that I ended up minoring in mathematics in college! While I didn't realize it at the time, he actually blessed me and other students in the class. He did this by providing us with a clear picture of an active commitment-.....

Standing before the class that morning, our new teacher told us, "If anyone fails this class, then I have failed." He made a commitment that morning to do whatever it took to see that we all pass the course. He pledged himself to see that we learn and enjoyed the subject to the best of our abilities. Whether that meant his staying after school to tutor us or even coming in for a special session on the weekend, he dedicated himself to seeing that each of us made it through the course."

Smalley goes on to say that the whole attitude of the class was changed, and at the end of the year everyone passed. He even received his first A in math. We have no idea how many lives this teacher encouraged. He was one of those behind the scenes people who never got his own name up in lights, but he encouraged others to go on and do their best so that they became famous and helpful to many others. We tend to scold and criticize the weaknesses of children, but the approach of encouragement motivates children to go beyond their weakness and be over comers.

The best people in care giving professions are those who see the opportunities to be a Barnabas. Barnabas went out of his way to encourage people. He put himself through great inconvenience and sacrificed what would have been best for him. The surprising thing is that it is possible to be a Barnabas often by just saying words of encouragement. It sometimes cost far less in stress and tension to be an encourager than to be a discourager. Sherman Rogers, the industrialist writer, tells

of the day he was made foreman of a logging camp in Idaho. He was planning on firing a spiteful worker named Tony whose job it was to sand hill number two so the giant sleds would not run down men and horses working that area. The owner of the camp came to him before he took any action and said, "Whatever you do don't bother Tony. He's cantankerous and a holy terror sometimes, but I've never had a better sander. Not a man or horse has ever been lost on his hill."

Roger's later that morning met Tony by the fire where he was warming sand to throw on the icy hill. He said, "Good morning. I'm the new foreman. The boss told me what a good man you are." Then he told Tony what the owner had said. Tony had tears running down his face. He said, "Why didn't he tell me that before? Thank you, thank you!" he said as he shook Rogers's hand. That night Tony was the talk of the teamsters. The next day he threw enough sand to cover a dozen hills, and he joked and smiled all day. He went on to become the superintendent of one of the biggest logging camps in the West. He said to Mr. Rogers many years later, "That one minute you talked to me back in Idaho changed my whole life." Barnabas strikes again.

Mr. Rogers only passed on an encouraging message. It cost him nothing, but the owner could have done it, but did not do it. He was not necessarily a mean man, but he just was not a Barnabas, for he did not realize what a difference it could make to a man to have some encouraging words. Masses of people could be encouragers, but they just never think about it, and never realize the power they have to encourage by simple acts of kindness and words of encouragement.

Barnabas never held a man's past against him. So what if you were a bloody tyrant in the past, and you hurt and killed innocent people? Such was Paul, but Barnabas took him in as a friend and encouraged him to a better future. So what if you were a coward and betrayed your friends in the past? Such was Mark, but Barnabas accepted him for what he could become and not for what he was, and he became great. Others looked to the past and said how awful, but Barnabas looked to the future and said how awesome. May God help us all to be more like this encourager.

10. JAMES THE MARTYR Based on Acts 12:1-3

A number of years ago the great tenor in Enrico Caruso was driving through New Jersey when his car broke down. While a mechanic in a small town was repairing it Caruso struck up a conversation with the owner of the garage. He happened to mention that his name was Caruso. "Hey," said the owner, "Your not that guy who is so famous are you?" The tenor modestly admitted that he was rather well known. Excitedly the owner stepped to the door where his living quarters were, and he shouted, "Ma' guess who stopped at the station? That explorer fellow Robinson Caruso." Cruso and Caruso are very close, and apparently the man had a taste for adventure more than for music so Caruso was over shadowed by Cruso in his mind.

Men only gained fame by doing things which capture the interests of other men. Fame, therefore, is not a measure of a man's greatness, for many men do great things but never get fame. It is because that what they do is not recorded. This is true also of the 12 Apostles. Being well known and loved by Jesus does not mean one will become well known among men. James was one of the 3 in the inner circle of the 12, and yet he is not very prominent in the minds of most Christians. The

other two in the inner circles became the 2 most famous of the 12, and they are Peter and John. James did not gain such fame. Everything he did was in connection with the 3, or with his brother John. We never see him as an individual. There is only one place where we see James alone and that is in Acts 12:2 where he is alone in death as the first of the 12 to be martyred. This is the only distinctive fact that we have about James.

Out of that inner circle came the first martyr, and in contrast to this, out of it also came the last of the Apostles to die, and that was his brother John. They wanted the right and the left hand positions in the kingdom of Christ, but what they got was the first and last positions as far as the order of entrance into the presence of Christ through death. John Henry Newman wrote of these 2:

Two brothers freely cast their lot
With David's royal Son;
The cost of conquest counting not,
They deem the battle won.
Brothers in heart, they hoped to gain
And undivided joy;
That man may one with man remain,
As boy was one with boy.
Christ heard, and will'd that James should fall,
First prey of Satan's rage;
John lingers out his fellows all
And die in bloodless age.
Now they joined hands once more above,
Before the Conqueror's Throne.
Thus God grants prayer, but in His love
Makes time times and ways his own.

All 12 Apostles died as martyrs according to tradition, but James is the only one whose death is recorded in Scripture, excluding Judas. Of course, he was no martyr. There is no elaboration, but just a simple statement of fact that he was killed by Herod with a sword. Anyone today would get a more detailed obituary than that, but here is all that is said of the martyrdom of a great Christian leader. James was one of those of whom Lowell wrote:

The bravely dumb who did their deed,
And scorned to blot it with a name;
Men of the plain heroic breed,
Who loved heaven's silence more than fame.

There could be no doubt that the death of James at an early stage in the history of the church is what caused him not to become as famous as Peter and John. He did not live long enough to leave a lasting mark. His brother John wrote a sixth of the New Testament, and all of it he wrote late in life long after James had been killed. James wrote nothing, and so there is no letter or book to remind us of him and to reveal his character and teaching. The book of James in the New Testament was written by James the brother of Christ, and not by James the Apostle.

All through Christian history we see the same pattern. Those who live long and become mature

in the faith produce Christian literature, which gives them an important place in the history of the church. Those who are killed and die before they express themselves in writing are seldom remembered, even if they were great in the eyes of their contemporaries. James beat his brother in gaining a vision of heaven, but John got all the fame for he wrote it down in the book of Revelation for all to read. John knew nothing that James didn't know, but John was able to communicate it. Martyrdom has its rewards, but so does a long life of service for Christ. Most of us would prefer to be a John than a James, but let's not sell him short because he lacks fame.

The question naturally arises as to why Herod would kill James and not one of the other Apostles. The answer is quite obvious for one reason in particular. James was probably the oldest of the 12, and his age, plus his being one of the inner 3 led him to a place of prominent leadership in the early church. The Christians and the Jews were at war, and the Christians being a minority would motivate Herod to try and please the Jews who were the majority. James was the most likely victim, for he was the spokesman for the Christians. When this succeeded he went after Peter next. The clear implication is that James and Peter were the two key leaders of the church. John was too young at this stage to be a leader.

The text seems to indicate, or at least leave open the possibility, that Herod killed James for some other reason, and then he learned that it pleased the Jews that he did so. This has led to speculation that James was a man who took after his first master John the Baptist. John the Baptist pulled no punches in denouncing sin in high places, and especially in the house of Herod. James may have been boldly doing the same thing, and as a result he ended the same way. It is likely that death by the sword means that he was decapitated like John the Baptist. Whatever the case, the fact that the Jews were pleased tells us that James was a man of zeal, and that he was one they were glad to see gone. They would not be so pleased unless James was an enthusiastic and effective opponent. One less Christian would be nothing to rejoice about, but one less zealous leader would be.

Martin Luther once told an allegory in which Satan was listening to reports of his workers. One told of how he let wild beasts loose on a caravan of Christians, and he left their bones bleaching in the sun. Another told of sinking a ship of Christians and they all drowned. Satan listens but is bored and unimpressed, for he said, "What of it all, their souls were not harmed." Then one said that for 10 years he attempted to destroy the zeal of a disciple and at last he had succeeded. Then all hell rang with the triumphant shouting of the sons of darkness. James lost his life and his head, but he never gave hell cause for cheer, for he never lost his zeal for Christ.

James and his brother John made a solid commitment to Jesus. When he asked them in Mark 10:38 if they could drink of the cup that he drank of, and be baptized with his baptism, they said that they could. Whether they fully understood it or not they were saying they would follow Christ in persecution and in death, and that is what they did. Someone wrote,

Of the cup that I sup are ye able to take,
Desolation and anguish and bitter heartache?
Will ye share my despair and count all but loss
Save the rack and the anguish of Calvary's Cross.

In the fight for the right are ye willing to share
And the brunt of the battle full able to bear?

Will ye come to drum at the word of command
And the rush of enemy bravely withstand?

James was the first to demonstrate the depth of his commitment to Christ. This is just about the only positive statement we can say on his behalf, for all of the other references to James are in connection with his brother John, and they are mostly negative. Those that are not are merely neutral and simply indicate that he was among the inner circle invited to come with Jesus on special occasions. He never took a stand different from his brother. When his brother got angry at the Samaritans James also blew his stack and felt those small town hicks deserved to die. He felt his indignation was righteous, but Jesus rebuked him and made it clear that he did not have the spirit he ought to have. Some poet put it,

My son, art thou above thy Lord?
A greater one than He?
When called I for fire or sword?
Thou hast not learnt of Me:
Make truth thy sword, and love thy flame,
Then battle in thy Master's name.

There is every reason to believe that James did learn the lesson Jesus wanted him to learn. We have no biblical text to support this, but only tradition. Eusebius the historian of the early church quotes from a lost book of Clemens Alexandrimus, which tells us the only thing on record about the death of James. A man informed Herod against James and this led to his arrest. This informer, however, was so deeply moved by the Apostle's noble behavior at his trial that he became a Christian. He asked James to baptize him before he was killed and he was received into the church. This was treason to Herod, and so that man was sentenced to die with James. The informer begged James to forgive him as they were led to the place of execution. James kissed him and said, "Peace be unto thee." The son of thunder was more like the Prince of Peace before he was martyred.

From the point of this martyrdom on James is connected with Spain. Legend says that his body was put in a ship by his friends, and the next morning the ship was off the coast of Spain. His body was kept there and he became the patron saint of Spain. Spanish tradition says that James was the founder of the church in Spain. It seems unlikely, but it is not impossible. Someone went there early in Apostolic days, for Paul desired to go there as if he had some reports from Spain. Christian art pictures James with a copy of the Gospels in one hand and a Pilgrims staff in the other. This shows that he was a traveling evangelist.

The story in Spain is that some hermits saw an exceeding bright star in the sky. It continued night after night, and they heard marvelous singing coming from the star. The bishop was informed and an investigation led the discovery of a cave under the star. In it was found a beautiful tomb and a letter in good Spanish. It read, "Hear lies Santiago, son of Zebedee and Slaome, brother of St. John, whom Herod beheaded in Jerusalem." The date of that discovery was July 25, 813, and it has been the feast day of St. James.

The King Alfonso II gave 3 miles of land in each direction for a shrine, and later it was increased to 6 miles. People from all over Spain have come to see it. It was called Santiago, which means St. James de Campostelo-field of stars. It rivaled Rome and Jerusalem in attracting pilgrims.

They came from England, France, and all of Western Europe. Commerce and trade were greatly stimulated. The Christians felt that St. James gave them victories over the Moslems. 1492 is the date that the Americans think of as the discovery of our land, but in Spain this was the year of liberation from Moslem control. Ferdinand and Isabella celebrated their victory by ordering a thank offering to the shine of St. James. St. James is to Spain what George Washington is to the people of the United States. James became famous after all in at least one part of the world, and this may have never been had he not been the first Apostolic martyr.

11. GUARDIAN ANGELS Bases on Acts 12:1-11

There are few stories more exciting than escape stories. One of my favorite kinds of movie when I was a kid was prison escape movies. They are so full of suspense, and the obstacles to overcome are enormous. There is a great need to be clever, and best of all, they are not fiction, but are based on fact, for history is packed with true prison escape stories. Sometimes the key is simplicity. Leon Daudet walked out of a French prison in 1927. It was thought to be escape proof. He had a friend telephone the warden and tell him that Daudet had been pardoned. The warden believed it, and without double checking he released him.

Sometimes the key is love. In Charles Reade's book *The Cloister And The Hearth* he tells of how his hero Gerard was imprisoned in a tower. All at once an arrow came whistling through the tiny window high up in the cell. His first response was fear that someone sought to assassinate him. But when no other arrow came he crawled about in the dark to find the mysterious arrow. When he found it he was puzzled because of a silk cord attached. What good was a silk cord to him? Then it flashed in his mind that the hand of Margaret his sweetheart was behind this arrow. He lowered the silk cord from his window, and when he felt a tug he pulled it up, and at the end was a thicker cord. As he continued to pull a heavy rope was attached, and by means of that heavy rope he was able to escape.

The stories of escape are near endless, and the Bible is a great resource for escape stories.

1. There is Lot's escape from Sodom.
2. There is Isaac's escape from death on the altar.
3. There is Joseph's escape from the pit and Potiphar's wife.
4. There is Israel's escape from Egypt.
5. There is Moses's escape from Pharaoh.
6. There is Elijah's escape from Jezebel.
7. There is David's escape from Saul.
8. There is Jonah's escape from the whale.
9. There is Jeremiah's escape from the dungeon.
10. There is Daniel's escape from the lions den.
11. There is Paul's escape from assassins, prison, and shipwreck.
12. There is Peter's escape from prison.

All of these escape stories have something in common. They are stories of successful escapes do to outside help. There are times in life when you just cannot do what needs to be done to escape

bondage and be free. You need someone else to be there on the outside who can lend you a hand. Sometimes we need to depend on a friend, lover, or family member, and sometimes we need to depend on resources that go beyond what any man or woman can supply. We need to depend on the supernatural means that God alone can supply.

In Peter's case it was a guardian angel. As we face another year with all of its potential for conflict and victory, bondage and freedom, I thought it would be of value for us to explore what the Bible says about these unique beings that can be our allies in the battle of life. Hardly anyone ever preaches on this special class of beings called guardian angels. They have been around a long time, and the Jews developed the idea that everyone has a guardian angel. The early Christian leaders like Origen and Chrysostom also believed that every Christian has such a guardian.

Many felt that the guardian was actually a look-alike of the one he was guarding. Angels were seen as doubles. If this theory is true, then it means everybody does have a twin; if not on earth then in heaven. This theory is based on Peter's experience in verse 15. Rhoda ran to tell the Christians praying for Peter that he was at the door. They had some debate and told her she was crazy. When she insisted she saw Peter, they responded that it must be his angel. These Christians felt that this person at the door who looked like Peter must be his guardian angel. In other words, they felt Peter had an angel that looked just like him. It is a fascinating theory which the early Christians used to give dignity to the individual. Every age struggles with self-esteem. They stress that every person is of such worth to God that He has another one just like them in His presence. If one just like you is good enough to stand in God's presence and serve Him, then who are you to belittle yourself?

Not all Christians accept this theory, and not all Christians believe that every Christian has a special guardian. Calvin felt that angels in general are assigned to minister to man, but not specific angels for specific men. B.B. Warfield felt that the assignments of guardian angels were temporary for a specific time and need, and not a permanent assignment for life.

There is a host of different ideas about these beings, but all Christians have had some conviction about them. They are not too unlike the creatures today which we call viruses. Everybody believes in these creatures that we do not see, and there is a host of different ideas about them, even among doctors. They have a great effect on our lives even though we never see them, and they are really tough to figure out. They come in so many varieties that they are hard to nail down and classify. Science has its mysteries, and it deals with materialism. So it is not surprising that theology should have its mysteries, for it deals with the spiritual realities of life. Just as no doctor would presume to stand up and try to tell us he knows everything about viruses, so no theologian will presume to tell you all about guardian angels. But I can tell you something worth knowing and exploring as we focus on three points.

I. THE REALITY OF GUARDIAN ANGELS.

Our first and highest source of support for the existence of such beings is the Bible, and the most authoritative word is that of Jesus Himself. Jesus had to know He was opening up a door to endless speculation by saying what He did, but He said it anyway. In Matt. 18:10 He said, "See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven." Jesus gives a great deal of dignity to the life of every child by this saying.

This becomes the foundation for the idea that every little child has been assigned a guardian angel. Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the lost sheep; the one that wanders away from the fold. The shepherd will leave the 99 and go find that one lost sheep, and be so glad when he does. Jesus says the Father in heaven is not willing that anyone of the little ones be lost. The implication is that angels are the heavenly shepherds who watch over the children.

The mind goes wild with questions at this point. Why then do children die, and why do millions grow up and go astray, and be lost to the kingdom? At this point we are not addressing the problem, but just addressing the issue of the reality of such beings as guardian angels. This text simply puts the testimony of Jesus on the side of the evidence that they do exist.

Psa. 91:11 opens up this idea to a wider sphere of influence. It lets us see the possibility of adults also having their guardian. It says, "For He will command His angels concerning you to guard you in all your ways." It is of interest to note that the very next verse is the one Satan used to tempt Jesus. It says, "They will lift you up in their hands so that you will not strike your foot against the stone."

The red light should flash in our minds if Satan's first try to trick Jesus was by a focus on the role of guardian angels. It means we are dealing with one area of truth in which it is easy to be deceived. It is possible to make some very presumptuous and dangerous choices based on guardian angels. Satan thought maybe even Jesus would blow this truth out of proportion and take a chance that would benefit the kingdom of darkness. They are real, but we need to be cautious about what we do with their reality.

These beings are very active in the book of Acts, and jail breaks are their specialty. Peter and other Apostles are put in jail in Acts 5, and verse 19 says, "But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out." There is no doubt that a guardian angel is a prisoner's best friend. No phone calls, no waiting for bail, no trial; you just walk out as the door opens, and go free. Strange as it may sound, Paul spent a lot of time in a lot of jails, but he never had this experience that Peter had twice. Paul had his guardian angel experience in a shipwreck, which Peter never had. In Acts 27 Paul and 275 other prisoners, guards, and crew are fighting for their life as a storm threatens to destroy the ship. Paul encourages them to hold on for none will be lost, and he says in vv.23-24, "Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, 'Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.'"

For two solid weeks the ship was driven across the Adriatic Sea, and the men were starving and they threw everything overboard to lighten the ship. Finally it went aground and began to break in pieces, but everyone on board was spared just as the angel had promised. You can count on it that Paul believed in the reality of guardian angels. The evidence seems to suggest that guardian angels are involved in crisis intervention. They never seem to appear in everyday life when all is going well. They are usually involved in life and death situations. Even in the life of Christ we see this. As a baby his life was in jeopardy when Herod sought to kill him. That is when we see the guardian angel of the baby Jesus go to work. He came to Joseph in a dream and told them to escape to Egypt.

I think we are safe in saying that the Bible supports the reality of guardian angels, and if you believe in the Bible, you are committed to belief in them. Consider next the conviction of Christians

through the centuries.

1. St. Ambrose, the great preacher of the 4th century, said, "The angels must be entreated for us, who have been given to guard us."
2. St. John of Damascus of the 8th century felt that they not only guarded us as individuals, but as nations.
3. St. Thomas Aquinas, the greatest of the Catholic theologians, felt that angels were to us what we are to animals. We protect them and preserve them. The higher looks after the lower, and so angels look after us.
4. John Calvin said, "The angels are the dispensers and administrators of the divine beneficence toward us. They regard our safety, undertake our defense, direct our ways, and exercise a constant solicitude that no evil befall us."
5. In the 17th century the church even had a feast of the guardian angels, and they used this prayer poem:

King of Kings, and Lord most high!
This of Thy dear love we pray;
May Thy guardian angel nigh
Keep us from all sin this day.

Here is a new slant on their duties. They are not just to protect from danger of the body, but of the soul as well. A more contemporary poet put it like this:

The Lord preserve Thy going out,
The Lord preserve Thy coming in;
God send His angels round about,
To keep Thy soul from every sin.

This is a role that makes the angels have a more spiritual goal, but the most popular idea is still the idea of their role in physical deliverance.

6. A family camping in Estes Park, Colorado were enjoying the outdoors, and mother was preparing dinner when all of the sudden she stopped. She heard someone say, "Where is your son?" She ran frantically to the nearby stream just in time to see the little head of her boy come to the surface. Not far down the stream was the yawning mouth of a tunnel. If she did not get her son out of that stream, it would soon be too late. She ran along the bank and plunged her hand into the stream. She caught his arm and pulled him to safety. Had that voice not spoken just when it did, that child would have been gone. There was a mother who believed in guardian angels.
7. Ruth Graham, Billy Graham's wife, lived through a dangerous childhood with her missionary parents in China. Rats were an ever present menace, and one night Ruth let out a scream. Her parents came running to find rats all over her body, and her right hand covered with blood. One had

bitten off a part of her finger. She needed a guardian angel just to survive the environment. One day she was playing in the mission garden, and she found an object in the soil. She dug it out and was playing with it. She finally hung it on a nearby tree. One of the hospital workers recognized it, quickly snatched it, and threw it into a bucket of water. It was a live grenade. She could have so easily been killed had she activated it, but she was protected.

8. John Hay, who became one of Lincoln's private secretaries, and later became assistant Secretary of State, wrote of his 4 year old son who was left in the wagon while he went into the store. The horses were spooked, and they took off across the prairie. Snow began to fall hard, and a search party was sent out. They found the horses and wagon tipped over and covered with a mound of snow. But there was no sight of the boy. The search continued until they found a little shed, and inside the boy was huddled together with some little lambs to keep warm. Hays wrote a long poem about the experience, and the concluding lines go like this:

How did he git thar? Angels.
He could never have walked in that storm.
They jest scooped down and toted him
To whar it was safe and warm.
And I think that saving a little child,
And bringing him to his own,
Is a derned sight better business
Than loafing around the Throne.

9. History is filled with stories of deliverance and protection that go beyond any physical explanation. Elizabeth Elliot tells about her father. When he was a boy he climbed up to the upper story of a house that was being built. He walked to the end of a board not realizing it was not nailed at the other end. It began to tip, and he knew he was doomed. But then it began to go back down as if someone was standing on the other end. He saw nothing, but he always wondered if it had been an angel, for his life was spared by some unseen force.

10. The evidence of the Bible and Christian experience is so strong and widespread that it is hard for Protestants to find any basis to object when Pope Pius XII said this to some American pilgrims, "No one is so humble, but he has angels to attend him. So glorious, so pure, so wonderful they are, and yet they are given to be your fellow-wayfarers, charged to watch carefully over you, lest you fall away from Christ, their Lord. Not only they wish to defend you against dangers lurking along the way; they are also active at your side with a word of encouragement to your souls, as you strive to ascend higher and higher to closeness to God through Christ."

Here are some testimonies of guardian angels experiences:

1. Norma Zimmer, star of the popular Lawrence Welk Show for 18 years, tells of when her son was very ill. "Suddenly I noticed a brightness behind me. I looked around. Standing near the bed was a lovely young blonde woman with a white blouse and a dark skirt. I was stunned! I was not sleeping-in fact, I was very wide awake. Transfixed, I watched her for what seemed like 30 seconds. She just stood there with a radiant smile on her face, looking down at Ron. Then she faded away. It was a glorious experience. I felt no fear-just awe. I have always believed that I was permitted to see Ron's guardian angel."

2. Evie Tornquist in an interview on the 700 Club told of how she saw guardian angels around her home one night when she was alone and frightened.

3. Pastor Rolland Buck in Boise, Idaho, who pastors a church of a 1000 members, wrote a book called *Angels On Assignment*. In it he describes a number of encounters with guardian angels who protected him from attacks by demons. It stirred up a lot of controversy and brought the issue of angels back into the spotlight of theology.

4. Corrie Ten Boom in *Marching Orders For The End Battle* writes about her experience in the Congo when there was an uprising. "When the rebels advanced on a school where 200 children of missionaries lived, they planned to kill both children and teachers. In the school they knew of the danger and therefore went to prayer. Their only protection was a fence and a couple of soldiers, while the enemy, who came closer and closer, amounted to several hundred. When the rebels were close by, suddenly something happened: They turned around and ran away! The next day the same thing happened and again on the third day.

One of the rebels was wounded and was brought to the mission hospital. When the doctor was busy dressing his wounds, he asked him: 'Why did you not break into the school as you planned?'

'We could not do it. We saw hundreds of soldiers in white uniforms and we became scared.'

In Africa soldiers never wear white uniforms, so it must have been angels. What a wonderful thing that the Lord can open the eyes of the enemy so that they see angels! We have faith in the Bible, and by faith we see invisible things."

5. Many have testified of seeing angels on their death bed. The interesting thing is that males often see female angels, and females see male angels. It is as if we are guarded by the opposite sex. Another note of interest is that most only have one angelic visit that they see, even though they have many needs for such who guard and guide them. Quite often people see two white dressed men. Many have seen angels escort the dead into heaven.

6. A. C. Gaebelein in *The Angels Of God* says, "The great men of God in the past in every century record miraculous escapes from threatening dangers

which they could not explain in any other way but by the ministry of the angels.

The second point we want to look at is-

II. THE RESISTENCE TO GUARDIAN ANGELS.

In spite of all the evidence in the Bible and history, there is a resistance to this truth. It is not that we want to reject the reality of guardian angels, but we have some serious problems with taking them too serious. The primary one is their inconsistency. You cannot really count on them to be there for a special delivery just when you most need it.

It is true that Jesus was spared as a baby by His guardian angel, but what about the other boy babies of Bethlehem? Herod got to them. If they had guardian angels, they were either on vacation at the time, or they were very incompetent because the children did not escape. It would seem that for every miraculous escape there are dozens, if not hundreds, of stories when the child did fall and get killed, and when the child did drown, or did get hit by the car, and did swallow the poison and die. Joni Erickson Tada wondered why God could not have spared one guardian angel to keep her from making that fateful dive that broke her neck. In her case you could argue that her injury made her a far more powerful instrument for the glory of God. But that is not the case with most people who break their necks.

John the Baptist was announced by the angel Gabriel. He was a miracle baby, and he was a special person in God's plan. Jesus called him the greatest born of women under the Old Testament system. If anyone ought to have had angel protection, you would think it would be John. Yet the Bible makes it clear that he was violently killed by his evil enemies with no sign of angelic struggle to prevent it. James and Stephen were also martyred by their enemies. Many other Christians in the early centuries, and many more in the 20th century have been martyred.

All of this leads the Christian to develop resistance to the idea of guardian angels. If you cannot count on them, then you are better off not even taking them into consideration. They fall into the same category as a plastic saint on the dash board, or a lucky rabbit's foot. It almost seems like a superstition to have any faith in the protection of guardian angels. Emerson expressed the question of thousands of parents who have lost children.

Was there no star that could be sent,
No watcher in the firmament,
No angel from the countless host
That loiter round the crystal coast,
Could stoop to heal that only child?

We are forced to conclude by the facts of the Bible, history, and experiences,

that there is no basis for the believer to claim any right to be protected from all accidents, natural disasters, laws of nature, and evil forces. It is not that such protection does not happen, for it is a frequent reality, but it is not an automatic reality that we can depend on. It is purely a matter of grace.

I was surprised to find in the book of illustrations by Clarence Macartney two illustrations supporting the idea that Christians become guardian angels when they die. He tells of Theodosia Burr, the gifted daughter of Aaron Burr who wrote to her husband who was governor of South Carolina as she was dying: "If it is permitted, I will hover around you, and guard you and intercede for you." After telling another story of a man who received knowledge about a distant aunt that died by means of a vision he wrote, "... it is not strange that such an office-the guardian angel's ministry- should be assigned to our loved ones who have gone before us." As a matter of fact, it is strange, for as far as I have been able to discover he is the only one who has ever dreamed of such an idea. There is no support in the Scripture for such an idea. Even great men get some strange ideas about beings like guardian angels. Our third point is-

III. THE RECONCILIATION OF POINTS ONE AND TWO.

There must be some way to deal with the dilemma of a clear obligation to believe something, and an overwhelming basis for doubt. How can this contradictory evidence be true for both? There must be some way to reconcile these two categories. The key is to simply recognize the limitations of guardian angels. God has limited Himself in relation to the gift of freedom. He cannot let us be free, and still make us do His will. If He could, His will would always be done. If God has limited Himself, then, of course, His servants have this same limitation.

It is foolish to think that the job of a guardian angel is to make sure we never do anything stupid or careless that can injure us or even kill us. If this was the power of our guardian, then we could do anything we pleased, and tell mother nature, and all her laws, to take a hike. We would be living right now in the eternal kingdom, for nothing could go wrong. We could drink poison, drive a hundred miles per hour, play Russian roulette, cross streets without looking, and live with no care whatever for danger. All danger and risk would be eliminated, for nothing bad could ever happen to us.

This is obviously not the world we live in, and so are we to conclude that guardian angels do not exist, or that they take long vacations and are seldom on the job if they do exist? No, we are to simply face up to the reality that guardian angels are not given powers that are greater than God's. They cannot abolish the freedom we have to make mistakes and wrong choices. If they could, then God just as well have made us robots in the first place, and forgot about freedom.

What this means is, you can't escape the responsibility of freedom. You cannot throw it back on a guardian angel, and say I do not have to check my tires to see if they are so bald I could have a blow out. If you think you can count on a guardian angel to spare your life when you drive on bald tires, you have been deceived. The same goes for any other risky behavior. Christians die for many reasons that are the result of their own foolish choices. They take risks that are dangerous, and they

have no right to expect to be spared the consequences. If I leave dangerous poisons where my children can easily get to them, it is not the guardian angels who are not on the job, but it is myself who is not on the job.

Jesus did not fall for the temptation to jump off the temple because of the promise of angels to protect Him. Why? Because he did not have to jump. It would be tempting God, and would be presumptuous to jump with a demand that He be protected. Anything we do that is dangerous, and we do it deliberately, is not a case where we can claim any right to protection. It is when you are in danger, not by choice, but because of circumstances beyond your control, that the guardian angels come to your rescue. When you deliberately do what is dangerous you are choosing to go beyond the boundaries where you have any claim to protection. It is like an Old Testament priest deciding to walk into the Holy of Holies. No guardian angel would have protected them from death in such a situation.

So there is no contradiction between having faith in the reality of guardian angels, and at the same time not counting on them to relieve you of your responsibility. They work for God and not us. They are real, but we must resist any temptation to forsake our responsibility for self-preservation. They only appear on rare occasions. Nowhere are we told to put our trust in guardian angels. We are to put our trust in Jesus Christ, and then live in obedience to all the wisdom of His Word. It is a precious hope that we may be spared from tragedy that is beyond our control, but it is our first responsibility to try to avoid those things that can cause tragedy.

Guardian angels are real, and there can be no doubt of that, but they are not our business. We have no control over their activities, and no claim on their protection. When I travel I do pray to Jesus to protect us, and ask for the protection of the guardian angel, but I use all the wisdom I have learned over the years to make sure I am driving in a way that does not endanger myself or others. In other words, I believe in guardian angels, but I take my responsibility very seriously to protect myself and my family, and I do not expect them to do what it is my job to do. I believe, but I resist trying to take advantage of them, as if I have any claim on their protection.

12. LYDIA THE BUSINESS WOMAN Based on Acts 16:11-15

We may not see them very often, but they are out there in the world, and they have always been there, and in our day their number is increasing. I am not talking about UFO's but about those women who are wise in the ways of the world of wealth, and, thus, are rich and successful women of business. Murial Siebert, for example, the superintendent of banks for New York State where she supervises the management of 4 hundred billion dollars in our nations largest state banking department. She was the first woman to attain this kind of power in the financial world. She was the first female member of the New York Stock Exchange, and she owns her own brokerage company.

Vera Newmann, the Jewish grandmother, who is co-chairman of Vera Industries with retail sales

over 100 million. She made the first designer signed articles, and the top selling designer sheets. Her merchandising vice-president and executive vice-president are both women. Joan Cooney is head and co-founder of the multimillion dollar Children's Television Workshop, which produces Sesame Street and Electric Company. Her commitment to Christian principles are important to her, and those values play a major role in the work she does in teaching children on TV. She is and honored and respected business woman.

These three I mention, out of numerous contemporary examples, have something in common with Lydia the business woman of the Bible. They are all single for one reason or another. Lydia was likewise single. She represents the millions of women who have been thrust by circumstances into the world of business. We don't know if she was a widow, or divorced, or never married, but it was a matter of survival for her, as well as many others, to use their gifts to become successful in the world of business. Corrie Ten Boom learned watch making, and she became so good at it she became Holland's first licensed female watchmaker. When women discover their gifts they can be successful in any endeavor.

We do not know how rich Lydia was, but the evidence we have suggests that she was quite successful. She was a seller of purple goods from the city of Thyatira. We find her far from home in the city of Philippi. She was a traveling sales woman of the ancient world. Not only is her business one that takes her over a wide territory, but it is one that provides well for her and her household, for she had a good size house there. She invited Paul and the others to come and stay at her house. It was obviously a large and lovely home able to accommodate more than her own family. Lydia was obviously selling some of that purple stuff, and doing alright in the business world. Ancient accounts tell us that this purple she sold was used by royalty and the upper classes, and so she was dealing with the money people of her day. She was one of those women who put her whole heart into everything she did. We want to focus on her heart as we see it functioning in three ways. First let's look at-

I. HER OBEDIENT HEART.

The only reason we even know about Lydia is because, in spite of her being a busy business woman, she closed up shop on the Sabbath and joined some other ladies for a prayer meeting by the river. She put God before gold in her value system. There are only women referred to, and so we see there were others like Lydia-women who had no place to go to worship, for there was no synagogue or church. This little group of women by the river provided the base for the beginning of Christianity in Europe. God led Paul to this ladies prayer meeting, and out of it came the first convert in Europe, and the first church in Europe.

Paul did not look at this group and say there is nothing here but women so we just as well move on until we find a more important group. God led Paul to Lydia because she was woman with an obedient heart. She lived up to the light she had. She was a Gentile who by some means had heard of the God of Israel, and she was convinced He was the true God, and she worshipped Him. God honors those who obey the light they have received by sending more light. The reason Lydia received the Gospel from the Apostle Paul is because God knew she would respond to this good news as she had to the previous light she had been given.

The book of Acts is filled with stories of resistance and opposition to the Gospel, but remember

there is also the other side. Many have hearts where the seeds sprouts immediately, and there is the fruit of faith. We need to pray constantly that God would lead us to people whose hearts are prepared like that of Lydia. There are many like her in the world, and the majority seem to be women. Women are more likely to have hearts that are obedient and ready to respond to the Gospel. We ought not to assume that all unsaved people are ungodly. Lydia was a very godly person. She believed in God and worshipped Him, and sought to live according to His law. She was all of this before she was saved by faith in Christ. She had a good head on her shoulders, and she knew a good deal when she saw it. She knew opportunity was knocking and she did not hesitate to open the door. This leads us to look at the second point which is,

II. HER OPENED HEART.

There are several terms to describe the experience of being saved in the New Testament. One can be born-again, or redeemed, or converted. But the most gentle description of salvation is that of Lydia's experience where the Lord opened her heart, and she gave heed to the message. She believed and responded by trusting Christ as her Savior, and then she was baptized.

There is no description of a conversion anywhere that is so simple as that of Lydia's. What a blessing there is to the millions of believers who come into the kingdom of God more like Lydia than like the Apostle Paul. We so often promote the radical and exciting conversion of people like Paul that we give the impression that this is the real experience to expect. The lights flashing from heaven, the vision of Christ, the radical experience of being blinded and then restored, are held up as the norm. Most of the testimonies that make it into print are the Paul type testimonies because they are exciting, and they proclaim the grace of God loudly. This is alright as long as we get things in a proper perspective. The reason there are radical conversions is because people have gone so far off the path that the only way to get them back is by means of a radical conversion. This type of conversion exalts the grace of God, but it is no credit to the one experiencing it, for it is a sign that they were far from the kingdom in their rebellion.

Lydia did not need a radical conversion like Paul, because she never rebelled and went astray. She was a sinner in need of a Savior, but she did not need to be knocked to her knees and blinded. All she needed was to hear the truth of God's love, and of the gift of His Son, and her heart was opened. God had to dynamite the door open on Paul's heart, but Lydia's heart was available to God. God merely touched it gently and the door swung open, and Christ entered her heart by faith. Paul's story is more exciting and interesting reading, and we would all rather marvel at the message of his conversion than hear dozens of commonplace testimonies like that of Lydia. But the fact is, the ideal conversion is like hers.

To never go far into the depths of sin and rebellion, but to stay in the realm of the honest seeker whose life style is not far from that of the true believer is the way God wants it, and the way that is best for the world and for all concerned. Thank God for the Lydia type heart so easily opened because it is not warped by a wild life of sin. Thank God also that His grace is sufficient for a Rahab the prostitute, and the woman at the well, who lived in immorality. But rejoice if your conversion is the more simple and gentle kind like that of Lydia. This is the more common conversion that we see in millions of children and young people who have not experienced a life of sin.

Many Christians like Lydia are made to feel unimportant because they were not wild rebels into gangs, night clubs, and the drug scene. These are the conversions that sell books, but the kingdom of God is built primarily out of those who are more like Lydia, and it is folly for them to feel bad for not living such a wild life that their conversion is more spectacular. We do not see Paul expecting anyone to have a radical conversion like his. He is delighted when God simply opens the heart of a person, and they quietly enter the kingdom by simple faith.

It is of interest also that her heart was opened as she sat by a river listening to Paul share the Gospel. Many of fisherman loves this text which shows you can worship God by the river as well as in a church. But we note also that there is no fishing gear involved in this account, and there were no churches to go to at that point. New Testament Christianity is, however, an outdoor faith. There were no church buildings and so people had their conversion experiences in outdoor places. Zaccheus was in a tree, Paul was out on a road, the Ethiopian Eunuch was in a chariot in the desert, the Philippian jailer was in a jail leveled by an earthquake, and the thief was on a cross.

All of these conversions remind us that the Holy Spirit is not limited to the church building. Nobody has to come to church to come to Christ. People can open their hearts to Christ at work, at play, out in a boat, or while driving to work or home. The settings are endless. We need to be reminded of this so we do not go through life limiting God to the church as if the only place people can come into the kingdom is there. Don't spend your life trying to get people to church only. The wise way to is take the church, or the message of the church, to them where they are. Jesus did not say let all the world come to church. He said for the church to go into all the world.

God can and will open hearts anywhere where people are given the opportunity to respond to the Gospel. He does not dwell in buildings made with hands, but is ever available to open the hearts of those who are ready to believe. Don't wait for people to come to church to share the love of Christ. Note also that God opened her heart, but she listened, believed, and responded by getting baptized. We see clearly the cooperation of God's Spirit and the human will. There is no point in asking which gets your hands cleaner-the soap or the rubbing? It is obvious that both work together, and so also the Spirit of God and the will of people. Don't try to separate them, for God desires human cooperation.

Her open heart led her to open her mouth also, for she shared her experience with others, and especially with her own family. We do not know how old her children were, but they were old enough to listen to the Gospel, and to follow their mother in public commitment by being baptized. Lydia was the spiritual leader in her home, for she was a single parent, and she shows that a woman can be an excellent parent to her children without a partner.

What a contrast this story is from the great mass evangelism of Peter at Pentecost where 3,000 were baptized. Here we see this little family ceremony with one woman and her children, and possibly a servant or two. One is not better than the other, for both are beautiful, and both bring rejoicing in heaven. But the fact is, this little family baptism is the more typical experience throughout history. Most people who come to Christ and give their testimony in baptism do so in small groups, and not in crowds. Many are all alone like the Ethiopian Eunuch out in the desert with Philip. I think God intends it to be this way so that the testimony of faith is more personal. Nobody could doubt that Lydia and her household were making a commitment to be Christians. She was well known, and many of her personal friends would be there at the river to watch her give

this public testimony. Her obedience set an example that, no doubt, had an impact on many other lives in that community. God opened other hearts through her openness to obey, and take an open stand for Christ.

Being a part of the business community enabled Lydia to have a greater impact. It is of great value when Christians have lines of communication with the non-Christian world. Business is often the key link of the Christian to the non-Christian, and we need to see its value. Lydia, no doubt, sold her purple dye to pagans who used it to make curtains for their pagan temples, and garments for their idols. Profits from these sales would go to help build the church of Christ in that community.

Through business the Christian and the non-Christian are linked. The Christian in business is constantly serving the non-Christian. For all we know the Mafia buys all their bullets from a Christian hardware dealer or sports shop owner. Prostitutes buy their toothpaste from a drug store owned by a Christian. We could go on endlessly sharing how the two worlds of the saved and unsaved touch on the level of business. That is why it is so important for Christians to be truly Christ like in business, for it is the place where one is most likely to have an impact for Christ. Next we want to look at-

III. HER OVERFLOWING HEART.

Lydia was so grateful that Paul brought her the good news about Jesus that she immediately went into home missions. She asked Paul and his fellow laborers to come to her home and set up their base of operations. Her overflowing heart expressed by her hospitality led to her home becoming the first church in Europe. The church of the Philippians was born in her home. Paul wrote her famous letter of joy to her church. It got off to a happy start and had far fewer problems than most of the churches Paul started. We can assume that the spirit of Lydia had a lot to do with this positive picture.

Lydia is not named in the letter to the Philippians, and so we can assume that she went back to Thyatira, or moved on to begin a new work. This letter does reveal Paul's deep respect for women, however, and for their work in the church. Two women leaders there had some kind of dispute going, and Paul writes in Phil. 4:2-3, "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord, and I ask you also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they have labored side by side with me in the Gospel." Paul does not write to this church that got its start in Lydia's home, and tell them not to permit a woman to speak. The church was her home, and she, along with other women, work side by side with Paul, and not in the kitchen only, but in the Gospel. This was a church where women were not in the background. They were side by side with the Apostle Paul, and it was a church characterized by joy.

Lydia's overflowing heart provided the physical resource for this church. She was the first to be baptized, and other women soon joined her. You can count on it, as she about selling her purple dye for garments, she would talk to women about Jesus. Those women she met with for prayer each Sabbath were her friends, and she would seek to win them to Christ. This church started with women, and women played a key role in it. It was a great church, and the beginning of the westward movement of the church into all of Europe.

There are no negatives about women in this church, for Paul knew the church owed its very

existence to godly women like Lydia. When Paul has to write about women in a way that is negative, remember that he does so because of local problems that need correcting, and not because he was a male chauvinist. When women discover their gifts they can be successful in any endeavor. Paul, next to Jesus, is our greatest resource for the exaltation of women. Paul both preached and practiced the equality of women in Christ, and you can be sure that Lydia's love and hospitality had a great influence on Paul's view of women.

Blessed are those women whose hands are open to God to be used in His service; whose hearts are open to God to be blessed in salvation, and whose homes are open to God to be blessed in worship. Quiet and gentle Lydia was successful in selling, in salvation, and in service, and all this while raising a family alone. If you are looking for a woman to admire as an example toward which to aspire, look no further, for you have one in Lydia the business woman.

13. EARTHQUAKES EXAMINED Based on Acts 16:22-34

It was in Santa Clara, California, in the summer of 1988 that Lavonne and I experienced our one and only earthquake. We were in a motel and the bed began to vibrate like it does when you put a quarter in the machine at the side of the bed. It only lasted a few seconds, but even that made an impression on us, and we felt a mild fear to be in the presence of such power. Psychologists say earthquakes can be more destructive psychologically than natural disasters because quakes strike at our most cherished belief—that the earth beneath us is solid and steady. Earthquakes shake the very foundation of our security. We can imagine the awful fear that comes with a powerful earthquake, like the one that hit that same area where we were.

Earthquakes are a part of this fallen world and they are going on all the time. Some like to speculate that they are more frequent now than ever, but F. W. Boreham, writing in 1918, said, "there is an earthquake on the average every quarter of an hour—or about thirty to forty thousand a year. The earth is like a flea-bitten dog which is always shaking and twitching." Sometimes the destruction is beyond belief, but experts say we have not seen the worst yet—the big one. But the world has already seen some really big ones.

The greatest loss of life by an earthquake took place in 1556 in Central China when 830,000 people were killed. The second largest loss of life was in 1976 near Peking, China when 655,000 people died. There have been dozens of earthquakes with tens of thousands of lives lost. It is estimated that about 13,000,000 people have lost their lives in earthquakes. So there have been big ones in the past, and there will be bigger ones in the future.

The Bible tells us of the biggest one of all big ones. In Revelation 16:18 we read, "Then there came flashes of lightning, rumblings, peals of thunder, and a severe earthquake. No earthquake like it has ever occurred since man has been on earth, so tremendous was the quake. The great city split into three parts, and the cities of the nations collapsed." The implication is, the biggest big one will not be affecting anyone nation only, but will be international. So the experts and the Bible

agree-we haven't seen anything yet.

But what we have seen is very disturbing to Christians and non-Christians alike. Anything as big as an earthquake gets you into theology, for it goes beyond humanism. You have got to think about God when you think about earthquakes. The problem is, earthquakes seldom stimulate good thoughts about God. Paul said whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, what is admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy-think about such things. These kinds of thoughts lead you to praise God. But it is hard to maintain this level of positive thinking when the world is collapsing around you, and you lose loved ones and all you possess.

Earthquakes force you to confront God from a different angle, and they make you tend to blame God for all the evil that they bring. It is hard to avoid since we have already tried God and found Him guilty. We call such tragedies acts of God, and so He is the one to blame. Coming to this conclusion has never been a fortifying factor in people's faith. Earthquakes can wreck everything, including faith.

In 1755, on Nov. 1, the great Lisbon earthquake hit when the churches were full of people, and over 50,000 were killed. It was devastating to faith, and Goethe made up his mind the earth was a chaos that hopelessly got out of control, and no longer in the hands of God. Many came to this conclusion as their faith was shaken, and that is why we need to do some serious thinking about earthquakes, and tragedy in general, to know just how God fits in, and whether it is valid to get mad at God, and blame Him for the tragedy.

The first thing I learned about earthquakes in the New Testament is that they can be completely positive with no harmful effects. Our text is a case in point. Paul and Silas are delivered from prison by the violent earthquake that opened all the doors. Nobody was hurt in this quake. There was no judgment on the criminals there. Just the opposite, in fact. It was a day of salvation for the Philippian jailer and his family. God used an earthquake to open the doors of the prison, and the doors of the Kingdom of God, and a new family was taken into the family of God. This family would be praising God for the rest of their lives, and for all eternity, for the night of the earthquake. It led to deliverance and not to destruction.

That would be great if God always used the power of the earthquake for such a positive purpose. The fact is, every earthquake in the New Testament that God deliberately caused was just such a positive power. Come with me to the cross where we see another of God's directly caused earthquakes. Listen to Matt. 27:51-54. "At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn into from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus rose from the dead they went into the holy city and appeared to many people. When the Centurion and those with him who were guarding Jesus saw the earthquake and all that had happened, they were terrified and exclaimed, surely He was the Son of God!"

Here again, is a totally positive earthquake. It did tear the temple curtain, but that was symbolic of God's making the way into His presence open to all in Christ. There is no report of injury or death. In fact, the tombs were open so that we have here the only earthquake on record that added to the population. People who were dead were shaken into life. The spiritually dead were also shaken into seeing the truth that Jesus was indeed the Son of God. What a powerful positive impact

God had with this earthquake.

Then in Matt. 28:2 we find another one-the Easter earthquake which accompanied the resurrection of Jesus. Here was the best of them all. Here is the really big one from the positive perspective. This was the ultimate in positive earthquakes. The kingdom of hell was unhinged, and Jesus walked away as Lord of all with the power to release everyone from the bondage of death.

Now let's face this New Testament fact. God used earthquakes to accomplish His purpose of salvation for mankind, and, therefore, there is a wonderful and awesome and positive side to the earthquake. It is important for us to see this positive side for it is comforting to know that God may be doing something of great value for mankind even in what seems to us to be very negative.

Unfortunately, there are two sides to every issue, and we have to see the New Testament also reveals God's use of the earthquake as a means of judgment. Just as a father uses his belt both for support of his pants and for discipline; and just as a mother uses a kitchen tool for food control and child control; and just as the teacher uses the ruler to measure and to punish; so God uses the earthquake both for saving man and judging man. All of the seven judgment earthquakes are in the book of Revelation. They are severe in their devastation, and go way beyond the Richter Scale. Revelation 6:12-14 says, "There was a great earthquake. The sun turned black like sackcloth made of goat hair, the whole moon turned blood red, and the stars in the sky fell to earth, as late figs dropped from a fig tree when shaken by a strong wind. The sky receded like a scroll rolling up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place." Such are the judgment earthquakes that represent God's wrath on a sinful rebellious world.

The interesting thing we see in the judgment earthquakes is the radically different response of those who feel God's wrath. In Revelation 16:21, the response to the big one was the people cursed God. But, on the other hand, back in Rev. 11:13 we read, "At that very hour there was a severe earthquake and a tenth of the city collapsed. Seven thousand people were killed in the earthquake and the survivors were terrified and gave glory to the God of heaven." Every earthquake gets people's attention on God, either to curse Him or to praise Him.

So what we have so far are positive and negative earthquakes caused by God for either salvation or judgment. But the negative judgment type earthquakes still leave the door open for a positive response. They too have the potential of turning people to God and, thus, become positive tools that lead to salvation. If this was all we had on earthquakes we would be forced to conclude that most of those we hear about are judgment type earthquakes. The problem with this is the record will probably reveal that those who died, or suffer great loss, were not greater sinners than those who survived. In many cases they will be very good and even godly people. There will not be a clear, or even vague, connection between the crime and the punishment. Therefore, to classify it as a judgment earthquake takes quite a measure of audacity.

There are some records that leave little doubt about judgment. When the quake hit Mount Pelee in 1902, it was acknowledge to be the wickedness spot in the West Indies. Blasphemous rights and mockery of all things holy was the in thing. On Good Friday a pig was masqueraded through the city, and then crucified. The wickedness was deliberate and appalling. Forty thousand inhabitants perished in what could reasonably be considered the judgment of God.

But if we affix this label to all destructive earthquakes, we risk the danger of self-judgment. We would be like Job's friends who insisted that all his suffering was due to God's judgment. They were wrong, and they were the sinners for making this false judgment. What then is the alternative? The answer is, the one other New Testament earthquake that we seldom to never hear of because it is hidden in the sea. The Greek word for earthquake is Seismos, from which we get the word seismograph. This is the instrument by which the intensity of earthquakes is read.

This Greek word is translated earthquake 13 times in the New Testament. But it is used one other place where it is not translated earthquake. The reason is because the effects of it were taking place, not on land like all of the others, but on the sea. So the word Seismos this one time is translated tempest by the King James Version, or furious storm by the New International Version. It was the occasion when Jesus was asleep in the boat, and the storm became so furious that the waves threatened to sink the boat. The disciples were fearful of drowning. Matt. 9:24 tells us this was a seismos, or a storm cause by an earthquake. This is very common, and history is filled with accounts of great tidal waves created by earthquakes. The ancients believed that the shaking of the earth was caused by the anger of Poseidon, the brother of Zeus. He was the God of the sea. It was a seismic sea that was the origin of earthquakes they said. That is the case with this one that threatened to sink Jesus and His disciples.

It is obvious that God would not send an earthquake to drown His own Son and all of His hand picked men. Here is an earthquake that clearly is not of God. If that is the case, who, then, is the cause of this unique event? Just ask yourself, who would be most interested in wiping out the Messiah and His whole church in one swift storm? The same one who wanted to drown Moses as a baby, and destroy God's plan in the Old Testament. Satan, of course. But do we have any reason to believe that this was a satanic earthquake? Yes we do!

For one thing, it struck suddenly when Jesus was sleeping. It was a sneak attack when the only hope for survival would be divine power, and Jesus was deep in sleep. It was a clever plot that fits the mind of the evil one. We know from the book of Job that Satan does have the power to create natural disaster. But the key to seeing Satan is the cause of this seismic sea of destruction is the response of Jesus when He was awoken. In Matt. 9:26, and both Mark and Luke also, we see the same Greek word to describe it. Jesus rebuked the wind the waves.

This is the same word Jesus used when he rebuked the devil and the evil spirits. He used it again when He rebuked Peter by saying, "Get thee behind me Satan." This is a personally to personally word. Jesus was not speaking to water and wind. Water and wind are not persons. They cannot be evil, but there can be an evil person behind their destructive force, and that is what we see here. It is not Poisidon, the god of the sea, but Satan, the god of this world who is seeking to sink God's plan of salvation by means of this seismic sea.

Jesus puts a muzzle on this sea monster, and all is calm, and Satan is foiled again. The point of this story is, Jesus was not rebuking His Father in heaven for this earthquake. It did not have its origin in God's will, but in the will of Satan. This opens up the third possibility of how we are to look at earthquakes. It can be a satanic event designed by the evil one for his purpose, which is evil for evil's sake. This third option is a crucial one to avoid blaming God for every horrible thing that happens in nature. Jesus clearly teaches this third option when he deals with the signs of the time.

I always assumed that the signs of the end were signs that God was to be giving. But I discover just the opposite is the case. The signs are primarily of satanic origin, and earthquakes are one of the signs. In Matt. 24 the disciples asked Jesus, "What will be the sign of your coming?" Let's look at His answer, and note the author of the signs.

1. Many will come claiming I am the Christ and will deceive many. Does this sound like God's work? Does He send false Christs to deceive the world? No, this is the work of Satan.
2. There will be war and rumors of war and nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. This is also satanic, and the source of the strife and hostility of the world has its source in evil.
3. There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. These are listed in a context of signs which are of satanic origin. Why do we blame God for famines and earthquakes when what comes before and after these signs are clearly of the evil one? We would not dream of blaming God for all of the evil in the world, so why do we blame Him for earthquakes? Look at number 4-
4. You will be handed over to be persecuted, and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me. Does that sound like a God-designed sign?
Does all the evil that Christians have suffered have its origin in God? If so, Satan is not even relevant as a cause of evil. It gets even worse as we look at 5-
5. At that time many will turn away from the faith and will betray and hate each other, and many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. If this sign has its origin in God and not Satan, then there is no distinction between good and evil.

Everyone of these signs of the end that Jesus gives us are of satanic origin. Yet, we have been so blind that we have lifted one of the signs out of context and attributed to God-the earthquakes. It is blasphemous to attribute to God what is of Satan. The evidence supports the conviction that the vast majority of earthquakes are of satanic origin. To blame God for an earthquake is as unjustified as assuming that false prophets are His will, and that the unjust persecution and killing of Christians is His plan, and that the destruction of His Kingdom and loss of faith is also a part of it. Jesus said a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand. If you attribute these signs to God, you have made God divided against Himself.

So what is the bottom line on all of this? How are we to think about the terrible tragedies produced by earthquakes? The Biblical evidence leads me to these conclusions:

1. You first of all assume that any such calamity of nature is evil in its origin. Just as the personal tragedies of rape, robbery, and murder are assumed to be of evil origin, so the destructive power of natural disaster is to be assumed to be of evil origin. It is just what it appears to be-evil.
2. Secondly, you recognize that God is sovereign, and even where He permits Satan to do his evil will, He is also accomplishing His own two-fold purpose of judgment and salvation.

In other words, we can assume that in any calamity there will be those who are reaping what they have sown. There will be some element of judgment. We can also assume that God is working to bring forth repentance so that there will be fruit for eternity because of the calamity. People will face up to their mortality, and will come to Christ, who alone can give eternal life. So what we have in the New Testament study of earthquakes is a total picture which enables us to see any particular earthquake from a three-fold perspective. We will see evil that is satanic, and we will see God working for good through the response of His people to the calamity.

Heb. 12:26-29 sums it up beautifully-"Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens. The words 'once more' indicate the removing of what can be shaken-that is, created things-so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire." God can use the shaking of what is passing to move people to the solid rock that does not shake, and, thereby, bring good out of evil.

In 1923 half of Tokyo was left in ruins, and five million people were homeless because of an earthquake. One hundred thousand people died. The suffering of the survivors was enormous. Toyohiko Kagawa, a Christian with great compassion for suffering people, collected supplies and went to Tokyo to help. He got Christians organized, and began to feed, clothe, and shelter the victims. The government saw him at work and set up a commission, and they asked him to serve on it. Through this commission Kagawa persuaded the Japanese government, not only to rebuild Tokyo to rid it of slums, but a number of other cities as well, which were not even touched by the earthquake. He helped tens of thousands get decent housing. His Christian compassion put an end to many slums, and made him one of the greatest Christians in history to have an impact on a non-Christian government. He did great things for God and man, and it was an earthquake that opened the door for his great service.

Disaster may come from the devil, but God will be working in the midst of it for good with those who have a compassionate heart. We weep with those who weep, for evil is real, but we also rejoice with those who rejoice because out of evil God brings forth victory that even an earthquake cannot shake. The goal of life is to have a foundation that nothing can shake, and that foundation is the Solid Rock-Jesus Christ. Put your trust in Him and you will have an unshakable foundation forever.

14. THREE BABIES AND A MAN Based on Acts 17:1-15

Maybe some of you saw the Donahue Program where he wore a special outfit designed to help men feel what it is like to be pregnant. It was an awful experience for him as he felt the pressure and the pain involved in bearing a child. The whole idea is that men just do not understand the cost of new life for a mother. Men create things too, but as Mike Nichols says, "The Golden Gate Bridge does not give you stretch marks, the Hoover Dam will not wet the bed, and the Chrysler Building never needs to be burped."

But let's not write men off as wimps when it comes to giving birth, for there are other things besides babies that need bearing and birthing. There are churches as well as children, and the Apostle Paul gave birth to a number of churches, and it was after a painful labor, and they did leave stretch marks. Listen to Paul as he has to go through the pain of labor the second time for the Galatian Church. Gal. 4:19 says, "My dear children, for whom I am again in the pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you." Paul had to go through labor twice, and not for twins, but for the same baby. Can men have babies? In some sense they can, and they can also know the problems and pressures of raising them up to maturity.

Listen to Paul as he writes to another of his brood in II Cor. 11:27-29: "I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep." If that is not a man experiencing motherhood, I don't know what is. And after listing other sacrifices he says, "Beside everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?" This is no mere spiritualizing the idea of motherhood, for Paul actually felt the physical and mental anguish involved in giving birth to and raising these baby churches. He felt just as Jesus did when he cried out over Jerusalem in Matt. 23:37, "...how often I have longed to gather your children together as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing."

The male is capable of having many of the emotions of motherhood. The whole book of Acts is really an account of the babies of the Apostles. They went everywhere giving birth to churches, and Paul was the most fertile of them all. In Acts 17 we see Paul giving birth to three new baby churches—one in Thessalonika, one in Berea, and the third in Athens. Many feel that he had a miscarriage in the Athens pregnancy because we have no letter of Paul to the church there, but this is true of Berea as well. Others feel it was premature, but did survive. Whatever the case, we have an account here of three babies and a man, because in all three places the new birth took place and babies were born into the kingdom of God.

If you saw the movie *Three Men And A Baby* you know you learned more of what not to do with a baby than what to do. But here in this account of three babies and a man you learn what to do to be a reproducing Christian, that is, how to have babies and help them grow up to have babies of their own. This, after all, is what Christianity is all about. Jesus took a bride because He wants to have a large family, and the church is His bride, and so all Christians both male and female are to fulfill His purpose by bearing much fruit, and that means to be having a lot of babies for the King that His kingdom might be populated. Paul says in Gal. 4:26 that the church is our mother. All people are born into the family of God just as was God's Son. He was born into the world by the Holy Spirit and an earthly mother. So also all Christians are born of the Spirit through the earthly mother of the church.

The church, composed of both male and female, is the bride of Christ and the mother of all His children. Male and female are equal in God's plan when it comes to having and raising babies. In the kingdom of God this is not the exclusive realm of the female. Males are also baby-makers. The fascinating thing is that the New Testament tells us that the process of reproduction in the family of God is just like that of all life. In other words, eternal life though super natural is just a continuation of the natural process of reproducing all of life. All of life is reproduced by means of seed. The Greek word is sperma, and the New Testament uses this word 44 times. It refers to the seed of plants, animals, men, and God. All have seed by which they reproduce.

The children of God are the seed of God, and they carry in them His sperma and by it they reproduce new life for His family. Evangelism in the New Testament is a process of spiritual reproduction where the Holy Spirit and the Christian labor together to bring forth new life. The Christian is born to reproduce. We want to begin a study of how this spiritual reproduction works as we look at Paul sowing the seed and bearing babies for Christ. The first factor that has to be considered in reproduction is-

I. FERTILITY.

This means having the capacity to reproduce. There is not much point in sowing seed on a mirror. It may reproduce its image, but it will never reproduce another seed, for that is not fertile soil. The first requirement for reproduction is fertility. You will observe that the first verse of chapter 17 reveals Paul passing through Amphipolis and Apollonia. He did not stop there to preach the Gospel. These people were just as lost as anybody else, but Paul did not sow any seed there. Why? Because he had no foundation for fertility.

The three places where he did stop to sow the seed and bring forth new life all had synagogues, and that is where he began his proclaiming of the Gospel. Paul did not just go off casting seed indiscriminately everywhere, and hope that some would find a fertile bit of soil in which to grow. Paul had a plan. He went where he knew there were people who were open to the Word of God, and were ready to respond to the new word that he brought to them about the Messiah. The synagogue was the mother of the church. It was fertile soil in which the seed of the Gospel grew and the church was reproduced.

Paul already had common ground with these people. They were there because they had a desire for devotion to God, and a desire to learn more about God and His will. The point is, Paul targeted his audience. The babies he gave birth to were not the result of promiscuous sowing of the seed. He focused on fertile soil where he knew the seed could get a chance to grow and reproduce. If we are going to be reproducing Christians we need to find fertile soil. We need to identify specific people just as Paul did, and make them our target. There are people we just cannot reach, and God does not expect us to. They are not our target, but they may be the target of someone else that God will raise up. But all of us can reach someone who has much in common with us, and who will be fertile soil for the seed we sow.

What Paul is practicing is sometimes called Friendship Evangelism. It is reaching people with whom you already have much in common. You have to have some common bond in order to build a relationship. There has to be some common values and convictions if you are to influence anyone to come to Christ. They have to in some way like you to even listen to you. They like you because they think like you and have some of the same loves and common interests. If people have nothing in common with you and do not like anything you like, they are not likely to care about what you think is the greatest thing in the world, which is the Gospel.

All evangelism is really friendship evangelism. We have no record of anyone being saved who hated the one sharing the Gospel with them. The sower has to be accepted before the seed will be accepted. You can only reproduce through people who find something in you that is appealing. It is amazing how reproduction in the spiritual world parallels that of the physical and romantic world of human love. People do not tend to reproduce who do not find something attractive in each other, and so it is with the Gospel. It will not appeal to those who find nothing in you that they like. All of life reproduces itself through another that is attractive and appealing.

Paul was a great spiritual lover, and he knew how to court people and entice them to become a part of the bride of Christ, and then to bear his seed and reproduce. The essence of evangelism is love. You have got to love people and seek to find ways to become intimate with them on some level that they might be fertile soil to receive the seed of God and become a child of God. We may not be Paul, but according to I John 3:9 all who are born of God have His seed in them. We have the sperma of God in us, and we are expected to reproduce.

The whole idea of discipleship is that every Christian is to be so trained that they can reproduce and train another. Reproduction is the bottom line. It is the only way the Great Commission can be fulfilled. The world can never be won by preacher and evangelists alone. It can only be won when each cell in the body of Christ does its job of reproducing. The physical body grows because each cell divides and this continues until there is maturity. So it is in the body of Christ. Each cell is to reproduce and become two, and those two to become two others, and on and on until all the elect are born into the kingdom. We are all called to give birth to a baby, both male and female. Having a baby for Jesus sounds strange, but it is the goal we are to strive for as we relate to a lost world.

If I love a certain T.V. show, I tend to tell others about it and express how enjoyable it is. If they turn to it the next time it is on and also fall in love with it, I have reproduced myself in that area of life. I have made a convert and doubled myself in that way. Now there are two who love that show. If I love tennis and get someone else to love the game, I have reproduced my love. I have had a new baby in that area of life. This can be done in many areas, but if we do not reproduce in the spiritual realm and have babies for Jesus we are not acting as His bride. We are prostitutes who are having babies for all sorts of other interests, but none for the kingdom of God.

The judgment of God fell on Israel over and over again because they were having babies for every Tom, Dick and Harry in the world of idolatry, but were not reproducing for Him who was their Husband. We do the same thing when we do not look for fertile soil where we can sow the seed and make a baby for Jesus. May God make us aware of our duty to look for such soil, and, like Paul, be busy about the business of reproduction for the kingdom of God.

15. A BABY MAKER based on Acts. 17:1-15

Men are trying to have babies. Some are experimenting with the idea of surgically implanting an embryo into the male and then surgically removing the child when it is grown enough to love on its own. But there are things even more bizarre. In 1978 science writer David Rorvik wrote *In His Image*. It is about an American millionaire who goes by the code name Max. He wanted a child created from one of his body cells. In other words, he wanted to be cloned. He found a willing scientist and set up the lab, and the attempt was successful. Max is now the proud father of a son made in his image. He is a carbon copy of his father, and has only one genetic parent.

This stirred up a great controversy that went all the way to the U.S. Congress, but nobody knows if it was a hoax, or if it was true. Nobel Prize winning geneticist Joshua Lederberg said of cloning, "There is nothing to suggest any particular difficulty about accomplishing this in mammals or man.." In other words, it may very well be a reality that a man has had his own baby. Hoax or not, it reveals just how desperate people become to reproduce. There are so many infertile couples who want babies that they have created a whole new world of baby making science. Not a day goes by that there is not a baby conceived outside the human body. In vitro fertilization is conceiving of a baby in glass. It is often called a test tube baby.

The first such baby was born on July 25, 1978 in England. Until Louise Brown was born every human being had begun their existence deep in their mother's body, but Louise began in a glass dish.

Yes Solomon, there is something new under the sun. But he was right in that the ingredients are the same and the process the same. They had to have a mother's egg and a father's sperm in that dish or she never would have been born. The dish was merely an artificial womb. All life demands an egg and a seed, or fertility and verility. This is true for those born into the family of God as well. In our last message we looked at fertility and the need for the proper soil for sowing the seed. Now we want to look at the second element which is-

II. VIRILITY.

All the fertile eggs in the world will not produce a baby without seed, and so fertility and virility are the twin elements that must come together to make any baby possible. Vir is French for man, and virility means masculine and manly vigor. In the spiritual realm it applies to both sexes for in Christ all are part of the bride of Christ and can reproduce.

When we looked at fertility we looked at the nature of the people Paul preached to. They were the synagogue people who loved the same God and the same Bible that Paul did. They were open to new light on the Messiah and so were fertile soil. Now we are focusing on the seed which must penetrate that fertile soil to bring forth babies for the kingdom of God. Fertile soil will not necessarily bring forth fruit without vigorous effort. When Paul found fertility he still had to demonstrate virility. He had to go through tough labor to bring forth new life.

We look at verse one and it sounds like an afternoon stroll in the park as Paul passed through Amphipolis and Appellonia. But it was not so, for it was 33 miles from Philipi to Amphipolis, and this was a journey taken after Paul and Silas had been beaten and spent the night in prison where they were up most of the night. Like so many mothers do, Paul gave birth to babies for the kingdom in the middle of the night. The Philippian jailer and his family believed in Jesus and were baptized. It was a hard night and after some refreshment in the home of Lydia they took off for a new adventure. It was just like the old stories of the women who would be working in the fields. Her baby would come and she would lay down in the grass for a brief rest after her delivery, and then get up and keep on working. This is what we see Paul doing in the realm of having babies for Jesus.

After 33 miles to Amphipolis they had another 30 miles to Apollonia, and then another 37 to Thessolonika. It was a hundred mile journey. This is not much in our day but it was no small effort for Paul, and it took the better part of the week. Paul had to spend three Sabbaths in reasoning and explaining and in proving that Jesus was the Messiah. It was hard physical labor to get there and then he had to labor hard mentally to get the seed to penetrate the minds of those who listened to him. He had to work hard to get them pregnant with the Gospel. Virility had to be combined with the fertility of the soil. You cannot just cast the seed out and hope for results. Had Paul given up after two Sabbaths he could have lost all his labor, and there would have been no one born anew there.

There are many infertile couples who do not have the baby they desperately want because they give up too fast. There are dozens of options available today to help people have a baby. It is the same in the spirit realm. People fail to see the seed they sow bring forth new life and so they quit sowing thinking they just do not have the gift. Even though the Bible says all God's children have His sperm, they are convinced they have such a low sperm count that they cannot reproduce.

The real problem is the lack of understanding. They are trying to sow in the wrong soil where

there is no fertility. They buttonhole strangers, or give tracts to strangers, and do all sorts of witnessing to people they have no positive relationship to on any level. This is ineffective for the most part even though there are some outstanding examples of such seed that does produce fruit. It is usually futile to sow that way, and it leads to discouragement, and Christians give up altogether and never do it the right way.

They also lack persistence when they do press on to find the right soil, which is the person who likes them in some way. The people liked Paul, for he was a Bible expounder and that is why they were in the synagogue. But they did not just accept everything without question and a great deal of skepticism. They did not just jump on his bandwagon. It took a lot of persuasion to convince them. We need to realize that people have a right and an obligation to be skeptical of any religious message. There is so much false teaching and foolishness in this realm of life that we need to be very cautious and expect others to be also. Accept people's doubts as legitimate, and seek to give them all the evidence they need to believe. Virility means that you hang in there and persist with vigor to persuade people of the truth. Christians often give up too quickly and lose the babies they might have had.

The key to successful fertilization is focus. You will notice Paul did not get into the 1000 and 1 issues that Jewish theologians debated. Out of 200 million sperm only 1 penetrates the egg and determines the nature of the baby. The sperm that Paul wants to succeed in this tremendous competition is the seed of Christ. Paul had a narrowly defined target and his focus was on the cross and resurrection of Christ. He did not get off the track on minor issues. He had his convictions on many subjects, but the only sperm that will produce babies for Jesus is the truth of the crucified and risen Savior.

Christians get off on so many side issues that will never produce a baby. If all you ever do is try and persuade people that your denomination is the best, or that some pet doctrine is true, you will never have any spiritual kids. The new birth comes only by people trusting in Jesus as their Savior, and no other truth will enable it to happen, and so success in persuading them of any other truth will not produce new life for the kingdom of God. Only one sperm can fertilize the egg, and only it will be honored by the Holy Spirit to produce new life, and that is the truth of the crucified and risen Savior. So this has to be our focus if we expect to have a baby for Jesus. Paul had to cover some common ground with the philosophers when he preached on Mars hill, but he vigorously stuck with persuading them concerning Christ as his primary goal.

You will also notice that being vigorous does not mean threatening people and being high pressured with tactics that rob people of their free choice. Paul reasoned and explained the good news and what this could mean to people. He did not once in this chapter preach hell fire and brimstone. People say there is not much preaching on hell these days, and they are right. It was also true of Paul's preaching. It is true these people were going to hell without Christ as Savior, but that was not his message. His message was that all could be saved because of Christ's death and resurrection. Paul had a positive approach. The negative is real, but it is not a part of the good news, and seldom does it have a place in effective evangelism. Evangelist who use the negative approach to scare people into a decision often see their so-called converts disappear as fast as they come forward. They do not love the Lord but are responding in fear.

We are to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, and going to hell is not the Gospel. The

good news is that nobody needs to go to hell because Jesus paid the penalty for us when he died for all of our sins. The good news is that we are loved and forgiven in Christ. It is folly to complain that hell is not preached if people are preaching Christ and the salvation that is freely given to all who will receive Him as their Savior. He is the good news. There are times when you have to give stern warning to some, and the threat of hell needs to be made real, but this is the exception and not the rule. We do not hear the negative approach in Paul's preaching in Acts. He refers to judgment when preaching to the idolaters in Athens, but only to exalt Jesus as the Judge of all, and the one to give your life to.

The point is that Paul gives birth to most all of his babies by means of a positive appeal. Virility does not mean to treat people with forceful aggression and tell them they are hell bound sinners. It may work for some personalities in relation to certain other personalities, but for most Christians it is not an effective approach. We need to, like Paul, be so convinced that we have the greatest news in history, and because of it seek to use every positive means possible to persuade others to open their lives to Jesus.

The beauty of the message of the cross and resurrection is the simplicity of it. It does not take any great theological training to tell this Gospel story. A child can learn this story and convey it to others. Remember, babies are not born because dozens of sperm penetrate the egg, but only one, and people are not born into the kingdom of God because they have been persuaded of dozens of doctrines. They are born anew by just one truth that penetrates their minds and hearts, and that is the truth that Jesus died for them and rose again to assure them of eternal life if they will trust Him.

People like to embellish the Gospel and offer what God does not, and this leads to discouragement. God offers eternal life in Jesus, but some want to add to the Gospel offer that if you come to Jesus your problems will all be over and you will have heaven on earth now. This is a false promise that men offer and not God. Those who come to Jesus with this false hope will be greatly hurt when life had all sorts of troubles that follow. They will feel they must not be truly saved because of all the things that go wrong in their life, and they will be discouraged and may even fall away. Paul makes not such promise, for it is not part of the Gospel. The problem free life is a fiction and is not found in the Bible. Paul suffered greatly in being what Jesus wanted him to be, and he knew better than to offer what Jesus never authorized anyone to offer.

Virility does not mean to misrepresent the Gospel so as to get people to come to Christ under false pretense. This is like planning miscarriages, and it is not an effective way to build the family of God. Virility means a vigorous effort to have a baby, but not at the expense of the truth by the use of deception. We need to have a strong motivation to have babies, but always be under the control of the truth that God has given in His Word. We need to want babies as much as couples want babies who have a problem with fertility.

Here is a partial account of just how desperately people want babies from Peter Singers book Making Babies. Stefan was 43 and Nadia was 39. For 18 years they longed for a baby. After 5 operations the doctor told her it was hopeless. She got a second opinion and he agreed. They wrote to test tube baby programs in Britain and the U.S., but they were told they were too old. In 1980 they heard of the idea of surrogate mothers. A lawyer told them they would have to move to Kentucky and pay 22, thousand for all the expenses. They did it and the surrogate mother was inseminated with Stefan's sperm, and they at last had the child they dreamed of most of their lives.

This is not an isolated story, for it is going on all the time all over the world. Hagar became a surrogate mother so Abraham could have a baby. Both Rachel and Leah did the same thing with their maid servants.

It has been a major issue all through history-how can we get a baby? And this has to be a major issue in the realm of the spirit as well. We need to want to have babies for Jesus as desperately as Paul. He gave his life and suffered greatly in order to have babies for Jesus. He had special gifts for the job, but all of us have the ability to look for fertile soil in which to sow the good news of Jesus. All of us should be praying for some specific person to come to Christ, and make some effort to make that happen. God forbid that we practice birth control in the realm of the spirit and try to avoid having a baby for Jesus. May God motivate us by the life of Paul to keep trying to be a baby maker for the kingdom of God.

16. COMPLICATIONS OF THE NEW BIRTH Based on Acts 17:1-15

Can dead people have babies? If you think not, you have not kept up on modern technology in baby making. They can now freeze human embryos in liquid nitrogen at a temperature of 321 degrees below zero and keep them for up to 600 years, and then implant them in a woman, and she will have a baby. It might be difficult for this child to explain that his biological mother and father died over half a millennium ago, and how it could be that he was 600 years old the day he was born. This is not science fiction, for there are thousands of these frozen embryos waiting to be implanted.

In Paris a man knew he was dying of cancer and so he had some of his sperm frozen. He did die but failed to leave in his will what he wanted done with his sperm, and so his wife had to go to court. She did win the right to use his sperm to get pregnant, and she had his baby after he was dead. But what happens to frozen embryos when both parents die? This has happened and there are orphan embryos. In 1984 the Queen Victoria Medical Center in Melbourne, Australia learned of the death of both parents of two of the frozen embryos they had in storage. They left an estate of one million dollars. Right to life lawyers claimed that the embryos had rights to the estate. They had another son who had to go to court to pursue his rights. This just illustrates the complexities involved in trying to have babies after you are dead.

In the spiritual realm it has always been possible to have babies after you are dead. The Apostle Paul gave birth to many new babies for the kingdom of God in his lifetime, but he has given birth to millions more after his death. He put the Gospel he preached into writing and by means of the printed word the seed he sowed in life has been penetrated millions of minds after his death, and has led to the new birth all over the world, and all through history.

There is no question about it being possible to have babies for the kingdom of God after death, but there are complications in these births quite often. They are the same complications that Paul experienced in winning people to Christ when he was alive. Acts 17 reveals clearly some of the complications of spiritual childbirth. We want to focus on these so that we are not surprised if we

experience the same complications in bringing new babies into the family of God. The first complication we see is-

I. JEALOUSLY ON THE PART OF THOSE WHO DO NOT BELIEVE.

Fertility and virility not only lead to new life, but they lead to hostility which aims at bringing about sterility, and a ceasing of this production of new life. In other words, forced birth control is their goal. Verse 5 says that the Jews were jealous of Paul's success. It is one of the paradoxes of success that it will lead to opposition. It is almost impossible to lead someone to believe in Christ without offending those who do not believe.

You will note that verse 4 describes the converts of Paul. It says that some were Jews, and a large number of God fearing Greeks, and not a few were prominent women. These women had prominent husbands, and the implication is that they were not all that eager to give up their views, especially since they probably got where they were by holding those views. Paul's success with the Gospel was eroding a monopoly, and people who have a monopoly cannot stand anyone who threatens it, so it leads to conflict.

If you have a religious family with 7 children, all of whom are active in their church, and you persuade one of those children to follow another persuasion you will likely bring down the wrath of the whole family upon you because you have broken up the monopoly. This is true for any family, or any group of a common persuasion. This is one of the most common complexities in spiritual childbirth. You offend the physical family when you bring them into the spiritual family of God. Your success will lead to jealousy, and jealousy is a powerful negative motivation.

The Jews were so jealous that even though they were religious men they stooped to using the lowest characters in town to form a mob and start a riot in the city. In a mob spirit Jesus was crucified, and this has been the case every since. A mob can murder and nobody has to feel all that guilty because it was not him or me, but they who did the murder. Paul knew the dangers of religious anger for he had it himself before his conversion. He knew you cannot reason with kind of anger, and so he skipped town in the night.

The point is, there is not only the pains of childbirth that one has to endure to bring a new babe into the kingdom of God, there is the after pains of complications. Not only did Paul suffer as the mother-father of these new children of God, but they had to suffer as well. Jason and some other new Christians had to suffer. His house was searched without a warrant, and he was hauled off to court and had to post a bond to go free. We do not know what other legal complications he had to endure just for being hospitable to Paul, but he was not alone. When Paul wrote to them he made it clear that he knew they had to suffer.

Listen to how Paul writes to these people in I Thess. 1:6: "You became imitators of us and of the Lord; in spite of severe suffering." In 2:2 he writes, "..We dare to tell you the Gospel in spite of strong opposition." Paul makes it clear in his first letter to these people that they were like his family of children, and because they were suffering so much trial in their faith they needed both the mother and father to help them. Paul was both and he says in 2:7, "..we were gentle among you like a mother caring for her little children." Four verse later he takes on the other parental role and says in 2:11, "..we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging,

comforting, and urging you to live lives worthy of God.."

What we see here is that the complexities of the new birth calls for discipleship. You cannot just have babies for the kingdom of God, and then walk away and let them survive on their own. They come into a world of suffering with all kinds of trials and opposition. They need to be nurtured and helped along so they can survive. Many a baby has died without ever growing up, and this is true in the kingdom of God as well. They are born healthy, but they are not cared for. They are allowed to be taken into a terrible environment where they will be strangled for lack of nourishment.

Paul says that he played both mother and father to these Thessalonians to make sure they survived the complications of living in a very unhealthy environment where they were made to suffer at the hands of jealous Jews and hired hoodlums. Paul had no illusions about the battle to give birth and then to keep these new babies alive so they could become mature Christians. He knew it was just like being parents back in the days of the great smallpox epidemics. It was an endless struggle to try and keep your babies alive.

Paul never promised his converts a rose garden. He promised a fight for survival. He writes in I Thess. 3:4-5, "...when we were with you, we kept telling you that you would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know. For this reason, when I could stand it no longer, I sent to find out about your faith. I was afraid that in some way the temper might have tempted you and our efforts might have been useless."

Mothers and fathers who worry about their children do not need to worry that their worry is wrong. It is biblical to worry about the state of, and the fate of, your children. Paul was a nervous wreck until he knew if his babies were surviving their persecution. Not to care about your babies is to be an unfit parent. Paul could not stand it until he knew his new babies were okay. When Timothy brought the good news that they were firm in their faith and love, Paul was in a state of great joy and thanksgiving. The point of all this is, there is a price to pay to have a baby, and there is a price to pay to have a baby for the kingdom of God. It is not all fun and games. Mary and Joseph had the perfect child, but their lives became extremely complex because of it, and they had much anxiety. A child that brings no complexities into life is in a non-existent category.

I looked at a book on the complexities that can happen in childbirth and I was amazed at how many things can go wrong. It was a book of over 1500 pages on the defects and disorders than an infant can have. When we go to the New Testament and check out the new birth we see there are many parallels. New babes in Christ can have all kinds of developmental problems. The Corinthians were especially immature. The Thessalonians were in need of special instructions, for they were different. Each of the babies of Paul were unique and needed individual instruction. That is why each of his letters deals with different needs. They had many common problems, but each had their unique problems that he had to deal with. Each church was just like each child in a family. They may be alike in many ways, but each will also be very different. It was the same Gospel seed he sowed everywhere, but it led to varied results, just as mothers and fathers can have any number of children, and yet they will be radically different.

Paul had to take three weeks of persuasion with the Thessalonians to see results, but in Berea they were eager to search the Scripture to see if what he said was true, and they became Christians in a short time. Some babies come easy and other call for hard labor. People come to Christ in a variety

of ways and this can lead to complications in the church. George Morris in his book *The Mystery And Meaning Of Christian Conversion* tells of being at a conference where a friend was leading a discussion on Christian experience. A lady was getting restless and was questioning the man's own conversion because he was not using the magic words of her church background. Finally she stood and asked, "I want to know one thing-are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?"

This was not the terminology used in his background, and so he responded like this: "I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I know he has forgiven me. I love him with all my heart and I have pledged to follow him always." The lady was not satisfied and repeated her question, "Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?" The leader kindly repeated his answer. With that the sister stormed out of the room and refused to attend any more sessions, and she tried to get others to boycott his sessions. Here was a Christian in arrested development. She had been taught that there is only one way to describe the experience of being born into the kingdom of God. If you could not repeat the magic formula you were not an authentic Christian.

This was a complexity that Paul had to deal with as the Judaisers followed him and tried to get his converts to swallow a formula which was legalistic and narrow, and included the necessity for circumcision to be considered an authentic Christian. They were Christians in arrested development, and could not escape from their legalistic background. It is important that we see that the new birth has various ways of happening just as physical birth does. A hippy type person was asked if he was a drop out and he said, "No, I was born caesarian." People come into the world in different ways and also into the kingdom in different ways, even though all come through Christ who is the only way.

Great minds recognize the validity of variety in the new birth. Jonathan Edwards is considered by many to be the greatest mind America ever produced. He stressed the variety of ways that God works in leading people to Himself. This was the conviction of Finney, Moody, Spurgeon, and the great soul winners of history. Moody went so far as to say that God never repeats Himself, but approaches all people in a unique way. We need to eliminate the complexities within the body of Christ by recognizing that if people claim Jesus as their Lord and Savior, we need not be concerned about the ways they came to that commitment to enter the kingdom.

Evangelism can be complicated, for some babies are stillborn, and some of them never grow up. Some develop spiritual colic and all they do is cry about one thing and another. Some grow so slow that they remain mostly worldly and immature, and are an embarrassment to the parents. This leads to discouragement and so many Christians decide they would rather remain childless and not have to deal with all the complexities of have babies for Jesus. The result is they never try to share the Gospel with anyone.

This is living in disobedience to the command of Christ to go into all the world and make disciples. We all have an obligation to take on the complexities involved in bringing new babies into the family of God. It can be costly, time consuming, and painful, but it is the only way we can be obedient to our Lord. The cost of neglecting evangelism will be far greater than the cost of obedience to Jesus. So let us be about the business we have looked at in these three messages. Let us
SEEK FERTILITY,
SHOW VIRILITY,
SHUN STERILITY,

And seek to have babies for Jesus.

17. PRACTICING THE PRESENCE Based on ACTS 17:22-31

An atheist and a Christian were debating the value of prayer, and the atheist said, "I never pray." The Christian said, "But you must have prayed at sometime in your life." "Yes," he admitted. "I did pray once. I was on a hunting trip in the Yukon and got separated from my party. A blizzard came up, and I became snow blind as I wondered about, and then I was also starving and cold. I finally fell on my knees and asked God for help." "Well," said the Christian, "it looks like you got it." "Got it nothing" he responded, "if an Indian guide hadn't come along just then I would have died."

Here was a man who was experiencing the absence of God in the very presence of God's grace and loving kindness. Unfortunately, this is an experience not limited to atheist and unbelievers. Even God's own people can have all kinds of misconceptions that blind them to the presence of God. The Jewish leaders had their own ideas about what the Messiah would be like, and so, even in the presence of the Messiah they experienced His absence, and they rejected Him. Christ was objectively there in their presence, but they were not subjectively aware of His presence.

How often does Christ come unto His own, and His own receive Him not? Multiplied millions of times, I am sure. Theologically Jesus is always present with us, but practically we experience His absence because we are not aware of that presence. He promised He would never leave us nor forsake us, but we need to become aware of His being ever present. This is what Paul was doing on Mars Hill as he tried to make the Athenians aware of the presence of God. They worshiped an unknown god. A god that seemed far away, and they only had an obscure awareness of this absent god. Paul's message was to help them become aware that God is not far away at all, but very near, and that in fact, they lived and moved and had their being in Him.

We are not unlike these Athenians, and part of our problem is that we need to be up a tree and out on a limb like Zacchaeus before we become aware of the presence of Christ. We get conditioned by dramatic stories to think that the only time to seek Christ's presence is in a crisis. We read of Daniel in the lion's den; the three friends in the fiery furnace, and Paul and Silas in the dungeon, all experiencing the presence of Christ in great power, and we think this will come in handy if I ever get stuck in a hopeless situation. But what we really need is an awareness of His presence in the common place every day events of life. The crisis is rare, and if we only want to be aware of Christ in a crisis, we put Him in the same category as an insurance policy. We only need to think of Him when something goes radically wrong. This is a very superficial concept of who Jesus is as Savior and Lord, and it eliminates Him altogether from the role of companion, guide, and friend.

Paul is seeking to convince the Athenians that the God who sent His Son into the world is the God of the commonplace. He is the God of the every day, the marketplace, and the home, as well as the God of the Temple. This unknown God does not need to remain unknown, for it is His desire that men know Him and experience His presence. In verses 27 and 28 Paul makes two things clear: There is an objective and subjective presence of God. In other words, there is the actuality Of God's

Presence, and the awareness of God's presence. There is the fact of God's presence, but only the feeling of God's presence makes the fact a vital part of every day life.

Paul says God wants us to seek for Him. He wants man to reach out and touch someone, and He wants that someone to be Him. He is not far from each one of us, but we can miss Him completely if we do not strive to reach Him. Fact and feeling must become one; the actuality and the awareness must be united. Let's look first at-

THE ACTUALITY OF GOD'S PRESENCE.

The Bible makes it clear that God is everywhere because of the very nature of His being. Matter cannot be at two places at the same time, but this law does not apply to spirit. Spirit does not have the limitations of matter, and since God is spirit He has no limit of place. Our bodies are stuck to being in one place at a time, but our minds can be in many places at the same time. My mind is just as aware of the clock in the back as it is of the pulpit in the front, and of the windows on the side. My mind is present everywhere in this room even though my body is present only in one spot. My body is in the front, but my mind is everywhere in the room. If I had a mind that transcended the limits of these walls I could be aware of more yet. God has a mind that is universal, and thus, He is aware of all that is a part of His creation, and thus, He is everywhere present in His universe, just I can with my mind be everywhere present in this room.

There is no where to go to be out of the presence of God. This is David's point in Ps. 139 where he writes, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Where I can flee from your presence? If I go up to the heavens you are there; if I make my bed in the depths you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me." You can't go where God is not, anymore than you can go to another pew and be out of my awareness. As long as you are in the sphere of my awareness you are in my presence. God's awareness takes in all the universe, and therefore, there is no place to go out of His presence.

God does not have to work at being present everywhere anymore than we have to work at being aware of how many fingers we have, or of how many people are sitting at the table with us. We can all easily be aware of what is part of our immediate environment. So God, because He is everywhere present, is easily aware of all that is. As President Lundquist of Bethel once said, "God knows the number of hairs on our heads, not because He makes a count each time I comb it, but because He is present at every point. He knows that number as easily as we know the number of people riding in a car with us.

The implications of God's omnipresence are enormous. One of them is that He is always available whether we are aware of Him or not. Tennyson wrote,

Speak to Him for He hears,
And Spirit with spirit can meet.
Closer is He than breathing,
And nearer than hands and feet.

The actuality of God's presence is a theological truth, but to experience this reality we need to move on to the second point which is-

THE AWARENESS OF GOD'S PRESENCE.

We need to understand that much that is real, true, and actual does not have an impact on our lives until we become aware of it. Candid Camera is a great example. People do things they would never do if they were aware they were on camera. When they become aware they immediately cease to do the foolish things they were doing.

We do the same thing everyday in our homes. We do things that hurt and hinder rather than help and heal. They are foolish things we do and say to those we love for any number of reasons, but primarily because we let the circumstances of life control us. We let the frustrations of life outside the home affect how we treat those inside the home. Just imagine how becoming aware that the Candid Camera crew had set up your home to film how you treat your family after a miserable day at work. You would by the power of that awareness suppress all anger and unkind cutting remarks, and you would be courteous and thoughtful and reasonable in all your requests. You would be a model of love.

But since you know the chances are several billion to one that your reactions to life behind your own doors is going on tape, you feel free to be sub-Christian without the fear of discovery. Our awareness that our behavior would be exposed to the public would greatly modify our behavior. We can only justify sub-Christian behavior because we are unaware of the presence of Christ. We practice the absence of Christ because it is the only way we can be comfortable on a sub-Christian level.

It would be extremely embarrassing to come rushing into your living room screaming at your mate or children, and discover Jesus sitting on the couch visiting with the one you are blasting verbally. You'd give anything to have the chance to go back and come in dealing with the issue in a civil and polite manner. The point is, if we could be aware of the presence of Christ we could control all of the sub-Christian impulses that all of us feel at times.

Teilhard de Chardin said something that could change our lives if we would take it seriously. He said, "Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God." If we were aware of the presence of God and of Jesus in our lives, we would have a taste of heaven, and joy would be a dominant characteristic of our lives. Only in heaven will all tears be wiped away, and so there will always be tears in this life, but an awareness of the presence of Christ will enable us to handle the negatives of life in a more positive way.

Angela Morgan may seem too ivory towered in her poem, but the fact is, the more we can reach out to the level of her awareness, the more we can experience the glory of the commonplace. She writes,

I am aware
As I go commonly sweeping the stair,
Doing my part of the everyday care,
Human and simple my lot and share-
I am aware of a marvelous thing.
Voices that murmur and ethers that ring
In the far stellar spaces where cherubim sing.

I am aware of a passion that pours,
Down the channels of fire through Infinity's doors,
Forces terrific with melody shod,
Music that makes with the pulses of God.
I am aware of the glory that runs
Bound to the stars by invisible chains,
Blaze of eternity now in my veins,
Seeing the rush of ethereal rains,
Hear in the midst of every day air,
I am aware.

Here the theological and practical are made one. The actuality of God's universal presence is mingled with the awareness of His special presence in her everyday duties-even that of sweeping the stairs. This sounds like Brother Laurence who became famous for his classic little book called, **THE PRACTIC OF THE PRESENCE OF GOD**. He developed such an awareness of the presence of Christ in his life that it made no difference to him if he was in the prayer room or in the clutter and clatter of the kitchen. The result was his work was the same as worship, for it was done in Christ's presence, and for His glory, with equal joy. Imagine being able to eat or drink, or do whatever you do, to the glory of God. Every activity or chore becomes a project you do to please Christ, as you are aware he observes you. Brother Laurence could wash pots and pans for the glory of Christ because he had learned that all of his secular life, as well as his religious life, was lived in the presence of Christ.

This does not mean that Christ does not work in our lives if we are not aware of Him. He does. He entered the home of the two on the road to Emmaus, and he talked with them, ate with them, and they enjoyed his fellowship even though they thought he was a stranger. Jesus can be present blessing us in many ways regardless of our awareness, but the awareness increases our openness to His leading, and to a sense of joy and gratitude for His presence. God will not cease to work His will if we remain unaware of Him, but we miss out on the joy of His presence.

In Is. 45:5 God says of Cyrus, the Persian King he used to change the course of history: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me,..." Here was a man who was greatly used of God, but he did not even know it, and was not aware of the presence of God. God did not lose anything, but Cyrus did. So with us, we are losers by not being aware of the presence of Christ.

C.S. Lewis felt that we need to be aware of our unawareness of God. He wrote, "If we cannot practice the presence of God, it is something to practice the absence of God, to become increasingly aware of our unawareness till we feel like men who should stand by a cataract and hear no noise, or like a man in a story who looks into a mirror and finds no face there..." Lewis is saying we need to become aware of just how unaware of God we are. This is necessary if we are to be motivated to do what God wants us to do-reach out and seek for His presence. The prodigal did not long for his fathers presence until he felt deeply the sense of his absence. We do not invite Christ into many situations of life, because we are unaware of our unawareness.

Leslie Weatherhead, the great English preacher said, "I believe we can live in a world where His presence is the very atmosphere that we breathe and where almost everything we touch reminds us of

Him." This is possible to the degree that we become aware of God's presence in all of life. If we could just become aware that in Him we live and move and have our being, we could say with the poet,

The Presence of the Living Christ
Seems sweeter every day.
The overwhelming love of God
Is felt on life's highway.

David S. Lampel wrote, "To imagine that one meets God only during weekly, corporate worship is a little like imagining that one is only bound by one's marriage vows once a year during the anniversary celebration; the rest of the year one is free to disregard the commitment to, or even the presence of, the marital partner. Ridiculous? Precisely."

Keith Miller, in his book *A SECOND TOUCH*, tells about the problems he had with his family when he got up early for his devotions. Each morning his children would follow him, climb on his lap, and ask him questions. He finally became irritated and said to them, "Be quiet and get out, because daddy is busy." One of his girls asked her mother what was wrong with daddy, and she said, "Oh, he's learning how to be a good Christian so he could love the people downtown." When Keith heard this, he realized he had to handle this situation differently. When his daughter came in the next time, he put his arm around her and told her he was learning about Jesus. He showed his love to her, and she wanted to join him every morning for a time of reading and prayer. He came close to being one of those who was working like the devil for the Lord. Christians can become so zealous in some legitimate goal, but become sub-Christian in their behavior, because they forget the presence of the Lord.

Asking Christ into your life is more than just an event. You do not just say, "Lord, come in and make yourself at home," and it is done. It is a process of developing a habit. You have to work at some systematic method whereby you call yourself to awareness of Christ in your life. You will forget and fail to be aware all the time, but with conscious and continuing effort you can develop a pattern that will increase your awareness, and give you daily victories.

Bible reading and prayer could be more easily linked as one if we could develop the awareness that the Bible is the only book in the world whose author is present when it is read. This can make prayer more meaningful, and Bible reading more of a listening side of prayer.

Love is characterized by a longing for the presence of the one who is loved. This is true in all relationships. You love to be near and with those whom you love. Their presence adds to your joy, and their absence subtracts from your joy. The reason courtship is so exciting is because of the high quality of the experience of presence. You are really with each other, and talk to each other. You are so dominated by each others presence that all the rest of reality takes a back seat and becomes obscure in comparison. When you get married and raise a family there are many demands that divide your attention. You no longer give each other one hundred per cent of your presence. You let your presence be absorbed by many other people and tasks. The number one battle in marriage is to keep on giving your mate a high percentage of your presence. When this gets to be a minimal part of your relationship, you have slipped into what is called a nominal marriage. That is, you are

married in name only, but not in experience. It is like the nominal Christian. He or she says, "I believe in Christ," but they do not seek His presence or His guidance. They do not love to learn of Christ and grow in their awareness of His being and His will.

There are nominal parents too. They have the label of parents because they have produced children. But they do not love to be with their children, and give them their presence. They are too busy with other things that demand their presence. The children then become an irritation because they also demand their presence. Presence is to a child a primary meaning of love. You can provide all that life offers to a child, but if you deny them your presence you deny them your love. Love's best gift is always your presence. During the Nazi bombing of London that began in 1939 many English children were evacuated from dangerous areas. Amazingly it was found that these children suffered greater emotional upset from being separated from their parents than they had suffered from being exposed to physical danger.

We all need the presence of someone we know who loves us to feel secure in life. You are never so lonely as when you feel a lack of the presence of someone who cares. Jesus promised to never leave us or forsake us, and so we are never alone, but we still feel alone at times because we cannot sense His presence.

We need to practice the presence of Christ by recognizing that His invisible nature is able to be seen in what He has made. This is what Paul wrote to the Roman Christians- "For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." Romans 1:20

We are without excuse, but we still miss His presence because we do not pursue it in our minds. If we just look at creation and tell our mind to think of its Creator we could sense His presence. We need to remember what we sing in church when we are out of church seeing the creation of God. Maltbie Babcock wrote over a hundred years ago-

This is my Father's world,
And to my listening ears
All nature sings and round me rings
The music of the spheres.
This is my Father's world:
I rest me in the thought
Of rocks and trees, of skies and seas--
His hand the wonders wrought.

This is my Father's world,
The birds their carols raise,
The morning light, the lily white,
Declare their Maker's praise.
This is my Father's world:
He shines in all that's fair;
In the rustling grass I hear Him pass,
He speaks to me everywhere.

This is my Father's world,
O let me ne'er forget
That though the wrong seems oft so strong,
God is the Ruler yet.
This is my Father's world:
The battle is not done;
Jesus who died shall be satisfied,
And earth and heaven be one.

All Thy works with joy surround Thee,
Earth and heaven reflect Thy rays,
Stars and angels sing around Thee,
Center of unbroken praise:
Field and forest, vale and mountain,
Blooming meadow, flashing sea,
Chanting bird and flowing fountain,
Call us to rejoice in Thee.

A.W. TOZER wrote, "God is indeed there. He is there as He is here and everywhere, not confined to a tree or stone, but free in the universe, near to everything, next to everyone, and through Jesus Christ immediately accessible to every loving heart. This truth is to the convinced Christian a source of deep comfort in sorrow and of steadfast assurance in all the varied experiences of his life."

May God help us to practice His presence, and thereby gain more of what He desires us to experience in life.

18. FATALISM OR FAITH Based on Acts 17:16-34

A young man driving through the rich part of the city could not believe his eyes when he saw a sign on a Mercedes Benz that said, "For Sale \$100.00. He pulled into the driveway and went to the door, and he asked if the sign was correct. The woman assured him that it was. He asked, "Is there something wrong with the car?" She told him that it ran perfectly. He whipped out his checkbook and bought it on the spot. As he stuck the title into his pocket he asked the lady, "Why are you selling this car so cheap?" She said, "Well, I'll tell you. My husband ran off with his secretary a few days ago, and he just wired me from Hawaii this morning asking me to sell his car and send him the check."

Nobody gets everything they ask for or hope for, and in cases like this we can say thank God. But the fact is, the good guys don't always get what they want either. Paul wanted all who heard him on Mars Hill to repent and become followers of Christ. But the text says that there were only a few who responded. This was no second Pentecost with three thousand coming to Christ. Only a handful came, and so we see that the best of evangelists with the best of skills, and sharing the best

of messages, do not always achieve the best of success. Nobody gets what they want all the time-not even God.

Jesus wept over Jerusalem saying, "I would have gathered you as a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wing, but you would not." Jesus wept for the rich young ruler because He loved him and wanted him to be a follower, but he turned and went away." If God always got what He wanted, there would be no disobedience to His will. If God got His will done in all lives, then His will would be done on earth as it is in heaven, but we know this is not so, for there would be no need to pray for it if it was so.

If even a sovereign God, who has all power, does not get all he does desire, then it is obvious that he chooses this as a possibility. In other words, the only way an all powerful God could not get His will done is by a sovereign choice to let it be possible that His will not be done. If He chooses this, then even the not doing of His will is His will. If God says, "I do not want anyone to murder another human, but I will let men be free to defy my will and do it anyway," then you have God's will being done even in murder but let's keep in mind that we clearly have two levels of His will.

God's first priority is that nobody murder, for this is His command. His will, in the sense of what He wants to be, is that nobody murder another person. But He does not in His sovereign power do what He could do, and that is to make sure that by sheer force nobody ever breaks that command. What He does is permit men to do what He does not want. When they do this it is called His permissive will. His priority will is what He wants, and His permissive will is what He allows whether He wants it or not. These two wills are often opposites, for the priority will is always right and just, but the permissive will can be neutral or evil. If I eat an apple rather than an orange, that is God's permissive will. He leaves the choice to me. I do not please Him more by eating one or the other. But if I choose to steal an apple from the store, God will permit it, but I am out of His priority will, for I have broken His law. It is His will that I be free to do so, but it is not His will that I actually do so.

So what we have here is the fact that everything is God's will in some sense, but the sense may be radically different. It is God's priority will that I not steal, but it is His permissive will that makes me free to steal. To be in God's will means to be in His priority will, and that means to be doing what He wants me to do. The distinction of these two wills is vital to a biblical theology, for if one does not make this distinction it leads to fatalism. Fatalism is the belief that all events are determined by necessity or by fate, and so everything is God's will.

The Stoics that Paul is confronting on Mars Hill were fatalists. They taught that whatever will be will be. Man has no choice in the matter, for all is determined by the gods, and even the gods are determined by fate. There is no point in getting emotional about anything as if it might have been different. Whatever happens you just grin and bare it, for it had to be that way, and so just accept reality as it is, for it can be no other way. The Stoics were experts in self-control. They said that the only thing they have control of in life is their inner reaction to circumstances.

The stoic view of life does produce strong people who can be cool under very negative circumstances. There are times when all of us need to be somewhat stoic and not let our emotions run our lives. We need to accept reality of negative experiences and not go all to pieces, but as a philosophy of life fatalism is a copout. It denies personal responsibility for anything. Fate has

already determined what will be, and so I am not to blame for anything I do or don't do. All is just as it has to be, and so blame God if you don't like it, and don't blame me. This is the ultimate copout, for it places all blame on God.

Much of the suffering of the world is due to this philosophy of life. H. B. Dehgani-Tafti, the first Persian Bishop of the Evangelical Church of Iran said, "One of the most unfortunate characteristics of us Iranian people is our lack of sense of responsibility for our destiny." They just wait for life to happen, for they feel no responsibility, and the result is that they are manipulated by all kinds of forces, and they suffer a great deal as a result. Mohammed taught that all is predetermined, and so all human effort is futile. He declared, "When God creates a servant for heaven, he causes him to go the way of heaven until he dies, after which He takes him to heaven, and when He creates a servant for the fires of hell, then He cause him to go in the way of those destined for the fires of hell until he dies, after which He takes him to hell." It is all cut and dried, and there is no point in wishing anything could be changed and made different.

Sophocles the ancient Greek wrote Oedipus Rex to illustrate the futility of trying out wit fate. The oracle said that he was destined to murder his father and marry his mother. To defeat this fate the king ordered his son to be exposed on the mountain side. The servant who was to carry out this gruesome task gave the child to passing pilgrims. They carried the child to a far country where he was adopted by another royal family. When he grew up he learned of what the oracle had said of his destiny. To avoid it he fled from the palace to a far country which he did not know was his homeland. There he fell in love with the Queen, and he killed the King to marry her, not knowing that the King was his father and the Queen was his mother. With all the efforts to avoid the decree of fate it all turned out just as it was determined. The modern writer put it in poetry:

All that is was ever bound to be,
Since grim eternal laws our beings bind;
And both the riddle and the answer find,
Both the pain and the peace decree
For, playing within the Book of Destiny,
Is written all the journey of mankind
Inexorably to the end, and blind
And helpless puppets playing parts are we.

As helpless puppets the fatalists just wait to see what will happen. They do not bother to try and change anything, for it is futile. Paul meets this fatalism head on with the message of faith. Faith is the opposite of fatalism. Faith says that freedom is real and that the future is not all determined. We can make choices that altar what will be. Paul says that God commands all people to repent. That is a call to change, and by changing their attitude toward God they can change their destiny. God has set a day for judgment, and He will hold men accountable for their response to His good news in Christ. He gave them proof by raising Jesus from the dead. By faith in the risen Christ all of life an eternity can be changed.

If Paul did not faith to believe, in the midst of all the idolatry of Athens, that men could still be persuaded to have faith in Christ, he never would have bothered to open his mouth. But Paul was a man of faith, and he believed that truth can bear fruit in any setting. He knew he could present the truth of the Gospel in a convincing enough way to persuade some, and that is what he did. Faith

does not say I can get anything and everything I want, but it does say, "I have the freedom to make a difference."

Many today are taking the concept of faith to the opposite extreme of fatalism. Fatalism says you cannot change anything, but the fanatical faith people say that you can change everything and get everything by faith. Just believe and you can be in charge of life and control circumstances and your future. You can get the best of everything if you just have faith. This is just as far fetched as fatalism, and it leads people to delusions of grandeur, and the kind of pride that goes before a fall. When it is biblical and balanced faith simply says that God invited man to cooperate with His will for the future. We are free to say yes and see His will fulfilled, or to resist it and see His will hindered. We are not in charge, but we can cooperate or not do so. That is the point of the prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." It is prayer of saying that I want to cooperate and make the future what God wills it to be in His priority will, for what He wants is what is best.

The fatalist does not pray, "Thy will be done," because it cannot not be done. Everything has to be God's will, and whatever is cannot be different than what it is. The Christian says that this is not so. The future can be radically different if we choose to cooperate with God in doing His will. Take earthquakes as an example. In nations where fatalism is the philosophy of life they say there is nothing you can do about them and their destructive results. And so they do nothing but rebuild the same way and wait to see what will happen. Those people die by the tens of thousands, and then say that it must be God's will. In contrast to that, those who have faith build with special design buildings and lives are saved because they know people can make choices that change what will be.

In the San Francisco quake of 1906 Dr. T. Nakamura, professor of Architecture of Tokyo University, was sent by the Japanese government to examine the city. In his report he said, "Dishonest mortar was responsible for nearly all the earthquake damage in San Francisco." Men have made choices sense then believing that what men could do could make a difference. They built with new principles and better materials, and those buildings stood saving lives and property. The fatalist will say it makes no difference what you do, for what will be will be. The person of faith will say, "Next time we will build even better and it will make a difference." Faith says it does matter what we do, and it does make a difference if we use our knowledge wisely. People do not die because God wills it, but because of man's ignorance and choices not be prevent it. The person of faith learns from his mistakes and stops making them.

America is Christian in its thinking in that we are a nation that says folly does not need to be repeated. We can learn from our mistakes and go on to change the future for the better and prevent tragedies that otherwise would be inevitable. For much of the world, life is like a movie. You can watch it over and over and the characters never learn from their mistakes. Each time you watch it they do the same thing no matter how stupid. They have no choice, for a movie is all predetermined. It is locked in and so are all the choices of the characters. There is no freedom to choose any deviation from what has been determined. That is fatalism. But faith says life is not pre-recorded. It is real, and we are free to choose, and our choices make a difference. Paul choose to relate to these pagan people in a positive way. He linked himself with them as one in verse 26. He acknowledged that all men have one origin. Then in verse 27 he says that God is near each of them and wants them to seek Him. Then in verse 28 he quotes one of their own poets that said we are his offspring.

Paul was not guilty of what Timmons, the well-known pastor in California, said that many evangelical churches are guilty of, which is stinken thinken. He says that many Christians feel that Christians have nothing in common with non-Christians. This has led to most American Christians being fatalists about winning people to Christ. It is all up to God, for we can do nothing. This is stinken thinken, for Paul says you can point out to non-Christians that we have much in common. We have the same origin; we loved by the same God, and we have intellects that see much truth in common. We could go on and on beyond Paul, and say we enjoy the same entertainment; endure the same mortgage payments, eat the same food; drive the same cars, and on and on.

It is a deliberate choice to focus on that which makes us different from the non-Christian. It is also a deliberate choice on Paul's part to point out the unity. We are free to choose how we will relate to others, and that choice will either be in God's priority will, or in His permissive will. He permits us to ignore and avoid unbelievers, and most of us choose that way. But His priority will is that we, like Paul, care enough to build a relationship with them. In a few minutes Paul changed lives for eternity. It was not a matter of fate, but a matter of faith, for Paul knew he could make choices that would change people's lives forever. May God help us make choices that are based on faith rather than fatalism.

19. IDOLATRY IS NOT DEAD Based on Acts 17:16-23

Does it ever bother you that good things that should happen don't, and bad things that shouldn't happen do? Dr. Larry Crabb whose book *Inside Out* was a great seller tells of the parents who decided to enroll their 13 year daughter in a Christian school. One of the teachers introduced their daughter to drugs, and she went on to develop a major drug problem which threw the whole family into chaos. Dr. Crabb tells of the respected elder in the church who molested his niece and caused her to grow up with all kinds of problems in sexually, which damaged her marriage.

Another Christian couple moved because of a great promotion, but they left the church where their children really got involved. When they moved the children never felt a part of the new church, and the they drifted from the Lord. Dr. Crabb is illustrating what we know to be true, and that is that there are a lot of awful things happening in the Christian community, and the question is why? Why are so many bad things happening to good people? This has always been a major issue, and Acts 17 opens up our eyes to a new way of looking at this issue.

Paul is experiencing a lot of bad things in this chapter. He is threatened by a mob and forced to leave two towns. He is deprived of the freedom to preach and the right to be with his companions. Paul, like his master, was despised and rejected of men and they would have killed him had they gotten their hands on him. Now we find Paul in Athens waiting for his companions to catch up with him. Verse 16 says he was greatly distressed to see the city was full of idols.

We pass by this and do not notice that Paul was not merely distressed, but he was greatly distressed. The Greek word is *paroxumo* from which we get the word *paroxysm*. It is a word we seldom use because we seldom have any occasion to do so. It refers to the most intense emotion we can describe. It is a fit, and attack, a violent convulsion of anger. It does not refer to just getting

mad, but to a sharp intensity of emotion beyond this. This is the same word used in the Greek Old Testament to describe God's anger at the people of Israel for making the golden calf. It describes His wrath.

This word is rare in the New Testament. Paul is the only person ever connected with this word and its intense emotion. Here it is used to describe its emotion, and Paul used it once in I Cor. 13:5 when he said love is not easily provoked. Love does not lose its temper and go into a raging fit. These two references are all there is in the New Testament. It is rare because it is a rare experience. I suppose it is possible to live a lifetime and never feel this intense disturbing emotion. Why does Paul have it in this text? Because of the great idolatry he saw.

Let me suggest that this should still be the most maddening thing to the Christian mind. But the fact is, idolatry is so in that we do not even see it, and the result is that Christians do not get intensely emotional about it and fight it. The consequences are that we see bad things happening to good people because of the power of idolatry. Paul suffered from both the Jews and the Gentiles because of idolatry. The Jews even had the right God to worship, for they worshiped the God of revelation, but they locked him into a legalistic system that made him just as limited as those who locked their God into a marble statue. Their God was not alive and able to speak to them revealing His love in Jesus Christ. Their God was just like a dumb idol who never responded, and so when Paul came with a message from the living God they ran him out of town.

We tend to dismiss idolatry because we think only of those who have visible forms of idols. This is still a part of our world, and it is amazing that people in the modern century have been just as foolish as were the pagans in the days of the prophets. Jonathan Goforth, missionary to China, told of how a flood came and water entered the temple and began to soak the feet of the idol. As the water rose the small god of clay began to get soft and finally tumbled into the water. He describes his eyewitness experience: "I saw him after the floods had abated. O pitiful sight! His neck was broken, his ears were well nigh soaked off, his nose needed repairs. One arm was broken off at the shoulder, the other was out of joint at the elbow, several fingers were severed from the hands, and his spine was visible. It was only a straight stick plastered with mud. When I saw that wicked god, I did think those Chinese would never be so foolish as to reinstate that god again, but they did. As soon as the floods passed away, the old women went around collecting for temple repair. They repaired that temple outside and in, and replaced that god and gave him a new coat of paint. His eyes were left blank until the day for reopening the temple came. Then when all was ready, a painter painted eyes into the god, and then he was supposed to see once more."

We love idolatry stories like this for it is so obviously irrational, and it makes us feel good, for we are so distant from such folly. Nevertheless, we do not escape idolatry so easily. Consider this experience of another well known missionary to China. Isabel Kuhn was with the China Inland Mission. She wrote in her book *In The Arena* of how when she told her mother of her call to go to China, her mother responded, "If you go to China it will be over my dead body. I will never consent." You are thinking, of course, that her mother was not a Christian, but you would be wrong. Her mother was president of the Women's Missionary Society. She had opened her home to many missionaries, and was a mature Christian leader. It was her Christian lifestyle that led to daughter to be exposed to missions that she heard God's call to be a missionary.

What is going on here? What is the dynamic that is leading Christian people to suffer here? It is

simply idolatry. This Christian mother did not have a clay small god she bowed down to, or a stone statue to which she prayed. But what she had was her own image of what her daughter should be, and that image meant more to her than God's will for her daughter. She resisted God because God was threatening her idol, and shattering her image of what ought to be. She had erected a mental image of her daughters life, and because it meant more to her than God's plan, that mental image was just as much an idol as a metal image. Just because the Christian escapes the lowest level of primitive idolatry does not mean they escape the higher and more sophisticated level which is just as dangerous, and which leads to much suffering.

Paul deals very strongly with this mental level of idolatry when writing in Col. 3:1-2. "Set your hearts on things above...set you minds on things above, not on earthly things." Then he gives examples of these earthly things in verse 5. "Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: Sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry." Paul is saying that Christian growth is a matter of a battle against idolatry. It is not a matter of sticks and stones, but of mental attitudes of coveting for the flesh. I want this and that, and I want to satisfy my body and my minds image of what is good regardless of whether it is the will of God or not. Idolatry is saying, "Not thy will but mine be done." This makes idolatry far more frequent in the Christian life than we thought.

Spurgeon said, "We are all idolaters. I say we are idolaters by nature-all of us." And because it is so, anything can become an idol. Every person in our lives is a potential idol. Every object we own is a potential idol. Every event we enjoy is a potential idol. Every value we treasure is a potential idol. This means that things that become idols are not necessarily bad in themselves. The problem is that anything or anyone that takes precedence over God and His will becomes an idol. It is not an idol in itself, but becomes such because of our perverted tendency to exalt our desires above the will of God.

It would take a lot of audacity for any Christian to say I never practice idolatry. It would embarrass us all if God opened His files on us and showed the computer read out on our lifestyle and what it reveals about our values. Would you want anyone to see your chart of comparison?

1. Time spent reading the Bible compared time spent reading the daily paper and magazines.
2. Time spent talking to God compared to time spent talking to others.
3. Time spent in telling others about God compared to time spent telling others about myself.
4. Time and effort spent building the kingdom of God compared to time and effort spent building up my own kingdom.

We could go on and on illustrating how many ways we put God in second place. The point of all this is that God's people suffer all kinds of things because of their idolatry. Christians put their culture above God and conform to the culture rather than what God reveals. They go right along with the popular goals of the day. The result is that the church is full of same scandals and the same suffering as we see in Hollywood.

Do you think Paul could come to any big city in America, as he came to Athens, and walked the streets and not feel the same deep disturbance that he felt there? Do you think he would be fooled by the fact that there were no images of gods on the street? He would soon see the mental images that motivate the American people, and he would soon recognize they worship their images. He

would be saying that he perceives that we are a very religious people, but he would go on to lead us from our devotion to idols to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ.

The only way you can ever overcome idolatry is to first admit you are guilty of it. The Jews who persecuted Paul would never admit it, and the result is they remain blind to the new revelation in Christ. The Jews who were willing to admit they may not have seen all that God had told them were open to new light. They escaped from the limited image of God they had to see His greater image in the risen Christ. We need to open our eyes to see reality as it is. We have a very limited image of God, and this can lead even Christians to be tempted to go into the god-making business. Don't kid yourself and think this is beneath you. Satan has deceived better people than any of us to make idols, and to put them in God's place.

Solomon was the wisest man of his world, and yet he became a fool by going after other gods. I Kings 11:4 says, "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God." He didn't just give mental assent to idols either, but he put forth time, talent, and treasure for them. Verses 7 and 8 says, "On a hill East of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. He did the same for all his foreign wives who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods."

Solomon was the first genius to think he could achieve world peace and make the world one big happy family by treating all gods and all religions as equal. It was a total flop, and it led to the division, and then the destruction, of his own kingdom. But since all men ever learn from history is that men never learned from history, many lesser men than Solomon have tried the same experiment with the same destructive result. When you forsake the God who made you for gods you make, you will end up God forsaken.

Hitler in Mein Kampf reveals his all absorbing god was the Aryan race. The supreme sin was to pollute this race. All right and wrong revolved around what was good for this race. If lying and murder was good for the race, then these were good things. If truth and justice were bad for the race, then they were evil. Nazism was a hideous idolatry, and millions were sacrificed to this god. As always idolatry ended in disaster, and yet men will never cease to keep trying to make their own gods. The reason is because man, like Satan, makes his first idol the self. Self is exalted above God, and this is the origin of all idolatry. In this state of self-exaltation men who can't create a worm begin to create gods for themselves.

Would a man who can't make a birdhouse have the audacity to try and build a space ship? Would a man who can't sing a note hope to get into an opera? Would a man who can't lift his suitcase enter a weight lifting contest? Men face up to their limitations in almost every area of life except when it comes to god-making. Here is where everyone feels confident to compete, and the result is we have not gone beyond Athens, as we so proudly assume.

These Greeks were brilliant and creative people. Their civilization still has a major impact on our world today. It was the birthplace of democracy, and many of the great ideas we treasure today. The great orators and philosophers stood where Paul stood on Mars Hill. Socrates was there, and the Parthenon, one of the wonders of the ancient world, stood there. Inside was the great statue of Athena after whom the city of Athens was named. It was craved by Phidius the most famous

sculptor of all time. But all of the genius of these people was not used for the glory of God who made them, but for the glory of the gods they made.

This is the real issue of life: Will we serve the God who made us, or the gods we make? This is the ultimate choice of all men and nations, and idolatry is choosing to serve the gods we make. It is the saddest aspect of the life of any people, or of any person, when the gifts God has given them are not used to glorify Him, but to glorify some god of their own making. Everything we do we do for the God who made us, or for the gods we make. The poet put it-

Whatsoever cometh as a cloud between
The eye of faith and things unseen,
Causing that bright world to disappear
Or seen less lovely or its hopes less dear,
That is our idol.

Power, sex, money, are all good in themselves and necessary, but when they blind us to God's will so that we pursue them rather than His will, they become goods which destroy our relationship to God. Professor Walter Horton told of a girl in one of his classes who said she didn't need God. She was engaged to be married to a wonderful man who would meet all her needs. Horton said he trembled for her because he knew the man, and while he was a nice enough fellow he lacked several important qualifications for the role of deity.

C. T. Studd, the great missionary, tells of how you can spot an idol in your life. What is in the heart wags the tongue. He became so in love with the sport of cricket that it was all he could talk about. He stopped talking about Christ and talked only about cricket. He realized that he had become an idolater. He knows it happens to all Christians at sometime in their life. The idol may be parents, husband, wife, or any number of good things, or even gifts of God. Idolatry is not dead, but it is alive and well and is one of the battles we fight constantly just as did the people of God in the Old Testament.

Awareness of this reality is the first step in victory over it, and that has been my point. Idolatry is far from dead in any of our lives, and it is important that we always remain aware of it. We need to be aware of idolatry, admit our practice of it, and take action to demonstrate we desire forgiveness and change. Only as we confess our guilt can we gain the power over this dangerous enemy. We need to pray with Cowper,

The dearest idol I have known
What'er that idol be,
Help me to tear it from thy throne,
And worship only thee.

20. EDUCATIONAL EVANGELISM Based on Acts 17:16-28

Marcus Bach tells of vacationing in Arizona where his 7 year old son came in to the house with a snake in his pocket. "What kind of a snake is this daddy," he asked? "I don't know," he responded. "Some harmless snake suppose. You wouldn't be carrying it around if it was dangerous." The boy wanted to take it home for a pet, and so dad agreed. He was always playing the naturalist with frogs, beetles, and whatnot. So they took the snake home to Iowa. One day the father decided to get the lowdown on this pet, and so he took it to a biology professor at the college. He put the snake on his desk and asked what kind of a reptile it was. The professor was shocked and instinctively jumped up saying, "Why man, that is a deadly Arizona coral." The snake sensing the fear present struck out, but they were far enough away to escape injury.

Here is a true story that illustrates the saying that what you don't know won't hurt you is sometimes true. If you don't know a snake is dangerous you will not react in fear. Your ignorance is bliss because the snake has no stimulus to strike at one who shows no fear. But it would be foolish to conclude that because ignorance is bliss, and on occasion can even be beneficial, that ignorance is preferred to knowledge.

Paul even tells these Greek philosophers on Mars Hill in verse 30 that in the past God overlooked the ignorance of man making gods in His own image. In other words, God has taken ignorance into consideration, and there have been people who were never judged even though guilty of idolatry because of their ignorance. God has accepted ignorance as an excuse. Jesus said from the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." They killed the Son of God in ignorance, and because of this they were not condemned. You can make a case for the benefit of ignorance in isolated situations. But over all ignorance is a curse, and the history of human progress is the history of knowledge pushing back the kingdom of ignorance, and the light of truth overcoming the darkness of ignorance.

Christians use to think that it was lack of faith to try and understand the diseases of a culture and how to fight them before you went with the Gospel. The result was that many a well trained missionary was sent to his or her death because of medical ignorance. In the first 40 years of missions in the Congo of Africa 61 missionaries died. This was common in other parts of Africa as well. Thomas Lewis, writing of his first experiences in Africa wrote, "I wonder how I am alive to tell the tale. We did such irrational things in those days. We were not taught to take precautions for our health, except perhaps not to expose ones self too much too the mid-day sun. There was not a mosquito net in the whole Mission...The only medicine we were told to bring with us was quinine, and that was to be used very sparingly neither Silvey nor I owned a clinical thermometer!...We all went out in faith in those days, certainly not with knowledge."

Ignorance is usually not bliss, but is a curse. It was ignorance that led to sin and folly and the reality of man's being lost. On the other hand, knowledge is the way back to God and eternal life. Jesus made this clear in John 17:3 where He said, "Now this is eternal life that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Salvation is in who you know, and what you know about the Father and the Son. That is why we find the Apostle Paul practicing what we can call educational evangelism.

Paul knew that nobody could be saved without the knowledge of the Gospel, and so in preaching he imparts to Jews and Gentiles alike the knowledge which can, if they believe it, lead them to eternal life in Christ. This chapter provides us with a fascinating account of the contrast between the

appeal to the emotions and the appeal to the mind. Paul had the evidence on his side as he proved that the Messiah was to suffer, die, and rise again. His opponents only had one option if they did not have the facts to defeat Paul in argument, and that was to stir up people's emotions. Look at the words that describe the emotions of those who attacked Paul.

In verse 5 we see the Jews were jealous, and with this strong negative emotion they were motivated to round up bad characters and form a mob to start a riot in the city. In verse 6 we see them shouting provocative accusations to arouse fear. What they were doing is called scapegoating. They were blaming Paul for all the troubles in the world. In verse 7 we see the rabble-rousing tactic. They said these men are anti-patriotic and are defying Caesar's decrees by saying there is another king. If you can get people to feel there is treason in the air, and that there is a threat to all you hold dear as the foundation for a stable life, you arouse fears that are very powerful. In verse 8 we read that the crowd and the city officials were thrown into turmoil. In verse 13 we read again that they agitated the crowds and stirred them up.

The strategy of Paul's opponents was to aim for the emotions and get people fearful and angry. This makes people feel that a horrible foe is threatening all they hold dear. When people have no evidence to support their position they turn to emotions. There is something very sub-Christian about the use of scare tactics and emotive language which creates a mob spirit to achieve a goal. It is dirty fighting, and when Christians try to use the same weapons to fight back they are equally sub-Christian. These are not acceptable weapons for those who are defending the God of all truth.

Jesus is the truth and in Him are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. If an idea or conviction cannot be defended with facts and evidence there is good chance it is a sub-Christian conviction. Look at the weapons that Paul uses in the midst of all this emotional turmoil. He refuses to stoop to their level and fight with their weapons. Paul's arsenal consists of those weapons that aim to reach the mind. In verse 2 we read that Paul went into the synagogue and for 3 Sabbaths reasoned with them. The Greek word *dialogomai* is used 4 times in Acts, and all of them of Paul reasoning and trying to persuade people that Jesus is the Messiah.

This word was the word the Greeks used to describe the persuasive reasoning of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. The Greeks said *dialogomai* is the only way the philosopher can reach the *logos*, which is the idea. Paul was saying that the Greeks were right, but that the *logos* was not merely an idea but was the person of Jesus Christ. He was the truth of God, and by reason, logic, and persuasion men can evaluate the evidence and come to know God. That is what Paul is doing on Mars Hill. He is taking these Greek philosophers through a mini-theology course which expands their concept of God and leads them to the ultimate truth in Jesus Christ.

Notice the other words used to describe Paul's approach. Verse 3 says he was explaining and proving that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead. Explaining is the Greek word for opening up thoroughly and exposing people to the full knowledge of the facts. It is the same word used to describe what Jesus did for the two on the road to Emmaus when He opened up the Scriptures to them. Proving is to expound so as to make clear. Paul was so good at teaching that the Greek philosophers had their interest stimulated, and he was brought to the meeting of the Areopagus, which was the body in charge of the religious education of the youth of Athens. These were the idea people, and they loved nothing better than to disgust new ideas. They were the think tank group of their culture.

From beginning to end this chapter makes Paul the Apostle of the mind. He does not rant and rave and try to move people by inflammatory speech. He is the great reasoner, and his weapon is the truth. Paul examines the evidence and expounds the facts. His goal is not to make people feel any particular way, but to help them make the wisest choice of their life, and that is the choice to believe in and become a disciple of Jesus Christ.

You will notice how Paul's success is described in verse 4. It says Jews and Greeks were persuaded. In verse 12 it says Jews and Greeks believed in Berea. In Athens it says in verse 34 that they believed and became followers. You will note that all the words that describe Paul's actions, and that of his converts, are words that refer to acts of the mind. But all the words that refer to his opponents are words of emotion.

Paul is doing just what Jesus commanded in the Great Commission when he said, "Go and make disciples teaching them to observe all I have commanded you." You cannot obey the Lord's purpose for the church unless you teach the truth. People become disciples of Jesus by means of education, and they grow by means of education. They become mature teachers themselves by means of education. Dr. Howard Hendricks says that the Great Commission makes it clear that there are two essentials for any body of people to be a New Testament church . they must be evangelizing, and they must be educating. And in a very real sense these are not two different things, for you cannot evangelize without educating, and while you are educating you are evangelizing.

What Paul is doing in Acts 17, and everywhere else we see him in action, is practicing educational evangelism. This is the very essence of why we exist as a church. This is our goal. It is to educate and evangelize people. If these two things are not happening, we live in disobedience to our Lord's purpose for the church. Paul is to be our example of how we are to reach the world of intelligent but lost people. Notice how Paul specializes in tact. This means the ability to discern what is appropriate to do and say in dealing with others, and in such a way as to not give offence.

This means that Paul had to choose to make his mind master of his emotions. He hated idolatry with a passion, and the word used for his great distress in verse 16 is the strongest word there is to describe intense anger. Paul emotions were on a rampage, and he could have chosen to pray like James and John once did and say, "Lord let fire come down from heaven and consume these idolatrous pagans." But Paul did not do that, nor did he get on a soap box and begin to denounce idolatry as the ultimate in folly and human blindness. All of this was true, and Paul felt its truth. But let's learn from Paul that only a fool blurts out the truth just because it is true.

The Christian who thinks that he is being honest and standing for his convictions when he goes about denouncing everybody for their folly maybe honest and standing for his convictions, but that is not what we are called to do. We are called to evangelize and educate. Jesus did not say go into all the world and tell everybody what fools they are. Paul knew he would not get far in this town by denouncing idolatry. He would probably be dead before he could get a chance to teach these people anything about the truth. So he held back his emotions and was very tactful in getting their attention so he could share it with them the truth about who God really is.

The non-tactful Christian is more concerned about judging people than about winning them to Christ. They become offensive with the truth rather than use it to gain an entry into the non-Christian mind. Paul could have started his message by saying, "Men of Athens! I see that in

every way that you are very stupid. Only the blindest of anti-intellectual nincompoops would worship gods they have made themselves." Some Christians like to clobber people with the light, but Paul liked to enlighten people with the light, and so he chose the tactful approach.

Have you ever bought a product from a salesman who first of all offended you for being so stupid as to be using your present brand? If I said to you, "Only a jerk would be using the junk you are now using," you would probably not be open to what I have to offer. Nobody likes to be offended, and so the secular world seeks to develop tact in their sales people. The woman at the perfume counter does not say, "You could really use some of this new cologne we just got in. The stuff you are wearing now makes my want to vomit." Instead, you are treated with dignity, or you shop elsewhere.

Christians need to learn the same commonsense tact in dealing with people. You don't blast them for their sub-Christian living. Non-Christians are expected to be sub-Christian. It is Christians who are to be rebuked for their sub-Christian living, but not the non-Christian. Our job is to be tactful in relation to the non-Christian so we can get an opportunity to share the good news. The Christian who offends before he gets a chance to teach has put his own agenda ahead of the Lord's, and is guilty of a more serious idolatry than the people he is condemning. Jesus chose Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles because he knew Paul was a master teacher and communicator. Teaching was his method of reaching both Jews and Greeks.

Some might ask with a skeptical mind, "Can you be educated into the kingdom of God?" The answer is revealed in this chapter over and over, and that answer is yes! In fact, there is no other way, for nobody can receive Jesus as their Savior until they are taught who He is and what He has done to be their Savior. I have never heard of anyone ever being saved who was not first of all informed about the Gospel. There is no evangelism without education, and so all evangelism is educational evangelism. Friendship evangelism that never becomes educational evangelism is not evangelism at all. No amount of friendship will bring a person to Christ. They have to be informed and taught before they can come to Christ. Every Christian has to know how to share what the Gospel is to do evangelism.

Paul did not win all of these intelligent Greeks, but he won some, and he left this example of how to reach the lost for Christians through the rest of history. You teach them, and you teach them with tact. You respect their intelligence, even if they are in some ways very stupid as worshipers of idols. You don't get an ax and began to chop their idols off at the knees. Most non-Christians have plenty of idols, and you don't take pot shots at them. You build on their idolatry. It is foolish and evil, but it is there interest, and so you use it as a stepping stone into their lives. Paul did not say, "You are lame brains by worshiping unknown God." He said, "Let me educate you about this unknown God so He can be a God that is known."

Education is vital to the advance of the kingdom of God, because the success of anything, be it good or bad, depends on know how. This does not mean the Christian who is not educated cannot be useful for the kingdom. People are educated in many ways, and those who may have had no formal education can be far more effective in building the kingdom because they have know how you can't get in books. It is the same way in the kingdom of darkness. Satan has plenty of learned leaders, but not all have had breaking and entering 101. That is, they are not scholars, but they know how to do evil very effectively.

Vincent Teresa in *My Life In The Mafia* tells about one of his thugs who used the phony name of Parker because that was the only name he learned to spell. He was a dumb kid, but he was so shrewd with street savvy that he made millions of dollars in crime. He was clever, and could see opportunity everywhere. In 1964 when money was tight because of gang wars he went to a toy warehouse, and while he was talking with a man who worked there he read the numbers on a big padlock on the loading dock. He went to a key man and had a key made for that lock. He made close to half a million dollars by stealing toys.

The point is, the kingdom of darkness advances because of street knowledge. Clever crooks have to learn and be educated for long range effectiveness in doing evil. The only way to outwit evil is to be educated in the way of righteousness. That is why Jesus said to go make disciples by teaching them to observe all that He commanded. Without teaching and education the kingdom of God cannot grow. If Christians have less power in our culture today, the reason is easy to find. Our education has become so secular that kingdom teaching is almost eliminated. There is no eternal dimension. The result is that our culture is built on a very limited view of reality which leaves out God and the whole spiritual dimension.

If the Christian church does not do an excellent job of adding this dimension, then it will fail to offset the secular dimension. The facts reveal that Christian education is pathetic in its impact. Youth who go through the whole system of what the church has to offer end up in college with scarcely more knowledge of God's Word and will than their secular peers. It is because Christians do not take education seriously enough. Christians were once the leaders in education in our country. The Pilgrims and the Puritans considered it essential. Yale began with 10 pastors setting their books on the table and saying, "I give these books for the founding of a college in this colony." Most of the great colleges in our land had a similar start. Christians were committed to study and link all knowledge to the Word of God. Today Christians just think of education as a way to get a better job and not as a key to evangelism. They do not seek to learn all that they can so as to be able to enter into relationships with people who love these areas of knowledge, and thereby be able to share the good news of Jesus.

Jesus spent a good portion of his short ministry in teaching, and he sent his disciples into the world to teach. His church is designed to be a place of education. Not to be committed to education as a Christian is like a swimmer who does not want to get into the water, or a pilot who does not want to enter a plane. It is nonsense for a Christian to not be committed to education, for it is the only way to be all that God expects us to be as a church and as an individual. Every Christian is to be able to share the Gospel with others, and seek to know what knowledge will open the door for them to share it. This is to be a part of the whole Christian life-style as we are to be effective in educational evangelism.

21. INTELLECTUAL FOR CHRIST Based on Acts 18:23-28

Arthur Constance and a friend were watching squirrels and chipmunks gathering nuts in Queens Park in Toronto and then looking for a place to bury them. He made comment to his friends that the

Indians use to watch squirrels and chipmunks to gage the severity of the winter. If they were very busy it meant a hard winter coming. It is remarkable he said that God gave these little creatures such a built in wisdom. But his friend, with a note of skepticism responded, "I suppose you know that they forget where they hide half of them? It is a pity God did not give them better memories." He was a bit shaken, for it did seem like a defeat to be so forgetful, and it seemed like a flaw in God's plan.

A few months later Constance read an extract from Forestry Digest, which was titled "Chipmunks plant 17 thousand trees per acre." Researchers had found that squirrels and chipmunks are responsible for planting all these trees because they do forget where they hide their nuts. That which seemed to be a defect in God's plan all of a sudden became a part of a plan of superior wisdom. By forgetting half of their hidings they guaranteed there would be food for future generations of squirrels and chipmunks, plus a forest where many other creatures in their environment.

The lesson he learned, and that which all of us have to learn, is that no matter how much you know about anything, you do not know enough until you see how it glorifies God. It may have a negative slant until you discover a positive purpose it has in God's plan. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, and this is the chief purpose of all that God has created. This means that the Christian is to pursue every subject until it in some way leads him to praise God who is the truth. In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. The intellectual goal of all Christian studies is to relate every subject to Christ, and see in them that which exalts His wisdom as creator and redeemer.

We want to look at the only man we know of in the New Testament who rivaled Paul for the title of the greatest intellect of the New Testament. Apollos is his name, and everything about this man is a challenge to the intellect. Just look at the vocabulary connected with him in these few verses of Acts 18 where he is first brought on the stage of Christian history.

In verse 24 he is called a learned man. He is the only man in the Bible called by this word. He is said to have a thorough knowledge of Scripture.

In verse 25 it says he had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he taught himself about Jesus accurately.

In verse 26 we read that he had the way of God explained to him more adequately.

In verse 28 we see him refuting the Jews in public debate and proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ.

Here was a brilliant and bold orator who was able to debate with great effectiveness. It is no wonder that he is considered one of the three most educated and trained men of the New Testament. The other two are Paul and Dr. Luke, who was responsible for telling us about these other two. Had Dr. Luke not revealed the existence of Apollos, we would never have known the role he played in the early church. Paul refers to him as his friend and rival in Corinth, but we would not have known how he ever merited such a status had Dr. Luke told us. Luke puts Paul on the back burner for awhile and devotes more space to Apollos than he does to any of his close companions except

Timothy and Titus.

Dr. Luke tells us enough about Apollos so that we have in him a fascinating study of one of the giant intellects of the early church. To study this man is not only of value for the graduates we are recognizing today, but for all of us, for the knowledge of how God works in history through people leads us all to glorify God and enjoy Him all the more. We want to look at this learned man from 3 points of view. First-

I. HIS PREPARATION IN LEARNING.

The amazing thing about the education background of Apollos is that the more you study it the more you see the hand of God in history. Verse 25 says Apollos was a native of Alexandria. That has little significance to us until we realize that Alexandria was not just the capital of Egypt, but it was the intellectual of the ancient world. It had the world's largest and most famous library with anywhere from 600 thousand to a million volumes.

Max Muller says the founding of the University of Alexandria was the beginning of the third great epoch in the history of civilization. It was a university where man was on the cutting edge of intellectual progress. They did original research, and schools of science and literature were formed for the first time. Scholars from Alexandria were in demand all over the world.

1. This is where Euclid wrote his famous Elements Of Geometry.
2. This is where Ptolemy spent 40 years, and published his studies of the universe that held sway for many centuries. His math is still the basis for trigonometry today.
3. This is where the works of Homer and great classics were preserved.
4. It was the center of the philosophic world for centuries.

This was the home town of Apollos, and he was a learned man. It was no accident that he came out of Alexandria. Everything about this city reeks of learnedness, but also of the providence of God in history. Alexandria the Great built a road out to the island city of Tyre and destroyed it, and thereby fulfilled the prophecy of Ezekiel. Then he marched on Egypt and conquered it. In 331 B.C. Alexandria the Great saw the strategic possibilities of an island in the Delta of Egypt, and he ordered that a city be erected there in his name. It was to be the best and most beautiful city of the ancient world. Deinocrates, the greatest living architect, famous for building the temple of Diana was given the job. We don't have time to describe its many palaces and parks. But when Alexander died he ruled the whole world of his day, but he was buried in a golden casket in Alexandria. Mark, the Gospel author, was also buried here for many centuries before his body was moved.

The largest merchant ships in the world were built here, and battleships that held a thousand men. Its 400-foot tower of white stone became one of the ancient wonders of the world. It was at its peak a city of 800 thousand people. Now you might be saying to yourself, "So what!" What do we care about some fancy pagan city built by Alexander the Great? We should care because God cared, and he use Alexander the Great and this great city of his to prepare the world for the Gospel. Alexander came on the scene just when Greek culture was at its intellectual peak, and Aristotle was his teacher. Alexander was a great lover of learning, and he wanted the whole world to benefit from the wisdom of the Greeks. The result was that he brought Greek culture to every land he conquered. He made the Greek language the universal language. He gave slaves and education so that they in

turn could teach their masters. In the New Testament world there was an estimated 6 millions slaves, and many of them were teaching Greek to the children of the Roman masters.

The point is, Alexander was the key man in God's plan to bring his son into a Greek thinking world and spread the Gospel by means of a Greek book, which is the New Testament. But God did not forget the Old Testament. It was vital that the whole Bible be in Greek. How could God bring about such massive intellectual challenge as that? The Hebrew Bible had never been translated into another language. The answer was Alexandria. The Jews were good scholars, and they were accepted in this intellectual center, just as they are today in the great places of learning. Ptolomy I of Alexandria had 30 thousand Jews in his army, and when Cleopatra ruled Alexandria two of her Generals were Jews. Many of the most influential Jewish writing came out of Alexandria. It became the center of Jewish and Greek interaction. The two were setting the stage for Christianity.

These Jews were close to the Gentiles and were accepting the Greek culture. They wanted their Hebrew Bible in Greek, and so here in Alexandria the Hebrew Bible was for the first time translated into another language in 280 B.C.

This Greek Old Testament was called the Septuagint, which is often referred to as LXX, because of the 70 who translated it. It was a pioneering work that changed the course of history and made Alexandria a center of Bible study for many centuries.

What does all this have to do with Apollos? Note that verse 24 says he had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. It was the Septuagint that he had this knowledge of. He was an authority in the Greek Bible, which became the Bible of the early Christians. When the New Testament quotes the Old Testament it was usually this Bible from Alexandria. Apollos was a Jew, but was one with the Greek mind, and as a Christian that was a perfect combination for accomplishing the goal of making the Jews and Gentiles one in Christ. This was all happening because of God's preparing the world for the Gospel through Alexander the Great and this great city of learning.

Apollos was not the only great Christian scholar to come out of Alexandria. The first theological school in Christianity was founded in Alexandria. Men whose works are still read today headed that school, such as Clement and Origen. By the fourth century Alexandria was the theological center of Christendom, and ten councils were held there. The point of all this is that Apollos was a New Testament brain who came out of the brain city, and his preparation in learning makes it clear that there is nothing anti-intellectual about Christianity. Not all Christians are scholars, but the history of Christianity reveals that those who have been scholars have had the longest lasting impact for the cause of Christ. The mind is a terrible thing to waste, and so God has used the great minds of history to promote the cause of Christ.

We have Papyri from 600 A.D. that tell us what a deacon had to know to be a deacon in the church of Alexandria. He had to learn by heart one of the Gospels, 25 Psalms and 2 Epistles of Paul. There are probably no deacons or pastors on the planet today who could meet these qualifications. It took a working mind to be a leader in Alexandria. We need to be humbled by the fact that we with all our technological progress are not necessarily any smarter than Christians of centuries ago.

Apollos is one of the authors most favored to have written the book of Hebrews. Martin Luther was convinced he wrote it and others as well. The reason is that he is one of the few in the world of his day that knew both the New Testament and Old Testament revelation well enough to write it. He was a learned man well prepared to be an intellectual leader in the early church. But we need to see that Alexandria did not give him all that he needed. He came to Ephesus and in that city we see a second stage in his education.

II. HIS PROGRESS IN LEARNING.

As great as his credentials were we see that this great intellect was yet incomplete. There were aspects of God's revelation in Christ, which he had not yet incorporated into his understanding of the Christian faith. When Aquilla and Pricilla heard Apollos speak boldly in the synagogue they detected this weakness, and so they invited them home with them to explain the way of God more adequately.

Now there is no doubt that Apollos was a Christian, and yet you will find many who speculate that he was not yet a Christian. I am amazed at how many Bible teachers ignore the text of the Bible and quote each other in support of what the text denies. In spite of the fact that it is two decades since the cross, and that Alexandria was the center of learning, and that Apollos has been a Christian, it is supposed that he never heard of the cross and resurrection. Look at verse 25 where we see that Apollos had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and that he taught about Jesus accurately. How can you teach about Jesus accurately if you do not know of the cross and resurrection? All the text tells us is that he knew only the baptism of John. This was a defect, but not one that leads to saying that he was not a Christian. Chapter 19 of Acts begins with an account of other Christian disciples who also knew only the baptism of John, and they were re-baptized in the name of Jesus.

Apollos was one of these who was not up to date in Christian baptism, but he was boldly proclaiming the Gospel as is stated in verse 26. A. T. Robinson says this word for boldly is used only by Luke and Paul in the New Testament. He says, "Always of the bold declaration of the truths of the Gospel." Apollos was not converted by Pricilla and Aquilla, but the text says that they explained the way of God to him more accurately. This word is used in Acts to refer to fine points. Apollos needed to have some things clarified and updated to be the best preacher of the Gospel. Here is one of the most brilliant scholar of his day being enlightened by a couple of Christian lay people. It would not surprise us if Paul had done this, or Dr. Luke, but here are a couple of tent makers instructing a scholar on details of the Christian faith.

There are some powerful lessons here for the learned who are interested in progress in learning.

1. You are never so brilliant you cannot learn more.
2. You are never so gifted that you cannot be informed by those less gifted.

The true intellectual is the person who is ever open to receive more light from any source. The thing we do not like about intellectuals is their pride, which refuses to believe they can be enlightened from lesser minds. The true intellectual is always teachable. This is why Apollos is so admired. He was able to humble himself and go to the home of a couple of loving people and be instructed. The pseudo-intellectual is the one who pretends that if he doesn't know it, it isn't

knowledge. Apollos was not one of these. He was a learned man who was still a learner. He was a teacher who could be taught. There are few things more noble in an intellectual than the spirit of teachableness. Next we want to look at-

III. HIS PROMOTION OF LEARNING.

Apollos was not a scholar who learned for the sake of learning as an end in itself. He wanted his gift to be used in promoting the kingdom of God, and so he wanted to go to churches and build up the body with his knowledge. The church of Ephesus encouraged him to do so, and they sent him to Achaia where he ministered in the church of Corinth, and was a great help to the believers there, as it says in verse 27.

Apollos used his brain power to refute the Jews in public debate and prove that Jesus was the Messiah from the Scripture. He gave the Christians a sense of security, for they had an intellectual who could hold his own and win against the greatest scholars of Judaism. We know he made a great impact, for when the Corinthians began to form their church Apollos was a rival of Paul. Some were saying I am of Paul, and others were saying I am of Apollos. Paul acknowledges a great contribution to the growth of the church of Corinth by Apollos when he writes in I Cor. 3:6, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it." God made it grow up, but He used great servants like Paul and Apollos to make it happen.

Paul and Apollos were friends. He writes to Titus in Titus 3:13, "Do everything you can to help Zenos the lawyer and Apollos in their way and see that they have everything they need." Here we see Apollos in Christian service traveling with a Christian lawyer. Here were two intellectuals traveling about ministering to the churches. He was aware that the key value in any gift is in the sharing of it with the whole body. Apollos was one of the first Christian professors who helped Christians in the area of apologetics, which is defending the Christian faith on an intellectual level. The world was full of doubters and attackers of the Christian faith, and somebody needed to help Christians know how to have an answer for these people. Apollos was that man.

He was a spirit led man, and as far as we can see from the New Testament he had only one he was accountable to, and that was the Holy Spirit. In I Cor. 16:12 we have a text in which we see Paul appreciating the gifts of Apollos and longing to see them used. But Paul was in no way the boss of Apollos, nor did he have any authority over this man's independent ministry. He writes, "Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity." Even Paul could not order Apollos to do anything until he was ready. He was a free spirit just as was Paul.

Spurgeon said, "Oh, that ministries were more instructive! Alas, it seems often as if the preacher skimmed the surface, and did not care to enter into the treasure-house of doctrine, and open up the deep things of God. We want the people instructed, for ignorance is the mother of superstition and skepticism. The uninstructed are easily carried away with novelties and delusions." There is probably more superstitions and more wacky cults, and more sophisticated religious nonsense in America than anywhere else in the world. We are anti-intellectual culture when it comes to religion. It is almost as it was in the day of Judges when every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Cults, the occult, and astrology are all popular, and all are anti-intellectual. They stress experience, and it does not have to make any sense as long as it feels good.

We need to look again at the men God used to produce the New Testament church. They were men like Paul and Apollos, and we need to ask ourselves if we are committed to the same values that motivated them. We need to have the same three things in our lives, which they had in theirs: Preparation in learning, purpose in learning, and promotion of learning. If we do we too can be intellectuals for Christ.

22. PAUL-A VICTIM OF SLANDER Based on Acts 21:1-32

When Irving Berlin visited London as a young man he gave the doorman at the station the largest tip of his life. He did it because when he held the door open for him he was whistling, "Alexander's Ragtime Band." That was Berlin's first big hit. That doorman was in the right place at the right time doing the right thing.

On the other hand, there was Mike Maryn in Chicago who had been mugged 83 times in 5 years. He had been mugged by men, women, and by youth. The police didn't know why. All they could say was, "He happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Paul gives us a picture of another possibility, and that is of being in the right place at the wrong time. He was in the temple doing good, but he was recognized by an enemy who started a riot. Paul got into serious trouble even when he did everything right. There are those who dispute whether Paul was right in coming to Jerusalem. Ray Stedman, for example, is convinced that Paul made a major mistake in his stubborn determination to come to Jerusalem. He was warned by people led of the Spirit, and he should have given heed to their warnings. He didn't do so, and it led to two years of imprisonment in Caesarea and three years imprisonment in Rome. It was all unnecessary waste says Stedman, and so Paul's problems could have been prevented had he been open to friendly advice.

The problem with such criticism of Paul is that it ignores the fact that Acts 20:27 says that Paul was compelled by the Holy Spirit to go to Jerusalem, and that he was fully aware of the risks that awaited him. We have to accept the testimony of God's Word and see that Paul was in the center of God's will. He was doing what was good and right, and yet was nearly buried under an avalanche of problems. Joseph Parker feels that the church leaders were the ones making a mistake in expecting Paul to have to prove himself to the Jewish Christians. Paul was God's man, and the Holy Spirit had used him mightily to open up the Gentile world to the Gospel. What business was it of theirs to impose their ceremonial nonsense on Paul?

It is easy to feel this way for us who are Gentiles, but the fact is, Paul did not present one word of resistance. This man of deep conviction, who withstood Peter to his face on an issue where Peter was falsely compromising, did not say a word to this proposal for peace, but he calmly cooperated. Who has the authority to call this a mistake? Paul was seeking unity with the largest Christian church in the world, and the headquarters of Christianity. It was a sensible move. Paul recognized when there were times when you have to cooperate with fellow Christians on issues over which you disagree, but which are not vital to salvation.

I think of Billy and Ruth Graham. Here is the world's most famous Baptist married to a Presbyterian. Many of Billy's friend urged Ruth to be re-baptized by immersion. In spite of the pressure she declined. So Billy has had to live with love, and cooperate with a wife who has a different conviction from his own. It is probably led to some problems, but it has also opened up doors for him in different denominations. Problems are not a valid criteria by which we judge the rightness or wrongness of actions, or the success or failure of a plan. You cannot say that if you do all that God wills that there will be no problems. That does not fit reality.

Paul's life was problem oriented from the moment he stepped on to the stage of history. He was a major problem to the Christians as he persecuted them. He then became a major problem to the Jews when he was converted. He was always somebody's problem, and so he had problems wherever he went. He was in Jerusalem as a peacemaker, and he was in the temple proving he was a lover of the Jewish heritage, and still he became the center of a vicious riot that almost ended his life. He was trying to solve a problem and became the cause of a larger problem. Erick Sevareid was right when he said, "The chief cause of problems is solutions."

Paul was not causing a problem because he was a proud and presumptuous Christian who thought he was above the law. He was not like the one who was driving an evangelist down the streets of Los Angeles when the evangelist shouted, "You are going down a one way street the wrong way!" He responded, "It's okay. We are children of the king, and so we have the right of way." We can understand such a Christian getting into serious trouble. But Paul gets into trouble even when he is being an ideal law abiding citizen. He is bending over backwards to please everybody. He is trying to please the Jewish leaders of the church, and he is trying to please the thousands of Jewish converts to Christianity who have heard false rumors that he is anti-Moses. Paul is a totally cooperative spirit, and yet he still gets into serious trouble.

In My Fair Lady Eliza Doolittle sang of the need for action rather than words.

Words, Words, Words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through. First from him, now from you!
Is that all you blighters can do?
Don't talk of stars burning above
If you're in love, show me!
Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme!
Don't waste my time, show me!
Don't talk of June! Don't talk of fall!
Don't talk at all! Show me!

This is what the leaders of the Jerusalem church wanted out of Paul. They wanted a demonstration of his loyalty to the heritage of Israel. They did not want a testimony or lecture on loyalty, but they wanted action. They said, "Show us," and Paul said by his actions of going into the temple with four other men that he was showing his loyalty. This sincere act of love and cooperation almost got him killed, and it did lead him to spending most of the rest of his life in prison. We have looked at the theme many times of how God brings good out of evil, but here is a switch where we see evil coming out of good.

As Paul's life unfolds after his arrest, and one court case after another, we see again how good

comes out of evil of his imprisonment. But in our study now we want to focus on this theme of evil coming out of good, and the primary tool Satan uses to make this possible. Why does it happen that people doing the will of God, and striving to be loving to others, end up in some sort of mess because the whole plan collapses, and folly wins the day? That is what we see happening to Paul, and it happens to Christians all the time. Their honest efforts to be peace-makers leads to more conflict. Paul trying to bring peace produced as much violence that we see anywhere in the New Testament. The whole plan backfired, and now Paul is the most hated man in town.

People try to pin the blame for this on Paul, or on the leaders of the church in Jerusalem, but these accusations will not hold water. The real culprit is a sin we seldom consider, but which is one of the most powerful causes for evil suffering in the world. And all of us are capable of doing it, for it is the sin of slander. All of the conflict and struggle we see in this chapter, and the rest of Paul's life, has its roots in this sin of slander. Slander is the defamation character. It is a false report, oral or written, maliciously designed to injure the reputation of another. This was a popular sin in Jerusalem, and Paul was the victim.

In verse 21 we see that the Christian Jews had been informed that Paul taught all the Jews among the Gentiles to forsake Moses, and to stop circumcising their children, and to cease living according to Jewish customs. In other words, Paul was slanderously accused of being anti-Semitic. The Christians believed this false report to some degree, or there would have been no need to devise a plan to prove it was not so. What we have here is an innocent man who has to prove he is innocent because he is being held guilty until proven innocent. It is the Christians belief in the false witness against Paul that led to all the problems. Slander cannot be effective without those with willing ears to listen. If such ears are available, there is no escape from the evil power of slander.

Moliere said, "There is no protection against slander." The Bible supports this statement by its frequent denunciation of false witness because it is such a dangerous and serious sin that can hurt even the best of people.

1. It is number 9 of the 10 Commandments: "Thou shalt not bear false witness."
2. David's major conflict is that false witnesses rose up against him.
3. Among the 6 things that God hates in Prov. 6 is a false witness.
4. In Prov. 19:5 God warns, "A false witness will not go unpunished..."
5. False witnesses accused Jesus and Stephen and they were murdered.
6. Paul fought false witnesses his whole ministry.

The point is, in spite of the numerous warning about false witness and slander in the Bible, it has always been a popular sin even among Christians. The reasons for this are that gossip and slander are always exciting because they put us in the inner circle. We are in the know and have privileged information to share about the personal and secret life of others. It is a great boredom demolisher, for it is hard to be bored when you are telling secrets. It also makes you feel superior. When you can put someone else down it makes you feel good because you are not on that level, but on a higher plain. If you can report that so and so never gives her children cookies after supper, it makes you feel good, for you do, and that makes you feel like a better mother.

Francis Schaeffer in True Spirituality wrote, "Every time I see something right in another man, it tends to minimize me....But each time I see something wrong in others, it is dangerous, for it can exalt

self." Since we all need to boast of self-esteem we are perpetually tempted to see the wrongs and the weaknesses of others, and then expose them by gossip and slander, for it is like a shot in the arm to our own self-esteem. Like all sins that are tempting there is pleasure in it, and that is why the Christian is just as tempted to engage in this folly as the non-believer. We need to see that there is a distinction between silly slander and serious slander. In our culture there is a built in level of valid slander. It is one of our rights as Americans to poke fun at authority, and enjoy jokes that slander and insult professional leaders.

Since we have to bear the burden of the mistakes of the politicians, the Constitution gives us the right to expose their folly and laugh at them, and so at least get something in return. Americans take full advantage of this right. Someone said, "If two wrongs don't make a right, the politician will try three." The Supreme Court says that free speech is so important in relation to criticizing those in political office that even false material is not considered slanderous unless actual malice can be shown. In other words, it is legal to slander politicians. This means we need to be very careful what we listen to, for they are open game, and people are free to say just about anything whether it is true or not. We should not listen to what anybody else says about a politician, but listen to what he says himself. The mob was willing to kill Paul based on false witnesses, and they would not listen to his own defense.

Ethnic jokes are slanderous if taken seriously. They are a put down of other people that make us feel good because we are not as stupid as they are. It is like the joke that says Baptists never die in their sleep because they cannot do two things at the same time. This is silly slander, and we can laugh at it as long as we do not take it seriously. Jokes for the sake of making light of the humanness of leaders and races is valid, but when we tell lies with the intent of damaging the reputation of others we are into the sin of serious slander.

Paul was trying to get the Gentiles free from the law of Moses, but it was a slanderous lie to accuse him of trying to get Jews to forsake their heritage. Christians spreading this lie poisoned the minds of people to the point that when Paul was found in the temple he was presumed guilty of defiling this sacred place by having brought Gentiles into the forbidden area. There was nothing but circumstantial evidence. They saw Paul with a Gentile earlier and they assumed he brought him into the temple. The mob spirit took over, and people went mad with blind rage determined to kill Paul and work out the details of evidence later.

Great is the power of slander to pervert and destroy all that is decent and just, even in good citizens. These were basically good people who are out to kill Paul. Some of them were likely very godly, but slander and false witness had blinded them to their obligation to be fair, and to hear the evidence before they jump to conclusions. People motivated by slander do not want evidence, for all the evidence they need is their feelings, and so their prejudice and subjective anger is in control, and they are capable of any evil. One of God's choice men is being beaten to death by people who think they are doing God a favor. That is just how dangerous slander can be.

Satan is a liar and a murderer. One of the ways he gets people to be murderers of passion is to get them to believe lies. The lie was spread that the Huguenats were Protestant Christians who met in secret to satisfy their unlawful lusts. People were aroused to a passionate hatred of them. Mob psychology took over and the masses fell upon them in bloody butchery. This has happened many times in history, and it proves that people are just waiting for a scapegoat to blame and hate for life's

burdens. Robert M. Grant in his book *The Sword And The Cross* makes it clear that one of the major causes for thousands of Christians being persecuted and killed in the first three centuries was due to slanderous lies about Christians. The Roman leaders were ignorant of what Christians believed, and they were easily persuaded by lies to believe they were a dangerous and immoral cult.

Around the year of 180 A. D. the Bishop of Antioch was Theophilus. He wrote a book defending Christians against the false charges made against them. He tells of the slander they had to face. He wrote, "Godless mouths falsely accuse us. The godly who are called Christians, saying that our wives are the common property of all and indulge in promiscuous intercourse; that further we have intercourse with our sisters and that most godless and cruel of all, we taste human flesh." The father of lies kept Christians on the defensive for centuries, and it cost them the lives of many believers.

The stories of false accusation and the tragic consequences are a part of our way of life in America. Guidepost magazine had an account of the Derek Sarow, who was arrested back in 1978 and taken by force from his New York apartment while his wife and child screamed and wept. He was charged with rape and convicted on circumstantial evidence. He spent 2 years living a nightmare, he lost his job, his home, and had to go on welfare. Had the real rapist not been caught, and he not confessed to the rape, Derek could be in a prison yet. There are few things in life more destructive to other lives than false witness and slander. It is a violation of all that is just and right. It is the reversal of love your neighbor to hate your neighbor.

Christians need to see the danger of inaccurate words about others. They need to see the warnings, and see the damage it could do. They need to make sure they are not conned into being a tool of Satan. A rumor is to be treated like a check, which means it is never to be endorsed until you are sure it is genuine. Make sure of your source. If people had not taken the accusation against Paul as absolute truth, but checked it out by giving Paul a chance to explain, this whole thing would not have happened. We need to make sure we have an accurate understanding before we begin to label people.

I have very little confidence in anything I hear about Christian authors from people who have not read these authors. The gossip, false witness, and slander is so common that it is my conviction that even if what you say is true, but you have not come to that conclusion by examining the evidence, you are still wrong in passing on your judgment. The reason you are wrong is because you would be passing it on even if it was wrong because you don't care enough about avoiding the sin of slander to be accurate and sure.

The saddest time in Paul's life was when he was a victim of slander. History is full of this kind of sadness and God says that those who are false witnesses will bare an awful load in judgment. We can joke and enjoy human fallibility about our leaders, but we need to beware of the serious danger of slander. Andrew Jackson was the 7th President of the United States. His fight for this office was one of the most vicious in history. His enemies spread scandal about his wife of 37 years. She became so seriously ill that she died. Old Hickory won that election, but he was one of the saddest winners in history, for he had to move into the White House alone because of deadly slander.

Shakespeare in *Richard II* says, "I am disgraced, impeached and baffled here, Pierced to the soul with slander's venom'd spear." We all have potential poison in our tongue, and it can slay

reputations. This is clearly a Christian problem, for in James 4:11 we read, "Brothers, do not slander one another. Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it." When you put together all that the Bible says about slander, false witness, gossip and judging, you have a colossal amount of testimony as to the deadly danger of the misuse of the tongue.

Peter adds to this vast witness by writing in I Peter 2:1, "Therefore rid yourselves of all malice and all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and slander of every kind." There are all kinds of slander, and so Peter speaks in favor of the Proverb, "If you can't say something nice about someone, don't say anything at all." Peter the great, when he heard someone saying something negative about another, would say, "Now tell me what you have noticed what is excellent about this person. It is easy to splash mud, but I would rather help a man keep his coat clean." The Christian is to avoid slander, not only because it may not be true, but because, even if it is true, it is very unloving to hurt anyone unless it is necessary to protect the innocent from getting hurt.

If I know there is an insurance salesman who is selling worthless policies, I have a obligation to slander him in the sense of spreading the word that he is a fraud. This is sensible slander that protects innocent people from getting ripped off. Public people who do what is harmful to others should be exposed. That is a part of our system of checks and balances. But to damage the reputation of others when that damage does not protect anyone is to delight in slander, and that is a serious offense against the will of God. Jesus slandered the Pharisees because they were hurting innocent people.

It was legitimate for Jewish Christians to question Paul about his ministry to the Gentiles. It was a whole new idea, and God's will is that we test all things and hold fast to that which is good. Paul did not mind debating the issue and seeking to convince doubters that the Old Testament supported his ministry. Putting ideas to the test is valid, and it is even an obligation for the Christian. But to pre-judge and slander before you hear the evidence is evil of the lowest kind, and it makes the believer who does it extremely worldly. The sins of the flesh tend to destroy you, but the sins of the spirit tend to destroy others. This makes it an even worse evil.

The sin of slander puts us in the category of a drug dealer. It is self-destruction to be a user, but the dealer is destroying other lives and he doesn't care. Roger Palm tells of how he wrote an article for a Christian Journal on the subject of clergy and their families. The editor left out the positive side, which gave the article balance. The lack of balance led to negative reaction, and he had a lot of his friends turn cold on him. His reputation for balance was lost. He felt like suing, but he knew this was not the answer. A wise pastor helped him see that even Jesus was slandered, and he was called a glutton and a winebibber, a friend of publicans and sinners. The people who knew him personally did not listen, for they knew who he was. He was saying that the people who know you will know you are balanced, and those who misjudge you do not know you, and so it is their problem and not yours. This helped him adjust and go on.

Roger Palm now says that he doesn't believe everything he reads, even if it is by the very man he may be evaluating, for his editor may have radically changed his intent. The point is, we need to be very careful in dealing with another person's reputation. Slander is not unforgivable sin. Jesus died for this sin, and we need to confess it and get cleansed from it. But the consequences can last a lifetime if by careless speech we ruin another's reputation. Even sin forgiven can go on having negative consequences. May God motivate us to make sure that we never make any innocent person a victim of slander.

23. SECULAR SALVATION Based on Acts 21:27-32

My father used to say that he had a piece of meat that was so tough it was like trying to eat shoe leather. I doubt that he ever knew that there was a time when Americans actually ate shoe leather. It was back in the year 1610 in the first English settlement called the Virginia Colony. The experiment had gone from bad to worse and the people had consumed all of their hogs, sheep, goats, and the few horses they had. Next went the dogs, cats, and even the rats and field mice. It is surprising how starvation cures the fussy eater. They dug up roots and everything eatable, and finally they came to the end of the line. There was nothing left but their shoes, belts, straps and leather covers of their books. These were boiled and eaten.

Obviously such a diet left them weak and some of them just froze to death as they lay in their beds. In nine months they went from a population of 480 down to just 60. You can imagine the thrill that came to those 60 starving people when they saw a ship on the horizon. The ship was aptly named Deliverance, for had it not arrived when it did all would have been dead in just a few more days. This deliverance of the people of Jamestown was a turning point for the colony, and it went on to play role in our nation's history. These people were saved, not for eternity, but for time, and this becomes an example of secular salvation. Secular means pertaining to time and flesh in this world. It is in contrast to that which is eternal and spiritual.

We may not think that secular salvation is of any great importance because it is only temporal and does not settle our eternal destiny. But the Bible makes a great deal of secular salvation. Paul was one of the major benefactors of God's providential secular deliverance. Paul was saved by Jesus forever, but he was saved by Roman soldiers for time, and this secular salvation was vital to God's total plan of eternal salvation. By means of these soldiers Paul's life was spared so that he could witness to leaders all the way up to Caesar in Rome. Because he lived he was able to write letters, which have carried the Gospel of eternal salvation into all the world. Because Paul experienced secular salvation, millions have experienced sacred salvation of their eternal souls by means of his letters.

Secular salvation is not small part of God's purpose in history. It runs all through the Bible, and yet we seldom think of it. The result is that we fail to see the hand of God in the secular world, and we miss much for which we should be grateful. In this message we want to focus on two aspects of this theme. First let's look at-

I. INSTRUMENT OF SECULAR SALVATION.

The instrument of sacred and eternal salvation is Jesus Christ. There is no other name under heaven whereby we must be saved. No man comes to the Father but by Him. Jesus is the sole instrument by which any person can be saved eternally. But when it comes to the level of secular salvation God uses some surprising instruments.

In Paul's case he was a Christian being saved from death by a non-Christian. It was the Romans to the rescue, and this word rescue is a key Bible word for secular salvation. The Greek word is

exaireo, and it was used by the Roman Commander who saved Paul from being beaten to death. In Acts 23:27 this commander used the word in a letter he wrote to Governor Felix explaining what happened. He wrote, "This man was seized by the Jews and they were about to kill him, but I came with my troops and rescued him.."

Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, who carried the message of salvation in Christ to them is now being saved on the secular level by a Gentile. From this point on in his life Paul is dependant upon Gentiles for his survival. Felix, Festus, or Agrippa could have turned him over to the Jews and he would have been immediately executed, but they spared him. On his way to Rome another Roman soldier spared Paul's life. Paul was only saved for eternity once, but he was saved for time over and over again. In Acts 28 a poisonous viper bite Paul and everyone expected him to die, but he experienced another example of secular salvation. Paul was being saved over and over by government officials and the providence of God.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery in *Prisoners Of The Land* tells of his ill-fated flight from Paris to Saigon in 1935. They crashed in the Libyon Desert of North Africa. He and his mechanics survived, but they had only a little food and water. On the 5th day of walking their hope was almost gone, and death was near. Then suddenly they found footprints and their hope was rekindled. They followed them and saw a Bedouin way ahead on a dune. They shouted, but they were so hoarse and dry it was but a whisper. All they could do was stare and hope he would turn and look back. If he did not do so, they would die. Life or death was to be determined by a mere turn of the head. Slowly the Arab made a right angle turn so that all he had to do was look to the side and see them. He did so and their lives were spared. They said he came like a god across the waves to create new life.

This is a case of secular salvation by one who had compassion to come to the rescue of dying men. God has used many instruments for saving men on this level, and quite often they are not necessarily godly people. A saint may be saved by a sinner on this level of salvation. In Acts 7:10 this same Greek word for rescue is used of Joseph. His brothers threw him into a cistern where he would have died in a few days, but some Midianite merchants came by and this motivated the brothers to pull him out and sell him to them as a slave. God used these secular merchants to save the life of Joseph, which led him to a place where he saved his entire family, and ultimately the Jewish race. It was all a matter of secular salvation, but it was a vital part of his plan for eternal salvation.

In Acts 7:34 this same Greek word is used of saving Israel out of Egypt. That was one of the greatest works of God in the Old Testament, but it was never the less a secular salvation. Their deliverance only saved them from Egyptian oppression. Their sin in the wilderness led most of them to perish. They were not even saved in time from judgment. It was just a temporal rescue that led to a whole new history. It was like the saving of Noah and his family on the Ark. It was crucial for God's plan, but it was only a secular salvation.

God choose Cyrus the king of Persia to rescue his people of captivity in Babylon, and then send them back to Israel to rebuild the temple. In Isa. 44 and 45 Cyrus is called by God, "My shepherd and the anointed." God used this secular pagan ruler to deliver His people. God can and does use secular instruments to accomplish His purpose. This is not His only tool for secular salvation, but it is common. Jesus is our only Savior of the soul was also a secular Savior. The word for saved is used to refer to the healing ministry of Jesus. He saved many people from sickness and death. This did not save them for eternity. Nine of the ten lepers He healed didn't even return to say thanks.

They were saved from leprosy, but not from sin, and so they merely experienced Jesus as a secular Savior. That is a wonderful deliverance, but it is no substitute for eternal life.

People can get so caught up in healing and miracles, and in being saved from poverty and other problems that they neglect the greater salvation of their souls. Secular salvation is precious, but it is not the Gospel. It will not save from sin and give eternal life, and so it must always be kept in balance lest we reduce our Sovereign and Sacred Savior to the level of a mere secular Savior. God can use anybody to save on this level, just as He used a Roman soldier to save Paul. We do not want to minimize secular salvation, for the whole point of this message is to bring its significance to our attention. On the other hand, it can be promoted to the point where that is the only salvation that matters. And people can be blest with a better life, but left to die in sin with no Savior of their eternal soul.

Secular salvation is the foundation for the very popular health and wealth gospel that is being preached in our day. To reject it is to reject the reality of secular salvation, which we have seen is clearly biblical. But to focus on it exclusively is to preach another gospel, for secular salvation is not the Gospel of Christ. The Gospel is that we, even though fallen sinners, can be rescued and reconciled to God and have eternal life because Jesus died for our sins and rose again from the dead and conquered death. By trusting him as our Savior we can have eternal life freely given to us by the grace of God. This is the only eternal Gospel.

Secular salvation is a delight, but there is nothing exclusive about it. Secular salvation happens to non-believers as well as believers. Barabbas was saved when the people cried out for Jesus to be crucified rather than him. Non-Christians experience secular salvation all the time. They are rescued from danger, disease, and every bad thing you can imagine. It was not only Paul that was saved from violence, for many in the empire were saved from injustice because of Roman law. Secular salvation does not depend on the beliefs of the people being rescued. Secular salvation is what we get when we go to the doctor and get medicine or surgery that saves our lives, and this is available to all people, even the atheist. Anyone can be saved in this sense.

In the city of Lystra Paul spoke to the pagans there and refers to God's secular salvation as a basis to get them to listen to the Gospel. In Acts 14:17 we read, "Yet he has not left himself without a witness. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy." Here are pagans who have experienced secular salvation by the providence of God in nature and history. The grace of God is universal in this realm of secular salvation. Everyone is saved in some way on this level. Sometimes Christians think that the non-Christian cannot experience true joy, but this is not so, for God makes joy a part of secular salvation that anyone can experience.

Secular salvation is one of the wonders of the world and the more we see it the more we will glorify God for his grace, mercy and love for all people. All salvation is to make us exalt the God of all salvation. He is the ultimate instrument of all secular salvation. He can and does use all kinds of worldly instruments to achieve his goals. He uses pagan kings, Roman soldiers, and every secular instrument you can think of. Jesus used his body to be a Secular Savior. When Peter began to sink in the water and cried out for help, Jesus grabbed him and saved him from drowning in the stormy sea. He was already saved for eternity, but his eternal salvation would not have saved him from drowning had Jesus not put out his hand to rescue him. He needed salvation of his body for time as well as

salvation of his body and soul for eternity.

We need to realize that each of us can be instruments of secular salvation. In James 5:15 we read, "The prayer of faith shall save the sick.." The word here for save is the same as that used for the salvation from sin, and the one used to describe those lost that Jesus came to save. Secular salvation is real salvation, and it is precious, and we can be a part of it. By our prayers we may be a key factor in the salvation of people for time and eternity. We are all partners with the Savior in the saving business. He alone can save for eternity, but we can be partners in saving people for time, and in getting them to trust him so they can be saved for eternity. God used a whale to save Jonah, and he can use any of us to save others on the secular level. Next we want to look at-

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF SECULAR SALVATION

We have already made it clear that Paul needed to be saved on the secular level so that he could be alive to communicate the good news of salvation on the sacred and eternal level. God keeps his servants alive by means of secular salvation so they can be instruments of eternal salvation. In 1906 a young man woke up to discover that his house was sinking. He quickly gathered some of his possessions and stepped out of his second story window on to the sidewalk. It had already sunk that far. He made his way through falling and burning buildings for 7 miles. Many died in this earthquake and there was 400 million in damage to property, but R. G. LeTourneau was spared, and he went on to become a millionaire for Christ. He has used his fortune to spread the Gospel all over the world. His secular salvation has led to eternal salvation for many people. He was spared several other times from certain death, but he survived to spread the grace of God to millions.

Nobody experiences secular salvation perpetually. Even God's best servants die, and even Paul was not spared from a martyr's death in the end, but each experience of secular salvation should make us see the importance of making life count for Christ and eternity. The more dangerous the calling of God is, the more we need to experience secular salvation. Those in high risk ministry need it more often. David Livingston needed to be saved almost daily in his exploration of the wilds of Africa. On one occasion he looked off to his side just as a lion was leaping at him.

Let him describe this frightening experience: "He caught my shoulder as he sprang, and we both came to the ground together. Growling horribly close to my ear, he shook me as a terrier dog does a rat. The shock produced a stupor similar to that which seems to be felt by a mouse after the first shake of a cat. Turning around to relieve myself of the weight, as he had one paw on the back of my head, I saw his eyes directed to Mebalwe, who was trying to shoot him at a distance of ten or fifteen yards. His gun, a flint one, missed fire in both barrels; the lion immediately left me, and, attacking Mebalwe, bit his thigh. Another man, whose life I had saved before, after he had been tossed by a buffalo, attempted to spear the lion while he was biting Mebalwe. He left Mebalwe and caught this man by the shoulder, but at that moment the bullets he had received took effect, and he fell down dead."

This could have been the end of the line for Livingston, but he was spared. Later he was urged to go back to England to share his mission work, but he declined. The ship he would have been on went down with great loss of life. He was again spared to go on and open up Africa for the Gospel, and many came to experience eternal life in Christ. Secular salvation has often been basic to eternal salvation. You have to stay alive to be used of God to bring the message of eternal life. Without

secular salvation the many great stories of those who risked all to get the Gospel to others would not exist. Many millions have been saved for eternity because of others who were blest with secular salvation that spared them so they could carry the Gospel to foreign lands.

The greatest example of secular salvation and its importance is Jesus Christ himself. He had to be spared from death long enough to get to the point where he could die on the cross as our sacrifice for sin. If Herod would have killed him as a baby like he tried to do there would have been no Savior to die for us. Jesus had to use his supernatural power in his ministry to walk away from those who would throw him off a cliff and end his life. Jesus needed secular salvation to get to the point where he could be the Savior of the eternal souls of men. He finally had to give up being saved like this, however, and face the cross. He prayed to be saved from this hour in Gethsemane, but then surrendered to the Father's will. He had to stop being saved on the secular level and surrender to the cross for our eternal salvation. But he never would have gotten there without experiencing secular salvation.

Secular salvation gets nobody into heaven, but it is often the stepping-stone on the way to eternal salvation. Every time we experience secular salvation we are given the opportunity to do for Christ what we could not do if we were not so spared. In Acts 27 we read of one of the most spectacular secular salvation stories in the Bible. Paul and 275 other men are caught in a typhoon that looks hopeless to escape. The soldiers were going to kill Paul and the other prisoners. But the Centurion liked Paul and would not let them carry out their plan. All of these prisoners were saved because of this pagan man's love for Paul. They were criminals and some of the worse men on the planet, and yet they were experiencing secular salvation, and it gave them a second chance to hear the Gospel and accept Christ as Savior of their soul. All 276 people were saved in a hopeless situation.

Why would so much space in the Bible history be given to this great secular salvation story? It is because it is important to save people on this level. Time is all people have until they come to Christ and gain eternal life. That is why Christians must feed the starving, give shelter to the homeless, give medicine to the sick, and in all ways save the bodies of the lost. This is the only hope people have to be saved forever. Some of those men on that ship, even the pagan soldiers and the pagan criminals, will, no doubt, be in heaven because their lives were spared to hear Paul share the Gospel.

The record of history is filled with examples of how secular salvation is the first stage in a two stage plan of salvation. Robert Wise was caught in a whirlpool that sucked him down into a cave under water. He felt his life was over like a popped bubble or burned out light bulb. But an inner voice told him to reach back over his head, and when he did he caught a part of the wall and was able to pull himself up to air. He survived and became a Christian and a preacher of the Gospel. This story can be repeated in many lives. The happy ending could not be told if they did not get past act one into act two. So secular salvation is the key to sacred or eternal salvation. It does not last to be spared from the death of the body, for one day all bodies have to die. But almost all who are saved for eternity are first of all saved for time. Every child that is born alive rather than dead had experienced secular salvation, and that means all of us are only going to heaven by faith in Christ because we have first of all experienced secular salvation.

24. REJECTING REJECTION Based on Acts 21:27-40

Paul is the most traveled man in the New Testament. He covered much of the known world of his day, and his ambition was to go to the end of the world. The furthest point West that man could then go was Spain. Spain is only mentioned twice in the New Testament, and both times by Paul in Romans 15. He says in verse 24, "...when I go to Spain, I hope to visit you while passing through." Then in verse 28 he writes, "I will go to Spain and visit you on the way."

Paul longed to bear the message of Christ to the frontier of civilization. There in Spain over 14 hundred years later a man with many things in common with Paul wanted to bear the message of Christ even further West. He became the greatest traveler of his day by going where man had never gone before. The interesting thing is that his first name means Christ-bearer. That is the literal meaning of Christopher.

Christopher Columbus had many things in common with Paul. They both had their share of shipwrecks and survival. They both traveled widely and longed to be used of God to fulfill His purpose in history. But where their biographies most resemble each other is in the rejection they had to endure and overcome to accomplish God's purpose. Columbus would have given up the dream and settled down had he not been a stubborn man who felt called of God to discover a new way around the world. He was as determined to sail West as Paul was to get to Jerusalem.

He proposed his plan to John II King of Portugal first. He turned it over to a royal commission of scholars, and after long deliberation they found his scheme utterly fantastic. He then appealed to Henry VIII of England where the response was that he was a fool, and his ideas were madness. He then turned to Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain. They also turned it over to their own royal commission, and they studied it for 4 and one half years. Their conclusions were more kind, but they also rejected it as an unlikely scheme.

On top of all the official rejection by the so-called experts, he had to endure the ridicule of those who heard of his dream. They would greet him like this: "Ah, here come our vagabond again, with his pathetic prattling about spheres and parallels. Tell us Christofaro, does the world appear any rounder to you today?" For 8 long years he had to endure rejection and humiliation. Finally he was granted the chance to fulfill the dream God had given him. He had plenty of rejection after that also before the dream was realized. It seems like anyone who makes a major breakthrough in history has to face much rejection.

Paul was no exception as the Apostle called to break down the wall between Jews and Gentiles. This wall was like the Great Wall of China. It had been worked on for centuries, and nobody was about to let it be demolished by some fool dreamer who had the notion that God loved all people equally. It was even hard for many Jewish Christians to accept this radical idea, and the result was that Paul held the record for being the most rejected man in the New Testament.

Jesus was despised and rejected of men, but he was only rejected by the leaders of Israel, and the mob they got to support them. Paul had all this plus. He was rejected all over the world, and not just in Jerusalem and by Jews. Paul was opposed by Gentiles who hated him for ruining their racket in idolatry. Paul was also opposed by Christians who did not like some of his teachings. Some of his

closest companions even forsook him. Demos forsook Paul for the world, and Barnabas split up with him over John Mark. Paul was rejected by more people in more places for more reasons than anybody in the Bible that I can think of. There can be question about it, for the evidence is overwhelming that Paul is the most rejected man of the New Testament. If we can't learn how to cope with rejection from him, we just as well forget it. We want to look at his life from the point of view of the reasons for his being rejected, and his responses which made him an over comer. First lets look at-

I. THE REASONS FOR HIS REJECTION.

Paul was rejected primarily for the same reason that any person is rejected, and that is because he was different. If you are different and do not conform to the majority, you are courting rejection. That is why people are such conformists. It is the easiest way to avoid rejection. Paul was not always rejected, for as a leader in Judaism he was a conformist just like all other good Jews. When he hated Gentiles and persecuted Christians he was going with the flow of his time and culture. But when he was converted and began to love the Gentiles he was considered a traitor. Now he was different and his old friends wanted to reject him.

Paul was a minority, for even the rest of the Apostles did not love Gentiles like he did. He had to rebuke Peter for backing off of granting them equality of fellowship. Paul had to deal with two different levels of rejection. He did not mind dealing with the racial rejection because it was a valid conflict to expect. He taught that we are to test all things and hold fast to what is good. He did not expect all Jews to change like he did in his view of Gentiles. After all, they were not confronted by the Lord and knocked to the ground blinded. They had a right to receive some reasonable evidence that this was God's plan all along to save the Gentiles and make them equal as His children. He welcomed debate and the searching of the Scriptures to prove these things. It was his calling to expound the way of God more clearly. That is why he is going along with this scheme to prove to the Jewish Christians that he is not such a Gentile lover that he now hates Jews, and that he has rejected their values and traditions.

He can understand racial rejection and recognize the need to build bridges. He was not going to magnify his difference at this point, but focus on similarities and common ground. The person who deliberately magnifies his differences in all settings is one who thrives on rejection. Show me the Christian who provokes hostility everywhere by calling attention to his being different from everybody else, and I will show you a Christian who is led by a different spirit than the Apostle Paul. He was the most rejected man of the New Testament, but it has to be kept in mind that next to Christ he is also the most respected man of the New Testament. He was a peacemaker, and he built relationships with people everywhere. He never sought for any of the rejection he received.

Garrison Keillor in Lake Wobegone tells of how he had to cope with being so different when he was growing up. He writes, "In a town where everyone was either a Lutheran or a Catholic we were neither. We were Sanctified Brethren, a sect so tiny that nobody but us and God knew about it. So when kids asked what I was, I said Protestant. It was too much to explain, like having six toes. You would rather keep your shoes on." So all of us try to minimize our differences from others to escape being rejected. Paul was doing this too, but unfortunately this was not the only type of rejection he had to cope with. He had the radical rejection that comes with deep-seated prejudices.

Paul was hated by the non-Christian Jews, and their language leaves no doubt. Even after Paul's defense in chapter 22 the crowd cries out in loud rejection, "Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!" In chapter 23 Paul stands before the Sanhedrin where many scholars are convinced that Paul once sat as a member. In verse 2 the high priest orders those near Paul to strike him on the mouth. He is radically rebuked and rejected by his former peers who once respected him. This hurts, and not just the slap in the face, for that sting will soon go away, but because the rejection by your own peers does not go away. Paul had to live with this scar the rest of his life. He had to appeal to Caesar because he knew if he ever came under the full authority of his own people he would be promptly executed. Paul had no illusions about his rejection. He knew it was total. He was now in the same category as his Lord before him, and of many of the heroes of God in history.

Joseph was rejected by his brothers. David was rejected by his peers in government. Moses was rejected by the people he led, and by his own sister. Noah was rejected by his contemporaries. The prophets were rejected by the very people they loved and sought to save. Rejection is a common experience for those who serve God. The reason is because people do not like that which is different, and especially when that difference makes them look bad. Nietzsche in *Thus Spake Zarathustra* has an episode where the ugliest man kills the beautiful god. When asked why he replied that he had to die. He had to because his beauty was intolerable to the ugly man. He could not become beautiful to be like the god, nor could he make the god ugly, and so there was no alternative but ultimate rejection-which meant murder.

This is why the Jews wanted to kill Paul. His love for the Gentiles made them look bad. They were the leaders of the spiritual world, and they represented the God of universe, but their prejudices made them ugly. But in a contest where all are ugly everybody looks just fine. But then comes along a non-conformist who really does represent God, and who really does love all people, and then ugliest stands out like a sore thumb. The great paradox of life is that the more you love the more you risk being hated and rejected. Your love will make other people look bad in comparison. The cross is the greatest proof to support this statement.

Paul was rejected for the same reasons Jesus was. He cared more about people than he did tradition, and this made tradition lovers look bad. It was just like that no good Samaritan who made the priest and the Levite look bad by going to the rescue of one they rejected as worthless. He was no hero to them, but a real pain, for his care for a person they rejected made their care about tradition look cold and cruel. So Paul was a pain to the powers that be, for he was embarrassing them by his love for the Gentiles. Even the Jewish Christians had problems with Paul's radical love, and the result is we do not see any rally on Paul's behalf by the thousands of Jewish Christians in Jerusalem. There is no hint that any of the Apostles coming to plead for his release. He was really isolated, from that point on he only had a few close friends who stood by him.

It makes me think of the story of Tonto and the Lone Ranger surrounded by 200 blood thirsty Comanche warriors. The mask man said, "Tonto, we are in serious trouble." And Tonto replies, "What do you mean we white man?" Paul knew the feeling of isolation and loneliness that comes with rejection. He could understand what Jesus felt when His disciples slept as he fought the battle of His life. He knew the loneliness of being forsaken because nobody could understand his goal and his love. Paul felt the ultimate rejection that his Lord endured. It eventually led to his being beheaded by Nero in 64 A. D. He was buried by a major highway just outside Rome. He probably never got to Spain. He was just too different to be tolerated. He loved the wrong people, and so he had to be

rejected.

Not everybody was like Paul, but everybody was something like Paul. Everybody tastes of rejection by some degree. It is recognized as one of the major problems of life. One of the causes for breakdown in marriage and family is rejection. It is the cause of so much abuse, drugs and even suicide. Few want to talk about their feelings of rejection lest they get even further rejection. Susan Sandberg in an article on rejection in Eternity Magazine says our society has taught that if you are rejected it is your own fault. People feel that they are to blame for all of the bad things that happen to them. But the Scripture makes it clear that you can be in the center of God's will, as Paul was, and still experience a great deal of rejection. Next let's look at-

II. THE RESPONSE TO HIS REJECTION.

Paul, like his Lord before him, responded to rejection by rejecting it as the final word in relationships. Paul refused to accept rejection as final. Jesus said on the cross, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Jesus got in the last word and refused to let rejection be the last word. He accepted those who rejected Him. This is the key to coping with rejection. Paul illustrates it for us here. He could have let the Romans carry him away to protective custody and forgot this mean rejecting crowd. But instead he pleaded for a chance to speak with them. They just tried to kill him, and yet he wants to share with them his testimony of what Christ did for him. He refused to accept their rejection as the final word.

We know from many studies what happens when you accept rejection instead of rejecting it. It becomes the determining factor in your life. People who accept rejection as the final word leave the church, leave the ministry, and even leave life. Accepting rejection is one of the major curses in life. Troubled children, who get into trouble with the law are often rejected by their parents. The parents feel disgrace and want nothing to do with them. If Paul's parents were alive, I'm sure they would be humiliated by his being almost killed in the temple, and then arrested. The shame leads to rejection.

Parents often say to a child in jail that they want nothing more to do with them. over 90% of the prisoners in America have been rejected by their parents. They have accepted that rejection as the final word, and so in order to bring reality into conformity with their feelings they do those things that get them rejected by all society. Rejection is what they got, and so rejection is what they give. It becomes the dominant force in their life because they have given it the place of the final word. Others do not end up in prison, but they carry it with them. They become so super sensitive to all disapproval that it enslaves them. the slightest negative remark plunges them into the dungeon of despair.

No matter who they meet and develop a relationship with, it is just a matter of time before the big rejection. They are never just disappointed when someone disagrees with them, or doubts their view of something. They are devastated, and the relationship is down the tube. They become attention junkies. They need a constant fix, and they feel high for a while in all new relationships where they are cheered up, because even strangers tend to be courteous and polite, and they do not rock the boat with negative remarks. But it cannot last in an imperfect world, and so they are soon back in the basement of despair because of some trivial word exalted to the level of gospel. These people live on the edge of rejection all the time, and they are just waiting for that word that pushes them over into the pits. They live under a perpetual cloud because they accept rejection as the final word.

Paul suffered the rest of his life because of the rejection he experienced in Jerusalem. His life was never the same, and he had to endure the limitations of prison. He could no longer travel. But do we see him become a bitter man because of his rejection? Not at all. He loved his people, and he loved the Gentiles, and so he went on for the rest of his life seeking to share the love of Christ by writing down his testimony. He refused to accept rejection as the final word. His example of following Jesus in this way has changed the course of history.

D. L. Moody was rejected because he made a lot of preachers look bad. They were educated and spoke perfect English, and then along comes this slang speaking shoe salesman and crowds are swept into the kingdom of God by his preaching. The whole thing was embarrassing. It was to different to be acceptable to the leaders of the day. The Calvinists in England said he degraded the sovereignty of God by giving too much attention to man's free will. His methods were anti-traditional and too emotional. He was just too different, and they could not stand it. They were doing it right and had dead churches. He was doing it all wrong and had revival. Moody said, "I like my way of doing it better than their way of not doing it." He went on in the face of rejection refusing to accept it as the voice of God.

The strong Calvinistic Baptist of England called Moody the Goliath of free will, and even the great Spurgeon was annoyed with Moody. The result was that few of the converts ended up in Baptist churches. Rejection hit Moody, but he pressed on to do the will of God, and God used him mightily. What if Jesus would have said that because the leaders have rejected me I am going to ascend to my Father and forget making atonement for man's sin? Had Jesus accepted rejection as the final word there would have been no plan of salvation. But He rejected rejection, and He made acceptance His goal. Many who formerly rejected Him did come around to accepting Him. Paul was the most famous, and then he went on to also reject his rejection, and to see many who rejected him come into the kingdom.

This is how we have to deal with rejection. Reject it and do not give it first place in your life. Put it way down on the list and press on to achieve those goals God has called you to. Love those who reject you. David Livingston had some gifts in winning the African people, and other missionaries became jealous of his growing reputation. He began to feel the rejection and realized that if he stayed the work of Christ would suffer. And so he had to move on from his lovely house and garden. The school he ran had to be left to start a new ministry. This is not rare, but it goes on all over the world. Those who accept rejection often leave the ministry, but those who reject rejection as the final word do what Livingston did. They press on to have an even greater ministry for Christ.

There is a lovely story that comes from the archives of the army. "An army chaplain has told of a burly sergeant who gave his life to Christ. He asked him, "What was it that prompted you to become a Christian?" The sergeant replied, "When we were in Malta, there was a private who was a Christian. We gave him an awful time, mocking him, laughing at him, but he continued to read the Bible. He continued to pray and live a wonderful life. We saw it, we knew it, and we hated it. It made us furious with him! The better he lived his life for Christ, the more furious I became," said the sergeant. One day when the private was on sentry duty, he returned to the barracks exhausted. He knelt by his bed, and began to pray. The sergeant, taking off his boots, hurled both of them at the private's head. He knocked the private off-balance, hurting him. But still the private got back on his knees and continued to pray. "I went to bed," said the sergeant, "and my heart was still filled with bitterness. But when I awoke the next morning, to my utter amazement, beside the bed, beautifully

polished, were the boots that I had thrown at the private. My heart was melted and I asked the One who could put such love into a human heart to come into my heart and to live with me. That's why I'm a Christian today," he told the chaplain."

Paul rejected John Mark and said he was not fit for the ministry, but Mark did not accept Paul's rejection as final, and the result is that he went on with Barnabus to become an effective servant of Christ. So much so that Paul's final word became one that was positive, and he recommended Mark as a profitable servant of the Kingdom. Had he accepted the rejection of one so great as Paul we would have lost one of the greatest servants of Christ, and would not have the Gospel of Mark that gives us such a unique perspective of our Lord. Thank God that he rejected the rejection he experienced. It was probably even valid rejection, because Mark was not living up to the level that he could have been at the time, but he did not accept that as final. Instead, he went on to live on the level that was worthy of Paul's admiration.

Paul did not hate the Jews for rejecting him. He kept on accepting them regardless of how they rejected him. The greatest parallel of Paul's experience that I am aware of in our life time is that of Kagawa of Japan. He was hated and despised for leaving his wealth and culture to live among the poor, and to waste his life on worthless people. He made other Christians look bad by his sacrificial love, and so they rejected him. After the atom bomb blasted Japan into surrender he was the only one who cared for the down and defeated people. He wrote to General Macarthur and urged him to treat the fallen enemy with Christian love. Macarthur met with him to plan ways to do this, and it changed the course of history for his people. His efforts kept communism from taking over in Japan.

Kagawa started more agencies and organizations for caring than seems humanly possible. He was elected as President of the Japanese Teachers Union, and was offered a place in Parliament, but he refused. He wanted to continue to preach the Gospel and save people for both time and eternity. He was greatly honored by the Emperor for all he did to save his people. None of this would have happened had he accepted rejection as the final word. In his early days the leaders of his country did all they could to destroy him and his ministry. Propaganda was spread that he was a traitor to his people, and he was arrested and imprisoned. His terrible sin was that he loved Americans. He cried out against the folly of going to war and of bombing Pearl Harbor. He fought for the acceptance of Americans as Paul fought for the acceptance of Gentiles, and he was hated for it. He loved people that everyone else hated, and so he was too different to be accepted. They radically rejected him, but he refused to accept their rejection. He rejected rejection and in the end won his enemies to praise him.

Paul could have said, "get me out of here, for I never want to see these people again," but instead he said he wanted the chance to communicate with them. He shared his testimony of how he was saved by Christ and called to take the good news to the Gentiles. He would not accept rejection as the final word, and this is the reason God used him to reach out into all the future to touch the world for Christ. Success in God's kingdom calls for people to reject rejection and press on to do what they are called to do. Christopher Wren was the architect of St. Paul's Cathedral in London. He is buried there and his epitaph says, "If you would see his monument look around you." And if you see Paul's monument just look around and see a world filled with Gentile churches.

Rejection is a part of life. Every child is rejected to some degree, and some of it is rational and reasonable. Not everything they want and want to do is legitimate and they need to be refused. But

they need to be taught that it is not final, and that someday they will be old enough to do what is now forbidden. One little guy wrote to God, "Dear God, Christmas should be earlier because kids can only be good for so long." It is hard to be good all year for anyone, and some rejection may be inevitable, but this is never the final word, for there is forgiveness and final acceptance in Christ, and all children need to know this, as do all believers whatever their age. Rejection is always just temporary, but acceptance is forever.

Dale Evans Rogers in *God In The Hard Times* tells of what life can be like without a strategy in coping with rejection. She represents the normal and natural man in dealing with rejection, and even the Christian who is not learning from Jesus and Paul. She wrote, "Believe me there have been times in my life when I felt desperately alone and rejected and discouraged. More than fifty years have passed, but I remember well the crushing loneliness and bitter feelings of rejection when my first husband walked out on me-a sixteen year old mother of a baby son. In my outrageous immaturity and crippling insecurity, I lashed out at anyone within striking distance and built up a high, protective wall around myself, vowing never to be hurt that way again."

The story goes on to tell of her rejection as a writer, and as a actress. She spent years feeling like a rejected failure. But then she found acceptance in Jesus Christ and her life was changed. She could now accept failure as not being final. God used her to encourage millions to refuse to accept rejection as final. You do not need to reject those who reject you. You can accept them and reject their rejection of you. This give you freedom to go on loving regardless of the response, and often it leads to receiving love in return. Love is the victory that overcomes the world. God did not accept man's rejection of Him as final, but went on loving him, and the end result is a vast host of people from all tribes and nations will praise Him forever. May God grant us the wisdom to see that the victory over all rejection is to be always rejecting rejection as the final word.

25. CHRISTIAN COURTESY ACTS 22:1-11

Timothy Eaton became the most successful business man in the history of Canada by the simple virtue of courtesy. Back in 1869, when he started his first store, he instituted a new policy. In those days a customer was almost compelled to buy something. He was coaxed and implored, and even bullied, and insulted, if need be, to make a purchase. If he did get out of the store without one, he was made to feel like a whipped dog running away. Timothy Eaton said, "No more of this nonsense." His clerks would be courteous, and let the customer shop and buy what he was convinced he wanted, and without pressure.

This new idea went over so well that his store was soon the busiest place in town, and before long he was building factories to supply his stores. He built branches all over Canada, and when he died in 1907, he was respected the world over. He had to have other virtues as well, but courtesy was one of the keys to his secular success.

Courtesy is a secular word that never quite got converted into a sacred word. The result is, we seldom deal with it as a Christian virtue.

It was a royal virtue to the ancient Greeks. It meant, to be friendly minded. Kings were expected

to be friendly to their subjects. The Athenians considered it a virtue that should characterize every man. The Emperor Julian, who was greatly influenced by Christians, exalted courtesy to the highest level in government. He taught that politics and laws were to be governed by this virtue.

The fact is, the New Testament is weak in promoting this virtue. The only two people in the New Testament who are described as being courteous are pagans. In Acts 27:3, the Roman Centurion, guarding Paul on the way to Rome, showed courtesy to Paul by letting him visit his friends. In Acts 28:7, the pagan chief Publius was courteous to Paul, and the others who shipwrecked on his island.

Being courteous just means being nice to people, and giving them a hand in time of need, and showing them respect as human beings. It is a basic secular and humanistic virtue. Nobody has to be a Christian to be courteous. Anybody can be, and almost everybody is, to some degree, and so it is a virtue greatly neglected by Christians. It is the Apostle Paul who rescues this virtue from the domain of the secular, and brings it into the realm of the Christian life. He does it, first of all, by making it a virtue of God. In Titus 3:4 he uses the Greek word *philanthropy*, the same word used to describe the pagans' courtesy to him, to describe God's love and kindness to sinful men. This is the only place in the Bible the word is used of God, but once is enough. God is courteous, or friendly minded toward men.

That alone puts courtesy on the theological map, but the most powerful witness of Paul to the value and validity of courtesy as a Christian virtue is his personal practice of it. There is good reason that Paul was treated courteously by pagans. He was reaping what he sowed. Paul could very well have another honor added to his impressive record. He could be considered the most courteous man in the New Testament, next to his Lord.

We know he got this courteous spirit from Christ, for he was anything but courteous before his conversion. He threw women, as well as men, into prison, and did not hesitate to approve the stoning of an innocent man like Stephen. The opposite of courteous is rude, rough, overbearing, and tyrannical, which fits Saul of Tarsus to a T. But look at Paul now, in his A D spirit, that is, after Damascus. He displays a level of courtesy that rises above the secular level. Paul gives us a demonstration of Christian courtesy. He exhibits this virtue in three ways. First of all-

I. BY HIS COURTEOUS ADDRESS.

Paul actually addresses this mob with the respectable titles of brothers and fathers. These are the same two words he uses all through the New Testament as terms of respect. Keep in mind, they had just minutes before tried to reduce the population of Jerusalem by one, and he was the one. They were trying to beat the life out of him. It was no brotherly fight, or fatherly discipline. They wanted to murder Paul on the spot. Yet we do not hear Paul shouting at them, "You lame-brain idiots, you madmen!" Instead, he says, "Brothers and fathers," and he says it in their tongue of Aramaic, and the crowd is shocked into silence. They had to be surprised by both his attitude and his Aramaic. He was addressing them like they were not his deadly enemies.

I read of a pastor who was asked to inform a man in his congregation, with a heart condition, that he had just inherited a million dollars. Everyone was afraid the shock would cause a heart attack and kill him. The pastor diplomatically approached the subject from a hypothetical point of view. He said, "Joe, what would you do if you inherited a million dollars?" Joe said, "Well, pastor, I think I

would give half of it to the church." The pastor fell over dead of a heart attack.

This mad mob did not fall over dead, but there deafening noise died down so Paul could be heard. He went on to address them in a friendly minded or courteous manner. Why? First of all, because it was a principle Paul lived by. He taught it to others, and he did it himself. He wrote in Col. 4:6, "Let your speech be always with grace, seasoned with salt, that you may know how you ought to answer every man." Words are like food, and a little salt makes them more enjoyable, and people will swallow them easier. Courtesy is just common sense. If you talk to others with respect and kindness, they will listen with the same spirit. If you blast them with a critical spirit, you will get the same in return.

Paul proves it here by getting the most hostile audience a speaker ever addressed to quiet down and give him a hearing. A hearing, by the way, that has gone around the world, and through the centuries. Because these hot heads were quiet for a few minutes, you and I, and millions of others, have studied these words they permitted Paul to speak. Such as the power of courtesy. We see Paul displaying this virtue over and over again, as he relates to the authorities.

He addresses the Sanhedrin in chapter 23 as, "My brothers." He does not shout at the Roman soldiers, who are about to flog him, "You numskulls." He simply, and very politely, asks, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen?" Paul shows nothing but courteous respect for Felix, Festus, and Agrippa, who sat in judgment on him. The point is, Paul did not just write in his great love chapter, that love is patient, love is kind, love is not rude, is not easily angered, but he demonstrated that love by revealing how it works in relation to real people who are not easy to love.

Paul was not only acting on a principle he lived by, he was motivated to be curious, kind, tactful, diplomatic, and just generally friendly minded, because he sincerely loved people. He was not interested in revenge, and getting even with the Jews. His goal was not self-defense for his own sake. He was not concerned about his reputation, but about their redemption. If he did not care about these people, he would have walked away, or gotten into a verbal bout, and called them names, and told them to go to the devil. But Paul is courteous, and addresses them with respect, because he wants them to understand that Jesus is their Savior.

Paul tells us just how deeply he feels in Romans 9:1-3. "I speak the truth in Christ-I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit-I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, the people of Israel." When you love people as deeply as Paul did, you can treat them with respect, even if they are killing you. Jesus did this, and prayed, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do." Stephen did this, and prayed as he was being stoned, "Lord do not hold this sin against them." So Paul here addresses those who just fought to get close enough to pound the life out of him, "Brothers and fathers."

It can safely be said, those to whom you cannot be courteous are those for whom you do not care. If you care, and you love, you can be courteous even to those who hate and despise you. Pagan courtesy does not rise to this level. This is Christlike, and, therefore, Christian courtesy. But Paul does not stop with a courteous address. We see that he extends the virtue-

II. BY HIS COURTEOUS ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

Many authors have a preface in which they acknowledge those who helped them achieve their goal. It is a thoughtful courtesy to others whose labor made their work possible. Paul begins his defense by acknowledging his Jewish heritage. I am a Jew says Paul, and I was raised in this great city of Jerusalem, and I was thoroughly trained in the law under one of Israel's greatest teachers, Gamaliel. Any speaker knows your chances of being heard are greatly improved by building some common ground between the speaker and the audience. If it is a hostile audience, it is an absolute necessity.

A tramp, who was nearly starved, stopped by a quiet old English village inn. It bore the classic name of Inn Of St. George And The Dragon. "Please mam," He asked the lady who came to the door, "Can you spare me a bite to eat." "A bite to eat," she growled, "For a sorry no good bum, a foul smelling beggar? No!" She snapped as she slammed the door. He started to walk away, but noted the sign St. George and the Dragon. He went back and knocked again. "Now what do you want?" The woman asked angrily. "Well, mam, "he said, "If St. George is in, may I speak to him this time?" He may have gotten even, but he got no closer to a meal. Courtesy would be a better gimmick than cleverness.

Paul is not being courteous as a mere gimmick. He loves these people, and he truly loves his heritage, and he wants to make it clear that his being a Christian does not in any way cause him to lose respect for his heritage. We can't take the time to explore all of Paul's heritage, but let's just look at the fact that he is proud he studied under Gamaliel. Gamaliel is worthy of a full sermon. For he was truly a great man and great teacher, but for this morning we just want to consider his influence on Paul. Because Paul was trained under the law by this great Jewish scholar, Paul's epistles are loaded with quotes from the Old Testament. He quotes Moses, David, Solomon, and prophets, more than he quotes Jesus. Paul was a product of his training, and he carried this heritage into his Christian life and scholarship. He interpreted the Old Testament as he was trained to do under Gamaliel.

Because of the bitter hatred between Jews and Christians, the early church fathers had a hard time with the Old Testament. But because Paul quoted it so often, and used it to defend his teachings, they were forced to recognize the Old Testament as part of the Christian Bible. The great modern Jewish scholar, Joseph Klausner, acknowledges that Paul is the Savior of Judaism. We live in a Judeo-Christian culture because Paul linked the two together so that they can never be separated. Klausner writes, "Perhaps he did not intend to do this: But the Pharisee, a son of a Pharisee, the disciple of Rabbi Gamaliel, was so filled and saturated with the Written Law.....that it was impossible for him not to base his teaching on the Holy Scripture of his people.....from whom he never to his last days separated himself completely."

Klausner points out that Judaism has survived where the Old Testament is linked to the New Testament or the Koran, but Judaism died in India, China, and Japan, because the Old Testament did not maintain it's position of authority. That is why this Jewish scholar, who does not like Paul at all, says he and his love for his Jewish heritage have been the key to the survival of Judaism.

This is fascinating when you think about it, for Paul loved the Jews, and longed for them to be saved. Had he not been such a lover of his heritage, and one who incorporated it into his Christian

teaching, there may very well have been no Jews to be saved. Judaism may have been absorbed into the culture as it was in India, and China. There would be no Jews for Jesus, nor any other group designed to reach Jews for Christ. Without Paul there may have been no Jews to be reached. Jesus used Paul to keep Judaism alive so there would always be a ministry to these chosen people.

Because Paul acknowledged his Jewish heritage, Judaism, to this day, acknowledges this great enemy of theirs, as the probable cause of their continued existence. Such is the power of courtesy in putting yourself in the same boat with people you are trying to reach. I had this experience several years back at the Union Gospel Mission. Two Indians came forward to receive Christ. This motivated me to remember and acknowledge my heritage from the Indians. We were from two different worlds, and I wanted to assure them that in spite of the radical differences, I still had something in common with them.

I remembered that my parents had an Indian friend who used to come to the house when I was a small boy and show me tricks with a rope. I learned to do some of these tricks, and years later show them to my grandchildren. Then as a teenager witnessing at the country jail in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, my first convert was an Indian. He was in for man-slaughter. His response to the Gospel was a compelling factor in my call to the ministry. I have had almost no contact with Indians outside of these two incidents, but these two influenced my life. They are part of my heritage, and they give me the opportunity to acknowledge that I have some common ground for communication with Indians.

The lesson we learn from Paul is, if you love people, seek for that common ground. There is almost always some way in which you can acknowledge some value in their life that is also a value in yours, and thus, by this courtesy gain a hearing. The third way we see Paul expressing the virtue of courtesy is somewhat similar to the second, but it is distinctively different as well, and that is-

III. BY HIS COURTEOUS ADMISSION.

Paul goes on from acknowledgment of a common heritage to admission that he was just like them in their zeal and fanaticism. Paul admits that he hated Christians just as they now hate him. Paul's approach here is not a holier than thou attitude which says, thank God I was never a hot head like you murderous maniacs. Paul said instead, "I understand your hostility for I have been filled with it myself, and my record is clear: I persecuted Christians to the death. I was, not long ago, just where you are now, and I would have joined you in killing me, for I too hated the followers of Christ."

You cannot go any further than Paul did in identifying with his audience. He was not only in the same boat, he was in the same shoes, and with the same mind and emotions. Paul does not hate them for their blindness and rage, for he was just as blind, and his rage was equally brutal, and innocent people died because of him. He was saved by the grace of God, and now he can do no less for these blind people than help them to see the light of this grace of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

It is a whole lot easier to be courteous to disgusting people when you admit to yourself and others that without the grace of God, you would be just like them. There but for the grace of God go I, said Paul, of these madmen who sought to kill him. Had he said, like the Pharisee in Christ's parable, "I thank God I am not as other men," then he could have treated them like the dirt they thought he was. But once Paul could admit that the only difference between them and him was the grace of God, he

had no choice but to have compassion for them. How can you hate and reject people who are just what you would be if Jesus had not touched you.

You can't treat a bad politician with disrespect if you know that without Christ you would be the same kind of politician. You can't look down your nose at a prostitute if you know that without Christ you too could be a prostitute. You can't be discourteous to any sinner if you admit that you would be just as sinful without the grace of God. Honest admission of just who and what you were, and what you would be without Christ, is the key to Christian courtesy. You can be nice to anyone when you realize that the only difference between you is, not your own merit, but the grace of God, which they too can have freely. This gives you compassion for the worst of people, and enables you to be kind and courteous in hopes of helping them to open their lives to that grace.

If you cannot be courteous to someone, it is because you have not, like Paul, magnified the grace of God in your life. The more you become aware that you are what you are by the grace of God, the more you will be able to be courteous to all people. The reason is, you will be able to admit you are only different from them by the grace of God. When you see, as Paul saw, you can understand how he could be so courteous to this mob of murderous men.

Paul shows us that Christianity is not a way of doing special things. It is a special way of doing all things. It is doing all things for the glory of God. Paul said, "Whatever you do in word or deed, (even addressing a mob), do it for the glory of God." And that means, do it courteously.

We can have a transforming experience in our view of Paul, just as Chuck Swindoll did, if we see the spirit of Paul here. Chuck in his book, *Improving Your Serve* said that he always saw Paul as a blend of John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and the Hulk. He rammed his way through life like a fully loaded battleship at sea. He was just too important to worry about little people, or those who got into his way. But he says, this false impression began to fade as he studied Paul in depth. He discovered Paul was a warm and caring person whose primary desire was not to lord it over anybody, but to be a servant to all. Swindoll says, "A true servant stays in touch with the struggles others experience." Paul really cared for this mad mob, and he really understood their intense intolerance of him. He courteously admits he was not better himself.

Chuck says he had to learn the power of courtesy from another. Dr. Bruce Waltke, a Semitic scholar, and he, with two other pastors, were visiting a large Christian Science Church in downtown Boston. The guide was a woman, and she had no idea they were clergymen. At one point she stated they did not believe in judgment. Dr. Waltke said, "But mam, doesn't the Bible say it is appointed on to men once to die but after this the judgment?" The lady did not respond, but said, "Would you like to see the second floor?" Chuck was saying to himself, "Go for it Bruce. Now you got her." But Dr. Waltke said, "We surely would. Thank you." She sighed with relief, and they followed her. Chuck could not believe it, and he later wanted to know why he didn't nail her. Dr. Waltke said, "It would not have been very loving now, would it?" Chuck was rebuked, and never forgot the lesson. If you are not courteous to other people, why should they bother to care what you think? Later on Dr. Waltke had 20 minutes to share Christ with this woman. A chance he never would have gotten, had he not been courteous.

We do not admire Paul for what he accomplished here, for he apparently accomplished nothing, as far as the record goes. We admire him for what he was: A beautiful example of Christ-like courtesy.

It is not a highly pushed virtue, nor is there any guarantee it will work, but if you really love people, and really want to please God, you will practice this seldom promoted virtue. Christ was courteous to those who crucified Him. Stephen was courteous to those who stoned him. Paul was courteous to those who sought to kill him. If you are going to judge the worth of courtesy by its fruit, you might be very disappointed.

None of these examples of friendly minded courtesy had any immediate impact on those to whom it was addressed. The mob did not change its mind. They shouted that Paul was not fit to live. If Paul was aiming to illustrate how to win friends and influence people he certainly failed. But Paul's courtesy, like that of his Lord, was not a gimmick. It was an expression of who he was, and of his love. It was right whether it paid off or not. The issue is not, does it work, but does it please God. Right is right whether it works or not.

Beauty is an end in itself, and beautiful behavior, like Paul's, is a work of art which exhibits Christ-likeness. Emerson said, "A beautiful behavior is better than a beautiful form....It is the finest of the fine arts." Beauty does not fail. People can fail to respond to it, just as the mob did here. But Paul's courtesy is still beautiful, and he has left us all with an ideal example of Christian courtesy.

26. PAUL'S UNIQUE EXPERIENCE Based on Acts 22:1-11

America was at war with Spain in 1898. One of the most unusual incidents in the history of naval warfare took place. One night Captain Freemont of the American ship Porter detected some strange object coming toward the ship. As it came closer he saw that it was a torpedo. Ensign Irving Gillis instantly took off his coat and shoes and leaped into the water. He swam to the side of the torpedo, which was floating toward the ship and not being propelled rapidly. He circled the war nose with his arm and screwed the firing pin up tight so it could not go off. Then he pulled the disarmed weapon to the side of the ship. He and his prize were hauled aboard and the ship was saved from destruction.

This very unusual experience is a parallel of the very unique experience of Paul on the road to Damascus. He was, by his own admission, like an enemy torpedo sent to sink the ship of Christ's church. He was armed and deadly, but Jesus leaped into the events of history and disarmed this torpedo and hauled it aboard the ship. It became one of the great trophies of victory in the history of the church. The point is that Paul's conversion experience is extremely unusual. There is nothing like it anywhere in the Bible or Christian history. It is a once in a history experience and it becomes a marvelous basis for the study of Christian experience. There is more Scripture dealing with Paul's conversion than with any other in the Bible. The story is repeated three times in the book of Acts.

The word experience is from the Latin *expertus*, which means to try out, to prove, or to test. An expert is one who has had experience, for he has tried things and proven by testing what works. An experiment is the testing to see if a theory is real and can be proven. Each of these words have the same meaning. Paul here in Acts 22 is an expert witness on his own behalf as he defends himself before an angry mob that wants him dead. His defense is not an armchair, ivory tower, theology that

he has reasoned out. His defense for being a Christian and a lover of Gentiles is his experience with the living Christ. Paul did not study and reason his way into the church. He was dragged in, and in his testimony he makes it clear that he is a Christian, not by any design of his own, but by the sovereign design of Christ who chose him.

Paul's cataclysmic conversion is probably the most famous conversion in all of history. It was not only a turning point in Paul's life, but in the life of the Christian church. From this point on Christians would be moving out into the Gentile world, and they would no longer be confined as a movement within Judaism. In this message we want to look at this event from the point of view of what it has to say about Christian experience. First-

I. EXPERIENCE IS PERSONAL.

This is Paul's personal testimony, and it fits nobody else in all of history. As far as the record goes, nobody else on this planet was ever converted by getting knocked to the ground and blinded by the presence of Christ. What happened to Paul was a once in a history experience. It falls into the category of-

1. Moses at the burning bush. Nobody else has ever seen God in a burning bush.
2. Adam walking with God in the garden.
3. Daniel in the lion's den.
4. Daniel's three friends in the fiery furnace.
5. Jonah in the belly of the whale.

The point is, there are all kinds of things that happen in this world that are unique and personal. They are not commonplace experiences that happen every day. God does not punch out people with a cookie cutter making them all alike, as if they were parts of a machine on an assembly line. People can have a lot in common, but every one of us is unique. God threw the mold away after making us, and not just the very unusual person. All of us have so much in common even with Paul. We have two eyes, two legs, and two arms, and we could go on and on with the list of the many things that we have in common. The ways we are like Paul could fill a book. Nevertheless, he was unique and different from us all, and from all the other Apostles. It is his radical difference that calls our attention to the fact that experience is so personal.

How we respond to our distinctiveness is the key to our self-image and our happiness as Christians. God obviously intended Paul to be unique and different from all the other Apostles. There was much about him that was nothing to be proud of. He was the only one who persecuted the church, and so he was the only one unworthy to even be called an Apostle. He said that he was the least of the Apostles, and in I Cor. 15:8 where he lists the resurrection appearances of Christ he says, "And last of all He appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born." Paul was not only the last and the least, he was the only Apostle who did not have a normal birth. He was born again, but not like the others who had natural birth. They walked with Christ and lived with Him. They came to love and understand Him, and by an act of their will surrender to Him. This was not the case with Paul. The Greek word here for abnormal birth means abortion, or premature birth.

Paul was not ready to be born into the kingdom of God. He was like Macduff in Shakespeare's Macbeth. "From his mother's womb untimely ripped." Paul did not grow and develop to become a

Christian. He was thrust into it prematurely, and like a premie baby he was not fully formed. He was something of a monstrosity, and the Christians still feared him as a fierce enemy. He was like an unformed fetus, and still a product of the law. He needed a lot of care before he was formed and developed in Christ. The other Apostles had three years to be formed and shaped by Christ. Paul alone was the aborted Apostle who was speed forced into the kingdom.

Paul is not proud of his uniqueness in the sense that it was good for him to have been so blind and cruel as a persecutor. He says in verse 9, "For I am the least of the Apostles and do not even deserve to be called an Apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." Paul did not consider his personal distinctiveness as good, or as a badge of honor. It was a disgrace that he was a persecutor of the church. But Paul goes on in verse 10 to say, "But by the grace of God I am what I am." Because of God's grace he worked harder than anyone who was born naturally. In other words, he did not let his negative experience and uniqueness hurt his self-image. He let it lead to a positive exaltation of the grace of God, and so to his own positive self-worth.

We are dealing with a paradox here that hinders Christians from developing a healthy self-image. The paradox is that Christians who have not been wild and anti-Christian like Paul feel that their conversion has not been radical, and so they feel they have missed out. On the other hand those who have been like Paul, and have been enemies of Christ, feel they are held back and are second class Christians because they have been such awful people before their conversion. The result is that Satan wins both ways, for Christians who have been too good or too bad both developed a poor self-image and settle for being mediocre Christians.

What we need to learn from Paul's personal experience is that how you are born again is not any more important as to your value as a Christian than is how you are born of the flesh is important to your value as a person. Do you ask anyone you admire if they were born premature or not? Do you ask if they were born in a hospital, at home, or in a cab? The personal experience of being born may vary a great deal, but none of these differences play a role in the value we place on a person. We do not say, "I would like you to meet so and so, but keep in mind he comes to us by way of caesarian. So also we do not make an issue of one's personal conversion. Did it happen on the road to Damascus, or while kneeling by a bedside after a great struggle? Was it after long thought and study, or was it instantly by conviction at a crusade? There are hundreds of different factors in people's personal experience of coming to Christ. All that really matters is that they confess that Jesus is Lord and believe that God has raised Him from the dead. It is the Lordship of Christ that counts and your submission to Him, and not the means or methods by which you came to experience it.

Being conformed to the world is clearly condemned, but we often do not see the harm in trying to conform to others experience in the church. It is almost always a pain to feel the pressure to be something you are not. The customer complained that the shoes are too narrow and pointed. The salesman responded, "These are what they are wearing this season, the narrow and pointed style." The suffering customer said, "It may be, but I'm still wearing last seasons feet." Fads develop in the church as well as in the world. The result is that Christians are constantly being pressured to conform to someone's idea of being spiritually in style. C. S. Lewis in a talk to Cambridge undergraduates said, "The most compelling of all temptations is the temptation to the inner circle. Men will lie, betray their wives for admission to the circle....the charm of the inner circle lies in the fact that others may not enter, that only a select few are admitted." This compelling temptation is the force behind

the fads that sweep masses of people into all sorts of things because of their craving to be in the inner circle. People crave for experience, and that is why they fall for every cult that comes along that offers some unique experience.

Back in the 1950's when South Pacific was at its peak on Broadway and Rogers and Hammerstein was being sung to sell out crowds, there were many visitors in New York who wanted tickets but couldn't get them. A couple of New York youth saw an opportunity. They began to pick up dropped ticket stubs and discarded programs. They sold them to out-of-towners who wanted to go back home with evidence they had been there. They were willing to pay to have evidence to convey that they had been in the inner circle where all their friends had never been. The next best thing to seeing the show was to experience the envy of those who thought you did. This trait of human nature often compels Christians to force themselves into some unique experience, or to fake it so they can be in the inner circle.

The reason it is important that we see the personal nature of experience is because there is a normal human tendency to try and imitate or duplicate that which we admire. On many levels this is good. Paul even said, "Be ye imitators of me as I am of Christ." But when we try and imply this to the unique and personal experience of life that are not open for all to imitate, we become frustrated and discouraged because we cannot be like our heroes and those we admire. Paul knew his conversion was very personal and unique, and nowhere do we read of Paul trying to impose his experience on others. He never expected his converts to go through what he did. He never asked if they had seen a vision and been blinded. He knew people were saved by their own personal trust in Christ, and not by trying to duplicate anyone else's experience.

One of the major problems with unique experiences is that people do not recognize that they are personal. They seek to use their personal experience as a standard by which they measure the experience of others. This was the major problem in Corinth. Some had been blest with the ministry of Paul, and others with the ministry of Apollos, and still others with a ministry of Peter or Christ. They began to form divisions in the church because each took his own experience and said that it was the measuring stick of spirituality. To add to the complexity of this mess they did the same thing with their gifts. Those with tongues and other charismatic gifts took their experience as the norm. They said this is what you need to experience to be first class Christians like us. They imposed their experience on others, and the result was that they became the most divided and unloving church in the New Testament. Experience can be such a blessing, but when it is not recognized as personal but made a general obligation it can become a curse, as it did in Corinth.

Some form of this nonsense of imposing the personal on others has plagued the church all through history. It is a rejection of all Paul says about love being kind, not proud, rude, or self-seeking. All of us can play this cruel game. We can take our strong points and unique interests and make others feel guilty because they do not have these same experiences in their own lives. I have not done it, but I believe I would if, I was confronted by a Christian, who began to impose his personal experience on me. If a Christian who has spoken in tongues urged me to seek this gift because it has done so much for him, I would respond that I asked the Spirit for the gift of love for learning, and I have seldom lived a week sense that I have not read from two to five books. I could ask if he likewise has this gift, and why not when the Bible makes it clear that this too is God's will for us that we grow in wisdom and in knowledge.

The point is, I do not do this because I know my experience is personal, and not all believers have the same motivations. I do not expect it of others, but if someone seeks to impose their personal experience on me I can make them see the folly of it by trying to impose my personal experience on them. Experience is that which makes you who you are. If you had the same experience as everyone else, then there would be no such thing as your individual uniqueness. We would all be clones and copies, and we would all be alike with no variety. God intends for us to be different, and that is why experiences are often so personal. Nobody is like Paul in his conversion, and that is why Paul is who he is. He is one of a kind. God has designed all of us to be one of a kind. Some unknown poet wrote,

I wonder if my fingerprints
Get lonely in the crowd.
There are no others like them,
And that should make them proud.

We can be proud of our distinctiveness because God loves variety, but not feel the negative pride that says we are better than others because our experiences are different. My fingerprints are not better than anybody else's. Paul's were different than Peter's, and they were also different in many other ways. Their value to the cause of Christ was not derived from their superiority to one another, but from their uniqueness. Paul was not better than the others, but was just different, and so he could do a job that the others were not equipped to do. A pair of scissors is not better than a hammer or a screwdriver, but it is more useful for specific tasks. Each is better than the other for certain jobs. Each is valued because of their uniqueness. God does not want us to be somebody else, but wants us just to be the best of who we are.

The point of all this is that experience is unique, but it is not our foundation. The foundation is the objective truth of Christ. This is what all Christians have in common however unique and different their experience is. We don't have to be like Paul anymore than we have to study under Gamaliel to be educated. What we have to do to get in on the only inner circle that really matters is to put our trust in the finished work of Christ. He is the one who saves you and not your experience. Paul was not saved by being knocked to the ground and blinded by his vision of Christ. He was saved by what Christ did for him on the cross, and by his submission to the Lordship of Christ. Everyone is saved in the same way and not by trying to imitate Paul's unique experience.

27. SPIRITUALITY AND SPEED Based on Acts 22:1f

Jamie Buckingham has written 20 of the best Christian book of the past decade. And in one of them called *The Last Word* he tells of how, even for a Christian sometimes, everything can go rapidly wrong. He lived in a quiet country home, but it was one with an unusual water system. He had a cut off valve in the back yard, which diverted water from the system to a pond. One evening he was in bed when his 14-year-old daughter was taking a shower. He heard gurgling in the heating vent, and suddenly he remembered that he had forgotten to reopen the valve after he washed the car. Water would be backing up into the house.

He leaped up, grabbed a flashlight and raced down the stairs and out into the back yard. It was already flooded and so he was sloshing through icy water in his bare feet. When he got to the pump-house he knelt in the cold and reach down into the hole to turn the valve. Something slimy moved and he jerked back quickly. He caught his pajamas on the wire fence and tore them. As a Christian he had given up swearing, but now he needed a substitute, and so he slung his flashlight into the pond in anger. As usual it solved nothing, and he was now in total darkness. He ripped himself off the barbed wire and sloshed his way back to the house.

He stepped in some doggie doo and it felt terrible, and so he began to hop in the high grass. He ran a thorn between his big toe and its neighbor. This was the final straw, and he lost control. He went crashing through the shrubs and into the house with his pajamas ripped half off and his back and neck bleeding. He woke up everybody in the house at the top of his voice. He never saw the humor of the situation at all, but his family got at least 5 weeks of laughter out of it. Life can change so rapidly that it is frightening. Here was a Christian leader who was living a life of tranquility, and in a matter of minutes he was in a rage of anger. His spirituality was radically changed with such rapid speed.

The good news is that the reverse can also happen. You can be in a rage of anger and suddenly be changed and calmed, and find yourself in a state of peace. This is what we see happening to Paul on the road to Damascus. He was like a fire-breathing dragon marching to incinerate the church when suddenly he was confronted by Christ. Paul was instantly transformed into a disciple saying, "What shall I do Lord?" This could be in the Guinness Book of World Records as the fastest transformation in history. Instant servant-hood is what we have here. The second Paul knew that the Christ he persecuted was not dead, but alive and powerful, he knew he was on the wrong side, and it didn't take him anytime at all to switch sides. He immediately called Jesus, whom he considered a false prophet, the Lord of his life.

You could go your whole life not believing there was such a thing as a duckbill platypus, but then when you are suddenly confronted by one, and there it is in your presence, it does not take many seconds before your years of doubt and disbelief are gone, and you are a believer. So Paul, who thought Jesus was a deceiver, discovered that he was a solid rock of reality, and instantly he began to build his life on that rock. Everything happened so fast with Paul. He was converted in seconds, and then in verse 13 he was instantly healed and his sight was restored. In verse 16 Ananias gave him a two sentence sermon and then said, what are you waiting for-get up and be baptized." Usually a baptism class will last longer than 3 or 4 seconds, but this is Paul we are dealing with, and he could be called Speed for a nick name, for the whole process of justification and sanctification is enormously speeded up for him.

Go, go, go is the theme of this chapter of his life. In verse 18 God spoke to him and God's first word is not all that surprising in the light of this rapid chain of events. God said, "Quick, leave Jerusalem immediately." God is usually not in a hurry, but in His dealings with Paul in this chapter, the name of the game is speed. Seeing this motivated me to search the Scriptures to discover what it has to say about the subject of speed. What I discovered is that it is a large subject, which cannot be covered in one message, and so we will deal with just two main classes of speed that the Bible refers to often. First is,

I. THE FOOLISHNESS OF SPEED.

This negative side of speed is seen in this rapid moving chapter as well. Paul was foolish in his speedy attempt to destroy the church. His own teacher Gamaliel warned about being too hasty in solving problems by violence. We see this back in chapter 5 of Acts. When the Jews wanted to kill Peter and the other Apostles he gave some examples of others who stirred up the people and then quickly passed from the scene. He concluded in verses 38 and 39, "Therefore, in the present case I advise you: Leave these men alone! Let them go! For if their purpose or activity is of human origin, it will fail. But if it is of God, you will not be able to stop these men: You will only find yourself fighting against God." Gamaliel was a wait and see type person, and not a jump in and do something no matter how stupid type of person. He was wise enough to know about the foolishness of speed in men trying to judge the workings of God.

Paul was a brilliant student of Gamaliel, but Paul had a different conviction. He was a shoot first and ask questions later type thinker. He was fast on the draw, and that is how he got the job of persecuting the Christians. He was not bothered by presuming them guilty before they had any chance to prove themselves innocent. Paul did not need to listen, for he had his mind made up before hand that they were worthy of punishment without trial. He illustrates the foolishness of speed.

Paul got a taste of his own medicine when this mob of Jews treated him like he treated the Christians. They made up their minds about him without giving him a chance to defend himself. He got a taste of foolishness of speed and it was not pleasant. The Roman commander was going to give him another dose by flogging him without ever doing a background check on him to see if he was a Roman citizen. This was a short cut that could have taken him swiftly to the grave. There are many foolish things you can do fast, and the Bible makes it a point to reveal to us a good number of these so that we are aware of the danger of speed. It is not just in travel, but in our actions that speed can destroy. We can only look at a few examples.

Prov. 12:16 says, "A fool shows his annoyance at once but a prudent man overlooks an insult." Prov. 20:3 says, "It is to man's honor to avoid strife, but every fool is quick to quarrel." The man who is quick tempered and ready to fight at the drop of a hat is not wise. You are always going too fast emotionally when your emotions are in control of your body, and your mind is not in charge. People who let their feelings run their life is just as foolish as teens out in the streets dragging with their cars. Both are illustrating the foolishness of speed.

Prov. 19:2 says, "It is not good to have zeal without knowledge, nor to be hasty and miss the way." Haste makes waste is the modern equivalent. All those Christians who suffered and even died under Paul's persecution did so because of the folly of his rash and speedy conclusion that the way of Christ was the wrong way. There are all kinds of ways of being stupid fast. A freshman at the university of Minnesota was amazed when he saw one of his classmates turn in his paper on a final exam in only 15 minutes. Later he asked him how he did it, and he answered honestly, "It don't take long to flunk a test." It is easy to be fast when you are not achieving anything.

We live in an age where so much can be done so fast that we lose sight of the fact that it still takes quality time for many things of value. Development of gifts and relationships take time. A woman buying a chess set asked the clerk if he could explain how to play the game as he wrapped it up. People want to be instant saints and scholars, but it doesn't work that way. It takes time to be successful at anything that is really worthwhile. The fastest way to be shallow is to think you can do or be anything worthwhile at great speed.

If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. That is part of the wisdom of the Proverbs, for it is the hurried decisions of life that often lead to great mistakes. Prov. 21:5 says, "The plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty." You read everyday of people who make "get rich quick" decisions, and all they get quick is ripped off. All through history people have rejected that which is new in haste. Morse met with considerable opposition to his telegraph. It took a brutal murder to get people to see its value. The murder took place in London where the culprit got on a train headed for a distant city. The only way a message could be sent swift enough to beat the train was by this new invention. When the police were waiting to arrest the man at his destination, the telegraph caught the popular fancy and prejudice was broken down. We need to be aware of the folly of a hasty rejection of that which is new.

It is folly to suppose that people who travel 60 miles per hour are ten times more civilized than those who travel 6 miles an hour, but it is equally foolish to hastily reject the more rapid speed supposing that slower is better. What really matters is not the speed, but whether or not you have a meaningful destination. But it is folly to reject the greater speed just because it is new. The negative side of speed is very real, but it is not all that is real about speed. There is also a positive side that we want to look at.

II. THE FRUITFULNESS OF SPEED.

The primary use of the word slow in the KJV is to describe the fact that God is slow to anger. Over and over the Old Testament describes God as swift to be merciful and slow to let his wrath to fall. If God was fast in judging, nobody would be saved, for all would come under His wrath before they had an opportunity to be saved. Christ could have confronted Paul on the road to Damascus and treated him like he was treating Christians. He could have struck him down in judgment and rid the world of one more hot head. But Jesus is slow to wreck vengeance and swift to show mercy. He forgave Paul in record time, for he forgave him even before Paul recognized his sin. Grace always comes first because God always beats man to the punch. We only love him because He first loves us.

God's speed in love, mercy and grace reveal the marvelous fruitfulness of speed. It helps us to discern when speed is wise and when it is foolish. It may not be an absolute, but it is close, and we can say that you are almost always going at the right speed when you are quick to love, forgive, and look for a way to be kind and merciful. You are almost always blowing it when you are quick to judge, condemn and take action that will hurt people and relationships. There is a time for everything under the sun, but the time for the positive is now, soon and first. The time for the negative is later, and only after the positive has failed to achieve a fruitful result.

God said to Paul to quickly get out of Jerusalem, and from that point on Paul knew the value of rapid movement to stay alive. Speed was the key to his living long enough to fulfill his purpose in God's plan. He had to escape quickly more than once, and the quick action of his Roman guards spared his life more than once. Speed kills, but it also saves. If you read the rest of Acts, you will see that obedience to the advice of James 1:19 was basic to the fruitfulness of Paul's ministry. It says, "Be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger."

I read about a young woman who returned to the United States after a year with the Peace Corps. She came off the plane with her new husband and the parents were horrified to see he was

carrying a spear, a set of rattles and a shield, and had a bone through his nose. Her mother ran to her screaming, "No you dummy! I said marry a rich doctor-a rich doctor!" Poor listening creates a lot of problems in life, but being quick to listen prevents a lot of problems. Paul became a fast listener who heard God's will and responded quickly to carry it out. The point we need to grasp is that sometimes God is in a hurry. His plan depends upon man's swift obedience. There are urgent situations where speed is vital for escape, and for getting into an open door.

You need to see when it is time to speed up the process of your witnessing, and in trying to touch someone for Christ. They do not have forever, nor do you. You can't just go off half-cocked and be doing things rapidly for the sake of doing them. But you need to develop a greater sense of urgency about looking for opportunities to do the will of God. This does not mean we are to conform to the rat race of the world. A little boy said to his chum, "The way I see it, school is just a mouse race to get us ready for the rat race." The Christian can't escape the fact that he lives in a fast paced world.

"This is the age of the half read page
And the quick hash and the mad dash,
The bright night with the nerves tight,
The plane hop and the brief stop,
The lamp tan in the short span,
The big shot in the good spot,
And the brain strain and the heart pain,
And the cat naps till the spring snaps,
And the fun's done!"

People have always been in a hurry, but what we need to determine is if speed is foolishness or a tool of fruitfulness. Thomas Jefferson said, "Most men spend their time at nothing, other than hurrying about and never arriving anywhere." Years ago in a Pogo comic strip one of the characters passes Pogo on the run and he asks him why he is in such a hurry? He tells him there is an emergency. Pogo asks him where it is, and he responds that he doesn't know. Pogo then asks, "What's all the hurry if you don't know where the emergency is?" The response was, "Man! That's jes it! It's when you don't know where you is goin that you gotta hurry." This is one of the reasons that hurry is one of the gods of our age, for modern man is a worshipper of speed. We do not necessarily have better goals, but we are able to go faster and faster.

Modern man measures things in terms of nano-seconds. That is the length of time it takes light to go one foot. In one second light goes around the world 7 and a half times. When it goes one foot that is a nano-second. There are obvious limits to what you can do in a nano-second, and so most of us still operate in the primitive second as our shortest measure of time. But man is in fierce competition to find a way to make computers faster and faster, and to break every kind of speed record of the past in every field of endeavor. Man is a speed lover, and we need to see that it is not all bad, for there can be a wise and fruitful use of speed.

A young man was asking his dentist how much it would cost to have a tooth pulled? The dentist said it would be forty dollars. He complained, "Forty dollars for a few minutes work?" The dentist responded, "I could extract it very slowly if you wish." Here is a case where speed is wise and a blessing. Speed is wonderful in the realm of communication, but it does need control. When Washington was elected as President it took two days for the news to reach Philadelphia, and 6 weeks

to reach Paris. Today we know even before the polls close who the winner is.

The speed of technology has made it possible to translate the Bible into a new language in months instead of a decade, as was the case not many years ago. Speed is not evil. It is just a tool, and like all tools it can be used foolishly or fruitfully. It is the Christians responsibility to make sure he uses it in a way that pleases God. God is always in a hurry to do what is good, and wise and loving. In Luke 14:21 the master said to his servants, "Go out quickly and bring in the poor, the maimed, the halt and the blind." A thousand years may be like a day to the Lord, but a day to a hungry lonely man may seem like forever. People with needs need someone who will respond to them now.

The angel said to Mary at the tomb, "Go quickly and tell His disciples that He is risen from the dead." People in depression and darkness need good news now, and so we need to hurry with the message of hope. In Children's Letters To God one little girl named Harriet wrote, "Dear God, are you real? Some people don't not believe it. If you are you better do something quick." God has already done something in Christ for all people, and what needs to be done quick is to get the good news to them so they can be forgiven and have eternal life in Christ. That is why God wanted Paul to quickly leave Jerusalem, for he wanted him alive to reach the Gentile world. God was in a hurry to save Paul because He is in a hurry to reach the world with good news.

The point of all this is that God is not anti-speed. He created the universe and our world with built in speed. We are spinning around at one thousand miles per hour. We are orbiting the sun at sixty eight thousand miles per hour, and we are moving through space at forty four thousand miles per hour. Yet with all this speed there is a sense of peace and tranquilly, and the only way we know all of this speed is happening is by our changing position in relation to other heavenly bodies. It is possible also in the spiritual realm to speed up the process of living effectively for Christ and yet, like Paul, still live in a state of faith and not frenzy; a state of rest and not rush.

Nobody has forever, and what we have to do we have to do while it is day, for the night is coming when no man can work. There is a time for everything, but when the time is gone so is the opportunity, and so we need to feel the need for speed, the faster we obey the will of God as we know it the more useful tool we will be in the kingdom of God.

Speed has played a major role in the history of our nation as well as in the history of the Kingdom of God. When congress voted on the Declaration of Independence it had to be unanimous, but the first vote was not. The next day there would be more debate and the final vote taken. The future of America was riding on that vote. Delaware was split with one delegate for it and one against. The only hope was for the third delegate to be there to break the tie. Caesar Rodney was that third delegate and he had been summoned home on urgent business. An express rider was sent to get him back. He reached his home at two in the morning and told him the news that in 7 hours the final vote would be taken. Rodney saddled his best horse and galloped off into the pitch-black stormy night.

It was 89 miles to Philadelphia. He got there just as the vote was being taken. He had to be helped into the state house because he was exhausted. He was barely able to speak, but he said, "I vote for independence." The deadlock was broken and the colonies became the United States of America. It never would have happened had one man not felt the urgency to quickly forsake all other needs and

speed to that place of decision with all haste. God, in his providence, has used speed to make America what it is, and to make the Kingdom of God what it is. May God keep us all aware that there is a connection between spirituality and speed.

28. THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE Based on Acts 22:1-21

On a dark November day in 1884 the people of Chicago passing over the bridge near Clark street were surprised. Below them at the dock was a ship piled high with Christmas trees of all sizes. The news raced through the city, and soon there were reporters there sensing a story, and they were right. A 13 year old boy named Herman Schuenenman, who was an orphan from Wisconsin, conceived of the idea of a Christmas tree ship that could bring Christmas trees from Northern Michigan to Chicago.

His idea worked so well that it became a Christmas tradition to buy a tree from his ship. Children who bought a tree with their parents grew up to become parents, and they brought their children to buy a tree. In 1898 the ship sank in a Lake Michigan storm, and Herman's brother went down with it, but he didn't quit. He got another ship and kept the tradition going. In 1912 Herman and his crew of 18, and all of the trees, went down in another terrible storm, and they were never found.

Barbara, his wife, known as the Christmas tree lady, the following year in 1913 shipped in the usual 20 thousand trees and kept the tradition going. She kept it going until 1932 even though in the last years all her trees were brought in by train. She died in 1933, and with her the tradition ended. All that is left is the cemetery headstone engraved with their names and a Christmas tree. The point of this true story is that even deeply formed traditions can and do change, and nothing stays the same, for the very essence of life in a fallen world is change.

We can all remember experiences of Christmas that can never be the same. I had a cousin and uncle near my age, and we ran around together as young boys. Christmas at grandma's house was a tradition all my boyhood life. It was a special time, but once I grew up it was never the same, for all of life had changed. It is the same for everyone, for nobody can stop time and keep everything the same. Even if you lived in the White House you cannot do it. Listen to Elinor Roosevelt describe her Christmas experience.

"I remember especially the Christmas that Mr. Churchill was with us after we were involved in World War II. After that year, the Christmases weren't so cheerful. My mother-in-law died in the autumn before that first war Christmas. The boys all went off to different war theaters. Their absence meant that we did what we could to cheer their families if they were with us, or we tried to get in touch with them by telephone if they were far away. We did more in those years for foreign people cut off from their homelands by war, but it was no longer the old-time Christmas and ever was to be again."

The world changes, the family changes, you change, and all of life joins in a conspiracy to make sure that nothing stays just as it is. There is good reason for the wedding vows being a covenant for better or for worse, for both are inevitable in a world of change. But thank God there is a solid rock in the midst of this quicksand of constant flux. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. He is the Rock and the Anchor that gives stability in this world of perpetual change. Nancy Turner wrote,

Under the old and arching skies
Clear carols call, by street and hill;
The stars that saw the great Star rise
Are shining still, are shining still.
In all the long years, come what will,
There's nothing new and nothing strange
In one old night of song and light-
The heart of Christmas cannot change!

If we are going to cope with life in a changing world, we need a heart that is captivated by the heart of Christmas that cannot change. We need to be filled with the Spirit of Christ, and surrender to His Lordship. This is always the key to a happy new year. The way to God does not change, and the ways to please God do not change. What we need to see is that even the Christ-filled Christian has to still live in, cope with, and adjust to, a constantly changing world.

Paul becomes an ideal subject for the study of a Christian in a world of change. He went through the most radical change of any of the Apostles in his conversion. He had the most radical change of career, and faced the most radical changes in theological commitment. I do not think you will find another person in all of the Bible who had to adjust to more change than the Apostle Paul. He was changed from a persecutor of Christians to a promoter of Christians. He was a brutal, prejudiced, and legalistic tyrant who became a gentle, open minded, grace oriented servant of the very people he persecuted. He changed from a Jewish focus to a Gentile focus.

Paul was a settled scholar who was changed into a world traveler. All this change was not without struggle, and so we can learn a lot about facing the future with all its changes from a man like Paul. What does the New Year hold in store? We do not know, but we know for sure there will be change, and so learning to understand change and how to deal with it will always be an asset. The first thing we want to learn from Paul's life is:

I. THE REALITY OF CHANGE.

Paul's life does not prove that change is good, or that change is bad. It just proves that change is a part of reality, and that it is inevitable. It can be good or bad, or both. His conversion was good, and the best thing that ever happened to him. Nobody can be saved without change, for one cannot go from a lost sinner to being a new man in Christ without change. Change is of the very essence of God's plan of salvation. Every major theological word dealing with salvation revolves around change. D. L. Moody saw this, and on the fly leaf of his Bible he had these notes:

"Justification, a change of state, a new standing before God.
Repentance, a change of mind, a new mind about God.
Regeneration, a change of nature, a new heart from God.

Conversion, a change of life, a new life for God.
Adoption, a change of family, a new relationship toward God.
Sanctification, a change of service, separation unto God.
Glorification, a change of condition, at home with God."

There is no point in being anti-change, for change is a vital part of God's plan. No change would mean no hope for a fallen world and lost men. It is the reality of change that gives us Paul instead of Saul- a builder instead of a destroyer of the kingdom of God. The first thing we have to do is face up to the reality of change as a blessing. Yes, it can be a burden, but it is not automatically so. Change also means hope. The negatives of life can become positives because of the reality of change. Lost people can be saved. Messed up lives can be restored to order. Good can be brought out of evil. Thank God we always have the hope of change.

Balzac considered himself an expert in handwriting. One day someone brought him a notebook of a small boy and asked him to evaluate the lad's potential. After careful examination of the child's scroll he said to the woman, "My frank opinion is the child is slovenly and probably stupid, and I fear will never amount to anything." The woman began to laugh and said, "This is your very own book from when you were a little boy in school." Thank God that little boys change, and what they do changes. Paul said, "When I was a child I talked like a child; I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man I put childish ways behind me." Don't knock change, for that is the key to growth, maturity, and progress, not only for Paul, but for all of us.

Bernard Shaw once said, "My tailor is the only sane man I know. He re-measures me every time I go get a suit." In other words, he assumes the possibility of change. Others often judge by what was, and forget that a person can change and be different. The Christian has an obligation to expect others to change. The optimistic view of change should characterize Christian thinking. We ought not to put people into a box and say this is who they are and what they do, and how they think, and that is all there is.

People who did that with Paul missed a great chance to be among the first to know and love the world's greatest Apostle. Jesus believed in Paul, and knew that with adequate light Paul would go the way God willed. He was truly blind and ignorant in his zeal for the law and opposition to Christ. But Jesus knew He had the capacity to change, and that is why he was chosen. Everybody needs somebody who believes they can change. So many people take their own lives because they keep saying to themselves, "Nothing will ever change. I am like I am forever, and things are like they are forever." Their blindness to the hope of change is what plunges them into the pit of despair.

The Gospel is the good news that anybody can change, and anything can be made different in its ultimate impact by the grace of God. The miserable people of the world need to hear that life can change. The sick people of the world need to hear that life can change. The sad and rejected people of the world need to hear that life can change.

The reality of change is the hope of the world. We look for the coming of our Lord again because that is the ultimate demonstration of the reality of change. He will change everything, and all evil will pass away, and there will be a new heaven and new earth wherein dwells righteousness. Change is the name of the game that God is playing, and that is why every new year is filled with potential happiness for there is no end to the possibilities it holds because of the reality of change.

Paul is trying to get the Jews to see that God has changed everything by the sending of the Messiah into the world. His plan is to use Israel to reach the whole world of the Gentiles. But they were not open to this change. Their tradition of being God's chosen people blinded them to the reason for their being chosen. They were chosen to be a tool to reach the whole world, but they were locked into the idea of being chosen as an end in itself. They were chosen just to be special they thought, and they were not open to change. That is why we must be ever evaluating our traditions, and asking if they are valid.

During the Boer War when the British fought the Dutch, the sharp eyed Dutch were expert snipers. Many a British soldier was shot in the light of his own match when he lit a cigarette. This is why the saying started that it was bad luck for three people to light a cigarette from the same match. Two might quickly light, but for a third to do so would give the sniper time to focus in, and it could mean death to that third soldier. It was no superstition. It was the fact, and a life or death fact. But away from that context the idea is pure superstition with no basis whatever. Change the context, and you change the meaning of all that relates to that context.

There was a point in Israel's history when relating to Gentiles was forbidden. God needed a people who were cleansed and sanctified to be a people who could be a channel of His love and truth in the world. They were to avoid the ways of the Gentiles and not get involved with their evil life-style. That has never changed, but now that God has achieved His goal, and sent His Son into the world through the pure virgin of Israel-all is changed. Now God's plan is to reach those lost Gentiles. Those who could see the reality of change, and how God even changes His strategy at different points in history, responded to change and became Christians. But as we see here, most rejected change as bad and unacceptable. You could be missing God's best by rejecting change, but what we want to see is that it is not easy to accept change. Paul in this context had a battle which leads to our second point which is-

II. THE RESISTENCE TO CHANGE.

Paul was quite cooperative with Christ when he was confronted by His supernatural presence. He quickly said, "What shall I do Lord?" And he followed instructions. He went into Damascus and was then baptized after the urging of Ananias. But then in verse 17 Paul says that later in Jerusalem when he was praying God spoke to him, and urged him to quickly leave Jerusalem. Paul then responds to God with resistance. He tries to explain to God that fleeing the city is not really necessary, for his reputation there will stand him in good stead. He did not realize how his conversion would change everything. He wanted to keep the status quo and go back to Jerusalem, and keep his role there intact.

God said, "Nothing doing-your out of there. Go, for I am sending you to the Gentiles." Here we see the other side of change. This is the side we don't like because it means loss of the familiar and the comfortable. Paul did not mind being changed from an unbeliever to a believer, but he sure hated how it complicated his life, and forced him to give up his loved environment. God had a new job for Paul as a Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul came to love it, but it was a radical change in his plans, and he resisted the change. Change can often seem like the enemy, and we are conditioned to oppose it.

Change is not automatically good, and so there is a legitimate right to question it and resist it, but it is important that we examine our motives. Do we resist change for selfish reasons? Paul just did

not want to run away from his people and his position of responsibility in Jerusalem. Paul Courtney wrote a poem about his resistance as a conservative Catholic to the changes in the church.

Latin's gone
Peace is too
Singin' and shoutin'
From every pew.

Altar's turned around
Priest is too
Commontator's yellin'
Page twenty-two.

Communion rail's goin'
Stand up straight
Kneelin' suddenly
Went outta date.

Possessions are formin'
In every aisle
Salvation's organized
Single file.

Rosary's out
Psalms are in
Hardly ever hear
A word against sin.

Listen to the lector
Hear how he reads
Please stop rattlin'
Them rosary beads.

Padre's lookin' puzzled
Doesn't know his part
Use to know the whole deal
In Latin by heart.

I hope all changes
Are just about done
That they won't drop Bingo
Before I've won.

This clearly self-centered resistance to change is funny, but more prevalent than we are willing to admit. A little boy prayed, "Lord if you can't make me a better boy, don't worry about it. I'm having a real good time as it is." We all tend to resist change that affects us personally, and which we perceive to be a loss to ourselves. Paul was not unwilling to serve God, but he was just not convinced

that God's way was the best. God had to push Paul to go against his feelings in order to be all he could be for the kingdom of God.

This same thing happened to Ida Scudder. Her doctor father and her mother were missionaries in India. She had no interest in India, but when her mother became severely ill she went to India to care for her. She longed to get back to America and the comfortable and familiar. One night as she lay daydreaming about her homeland, a knock came at the door. When she opened it, there was a stately Mohammedan who bowed to her and urged her to come to help his wife who was ill unto death. She explained that her father was the doctor and not her. But the man said that "no man has ever looked upon the face of my wife. She needs you." She explained she was no doctor and could not come. Three times this happened. Bramins who could not ask a male doctor to treat their wives begged her to come to help. She naturally resisted and refused, and all three of those women died.

Their religion made it forbidden to use a male doctor. Ida Scudder had no plans to be a doctor, or to be a part of India's history. She wanted only to get back to her comfortable life, but the death of those three women changed her whole life. She went back to America and became Dr. Ida Scudder, and she changed the lives of tens of thousands of people as the famous head of the Mary Tabor Schell Hospital in Vellare, India.

Resistance to change is natural, but we need to keep examining our resistance to see if we might be resisting the call of God to a change that fulfills His very purpose for our lives. God's plan may not look like our plan, but it is always the best for us, and resistance is foolish. A young girl won the Junior National Award for the best recipe, and she was being offered a check on national TV. But she said, "That is not my creation," and she refused the check. The MC was embarrassed and looked to the judges. One of them had to come over and explain, "We baked it in a different shape, but it is your recipe." So the girl took her prize. She resisted because of the change in shape, but when she understood the change she gave up her resistance. We don't have to like the shape of things, but we have to surrender when the change is in hands beyond our own.

Even Jesus resisted the radical change of giving his healthy life to death on the cross. It was not the shape of things that would appeal to anyone, but it was that cross shape destiny that would change the whole world and all eternity, and so Jesus surrendered to this radical change, because it was the Father's will. Resistance is normal, but God expects surrender when His will is clear. This leads to our third point-

III. THE RESOLUTION TO CHANGE.

That is what we see Jesus doing in Gethsemane. He resolved in His heart and mind to go along with the change to fulfill God's plan. So Paul also did not like the shape of things that God presented, but when he got the message that this was God's will that he go to the Gentiles, Paul resolved in his heart and mind that he would go and be the best Apostle to the Gentiles he could possibly be.

This whole chapter of Acts 22 is Paul's testimony of how he was changed. He was no longer a legalist locked into the law. He was now a man for all men. The Jews did not like the change. In fact, they said his change made him worthless to Judaism, and he ought to be dead. Every change seems to be bad news for somebody, but Paul's change was good news for the whole world, even if some hated it. Because Paul resolved in his heart to surrender to the changes God wanted in his life,

Paul became a major instrument in God's hands to change this world for Christ.

What we learn from Paul is that one of the best ways to have a happy new year, and new life, is to resolve to change, and become a more flexible instrument for God. Get rid of the idea that so often dominates us, and says that we are what we are, and can make no changes that are significant. We tend to feel we are destined to be in certain ruts, and however boring our routine, that is where we are ordained to stay. Not so! We can be different, and change for the better. If we have wanted to read through the Bible for years, but never got it done, we can change this year and do it. Pass failures do not lock us in. We can change and do what we have never done before.

If there was something that you have always wished you could do, or be, for Christ, but just have never been motivated to do it, let the potential of change excite you about the days ahead. Everyone of us can make changes that will be pleasing to God and beneficial to us and others. In a fallen world we must face the facts. Sin, folly, mistakes, and failures of all kinds will be a part of the future. Until the final changes that Christ will make at His coming, we have to admit some things will never change. Death and taxes, and as the poet said,

Something will never change although
We tour out to the stars;
Arriving on the moon we'll find
Our luggage sent to Mars! June Brady

The fact is also that we cannot always do what we once did, and so change is not always progress, but sometimes regress. We may slip back in some area of life and not be as capable as we once were. Again the poet captures the point.

The fabulous Wizard of Oz
Retired from business becoz
What with up-to-date science,
To most of his clients
He wasn't the wiz that he woz.

The idea is to recognize that in spite of negatives, and in spite of decline in life, we can all resolve to change in some ways that make us more effective as tools in the kingdom of God. Just a change in attitude can make a world of difference. Paul no longer thought God loved only Jews, but he changed and recognized that God loved Gentiles as well. The thing we need to do for rapid growth is to change our attitudes before they are changed for us by time.

Back in the 60's the cry was to not trust anyone over 30. It is gone the way of the dodo bird now because those who cried it are now over 30. It is not to their credit that they change their attitude. They were forced to do so by time. True wisdom would have been to change their perspective and recognize the value of people over 30 before they were that themselves.

Paul gets no credit for being saved and radically changed in many ways. It was all of grace and God's doing. But Paul can be honored for his resolve to cooperate with God, and to make the changes necessary to be more useful. If you are going to be a better Christian in the coming year, you must resolve to change in some ways. If you are going to be a better mate in the coming year, it

calls for change. If you are going to be a better anything in the coming year, you must make a resolution to change.

Ananias was not at first very favorable to God's plan to go and visit Paul. He resisted a change in attitude toward Paul, for, after all, he was a persecutor of God's people, and he had already done a great deal of harm. We can all understand his resistance, but we can all also be grateful that he surrendered and changed, and went to Paul, for his acceptance of Paul opened the door to a whole new history of this man's life. You need to ask yourself, is there anyone I can change my attitude toward in the coming year that may open the door in changes in relationships that will be a blessing.

I read of a woman who lived in a Boston hotel who heard music coming from the adjoining room. She called the manager to complain. She threatened to sue the hotel if it was not stopped. When she was informed that the man playing in the room next to her was the world famous Paderewski she withdrew her complaint and invited her friends over to listen with her to this great musician, as he prepared for his evening concert. Her liability suddenly was changed to an asset, and her whole attitude was changed. We make so many bad decisions in ignorance. If we knew more we would have a change of mind that could turn burdens into blessings.

This is what conversion is all about. People who do not like God, and do not believe that He cares often hear the Gospel of His love, and they change their mind. They repent of their folly and blindness, and of their sin and indifference, and they receive Christ as Savior and Lord. We come into the kingdom by change, and it is by change that we grow in Christ and become more useful. Therefore, be it resolved that we will seek for ways to change our attitudes and actions in the coming year so as to be more useful in the coming year.

It is not a sign of weakness to change your mind. Everybody in the Bible changed their mind when they got more light. Paul changed his mind on most everything. He had a bad attitude toward God's plan for the Gentiles, but when he received more light he came to love the Gentiles as brothers in Christ. Change is not optional if you are going to be available to God. If you not flexible and open to change, you have already arrived at your goal. Paul said he had not arrived, but was ever pressing on toward the goal. This means he was ever open to change in order to be what Christ wanted him to be in any situation.

It was no haphazard choice that Christ made in choosing Paul to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul was chosen because he was a man that could be molded and shaped so as to fit the need. He was a man who was alive to the challenges of change. Paul had to be changed by force at first, but soon after it became a way of life for him. He chose to change whenever he could. He chose to be all things to all men that he might win them to Christ. He was content in any state, and could accept prosperity or poverty. He could accept any change just so long as he could be useful for the kingdom of God.

In other words, Paul was anchored in the rock that does not change. Christ was the center of his life, and this was the source of his unchanging security. But he could change, adapt, and adjust to all the changes of life because the goal of all change was to keep Christ in the unchanging center of life. He did not change for change sake as if change was an inherent virtue. It is not! It can be evil as well as good. Paul changed for only one reason, and that was to be more effective in doing the will of his unchanging Lord.

Astronomy changes not because the stars change, but because astronomers change in their understanding of the stars. So the Christian changes not because Christ changes, but because the Christian gets more and better light on who Christ is, and what He wants from our lives. We change in response to our changing light. Chuck Swindoll said, if you were going to Hawaii and the plane instead took you to the Alps, you could sit around in your bikini and mope, or you could go get some ski clothes and enjoy the change in environment. He was saying that life does not always turn out like we plan. It didn't for Paul either. He was heading for Spain and he ended up in prison. That was not even on his agenda, and he spent years there. He did not curse the change of plans, but he made the change count for the glory of God by writing his Epistles there.

In the coming year we can be sure of one thing, and that is change. But let's not fear it, but instead, cheer it, and rejoice in it and ask God's guidance in even provoking change so that the new year might be a year of Christian growth. Let us enter it with a spirit of optimism, and be ready and willing to face the challenge of change.

29. LEARNING TO LISTEN Based on Acts 22:1-22

Benjamin Franklin decided to take stock of himself one New Year's, and try to figure out why he seemed to alienate people, and why he lost friends so easily. He discovered that one of his major flaws was that he was not willing to listen to others. He had all of the answers and was arrogant. He did not need to listen to other people's foolish opinions. Franklin did an amazing thing; he learned to listen and became one of America's most famous diplomats. His whole life and the history of America was changed by his learning to listen. He wrote, "A pair of good ears will drink dry a hundred tongues. He learned that when you talk you only say what you know, but when you listen you learn what someone else knows.

In spite of the fact that listening is such a vital part of learning and life, it is perpetually on the verge of being a lost art. Ralph Nichols from the University of Minnesota, who has been a leader in promoting in the art of listening in his book *Are You Listening?*, says people in general do not know how to listen. The reason is because nobody is training their ears anymore. For centuries the ear was the key to learning. All through the Bible times this was the case. We could spend hours just looking at all the references to the ear in the Bible. It was by means of the ear that the wise sought knowledge. It was the constant battle of God to get His people to incline their ears to His Word. God told Jeremiah, "Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem." Dozens of texts lament that God's people have not inclined their ears unto the Lord. They have ears but they hear not is the sad note in the Psalms and the Prophets.

One of the most frequent sayings of Christ in the Gospels is, "He that has ears to hear let him hear." This is also one of the most frequently repeated phrases in the book of Revelation. It is by listening that we are to live by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. Reading has only been the primary source of learning for the last couple of centuries. But because of the dominance of books people have ceased to think of the ear and have gone overboard in training the eye. We think the Bible days are long gone and that we have progressed beyond the need to focus on the ear. Ralph Nichols and many other scholars have revealed just how wrong modern man is. We spend 3 times as

many hours in listening as we do in reading, but we are not trained to listen. Forty five per cent of our communication time is spent in listening, but we do it poorly because we have only trained the eye. We graduate from our eye training schools, and then go off to an ear oriented world, where listening is the key to success.

Many people no longer read after they graduate, and for the rest of their lives they are most influenced by what they hear. People on the jury decide the fate of others by what they hear and not by what they read. We tend to vote based on what we hear from the candidates and not by what we read. Nichols has been a leader in the movement to get listening clinics developed to help people learn to develop the art of listening. Acts 22 is an excellent basis from which we can learn how relevant listening is for the Christian. I counted nine examples of listening in this chapter. Everyone in it is involved in listening, and their destiny is being determined at this point by how well or poorly they listen.

I have not read the whole book of Acts with this idea in mind, but a quick survey convinces me that the entire book revolves around the theme of listening. Good listeners hear God's good news and they repent and receive Jesus as their Savior. Bad listeners block their ears and refuse to hear God's Word, and they do foolish and evil things that leads to judgment. When Stephen gave his testimony Acts 7:57 says, "At this they covered their ears." Then they rushed upon him and stoned him to death. Story after story in Acts reveals people listen and are saved, or they don't listen and are lost. Heaven and hell lie in the art of listening. We see it again in Acts 22, and the first point we want to look at is,

I. THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING.

If we are going to take it seriously that listening is one of the keys to a better life and a happy New Year, then we need to establish just how important it is. This chapter would not even exist if Paul had not worked hard at getting the mob's attention so he could speak. He says, "Brothers and fathers listen to my defense." Paul is a man who has a hunger to be heard, and such a hunger cannot be satisfied without somebody who is willing to listen. One of the great hungers of the human soul is this hunger for a listener.

Seneca the ancient said, "Listen to me for a day-an hour-a moment. Lest I expire in my terrible wilderness, my lonely silence, O God, is there no one to listen." This is a common theme of the Old Testament as men of God cry out to God, "Give ear to my words O Lord, incline thy ear unto my cry." When men had nowhere else to turn they begged God to be a listener. Everybody needs a listener. But as important as this need is, there are not many people who give it a place of primary importance. John Godfrey, the lonely old man in Tayler Caldwell's *The Listener* says, "Nobody has time to listen to anyone, not even those who love you and would die for you. Your parents, your children, your friends. They have no time!" Time, of course, is what it takes to be a good listener, but listening is so low on our list of priorities that we seldom take the time to listen.

We live in a world where masses are starving, and not just for food, but for attention. Their deepest longing is for a listener. Jamie Buckingham, an outstanding author and pastor, once suspected that nobody was listening as he gave announcements. He tested the people by saying, "The baptism service for tonight is canceled because there is an alligator in the tank." Only one 8 year old came up after the service and offered to help catch it. Nobody else in his large church even batted an

eye. A man went to a psychiatrist and said, "Doctor, I don't know what's wrong with me. Nobody will listen to me. My employees won't listen to me, my children won't listen to me, my wife won't listen to me. Why is it that nobody will listen to me?" The psychiatrist responded, "Next!" This is a joke, of course, but its no joke when it is a reality.

This comes from an actual court case. The defendant said, "Judge, I want you to appoint me another lawyer." The judge asked, "And why is that?" "Because the public defender isn't interested in my case." The Judge looked to the public defender and asked, "Do you have any comments on defendants motion?" The public defender responded, "I'm sorry your honor, I wasn't listening." An un-measurable amount of the conflicts, confusion, sorrow and suffering of the world can be traced to the fact that someone was not listening.

These devout Jews of our text found Paul in the temple. They were there to pray to God, and now through Paul God was answering their prayer by giving them the greatest news ever preached to man, but they were not listening. Someone very briefly summed up much of the history of the relation by God and man by two big questions. Man says, "God, I have prayed and prayed and prayed. Why don't you answer? And God says, "Man, I have answered and answered and answered. Why don't you listen?"

The rest of Paul's life and the history of Israel could have been so different had God's people only listened. A watch was lost in a bin of sawdust, and after the others looked for it and gave up a small boy tried his luck. When they came back he had the watch and they asked him how he could have ever found it? He said, "I just sat down and listened." I know this would not work on modern watches that don't tick. But it is a principle that will always work when it comes to hearing the Word of God. Listening is the key to hearing what God has to say. By not listening people lose life's best messages. When Peter preached at Pentecost 3 thousand Jews were saved because they listened. Paul preached here and no one responded because they refused to listen.

Listening to God's Word brings us into the kingdom, and it is by listening to it that we grow and become sanctified. That is why Jesus says to the churches in Revelation over and over, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit has to say to the churches." To doubt the importance of listening is to reject the overwhelming testimony of both the Old and New Testaments. Don't take listening lightly, but make it a point to become a better listener, for it can make a world of difference in your life. It did for Paul. He was converted by what he heard. He says in verse 7, "I fell to the ground and a voice say to me, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Those with him did not hear the voice. They heard some sound but not the message. Paul heard and responded by saying, "What shall I do Lord?"

Paul was on a new wave link from that time on. He was marching to a different drummer because of what he heard. We don't have time to look at some of the minor characters in this chapter, but we just want to point out that they made a big different because they listened. Ananias listened to God and invited Paul into the Christian world. The soldier listened to Paul and saved he and his commander from great penalty by not flogging Paul as a Roman citizen. A careless listener could have gotten them both executed. Listening wisely is the key to why every hero in this chapter was a hero. Poor listening is the key to why every angry member of the mob was a loser. Listening does not sound like much of a topic, but it is a major league subject. Good listeners make a major impact on the world.

Dr. Harry Levinson of the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas said that listening is one of the least understood and practiced principles of human emotions. He wrote, "It is the key to helping a person who is constantly distressed." If there were more good listening in the world, there would be less stress, divorce, suicide, and less need for medicine and therapy. In other words, one of the major problems of our world is lack of listeners. A Christian woman in analysis was asked why she didn't just talk to some of her church friends. She answered, "Well, that would probably be all I'd need if one of them would really listen to me. But do you have any idea how quickly my church friends tune me out and begin talking about themselves? It's embarrassing to have to pay for it, but to have someone give me 50 minutes of undivided attention does me a world of good."

Ruth Bell Graham expressed in poetry how God can be our Listener.

Lord, when my soul is weary
And my heart is tired and sore,
And I have that failing feeling
That I can't take it any more;
Then let me know the freshening
Found in simple, childlike prayer,
When the kneeling soul knows surely
That a listening Lord is there.

The church needs gifted listeners, however, because of the importance of listening to the well being of the body of Christ. We need to be heard by another human being even when we know God had heard us. Next we see,

II. THE IMPEDIMENTS TO LISTENING.

If it is so important to be a good listener, why are we not all into it? What are the obstacles to being a good listener? The mob in our text illustrates a good number of the impediments to listening. The first is that the mouth will not shut. People who are forever talking are very poor listeners. Back in chapter 21 this crowd of Jews was shouting and making such an uproar that the Roman commander could not get any meaningful communication going. Now in chapter 22 verse 22 the crowd again broke loose with such racket that Paul's message was cut off in the middle. They refused to listen, and they choose to use their mouth rather than their ears. This is a major impediment to good listening.

James 1:19 says that we should be quick to listen and slow to speak. This crowd was in reverse, it was quick to speak and slow to listen. The mouth is one of the major problems in being a good listener. God did not make the ears to close, but He did make the mouth to do so, and this implies that there is a time to speak and a time to be quiet. It is always time, however, to listen. Wilson Mizner, an American Industrialist said, "A good listener is not only popular everywhere, but after a while he knows something." President Johnson had a plaque in his office that said, "You ain't learning nothing when you're talking." That may not always be the case, but it usually is. Learning comes primarily by listening, and if we are always talking we are not likely to be learning very much. Eisenhower was considered one of our most successful generals because he learned the art of listening to his subordinates.

The crowd of Jews at Pentecost held their tongues and listened to Peter to the end. The result was that 3 thousand of them were saved. This crowd was so busy shouting and abusing the speaker that they did not let him finish his message. The result was that they remained in darkness. You can't have your ears and mouth open at the same time and be a good listener. God put our ears right out in the open, but He put our tongue in a cave behind pearly bars, and perhaps the point of our architecture is that we ought to listen twice as much as we talk, for talking is an impediment to listening.

This mob did stop their screaming long enough for Paul to share his brief testimony, but as soon as he mentioned the word Gentiles their ears turned off and their tongues took over again. We see that the second great impediment to good listening was their prejudice. You cannot listen to a message when you have already rejected the message before it is delivered. The word Gentile was a red flag word to these Jews. As soon as it popped up their anger took over and they wanted Paul dead. They ceased to listen to Paul and began to listen to their prejudice. Anger is another impediment to listening. People who are angry are not people you can enjoy communicating with because they are not listening. It is folly to argue with an angry person, for reason is worthless in a context of non-listening.

Prejudice is not subject to reasoning, for it is not based on reason but feeling, and you cannot throw facts at feelings and expect a change, for the feelings will not listen. People who are prejudiced already have their minds made up. They have programmed themselves not to listen to any evidence that threatens their prejudice. This anti-listening strategy is very effective in the prevention of change and growth. It allows prejudiced people to be in a world flooded with evidence contrary to their views with a sense of tranquilly because they have the capacity to never listen to any of it. This is why you can have clear cut communication in speech that does not lead to clear cut communication. It is because there is no effective listening.

When Paul said Gentiles he was saying God's plan, purpose, fulfillment, and universality, but when the Jews heard Gentiles they heard betrayal, contamination and blasphemy. Talking is only half of communication. Without the other half of listening, you do not have communication. I like this way of saying it that has been around for many years. "I know you believe you understand what you think I said, but I'm not sure you realize that what you heard is not what I meant." This impediment of pre-judging what is meant cursed these Jews. They missed God's best. This impediment has caused all kinds of problems in the world.

On October 30, 1938 at 8:00 P. M. CBS broadcast the famous radio program "The War Of The Worlds" with Orson Welles. There was a clear statement before and after that one-hour program that it was all fiction. Local stations reminded people during the breaks that it was all fiction. But the American people were so poorly trained in listening that their prejudice took over. They heard what they thought was being said and not what was actually being said. The result was panic for many. A study by Princeton revealed that people who did listen just relaxed and enjoyed the program without stress. One out of 6 of those listening were not listening to the message but to their own inner fears. People missed so much of what God sends their way by means of His works and His word. They, like these Jews, are pre-conditioned to hear only what they want to hear, and they block out all that God wants them to hear.

Charles Kellogg the noted naturalist was walking on Sixth Ave. in New York City amid the

throng and the babble of noise and honking. Suddenly he stopped and said, "Listen! Do you hear that?" His friend asked, "Hear what?" "That cricket," he responded. His friend laughed and said, "How could anyone hear the song of a cricket in all this bedlam?" "Come with me," Kellogg said, and he led him down a basement stairway, and there in the wall was the cricket singing his song. "How do you do it?" his friend asked. He said, "Come back up to the street." He took a dime out of his pocket and tossed it onto the sidewalk. Scores of people in the crowd stopped in their tracks and looked toward the dime. "You see," explained Kellogg, people have their tuned to dimes and dollars. I have mind tuned to the sounds of nature." The point is, you hear what you are listening for. If you don't want to hear the truth of God, that very attitude will be an adequate impediment to prevent your hearing.

The Word of God is everywhere being sounded forth in our culture, but do not be deceived, for sound is not communication without listening, and there are so many impediments to listening that the crowds today are just like those in Paul's day. They do not hear, and so they remain lost. That is the tragedy of the impediments to listening. The third thing we want to see is-

III. THE IMPROVEMENT IN LISTENING.

If you add the first point on the importance of listening to your life, and subtract the second point of the impediments of listening, you will equal point three and see an improvement in your listening ability. Paul did this very thing. He had all the same impediments, as did this mob of Jews. He was not listening to God or His Word. But once Christ got his attention on the road to Damascus we see him make rapid progress in his listening.

When Ananias came and said to him, "Brother Saul, receive your sight, "He was instantly able to see. He was all ears to any word from God, and Ananias told him he was chosen to hear words from the mouth of God. When he returned to Jerusalem, and was in the temple praying, he heard God again. Paul was becoming a sensitive listener, and that is why God could use him so effectively. The Lord loves a listener, for they are the key channels of His Word in the world.

What Paul soon learned was that his success in doing God's will depended upon people who had improved the art of listening in their lives. If you read the rest of Acts, you will see that good listeners were the key to Paul's survival and ministry. In chapter 23 Paul's sister's son over heard a plot to kill Paul. He told Paul and Paul sent him to the Roman commander. He listened to the boy and the whole plot was changed, and because this Gentile listened Paul's life was spared. Later a couple of Gentiles did not listen to Paul, and because of it a whole shipload of men almost died. Paul did find that most Gentiles listened to him, and the result was that he was protected and greatly blest. God was using listening men to help his special listener accomplish His purpose in history. Paul spent the rest of his life listening the needs of the church and urging them to listen to God's solutions to their problems.

William Barker in his book A Savior For All Seasons tells of how Seiji Ozawa, the conductor of the Boston Symphony, was rehearsing one Saturday morning. His friend sat in the auditorium enjoying the music, but he was puzzled when a man got up from the audience and walked up to the platform and whispered to Ozawa. This happened three times, and each time Ozawa would let this man interrupt him. He wondered why he would permit this man to break into his conducting like that. Later he learned who the man was. He was the composer of the piece. Ozawa was listening to

the creator of the music so that he could perform it like it was created to sound. Only by listening could he lead his orchestra to make it sound like the composer intended. That is what made him a great conductor, and that is what made Paul a great Apostle and servant of Christ. Paul gladly let God interrupt him at any point to lead him in a new direction. If Paul did more for God than most, it was because Paul became a master in the art of listening.

We can all improve our listening by listening to what would improve us. This means we must be open to the voice of God and be listening to His Word. The point of Sunday School and church is to give people and opportunity to listen to God. These are key times to listen and hear what God may have to say to you. But real listening is just not hearing words, but it is interpreting the words and asking how they apply to you, and how you can respond to them. "Lord, what will you have me to do," was Paul's first response to the voice of Christ. That is real listening. And that is the improvement in listening we all need to work at.

A businessman once said, "I go to church regularly, but I cannot keep my thoughts on worship or the sermon. A thousand things I must do the next day rush into my mind like commandos landing on a beach, and I find myself planning and scheming rather than listening." His preoccupation became an impediment to his listening, and the only way he will ever improve his listening habits will be for him to grasp the importance of listening. Only when we see how vital it is to what God wants us to be will we be committed to learning to listen. May the essence of this prayer be yours often:

That I may do my part;
That I may never miss
Thy voice that comes to chide
To comfort or to guide
Lord, give me only this
A listening heart.

30. OUR LORD AND OUR LAND Based on Acts 22:25-29

Human rights is a major issue in our world today, but it is not a new issue. Even under the Roman Emperor men had rights and they were precious. The Apostle Paul was unjustly arrested. He was about to be beaten when he calmly asked the Roman Centurion in charge if it was lawful to scourge a man who is a Roman citizen and not condemned? His question changed everything immediately, and it sent the Centurion off to a higher authority to investigate. Paul's rights as a Roman citizen were about to be violated, and Paul stood on those rights and protested the injustice.

As a Roman citizen, Paul had a right to be treated with dignity until legally condemned as a criminal. Until this legal process had been completed no penalty could be afflicted upon a citizen of Rome. Technically he could not even be bound, and so when Paul made known he was a Roman citizen everyone involved was afraid, for they had violated his human rights. If Paul had wanted to,

he could have pressed charges against them, just as we could today press charges for unlawful arrest.

Paul had a high view of the Christians responsibility to the government because he knew that it is only the government that can't assure the protection of our human rights. It is true that God will judge those who violate the rights of others, and who deprive others of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but the government is ordained of God to be the human agency whereby these rights are established and protected. Paul was proud to be a Roman citizen. It was not because the empire was perfect, but because his citizenship gave him rights that were vital to his personal dignity, and to his service for God.

We as Americans do not have to blind to our country's sins and weaknesses to be proud and patriotic. Our pride, like that of Paul, is to be based on the principle that government gives us our rights. The Declaration of Independence declared to the world this fundamental American principle, which is our precious heritage. It says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Our nation, like the Roman Empire, may decay and become so corrupt that God's judgment will have to fall upon it, but, like Paul, we can ever be proud of the rights we possess as citizens.

Our love for our country is not an impersonal love for the land, or a blind love for its institutions. Our love is not just admiration for the beauty of its mountains, lakes, rivers and prairies, but it is a love for the beauty of its principles, which respect and protect the rights of people, and thereby give them a chance to be what God intends them to be. In many parts of the world people are not free to live in full and open obedience to God. In America we have this right, and we are free to be and do anything God wills for us to be and do. There is no part of God's revealed will that we cannot obey as citizens of this great land of liberty. We are truly independent of any authority that would restrict our obedience to God.

We live in a day when it is popular to expose the heroes of our history and reveal them to be men as sinful and fallible as others. None of this should shock the Christian, or cause a decline in their patriotism or admiration for the great men of our past. Certainly they were sinners as other men, just as the heroes of Israel were sinners who were guilty of some of the greatest follies. The Bible does not exalt men because they were perfect, but because they were loyal to what was right for the good of others in spite of their sins. Imperfect people can be dedicated to ideals, and they can even be willing to die for them. This is what makes them heroes. They are sinful people striving for what is good for all people, and that is what heroism is all about.

The great men of American history had bad tempers, bad habits, lusts, jealousies, and all of the weaknesses of sinful human nature, but they still choose to give their minds and bodies to the task of developing a system of government where all men could be equal, and where they could exercise their rights as being made in the image of God. Historians may rob us of our idealistic picture of the heroes of our past, but they can never rob us of the rights, which they gained for us. Our heroes are great, and our heritage is great, not because of perfect people, but because of sinners like our selves who lived, fought and died for what was good, just and right. A good Christian citizen is one who appreciates his rights, as Paul did his as a Roman citizen. We want to look at the 3 rights the Declaration of Independence lists.

I. THE RIGHT TO LIFE.

As the moon borrows its light from the sun, so the great documents of American history borrow their light from the Bible. The right to life is certainly a God given right. Jesus said He came into this world that men might have light and have it more abundantly. He is the author and sustainer of life, on the cross He won for us the right to live forever if we trust in Him. His atoning death is sufficient to cleanse us from all sin. Life is important to Jesus, and it should be important to all of us. Life is what Christianity is all about, and it is what the freedom of Americans is all about. Our Lord and our land-our Christ and our Country are both concerned about us having life. There is no conflict between the two. Our Lord wants us to live, and our land gives us the right to do so. The two are in perfect harmony. Our Lord wants us to live worshipfully, and our land gives us the right to worship freely.

We could list many areas of harmony that ought to make us glad and proud to be Christian citizens of our great land. Neither our Lord or our land compels us to live and experience the best each has to offer. They only make it possible. Jesus said we are to ask, seek, and knock, and he urged us to follow Him, but he does not compel. It is human nature to rebel against force. If someone told us we had to salute the flag every morning at 9 we would resent it. If we are told that we have to read the Bible every day at 9 we would also resent it. We don't have to do many things, but we are free to do them, and this freedom is part of what it means to have the abundant life.

Major-General Barton of the Fourth Motorized Division drove into a camp during a rebellion. All of the men had been ordered to crawl on their bellies while a foot overhead live bullets whizzed by from machine guns. The men refused and each man was subject to court marshal for disobeying orders. The General did not holler out orders, but instead he took off his coat, dropped to the ground and began to wiggle through the dust and the mud. He shouted to the men to follow him, and they dropped down and began to crawl behind him. He had given them an example and a choice, and the two together made them free. Our country doesn't always give us this freedom, but it often does, and our Lord always does. The result is we have a Lord and a land that respect our right to life.

II. THE RIGHT TO LIBERTY.

God made men to be free, and Christ entered history to set men free from the tyranny of sin and Satan. The cry of Moses has been the cry of all great leaders to the tyrants of history: "Let my people go!" Those men who signed the Declaration of Independence were convinced by the Bible and history that men should be free to choose the kind of government they would support. Men do not exist for the state, but the state exists for them and their welfare. The whole democratic process of government grows out of this right of men to have liberty.

It is of interest to note that God honors this right even more than does the government. We are not compelled to support the church. God gives us liberty to give in gratitude for His grace. He does not compel or demand, but he leaves us at liberty to choose. God respects our right to determine what values and efforts we will support. This kind of freedom puts greater responsibility upon us. In the Old Testament the tithe was like a tax. There was no choice, for it was a matter of law. It was no great virtue to tithe then because it was a legal obligation. No one is considered gracious today because he pays his taxes. But in relation to the church and charity we are free to give as God blesses. Giving becomes a greater measure of gratitude now under the liberty we have in Christ. In

Christ and in our country we are at liberty to decide what kinds of values and movements we will support with our money and our time.

III. THE RIGHT TO PURSUE HAPPINESS

We need to take note of the fact that the idea here is not that all men have a right to be happy. They have the right to pursue happiness is the point. All have a right to be free enough to choose that direction in life that will lead to fulfillment for them. The army may take a violinist and make him a cook, but in our country as a whole a man is free to be a cook or a musician according to his talents and interests. No man has the right to be happy, for no one can guarantee that, but all men have the right to strive for those goals they are convinced will lead to happiness.

My friend Bob Johnson told of his days after finishing college. He was sitting around the house one day and his father said to him, "What are you going to do?" He replied, "I don't know, something will turn up." His father said, "Why don't you try your sleeves?" No one has the right to expect his dream to be handed to him on a platter, but every man has a right to roll up his sleeves and pursue the goals he sets for himself.

It takes courage to live free, for there is always forces in the world that seek to enslave. The only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence was John Witherspoon, who was President of Princeton College of New Jersey. He had taught several other signers, and 9 of them were graduates of Princeton. When he took up his pen to sign it he made these remarks: "There is a tide in the affairs of men, a nick of time. We perceive it now before us. To hesitate is to consent to our own slavery. That noble instrument upon your table, that ensures immortality to its author, should be subscribed this very morning by every pen in this house. He that will not respond to its accents, and strain every nerve to carry into effect its provisions, is unworthy of the name of free man... For my own part, of property, I have some; of reputation, more. That reputation is staked, that property is pledged on the issue of this contest; and all though these gray hairs must soon descend into the sepulcher, I would infinitely rather that they descend thither by the hand of the executioner than desert at this crisis the sacred cause of my country."

It took courage to gain for us our precious rights, and it takes courage to exercise them. Only as we do so can we so live as to bring glory to our Lord and good to our land. Let us, therefore, live in liberty and pursue happiness.

31. THE POWER OF OBSERVATION Based on Acts 23:1-11

Paul and Socrates had so many things in common. Both were trying to enrich their own people. Paul was trying to enrich the Jews, and Socrates was trying to enrich the Greeks. But both were brought to trial before the Supreme Court of their cultures on charges of corrupting the people. Both were hated because of jealousy and competition. They were both considered trouble-makers because of their opposition to tradition. Both were kept in prison, but they were granted freedom to visit with their friends. Paul wrote letters to the churches, and Socrates wrote poetry and put Aesop's

Fables into verse. They both eventually died in captivity at the hands of the state, and both looked forward to a better life in the world to come.

On one point, however, they were radically different. Socrates refused all plans of escape from his enemies, but Paul looked for every possible escape. The result was that Socrates survived one month, and Paul survived for years. His aggressive and clever maneuvers got him out of one jam after another and gave him extra years to accomplish the plan of God for his life. Acts 23 is a record of some of Paul's close calls and clever escapes. It begins with Paul standing before the Sanhedrin, which was the Supreme Court of Israel. There were 71 judges on this court, which was led by the high priest.

The first we see take place in this court takes place in the defendant's eyes. Dr. Luke is obviously there, for he writes this account as an eyewitness. He is an eyewitness to the eyes of the key witness, for he observing Paul's eyes. These eyes, which had been blinded by the light of Christ's presence on the road to Damascus, and 3 days later were opened by a miraculous healing. Paul's eyes had been through a lot because of Jesus, and now they were in court with the rest of His accused body. Ever since those eyes had seen Jesus they saw everything else in a new light. Paul saw in the Old Testament what he never saw before, and all of life looked different to him. He, no doubt, would have agreed with Helen Keller who said, "I have often thought it would be a blessing if each human being were stricken blind for a few days at sometime during his early adult life. Darkness would make him more appreciative of sight."

It certainly worked for Paul, and he became a much more careful observer after his blindness and restoration to sight. His observation became a key to his survival time and time again, as it does in this chapter. It begins with Paul looking at the situation intently because he knows that if he is going to get out of this mess he had to see something that would show him the way out. Paul's life illustrates the link, not only between listening and salvation, as we saw in chapter 22, but between seeing and salvation, which is part of his conversion account, and the clever escapes of this chapter.

We cannot go into this in depth, but we need to make it clear that the eye gate is one of the primary ways that God gets into our life to guide us. The New Testament story begins with salvation by seeing. The wise men came saying, "We have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." Had the wise men never seen that star, they never would have seen the Messiah. Their eyes brought them to Jesus, and so it has been with millions. People not only hear the Gospel, they see it in the lives of other people, and in the love of those who have been changed by Christ. Jesus said, "If I be lifted up I will draw all men to me." Through the centuries millions have looked up to the Christ on the cross and have been compelled to repent when they saw the love of such a Savior.

Some, like Paul, have had very special visions of Christ. Placidus was a Roman nobleman who was out hunting and suddenly confronted by a deer with its proud head uplifted and between its antlers a gleaming cross. He was so struck by the sight that he fell from his horse to his knees. He repented and became a believer on the spot. History is full of stories of those who were saved by what they had seen. Many have given testimony as to how their eyes have been opened after seeing Christ, and how they then began to see all His handiwork in a new light. George Robinson wrote in his hymn, "Heaven above is softer blue, earth around is sweeter green, something lives in every hue Christless eyes have never seen."

Billy Bray, the evangelist of the 19th century, said when he was converted, "I remember this, that everything looked new to me, the people, the fields, the cattle, the trees, I was a new man in a new world." This describes Paul, and we can study the rest of his life just from the point of view of how he saw all things different after he saw the living Christ. He became a man of keen observation, and because of it he was able to see a way out of what seemed like hopeless situations.

Chapter 23 is a key case in point. He stands before this awesome body of judges that could take his life, and he stares at them. The Greek word here is used again in Acts 3:12 where we read Peter's response to the crowd that had gathered when he healed the crippled beggar: "Men of Israel, why does this surprise you? Why do you stare at us as if by our own power or godliness we had made this man walk?" They were staring at Peter trying to see how it was possible for a mere man to do what he did. They were staring like we stare at a magician trying to catch the move that reveals how he does his trick.

So Paul was staring at his judges, and what a story those staring eyes told. Paul was not merely looking down at the floor like a loser who was ready to submit to his powerful foes. Instead, with head held high he boldly gazes at his accusers. The odds are overwhelming against him, but he does not flinch. Like an Indiana Jones, he looks intently for a way of escape. There is no end to the possibilities in God's providence for the man who keeps looking for a way out. In his *Locusts And Wild Honey* the naturalist John Burroughs says the secret of observation lies in the habit of decisive gazing. He writes, "Not by a first casual glance, but by a steady, deliberate aim of the eye, are the rarest things discovered. You must look intently and hold your eye firmly to the spot, if you are to see more than do the rank and file of mankind."

Paul saw many things others did not see, and his powers of observation are noted by Dr. Luke. In chapter 27 he saw a dangerous storm in the atmosphere when the captain of the ship was blind to it. He saw solutions to problems that nobody else saw. Now we see Paul seeing his apparent hopeless situation from a totally different perspective than it would look like to any other observer. It looks like 71 to 1 to everybody else, and it was a foregone conclusion that Paul would be loser. But Paul was seen what was not evident on the surface. He was staring at his opponent and observing that those 71 men were not united in all points. They were both Sadducees and Pharisees with many points of disagreement. Paul saw a way to divide and conquer. It was only 71 to 1 if all eyes were on him, but what if he could get the focus on another issue, such as the concept of resurrection where these 71 were divided in their views? This is exactly what Paul does, and by this strategy he escapes the clutches of his enemies again.

Paul teaches us that one of the key ways by which we can be open to the guidance of God is by the power of observation. We need to be wise in the use of our eyes if we are going to rise above what is, and grasp the prize of what can be God's surprise in leading us to overcome the evil guys. Paul has the reputation of having very poor eyesight, and yet he saw what most never do. God even gave him a rare vision of heavenly glory because Paul's eyes were dedicated to seeing what God wanted him to see. Paul was a satisfied see-er of life. This combined with his ears ever ready to listen to God's voice. It made him the unique instrument he was for doing God's will. His eyes and ears carry him through the rest of his life allowing him to outwit all of the clever sources of his enemies to destroy Him.

I wanted to just move along in his chapter, but I saw in Paul's stare such an important lesson that

runs all through the Bible. I decided we need to look longer at the subject of seeing, for the power of observation is the key to many values in the Christian life. The power of observation, for example, is the key to-

I. DISCOVERY.

Paul had to observe detail and be able to see their relevance to his need, in order to keep escaping as he did. Paul had a knack for being able to see whom he could trust. He was always discovering people that helped him change the world for Christ. He saw in young men like Timothy and Titus the potential to make a difference in the world. He was able to see when a person was ready to respond to the Spirit of God. In Acts 14:9 we read of a crippled man at Lystra who was listening to Paul preach. It says, "Paul looked directly at him, saw that he had faith to be healed." Seeing that, he called upon to stand up and he did. A miracle happened because Paul could see the faith of another person. Paul was finding hidden treasure everywhere he went because he had eyes that could discern the presence of the unseen.

The point is, people like Paul, who are observant, see more than others who may have better physical vision, but who are not seeing all that might be discovered in a situation. Paul did not have this kind of insight before he saw Christ. He was so blind he could not see the marvelous faith of Stephen but watched him being stoned to death as a heretic. Stephen was looking up to heaven and seeing Jesus at the right hand of the Father, but Paul could not see the authenticity of his faith. Paul did not see faith until he was blinded, and then restored in his vision. Spiritual seeing that enables us to make discoveries where others are blind can only come by first seeing Jesus. All of life is seeing then in the light of the living Christ. And this gives us a whole new perspective.

Before we see Jesus, we see life from a totally self-centered perspective, and this colors all that we see. Paul didn't see any faith in Christians, but only folly, and so had only one goal and that was to blot them out and destroy the church. His perspective made them look terrible, but it was his own awful spirit that he was seeing.

In 1906 the astronomer Percival Lowell announced his discovery of canals on Mars. He even wrote a book called *Mars As The Abode Of Life*. He described the canals as red, and they seemed to mysteriously move. These detailed maps found their way into school atlases all over the world because he was such an authority. Why are they not in atlases today? It is because of the discovery that Lowell was suffering from a rare eye disease known as Lowell's syndrome. The symptom is to see the veins of one's own eyes. He was seeing his own veins and not canals on Mars. Such is the myopic vision of all those who call good evil and persecute the people of God. They think they see evil in others, but it is their own evil they are seeing. Paul was one of a long line of Pharisees whom Jesus called the blind leading the blind. They could not see God and godliness even when it stood in front of their eyes and did loving wonders that only God could do.

They could not discover gold if they sat on a golden throne. Jesus was throwing treasure at them, and yet they died in poverty, for they could not see it. Paul was one of those blind Pharisees also until Jesus broke through his blindness and set him free to see. One of the greatest freedom of life is the freedom to see. It is the freedom to discover the more that is always present in life, but which many do not discern because they have not developed the power of observation. If we could only see with the eyes of Christ we would discover so many opportunities to escape the evil and exalt the

good. Helen Keller said, "It is terrible to be blind, but it is more terrible to have eyes and not see!"

Dr. Ralph Sockman says that we all have three sets of eyes. The eyes of the body, which see the physical world; the eyes of the mind, which takes what is seen and gives it order and meaning so that we can say, "Oh, I see." This means the discovery that we call insight. The third set of eyes are the eyes of the heart. These are the eyes that see how what is seen and understood fit into the plan of God for our lives. Here is Paul looking at the Supreme Court judges who are ready to have his hide if they can. It is not a pleasant picture, but he sees beyond this to grasp some weakness in their plot. He sees a flaw he can't exploit. But he also sees with the eyes of the heart. These are the greatest leaders of Israel. How can he make an impact for Christ? Paul sees the resurrection of Christ as the key to dividing them, but also the key he wants to focus on as the essence of who he is as an Apostle of Christ.

Paul says, "If I perish I perish, but if I go down, I will die exalting the living Christ." Paul was able to discover the key that would set him free, and also focus on the central truth of the Christian faith. The challenge for every believer is to so stare at every situation of life until they can see how to outwit the forces of evil and turn this situation for the glory of Christ. It is by the power of observation that we can accomplish this goal. We don't all face the same trial as Paul, and we don't all get into the jams he did, and we tend to feel that we don't have to look so hard for God's guidance. This is a mistake, for God has discoveries for all of us to make in everyday life. We need to pray, "God give me eyes to know the joy that lies in common things."

Paul Rees, the great preacher and author wrote, "Significant seeing is an act that moves in two directions: the discovery of the extra-ordinary in the ordinary and the discovery of the ordinary in the extra-ordinary." In other words, the Christian who learns to see will discover in the common places of life that which is relevant to the glory of God, and they will discover in the glory of God that which is relevant to the common places life. Seeing is the key to the sanctified life and Christian maturity. A little girl saw this in her grandma. She begged her mother for glasses, and when asked why she wanted them she said, "Grandma has them and she can see when people are tired and uncomfortable, and she can always see what will fix them up." She saw her grandmother seeing how to be a loving person when others did not pay attention, and she thought it was in her glasses. Such seeing is not in glasses, however, but in the eyes of the heart that had developed the power to observe opportunities to serve.

Sometimes we are like the man who always rode the bus home with his eyes closed because he didn't like to see the ladies who had to stand. Or we are like the girl who always went for a walk on Saturday morning because she hated to see her mother working so hard scrubbing the floors. This way of not seeing causes people to miss life's greatest discoveries, for Jesus made it clear that not seeing opportunities to serve is to be blind to the way of eternal reward. The goat who miss it all in the day of judgment will say, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty, or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you." Jesus said, "Because you didn't do it for the least, you didn't do it for me."

Jesus is saying that we miss the boat constantly because we do not see that ministry to the nobodies of the world is ministry to the Lord of the world. When we begin to see this we will begin to discover opportunities to serve everywhere. Paul says we only see through a glass darkly now, but we can see what is the loving thing to do if we really look, and we can see what the wise thing to do is

when we need to escape from the way of folly. Our prayer needs to be, "Open my eyes Lord to see how I can discover your will for me today." Seeing is the key to discovery, and it is also the key to-

II. DELIVERANCE.

Paul was always getting out of a mess and having his life spared because of his observation. But we need to see that what he saw was also the key to his being delivered from depression and discouragement when the battle was so hard and seemingly hopeless. Paul was a bold man before his superior enemies because the eyes of faith see what the eyes of flesh cannot. They have a resource that gives hope and encouragement when the visible does not offer these positive values.

It is hard to be a minority and an underdog like Paul is in these closing years of his life. To see your own people and your highest leaders wanting to kill you is not a sight you forget after a good meal and a nights rest. This is a heavy load that Paul had to bear, and if he was not seeing something besides what was visible to the eye of flesh he would be in an inner prison even more dreary than the external prison he had to endure.

When we see what Paul had to go through and the odds against him, we can better understand why God had to give him special revelation. Most of us will never face what Paul faced, and so we will have to be content with the revelation we have from him and others, but God gave Paul special visions, for he needed them to be delivered from all the negative emotions that would have to be endured by any one in his situation. He could only be an optimist because of what he saw. Like the prophet of old he needed to see that, "Greatest is He that is in us than he that is in the world." Wesley wrote,

Lo! To faith's enlightened sight,
All the mountain flames with light.
Hell is nigh, but God is nigher,
Circling us with hosts of fire.

Paul could not only see the presence of God in his terrible times, he could see beyond the terrible times to the ultimate victory, and so he was always an optimist. He wrote in Rom. 8:18, "I consider that our present suffering are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us." In II Cor. 4:16-18 he wrote, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal." Paul was delivered from the depressing emotions of the temporal because he could see the long-range picture of God, which is always a pleasant work of art. Bliss Carman wrote,

Lord of the far horizons,
Give us the eyes to see
Over the verge of sundown
The beauty that is to be.

If we can see as God sees, we will be delivered from the awful scenes that plunge us into the pits. That is how Paul kept going when all that life offered him was one conflict and imprisonment after

another. We see what we are determined to see. Paul looked intently for clues to find a way to keep pressing on to do the will of his Lord. He never gave up and threw in the towel, for he knew there was always a way if you keep looking. When we close our eyes and cease to look for open doors we have surrendered one of our key weapons to the enemy.

The life of Paul is a message to us all, and that message is, keep looking. Keep your eyes open and your ears alert, and God and His providence will show you the way. We haven't seen anything yet, for the best we only see through a glass darkly, but even in time there is so much more for us to see. A great Dutch botanist was asked what he saw when he looked at a plant stem through his microscope, and he said, "I saw the cherubim and seraphim and heard them chanting holy holy holy is the Lord God Almighty." Children often see wonders that adults miss. A little girl said as she walked with her mother after it stopped raining, "Look mommy! There's a rainbow in the gutter." The mother said, "That's not a rainbow, it's only a dirty oil slick." We would see more to wonder at in the world if we had childlike eyes.

If we surrender our senses to be tools of the Holy Spirit we can see and hear what otherwise we are blind and deaf to. John Masefield in his classical description of Saul Kane's conversion has him saying,

The running brook to my new eyes
Was babbling out of paradise,
The waters rushing from the rain
Were singing Christ has risen again.

A woman said to the famous artist Turner, as she surveyed his painting of a scene she thought she knew well, "I never saw that!" Turner replied, "But you wish you could have seen it?" Marcus Bach in his book *The Power Of Perception* tells of his frustration of not being able to see what was right in front of his face. An amateur photographer had taken a picture of an old wagon shed with a morning glory vine and entwined, and he won a thousand dollar prize. He passed that scene over and over, and he had a camera too, but he never saw it. His point was that there is no end to the things that can be seen without going all over the world. Only a fool comes to the conclusion that there is nothing new to be seen where he is at, but that all such things are far away. The proverb says, "The fool has his eyes in the ends of the world." We have not scratched the surface of what can be seen right where we are.

Burton Hillis in *Better Homes And Gardens* tells one of his favorite stories of the little boy who didn't want to leave church. His parents asked, "Why don't you want to go?" "Because," he answered, "I haven't seen God yet." Maybe his expectations were too high, or maybe most have expectations too low. We don't expect to see God, nor do we expect to see anything new in terms of insight into life and meaning, and ways by which to escape evil and be empowered to do the will of God.

Spurgeon often lectured in his travels, and many times he concluded like this: "One more remark and I'm done. If you cannot travel, remember that our Lord Jesus Christ is more glorious than all else you could ever see. Get a view of Christ and you have seen more than mountains and cascades and valleys and seas can ever show you. Earth can give its beauty and stars their brightness, but all these put together can never rival him."

Paul's whole life was changed because he saw Jesus, and with his new eyes he had the power of observation that led him through the dark valley time and time again. May God help us to see that every day we live can be a day of victory over evil and a day of opportunity to serve our Lord if we will only turn our eyes upon Jesus, and pray without ceasing, "Lord help me to look at life and see what you see. Give me the Spirit enlightened power of observation."

32. CHRISTIAN CLEVERNESS Based on Acts 23:1-11

The first impeachment trial of a President of the United States began on March 30, 1868. The 54 Senators were at their desks in the Senate Chamber, and at the front was Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase of the Supreme Court, who would preside over the trial. The President himself was not there. He felt it beneath his dignity to honor the trial with his presence, and so he remained in the White House.

It was a complex case. Abraham Lincoln did a strange thing. He asked his Republican Convention to let him choose a Democrat to run as his Vice President. Believe it or not, they nominated Andrew Johnson for the Vice Presidency. Lincoln had appointed Johnson as military Governor of Tenn. Johnson favored Lincoln's plan to unite the North and South after the Civil War, and not seek to punish the rebel South. Many radicals in Lincoln's party wanted revenge, and they wanted the South to be punished. Lincoln won support for his plan for unity, and the result was a Republican-Democrat team won the election. A Republican President with a Democrat Vice President would be strange enough, but it gets even stranger.

When Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, Andrew Johnson became the President. Our nation went from a Republican to a Democrat President with no votes or election whatever. It was not a ballot, but a bullet that brought about this radical change. The Republicans were not pleased with this turn of events, and they set out to make life miserable for a man they never liked in the first place. To make a long story short, they finally found a way to bring impeachment charges against him when he forced his Secretary of War to resign, who was a Republican. The Republicans controlled the Senate, and all it took was a two-thirds majority of the Senate to impeach him.

It was a 6 weeks long battle with the best lawyers in the country on both sides. When the vote was finally taken on May 16, 1868 Andrew Johnson won by one vote, and survived as President. The only way he could have done it was if his lawyers were clever enough to divide his enemies, and that is precisely what they did. Seven Republicans were persuaded not to vote with the radicals. They paid with their political lives, and they never won another election to office, but Andrew Johnson, thanks to his clever lawyers, not only survived, but after his term ran for the Senate and won. He sat in that very chamber where he narrowly escaped his greatest defeat.

I share this long introduction out of our history because it is a fascinating example of the complexity of life, and of the importance of cleverness for success and survival. The only way a minority can win in a conflict with the majority is by the strategy of divide and conquer. The only way you can win in a court case is to get the jury divided. If they are all united against you, you are sunk. But if you can break that unity and get opposition among them, you have a chance to win. If

you are before the Supreme Court and all of the judges are united the battle is lost. But if you can get the judges divided you have hope of winning. The very essence of being a clever lawyer is in having the skill to bring about division in the ranks of your opponents.

The Apostle Paul in all of the trials of his final years never had a lawyer. Jesus was his heavenly advocate, but he represented himself before both Jewish and Gentiles judges. In chapter 24 the Jews brought a lawyer with them in Paul's trial before Governor Felix. One of their reasons for their bringing professional counsel is because of Paul's clever maneuvering here in chapter 23. As his own lawyer he was able to outwit the Supreme Court of the Jews. It was certainly a great embarrassment to them to be outwitted by Paul's cleverness. I suspect it is an embarrassment to many Christians even that Paul was so clever in his escape. The reason is that the Christian is often conditioned to think that being clever is more in tune with following Satan than the Savior.

So much of the cleverness of history has been the cleverness of evil. The cunning serpent was able to deceive Adam and Eve into choosing death for life, and by his cunning he has deceived the majority of mankind. We tend to think of cleverness as the ability to get away with something in a negative sense. Like the clever little boy who was warned by his mother not to take seconds. When his hostess at the party saw how eagerly he gobbled up his ice cream, she asked if he wanted some more? The boy said, "I promised mom I wouldn't except more the second time, but if you ask me the third time I guess it would be alright." Or what of the boy who asked his teacher, "Would you punish someone for something they didn't do?" When she said, "Of course not," he said, "Good, because I didn't do my homework."

We think that cleverness will lead to the con-man mentality that devices sting operations that cleverly rob people legally and ingeniously. And the reason we think this is because it is true. Vincent Teresa in his book *My Life In The Mafia* tells of all the clever ways he got people to give him money. He didn't need a gun to rob a bank. He would go into cash a ten-dollar check, and when the teller asked for ID he would say he had none. She would send him to the manager to get it okayed. He would go to the manager's desk and show his license and get the manager to initial the check. Then instead of cashing it he would take it and trace the manager's initials on a bogus 4000-dollar check, and then send his accomplice to the bank to do the same thing. He would be sent to get his ten-dollar check okayed by the manager, and when he came back to the teller he would switch to the 4000 dollar check. She would see it initialed and see he just came from the manager and give him the money. They took many banks by this clever scheme. He tells of all kinds of ways they robbed insurance companies of millions. Evil thrives by cleverness, and that is why we tend to think of it as evil.

We see satanic cleverness at its best in his temptation of Jesus. He came to a starving man and urged him to use His power to make bread of stones. He came to a man who was lonely and in need of fellowship seeking to entice Him to jump off the temple and have the cheering crowds at His side. He came to a man who felt weak and powerless, and offered him the kingdoms of the world if he would bow down to him. Satan is a master of cleverness, but we are blind indeed if we think he is the king of cleverness. Jesus outwitted him at every point and takes the throne as king of cleverness.

From that victory in the wilderness Jesus went on to His public ministry where He had to outwit the Scribes, Saducees and Pharisees time and time again. Then He had to outsmart the devil even in death, and gain control of his realm by getting the keys to

death and hell. Jesus not only outwitted the best minds of His day, He outwitted the serpent himself and became the greatest example of the power of sanctified cleverness in overcoming the forces of evil. If you are going to win any battle against the forces that promote prejudice, racism, discrimination, and all forms of injustice in the world you must develop the virtue of cleverness.

Cleverness is a skill, and it does not mean anything negative in itself. There are many positive synonyms such as apt, adroit, bright, capable, smart, talented, ingenious, sharp, intelligent and keen. If you don't think it is a virtue for a Christian to be clever, then you just as well cut out all the wisdom literature of your Bible. For the whole point of wisdom is that we might be clever in all areas of life in doing what is good, true and beautiful, and also beneficial to both man and God. If you are anti-clever then you will be promoting the opposite, which is dull, stupid, slow, perverse, clumsy, awkward, senseless, witless, foolish and ignorant. I think it is safe to say that there are no Christian ideals in this list, but there are in the synonyms of cleverness. We can conclude that the Christian is called to be clever, for it is the only way we can win in the conflict with the powers of darkness.

Jesus said that sometimes we don't win because the children of darkness are wiser in their generation than the children of light. They are not wiser in the long run, but for their generation they may win the battle, for they are more clever, and so they outwit the forces of light. Cleverness is one of the chief ingredients in any battle, and to be without it is to face armed opponents without a weapon. Paul had no sword as he stood before his judges, but he was not unarmed. He had the sword of the Spirit, and so he was armed with the weapon of cleverness that enabled him to win in spite of great negative odds.

You may still have more negative feelings about cleverness than positive ones. I needed more assurance that this could really be a biblical virtue, and so I went to my ten volume Kittels Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. I looked up clever, and to my surprise it was there. The Greek word *Sophizo* is used only twice in the New Testament, but what a revelation those two uses are. They make it clear that cleverness is either good or evil depending on what you use it for. The word is used very negatively by Peter when he says in II Peter 1:16, "We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." The KJV has cunningly devised fables. Peter is saying that the world is full of clever religious con-games that ensnare people by one psychological trick or another. Evil is clever. If it wasn't we would not have to be very sharp to avoid it.

This is the side of cleverness we have so often stressed that we seldom ever think of the other side of the coin. How are we supposed to win in a world so full of clever evil? How are families supposed to survive in a world with so many clever forces out to destroy them? How can you ever raise children who will escape the clever forces of evil that entice them into every sin and folly that can destroy them? How can Christians outwit the forces that entice them into every kind of immorality and compromise? The answer is that we need to fight fire with fire and develop, as Paul did, Christian cleverness.

Listen to the only other use of this Greek word *Sophizo* in the New Testament. Paul uses it in II Tim. 3. Let me share some of the context. In verse 13 Paul writes, "While evil men and impostures will go from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived." Paul describes the worldly cleverness that is a vicious circle of folly deception. But then in contrast he goes on in verses 14 and 15, "But as for

you, continue in what you have learned and have become convinced of, because you know those from whom you learned it, and how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Jesus Christ." The word there for wise is the word we are looking at. The same word to describe the clever and cunning myths of the world is used to describe the clever plan of salvation in Christ.

Do you think God is not clever, or that he is not able to outwit the devil? Of course he is. That is the basis for all our hope. The Christian has to be constantly growing in his knowledge of the Bible in order to be clever or wise in salvation. Paul was saying that Timothy was the sharp Christian he was because he grew up in a home where he learned the Scripture from infancy. Show me a mother and father who teach their children the Word of God and I will show you some clever parents. They are clever because they know they are giving this child a weapon that will enable them to defend themselves from the clever wilds of the devil.

The more you face the forces of evil, the more you need to be armed with the virtue of Christian cleverness. Elizabeth Wordsworth wrote,

If all good people were clever,
And all clever people were good,
The world would be nicer than ever
We thought that it possibly could.
But somehow, tis seldom or never
The two hit it off as they should.
The good are so harsh to the clever,
And the clever so rude to the good.

The poet's ideal is to see good and clever combined in the same person, and that is what we see in Paul as the Apostle of Christian cleverness. Let's look at how he exhibits his cleverness in facing insurmountable odds. And remember, this is the only way the underdog can win, for he has to outsmart the superior opponent. David could not match Goliath in strength, and so in a face to face combat he would be dead in seconds. His only hope was a specialized skill that would help him defeat the giant at a distant. That was David's key to victory. His clever use of the sling enabled him to take Goliath by surprise. God led His people to victory many times by means of clever strategy.

Gideon faced the host of Midiannites that covered the valley like thick locust. They had so many camels they could no more be counted than the sands on the seashore the Bible says. He had only 300 men, but by the clever maneuver of banging jars and blowing 300 trumpets and shouting they threw that vast army into a state of panic. They began fighting each other, and they fled in fear. That was very clever, and God used that kind of cleverness to save Israel time and time again. Paul's escape by means of cleverness reveals that God has not given up on cleverness as a key weapon for His people.

I. THE CLEVERNESS OF PAUL'S APPROACH.

The first thing you have to do in confronting an opponent is to test them and try to find out where their weakness is. This is true in war, sports and politics. Wherever there is a matching of wits, skills or strength you have to approach the battle with some strategy that will give you a clue to your

opponent's weakness. Paul does this by approaching the Sanhedrin in such a way that he can test their objectivity. If he can get the high priest to compromise the integrity of the court by revealing that the judges are prejudice against him he has already won a moral victory.

Paul does this by what he knows will be a very offensive approach. His first words before the court are a plea of not guilty. Paul says, "I have fulfilled my duty to God in all good conscience to this day." That was like saying that here you are as the Supreme Court of the land waiting to pounce on a man who is totally innocent, and who has never knowingly broken a single law of Israel. If Paul meant this to get under their skin, if sure worked, for the high priest responded with immediate anger. He ordered Paul struck for such arrogance. Paul had the audacity to imply that the Supreme Court had nothing better to do than harass innocent citizens.

Paul took the slap but he won this opening round, for as is usually the case, the first one to get mad in a conflict is the first one to make a mistake. The high priest was responsible to maintain a high level of objectivity in the court, and he has already lost his temper. By his rash action against Paul he has violated the very law he is sworn to uphold. Paul got the high priest to reveal something that he would rather have kept hidden. That put him on the defensive and gave Paul some measure of control in the situation. Getting an opponent to reveal what is hidden is part of what cleverness is all about.

Modern man has electronic devices to help him detect hidden weapons, but it is not a new idea. The ancients had this same cleverness. In ancient China the capital city Siam had its gates made of loadstone, which is a natural magnet. If a would be assassin came through the gate with a concealed dagger the loadstone would pull on the weapon like an invisible hand. Startled, the assassin would grab for his weapon and train guards would grab him.

If you find a way to make your opponent reveal what he is up to, it gives you an advantage. Paul has already established that he is standing before a hanging judge, and that any pretense that he is facing an unbiased court is a farce. This is not only important in the strategy to divide and conquer, it is important for ones own motivation. It is so much easier to be clever when you know for sure that you are facing a real foe who is not going to treat you fairly. Next we see-

II. THE CLEVERNESS OF PAUL'S APOLOGY.

We can't spend much time on this, for Paul certainly didn't either. When he was accused of insulting the high priest he backed off from his aggressive approach and became apologetic. "I didn't realize he was the high priest," Paul said. Then he shows that he knows the honor he is to give to the leaders of Israel by quoting the Scripture. Paul had just accused the high priest of violating the law, and everyone could see he had just done so, for it was illegal to strike an accused man until proven guilty.

Paul has lost his temper also in firing back with the name-calling. He says, "You white washed wall," and then gives the prophecy that God would strike him. The tension here is very intense, but Paul is clever enough to know that if he is going to get into a one on one duel with the high priest he is signing his own death warrant. He has been provoked into anger, but he is still in control, and so he cools it by submitting to the law, which demands respect for one's ruler. Had he not gained control

here, but let his anger go on blazing at the high priest, he would have hung himself before the trial began.

A part of cleverness is the ability to see when your opponent has set you up to destroy yourself. If you play his game he will win, and Ananias almost had Paul right here, but Paul could see where the chain of events was leading, and he refused to follow. He choose the way of strategic retreat where you stop fighting the war your opponent wants you to fight, and you go fight one of your own choosing. That is what Paul does here. He apologizes and closes down this front, and then he immediately opens up a new front where he is in control. He gets the court to focus on their own emotions rather than on him. There is just no question about it that this was clever maneuvering for survival.

One of the reasons that being so clever bothers us is because it seems unlike Jesus who stood before His judges and opened not His mouth. We forget that Jesus was not trying to defend Himself and escape. He was submissively laying down His life for our sin. Paul is not doing that. He couldn't do it if he wanted to. He was fighting for his life, and so he did open his mouth and use every clever trick he could think of to escape an unjust death.

If Paul could see how his death could benefit the church, he probably would have, like his Lord, surrendered to the unjust plot. But Paul had no such revelation. He was fighting evil forces to stay alive in order to do the will of God. Jesus did this same thing time and time again until it was the right time to lay down his life. He would have been killed much earlier if he had not used clever means and even miracles to escape death by violence. Paul's day came too, but until then he was a survivor, and if it meant apology to a tyrant to do it, that was the choice of Christian cleverness. Next we see-

III. THE CLEVERNESS OF PAUL'S APPEAL

The essence of cleverness in court cases is the element of surprise. The surprise witness, or surprise bit of evidence, that is so conclusive, or even better yet, the surprise confession is what makes the world of difference. It blows the case wide open and all is changed. Paul makes a surprise move and appeals to the Pharisees in the court to recognize that he is really on trial for being a Pharisee and believing in the resurrection of the dead.

Everyone was surprised but Paul. He knew exactly what the reaction would be. Cleverness is the ability to get your opponent to play your game. I know whether I am going to win or lose very early when I play tennis. I know if I can get the opponent to play my game I have it won. This is what Paul is doing. Soon there was no order in the court as conflict broke out among the judges. Paul knew the history of the conflict between the Saducees and the Pharisees. He knew they would fight like cats and dogs if their favorite bone of contention was thrown into the ring.

There is humor in this cleverness, for we have to chuckle when we see a large number of his enemies have suddenly become witnesses for his defense. The Pharisees were saying, "We find nothing wrong with this man." It is amazing and amusing that Paul could pull this off and have the Supreme Court judges fighting over him. It would have cost a fortune to hire so many lawyers, but here they are defending Paul for nothing, and that is clever.

A Jew in Russia, who owned a large farm, was arrested and kept in jail. One day he received a frantic letter from his wife, saying, in part, "I'm going crazy-how am I ever going to take care of the farm?" The husband answered the letter, concluding: "P.S.-don't worry; I have taken care of us on the northern 40 acres." A week later the prisoner received a letter from his wife. "What are you thinking of?" she wrote nervously. "How could you write such a thing in a letter? Since it came the Secret Police have dug up the whole 40 acres." To this the husband replied, "Good! Now plant!"

When your enemy is playing your game you are being clever. The cross is the symbol of Christ's cleverness. Satan and all the forces of darkness worked overtime to get Jesus crucified, and in so doing they played right into the hands of Christ, for it was by means of His death that gained the right to redeem all those in bondage to Satan. Just as the Pharisees were working for Paul, and the Secret Police were working for the Jewish prisoner, so Satan was working for Christ. Because of this we can look at the cross and see it as the ultimate symbol of godly cleverness.

All through history clever Christians have been able to get their foes to help them achieve God's plan. One of the cleverest Christian women in history was Evangeline Booth, who was the General of the Salvation Army. The liquor industry organized attacks on her because her ministry was hurting their business. They threw things at her, hollered curses, and just generally harassed her. She approached the ringleader of the gang in the neighborhood and asked for his help by being her bodyguard. He was proud to need his leadership needed, and his gang followed him in protecting her from those who threatened her. She used a segment of the world to protect her from another segment of the world. That is Christian cleverness.

The mother of Moses used the daughter of Pharaoh to raise the child that Pharaoh ordered to be killed. She was using his money to train and educate her son who would be wise enough to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. When you can get your enemies to subsidize the plan for their own defeat, that is clever.

Paul was clever because he knew human nature, and he knew what effect this appeal would have. It is in knowing how what you do will make others react that makes you clever. Eugene Nida, the Christian linguist who has helped thousands translate the Bible into many languages, has always been clever. He tells of how he sold vegetables in the summer as a boy. He would put up a sign across the road saying don't look at the other side. He knew people would look, and by this clever method of getting their attention he sold more vegetables.

A synonym for the word clever is quick or quick-witted. Clever is the man who can come up with a quick solution to a problem. F. W. Boreham tells of a man on a train in England who put his head out the window forgetting he had his top hat on. It, of course, blew off. Quick as lightening he grabbed his leather hatbox and threw it out the window. He was asked, "Why in the world did you do that?" "Well, you see, the hat box has my name and address on it, but the hat doesn't." And sure enough his hat was returned because of his quick thinking.

In Acts 27 the sailors let the lifeboat down into the sea. They were about to abandon the ship. Paul had to think quick or all would be lost. He said to the Centurian and Roman soldiers, "Unless these men stay with the ship, you cannot be saved." That one sentence motivated them to act, for their own salvation was involved. The next verse says, "So the soldiers cut the rope that held the lifeboat and let it fall away." Paul by his quick wit saved the day again for all of them. Paul had to

think fast to save himself many times.

In 1066 when William the Conqueror landed on the English shore with his Normans he boldly led the way. When he stepped ashore, however, he slipped and fell. A great cry of distress went up from his soldiers. It was an evil omen! But the clever William bounced to his feet clutching two handfuls of English soil. This is no evil omen he shouted! "This is a sign from God! See my hands, by the splendor of God I have taken possession of England with both my hands. It is now mine and what is mine is yours." The soldiers were cheered and swarmed ashore eager to possess the land. This fall could have been a disaster, but by his quick wit and cleverness he turned it into an asset, and he marched on to be the last invader to ever conquer England. He created the British Empire, and his blood became the royal bloodline of England.

He had to be clever in battle as well as in psychological warfare. When it looked like there was no way to penetrate the wall of English soldiers he ordered a retreat. The English thought they had them on the run and broke their ranks to pursue them. When William decided that they were thoroughly out of formation he gave the order to halt the retreat and attack. The English were not prepared for this, and were too unorganized to hold them back, and the Normans won the battle and all of England.

This strategy was used very effectively by the Jews in the Old Testament. It is one of the clever tricks of warfare. The very essence of cleverness in any conflict is to gain control, and have the opponent doing what you want him to do. You pretend you are going to hit the ball one way so that he turns that way, but then you hit the opposite way and hit a winner. In warfare it is done all the time. You send you men to build a bridge across a river, and the enemy thinks this is where you plan to invade. They station their army near that place to intercept you. Meanwhile, you have sent your major army to invade in another place while they watch you build a bridge. The classic cleverness that wins wars is making your opponent take actions that serve your purpose. This is just what we see Paul doing, and he was a master at it.

We love to see our team make clever plays that score. We love to see our favorite politician make clever moves that win votes. We love to see winners in all areas of life who succeed by their cleverness. The point is, God also loves to see His children outwit the devil and all of the forces of darkness. He loves to see wisdom in action. He loves to see Christians escape the traps of evil by their cleverness. You may have never asked this of God before, but will you join me now in praying that God would give us the wisdom to develop our skills in Christian cleverness.

33. DIFFERENCES MAKE A DIFFERENCE Based on Acts 23:1-11

Sometimes a man can be so different that nobody can agree with him all the time. Such was the case with Roger Williams, who was the founder of the first Baptist Church in America. He came to America for religious freedom, and he expected to have more of it than anybody was willing to give him. The Puritans regulated people's lives. They told them when they could be on the street and when not; when they could kiss their wives and when not. They forced everybody to go to church

and pay a tax to keep the church going, and this even included the Jews.

Williams had a different idea of what it meant to be free, and he began to resist the church-state combination that regulated all of life. Keep in mind that he was the pastor of the most powerful church in Boston. His cry for liberty was too radical, and so they asked him to leave. He went to Salem where they also found him too defiant for their blood, and so he moved on to Plymouth where he pastured the Pilgrims. Here he found people who also loved liberty, but they could not go along with his radical ideas about treating the Indians fairly, even to the point of paying them for their land. He resigned his pulpit there and became a preacher without a pulpit. Mary, his wife, kept going to the church each Sunday, and Roger did not stop her, for he believed in religious liberty in the home as well. He stayed home and preached to anyone who would come. The problem was that too many came, and Williams was becoming a threat to the whole Puritan system of church and state.

He had to be dealt with, and so the leaders of the church and state summoned him to court. The governor sat at the head, and his 25 deputies. All of the preachers were there to see that this plague was ended once and for all. Some of the preachers judging Williams were among the greatest in American history. There was John Cotton and Thomas Hooker, for example, whose writings are available in any theological library. It was Christians against a Christian. When they read the list of charges against him Williams pleaded guilty to all of them. When he was asked to recant he said, like Martin Luther, "Here I stand." He would not budge. He refused to stop his promotion of religious liberty, and so the court ordered him to be banished from the colony.

Roger Williams was too different to be tolerated, even by fellow Christians. None of these Christian leaders doubted that Williams was a Christian, but they just could not endure his demand for religious liberty. He was too different to fit into their idea of the ideal relationship of church and state. The end result was that Williams escaped and founded his own colony in Rhode Island. He founded his own church in Providence, which was the capital, and he began the experiment that changed the history of America. In his colony there was complete separation of the church and state, and total religious liberty. His ideal became a part of the Constitution of our country. His way of thinking was so different, but it eventually became the American way of thinking. The point is, history reveals that history is changed most often by people who are different. They are people who do not conform. They are odd balls and mavericks, and people who seem to be always swimming upstream and going against the grain.

Someone said that there are only two kinds of people in the world, those who think there are only two kinds of people in the world, and those who know better. It is easy to say everyone is either a Christian or a non-Christian, but this really does not cover the complexity of who people are. There are many differences among Christians, and many of the great conflicts of history have been because Christians are so radically different. The Jews could have said the same thing saying there are only Jews and non-Jews. But here they are in great conflict with a Jew named Paul, who is turning their world upside down. Paul was a Jew, but he was different from the majority of Jews. Paul was a Christian, but he was also different from the majority of Christians. He was no commonplace sparrow, but he was a rare bird. He was different in his conversion and in most every other way.

Paul was different in his calling. He was uniquely called to be the Apostle to the Gentiles. None of the others had this unique call. Peter was used to bring Gentiles like Cornelius into the kingdom, but Paul was different from Peter. Paul made an easier transition to universal Christianity

than Peter did. Paul had to rebuke Peter for his relapse into a narrow Jewish centered Christianity. All of the Apostles were different from each other. Jesus did not choose men who were all alike. Variety is not only the spice of life, it is the very essence of what makes life possible and interesting. I have often thought that if everyone was just like me, the whole economy of the world would grind to a halt in a matter of days, and civilization as we know it would perish. If everyone bought only what you buy, millions of people would be thrown out of work in a week.

Plato in the Republic said, "I am reminded that we are not all alike; there are diversities of nature among us which are adapted to different occupations."

Paul makes a great deal of this in dealing with Christians. He points out that God has made every member of the body different, and He has given them different gifts, and so it is important that we recognize the need for differences in the body. We do not have to like everything about the differences of Christians, but we must learn to recognize that God can and does love the differences. We do not have to like everything about Paul, for he didn't like everything about himself, but we do have to recognize that differences are not defects. They are the key to the churches having the diversity necessary to reach a very diverse world.

You do not have to worry if there are things you do not like about other Christians, or that there are things you cannot do that they do. Spurgeon, the great Baptist preacher, said that the saints have different relationships to God just as children do to their father. He wrote, "When I read some of the prayers of Martin Luther they shock me, but I argue with myself thus: It is true I cannot talk with God in the same way as Martin, but then perhaps Martin Luther felt and realized his adoption more than I do, and therefore was not less humble because he was more bold. It may be that he used expressions which would be out of place in the mouth of any man who had not known the Lord as he had done."

There was no one quite like Luther, and there was no one quite like Spurgeon, but like all whom God has used, they were different. We need to learn to celebrate our differences and recognize that just as our civilization would collapse without differences, so would the church. It grows and thrives on differences. Unity in diversity is what makes our nation great, and this is also what makes the church great. This is not to say that because differences can be delightful that all differences are good. Some people get so different that they become eccentric, which means off balance, and they no longer contribute to the healthy variety of the body.

Differences are also the foundation for conflict. The Jewish Talmud tells of the Jew who had a young wife and an old wife. The young one kept pulling out her husbands gray hair to make him look young. The old one kept pulling out his dark hair to make him look older. The end result was that he ended up bald. Differences of perspective can be destructive to the body.

Paul spent a good portion of his ministry trying to resolve the conflicts of Christians who were different, but still one in Christ. They were Jews and Gentiles, bond and free, male and female, and all of their differences made a lot of waves. They still do, and that is why there has always been a good many books on how to get along with people you love. It can be hard because people are so different. *Diakrino* is one of the key New Testament words for describing people's differences, and Paul is the main user of this word. He uses it most often in writing to the Corinthians. They were in constant turmoil over their individual differences. They were saying, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephus, I am of Christ."

The church was divided because the people liked different things in their leaders. Paul tells them that this is nonsense. It is God who makes each one different for the benefit of the whole body. Do not pick and choose, but accept all of the differences as beneficial. Do not boast that you are different Paul says, for you did not create this variety. It is God's doing, and so if someone has a difference you are to praise God for it and not the person. Differences divide the people of God when they begin to compare and compete. But when they celebrate the differences as God's gifts then the differences become an asset that unites the church.

The battle of the Apostles in the New Testament is to help Christians see that the differences that use to make such a difference should no longer make a difference for those in Christ. So what if people are Jews and Gentiles, or slaves and free, or male and female? These differences no longer make a difference in Christ. Peter stood up at the first Christian council in Acts 15 and told of what God did for the Gentiles. He said in verse 9, "He made no distinction between us and them, for He purified their hearts by faith." The word for distinction is *diakrino*. God said there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles in Christ, and so Peter says that we are to stop trying to keep Gentiles as second-class citizens in the kingdom of God.

This is the message of Paul as well. God has broken down all the walls that divided people. He has shattered all the differences that divide people, and which lead to prejudice and class-consciousness. The differences may be very real, but they are to be dissolved in a baptism of Christian love that washes away all the differences and makes them one in the body of Christ. Nevertheless, there is no escaping the reality of differences in background, gifts, and just a host of inherited and acquired individual differences. This means that Christians are perpetually caught in the tension because of differences that are to make no difference because they make no difference to Christ, but which are still differences, which make a difference to us, because we are not completely like Christ-but different.

All of this brings us again to still another look at Paul before the Sanhedrin. It is a very different setting with Paul being very different in his behavior, because he is dealing with people who are very different in their views. This scene is loaded with surprises and differences you do not find anywhere else. We want to look at it from these two perspectives: 1. The differences which Paul exhibited, and 2. The differences which Paul exploited.

I. THE DIFFERENCES WHICH PAUL EXHIBITED.

We usually do not find Paul mouthing off to dignitaries and starting a court room brawl, but this is what we see Paul exhibiting in this chapter. It is not typical for Paul, and he is behaving differently than usual because of the context. He is a Jew being persecuted by the Jews because he is different, and that difference is that he loves the Gentiles. This was a difference that they refused to tolerate, and so Paul was marked for elimination. When you are in a terminal situation, and it is all unjust, this has a tendency to altar your disposition. If Paul seems hostile here, it is because he is hostile. He is angry that an innocent man can be treated with such injustice.

Who of us has not had our anger aroused by being robbed of our dignity, or by being treated unfairly with no regard for our rights? Should this make us behave differently? Does the Christian have a right to act differently when he is being treated unjustly? It was Paul who wrote in I Cor. 13:4, "Love is patience, love is kind," and then in verse 5 writes, "It is not rude, it is not self-seeking,

it is not easily angered." Yet we see Paul in this setting exhibiting behavior that is radically different from that description. It seems rather rude to call the chief priest a white washed wall. How can we reconcile Paul's teaching with his behavior, which seems to contradict it? We simply need to recognize that what Eccles. 3:8 says is true, "There is a time to love and a time to hate."

The Christian who is in a context of fighting prejudice and injustice will often have to switch to a hate mode. When love is rejected, not even God can avoid changing His mode to one of judgment. What we see Paul doing here in Acts 23 is imitating Christ in Matt. 23. Over and over Jesus says, "Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees-you hypocrites-you blind guides-you white washed tombs-you brood of vipers." He calls them names and tells them that judgment is going to fall on them. That is what we see Paul doing in our text. He calls Ananius a whitewashed wall and says that God will strike him, and that is what precisely what happened.

The point is, Paul is being different here just as Jesus was different in a context of judgment. The reason Christians often cannot be clever instruments for God in history is their inability to be different when the context demands that they be different. In the conflict with evil forces that threaten all that is right there is a need for Christians who can change their usual pattern of behavior and be radically different in order to fight fire with fire. During the Revolutionary War many peace-loving pastors took up arms to fight for liberty. The British called them, "The black regiment." They feared them, for they stirred up such radical zeal in the Colonial troops.

One of the most colorful examples that Peter Marshall gives in his book *The Light And Glory* is that of Peter Muhlenberg. This 30-year-old pastor delivered a stirring sermon on Eccles. 3:1, "For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven." He concluded his message by throwing off his pulpit robe revealing he was in an army uniform. He said, "Now is the time to fight!" That very afternoon he led 300 men off to battle, and they won a number of victories. Washington made this fighting pastor one of his brigadier generals. This is not the normal function of a pastor, but in those very unusual years there was a demand for even pastors to be different, and their difference made a difference in who won that conflict.

On another occasion the British had the Colonial Army pinned down near a church. They ran out of paper wadding to hold the powder and ball in place in their muskets. Pastor James Caldwell carried out all of the copies he could of Watt's Psalms and Hymns. He tore the pages out of the hymnals and passed them to the crouching riflemen and shouted, "Put Watts into 'em, boys! Give 'em Watts!" That is a radically different use for a hymnal, but the point is, the context called for radical difference. To be radically different when there is no demand for it is to be strange and eccentric. But to be able to be different when the demand is there is a virtue of flexibility that can make all the difference in the world. Paul, by his exhibiting different behavior from the norm in this tense context makes it clear that the Christian does have to be flexible in order to respond wisely so that being different can make a difference.

II. THE DIFFERENCES WHICH PAUL EXPLOITED.

This word has taken on a negative tone, and often means to be unfair and selfish, but the word exploit simply means to utilize or get the value out of. Paul could see that the Sanhedrin was composed of two kinds of Jews, which were the Saducees and the Pharisees. These two groups were so different that Paul saw how he could exploit their differences to his advantage. Is it right to be a

troublemaker, and to stir up conflict between people? Again, the context is the key to the answer. The answer is no if you are like those Jews who stirred up conflict between the Jews and Gentiles over legalistic issues. It is evil and folly to cause strife among brothers, and God hates it. But if we are talking about bringing division among those who are out of God's will, and you can by that division thwart their evil plot, then by all means it is not only legitimate but an obligation to try and create such a division.

Here again, we see how Paul's difference makes all the difference in the world in his ability to exploit the differences in his foes. Paul was the only one of the Apostles who was a Pharisee. He is the only one who could pull the trick that he pulled here, and it saved his life. He shouted to the court, "I am a Pharisee the son of a Pharisee!" We have such negative vibes about Pharisees that it is hard to swallow that Paul, who is our key theologian and guide, was also a Pharisee. We tend to keep this fact hidden. I have never heard anyone say, "Let us turn to the Epistles of Paul the Pharisee." Can you be a Christian and still be a Pharisee? Paul does not say that he was, or that he had been a Pharisee. He says, "I am a Pharisee." This was a rare combination of a Christian and a Pharisee. There were others, but Paul was unique. He was different from most Jews, and different from most Gentiles, and different from most Christians.

Paul was the only person in the New Testament who is constantly being saved by two groups of non-Christians. In this chapter alone he is saved by the Jewish Pharisees and the Roman soldiers. It never would have happened if Paul had not exploited the differences between the Pharisees and the Saducees. The Saducees rejected the resurrection of the dead and the reality of angels. They were anti-supernatural. This was a difference that was intolerable. There is a limit to how different you can be and still be acceptable to the Christian. The Saducees went too far for Christianity cannot survive without the truth of the resurrection. Paul says that if Christ is not risen our faith is in vain.

Paul could honestly exploit this difference between the Saducees and Pharisees because it was a difference that made all the difference in the world to the Christian faith. It was a difference that had to be fought, for a rejection of the resurrection was a rejection of the Christian faith. Paul's survival, and the survival of Christianity depended upon the defeat of the theology of the Saducees.

A black man named Jim Williams sat in the electric chair for 20 minutes back in 1926. He was waiting for someone to pull the switch. The warden and the sheriff were each trying to the other to do it, but neither would give in. Their conflict could not be resolved, and so the convict was un-strapped and returned to his cell. For having to endure this form of torture the court changed his sentence to life imprisonment. Eight years later he saved two lives on the prison farm and he was given a pardon. You just never know what might happen if you can get people divided, and that is what Paul does here. He lived to do work for the kingdom of God because he exploited the differences of his enemies.

We need to recognize that one of the important freedoms of man is the freedom to be different. Justice Charles Evans Hughes said, "When we lose the right to be different we lose the right to be free." When Hitler took over Germany one of the first things he did was to deprive people of the right to be different. He rounded up anyone who spoke out against him and sent them to prison or concentration camps. We need to thank God that we live in a nation where we are free to be different. It is not always pleasant, but we are only free because we can be different. It can divide and it can hurt, but it is nothing compared to the slavery that does not permit differences.

The call of Christ to all of his followers is a call to be different. He was so radically different that they said that no man ever spoke as he did. He was different than all the teachers of his time. Someone said that the whole Sermon on the Mount could be summed up in the words, "Be different." Jesus kept saying, "You have heard it was said," and he would share the traditional view. Then he would go on to say, "But I say to you," and then go beyond the legalism of the past to the life of loving in the now. Don't just go the mile of the law, but be different, and go the second mile of love. Don't just love those who love you, but be different, and love those who despise you and are your enemies.

A boy came home crying and told his father that the neighbor stole his truck. The father said we'll go teach him a lesson. They went next door and the father said to the offender, "We want you to know we forgive you and will be a good neighbor even if you steal from us." They went home and soon the neighbor boy was ringing their doorbell. He said, "I'm sorry I took your truck. Here it is, and I want to be a good neighbor too." It was a different approach, but it was the approach of those who are different because of Jesus. Not to be different is to be not like Christ.

Jesus was so different and unpredictable that nobody knew for sure how He would respond to any situation. They kept trying to trick Him by asking Him about taxes, or by bringing people like the woman taken in adultery, but Jesus was always too clever to be trapped. Jesus was just too flexible and different to be trapped. He was suppose to say, "Stone the sinful woman." He was suppose to feel contaminated by the woman at the well and the woman who washed His feet and wiped them with her hair. There have been Christians who could be predictable in those settings, and they would have self-righteously condemned them all. They would be like the one Mark Twain referred to: "A good man in the worse sense of the word."

But Jesus was not predictable because he was not a legalist. He even ate with Pharisees as well as Publicans, and he choose for his key Apostle to the Gentiles one of the most hot-headed, narrow-minded Pharisees alive. Jesus was so different, and he uses people like Paul who are also so different. If you are a predictable conformist who has all the answers before the case even comes to court, you are not going to be a very usable tool for the Holy Spirit in being an example of creative grace. You have got to be different for that.

Almost everyone who becomes famous does so because they are different. Groucho Marx was so different from other comedians. He loved to tell of the time that he entered a Groucho Marx look alike contest and came in third. It was because the other two looked more like he did when he was younger, and he no longer looked like that, for he had changed. He became different from his own self of the past. We are all becoming different all the time, and if we are in the will of God we will be becoming different in a good way, for we will be becoming more like Jesus as we change.

There are differences and devilish differences. If God is the great I Am, then Satan is the great I Ain't. They are totally different, as life is from death, and light is from dark, and as love is from hate. We need to pray constantly that God would help us be different from the world, the flesh and the devil. We need to be different by being Christ-like, for this is a difference that will make a world of difference.

