

THE CHURCH AN EXTENSION OF CHRIST

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Chapter 1

The Church Has One Foundation

Matthew 16:13-19

If you were to build a house and you wanted to make absolutely sure that this house was earthquake proof, what part of the building would you concentrate on the most? Yes, the foundation. We as Adventists know that, during the Time of Trouble, the church of the last days, the days in which we are living, is to be shaken to its very foundation by the Great Tribulation.

For the church to stand the full force of Satan's attack during this time, our foundation has to be absolutely solid. That is why, in this very first study of our series of studies on the church, which according to the New Testament is an extension of Christ, we are going to begin with the foundation on which our faith is built. Our starting point is a

correct understanding of our Scripture reading,
Matthew 16:13-19:

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in

heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

In this passage Jesus raises a most important question. “Who do people say the Son of Man (meaning Himself) is?” According to the disciples, the answer was varied. Some said He was John the Baptist come back to life; others said He was Elijah who the Old Testament claimed would return; again others identified Him with Jeremiah the prophet; and still others with one of the other prophets. All these answers were based on human speculations.

So Jesus turns to His own disciples and asks the same question. “Who do you say I am?” And Simon Peter’s immediate answer was, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” In other words, you, Jesus, are the Messiah, the promised Saviour. While Jesus was pleased with this reply, He wanted to make sure that Peter did not figure this out on his own but this truth was revealed to him by God: “This was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”

Having said this, please note what Jesus added in verses 18 and 19:

“And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

His first statement was that on “this rock” His church is to be built, and no power — human or Satanic — will be able to destroy it. Secondly, He said that to you, referring not only to Peter but to all who belong to His church, will be given the keys of the kingdom of heaven so that what is bound on earth will be bound in heaven.

The big question is: to whom was Christ referring when He used the phrase “on this rock”? Was it Peter or Himself? The Roman Catholic Church insists it was Peter; the typical response we Adventists have given is that Peter was only a

small, moveable stone while the solid Rock on which the church is to be build is Christ Himself. Besides, Peter himself referred to Christ as the rock. 1 Peter 2:7-8:

Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone,” and, “A stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” They stumble because they disobey the message — which is also what they were destined for.

While both these are valid answers, we must keep in mind that the Greek word for Peter is Petros, while the word Christ use for rock was petra. Petros is masculine while petra is feminine. Therefore, petra, which does mean rock, cannot refer to either Peter or Christ since neither of them are feminine. Who then was Christ referring to by “on this rock”?

The only valid answer is that “the rock” or petra must refer to Peter’s confession:

“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

It is on this confession, Jesus said, that He would build His church and which the gates of hell will not overcome it. It is this same confession that gives the church the right to accept or reject individuals into the church by baptism. Read the Ethiopian eunuch’s experience in Acts 8:34-38, including verse 37:

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” The eunuch answered, “I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

Therefore, the foundation on which the church is to be build is this confession, that Christ, the Son of God, is its Saviour, its Lord and Master and its only hope of salvation. It is on “this rock” God’s

people are to build their house and none of the forces of the evil one can shake this foundation. However, this confession, to be unshakable and indestructible, has to be based on the full truth as it is in Christ. Ephesians 2:19-22:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

This brings us to the real problem. In the days of the New Testament, the big question, especially in Judaism, was: Is this man who calls Himself Jesus Christ really the Messiah, as He claims to be? While this may still be the question the non-Christians are asking today, the real question that Christians are to ask is: Which of the many Christs that are being proclaimed today within

Christendom is the true Christ?

If our allegiance or confession is to the false Christ, no matter how honest or sincere that confession may be, it will not be enough to stand the storms of life. Our foundation is only solid and unshakable if our confession of faith is to the true Christ.

Today the liberals are preaching one Christ while the conservative are preaching another. The Calvinists are preaching a Christ who saved only some on the cross, while the Armenians are preaching a Christ that actually saved no one on the cross but only made salvation available to mankind. Some in our midst are preaching a Christ whose human nature was spiritually like Adam before the Fall, while others are preaching a Christ whose human nature was exactly like ours.

Again, some are preaching a Christ who came to be our example, so that by following His example we can be saved; while others claim that Christ came to be the Saviour of mankind and by

His life and death actually reconciled the whole world to God. I can go on and on. But whatever Christ we confess, one thing is clear: our confession will be tested by fire. 1 Corinthians 3:9-13:

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay, or straw, this work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work.

All Christians confess that Christ has saved them from sin. However, some are limiting this salvation only from the guilt and punishment of sin, our egocentric concerns. But the Christ of the New Testament is a Christ that saved us from every

aspect of sin — its guilt and punishment, its power and slavery, as well as its very nature. In Romans 7, sin is defined as a law or constant force that has us in its grip. But in chapter 8, we are told that Christ has set us free from this power so that the righteousness of the law may be fulfilled in us who, like Christ, walk in the Spirit. Romans 8:2-4:

...Because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.

In Philippians 3:20-21, we are told that Christ will one day redeem us from the very nature of sin:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus

Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under this control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

All this leads us to a very important conclusion: That all Christian experience, when it comes to this matter of salvation, must be based on the finished work of Christ. This is the foundation which the church must confess and which the gates of hell cannot overcome.

The peace we have in Justification by Faith is because we confess that, in Christ, we stand complete or perfect. Colossians 2:10:

...And you have been given fullness in Christ, who is the head over every power and authority.

Sanctification is within our reach because we confess that, in Christ, we are already sanctified. 1 Corinthians 1:2:

To the church of God in Corinth, to those

sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ — their Lord and ours....

Finally, we believe that this mortal will put on immortality and this corruption put on incorruption in Glorification because our redemption in Christ was full and complete and we are seating in heavenly places in Christ. 1 Corinthians 15:51-54:

Listen, I tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed — in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality. When the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality, then the saying that is written will come true: “Death has been swallowed up in victory.”

Ephesians 2:5-6:

[God] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus....

Chapter 2

The Birth of the Church

Acts 1,4,5

The Book of Acts unveils one of the most exciting dramas of the Bible. In the first four books of the New Testament, commonly referred to as the gospels, we have an historical account of God being manifested in one person, Jesus Christ. But in the next book of the New Testament, the Book of Acts, we have God manifesting Himself in the Church, the extension of Christ.

As we face the 21st Century, nothing could be more helpful to us as a church than to review the record of the early church's rise and growth. The same principles which produced explosive growth then will do so today. The same pattern of leadership which prevailed then must prevail today. The same remarkable power which accounted for the church's success then can and must be found today, for, as we discovered in our last study, the

gates of hell cannot overcome the church built on the truth as it is in Christ.

The church of Acts is designed to be normative Christianity. That is why its history has been recorded and preserved. And that is why we are going to spend the next twelve studies on the Book of Acts. I believe that the Holy Spirit is today restoring our church to the pattern given in the Scriptures. For too long the Christian church, including our own denomination, has been following the pattern of the world.

No wonder the church has become secularized. As a result, there is not much difference between the people of the world and the members of the church. The only difference is time. What takes place in the world today creeps into the church tomorrow. This cannot continue if the church is to truly represent Christ and turn the world upside down with the gospel message, as it did in the first century. Acts 17:5-7:

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up

some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians, he employs two symbols to describe the church, two major figures that help us to understand what the church is to be really like. At the end of the first chapter he defines the church as the body of Christ. Ephesians 1:22-23:

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

What the apostle is saying here is that the church is an extension of Christ and, therefore, must reflect Him. He is the head, while we are His body.

Then, in the second chapter of Ephesians, Paul compares the church to a building made up of stone and mortar, that is, made up of members united together in love, and which grows up into a holy temple designed by the Spirit to be the dwelling place of God. Ephesians 2:19-22:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

When we put these two symbols together that represent what the church should be like — body

and building — we come up with a true description of the church. It is a living organism manifesting the life of Christ on this earth.

That is what the early church was like. Acts 4:32-35:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

Unfortunately, this manifestation of the life of Christ was short-lived. You know why? Because false teachers crept into the church and perverted the gospel. The Bible calls it “the falling away.” Once the gospel was perverted by human ideas, the

church lost its power and became another human organization, not much different to the world around it.

That is why, if we are to experience another Pentecost, we must first restore the gospel message that was first preached by the apostles. Once we have grasped this message and surrendered to it from the heart, self will be put aside and God's Spirit will take over. Acts 1:4-8:

On one occasion, while he was eating with them, he gave them this command: "Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit."

So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own

authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

This passage contains the key ingredient for a successful church: the baptism or infilling of the Holy Spirit. Jesus requested His disciples not to go outside the city but they were to stick around in Jerusalem until they receive the promise of the Father, the Holy Spirit. Why did Jesus make this request? His implication was: “Because you will meet with nothing but failure, if you try to witness Me without the power of the Holy Spirit.”

This is an essential. We cannot be effective Christians if we aren't operating in the power of the Holy Spirit. Every attempt we make to advance the cause of Christ which does not arise from this source of power destroys the message of the gospel God wants us to convey to the world. Just as Jesus worked and witnessed His Father in the power of the Holy Spirit, so must the church witness Christ. Luke 4:14-15:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

Today we tend to put a lot of emphasis on education and training, important as these may be. But without the power of the Holy Spirit, we will meet with nothing but failure. The disciples had very little education and they certainly did not have the qualifications to be effective witnesses. Yet, when they were powered by the Spirit, they turned the world upside down.

Look at Peter. While waiting in the courtyard while Jesus was on trial, Peter denied even knowing Jesus three times [Matthew 26:69-75; Mark 14:66-72; Luke 22:54-62; John 18:15-17, 25-27]. Yet at Pentecost, 50 days later, empowered by the Holy Spirit, Peter stood up and addressed a huge crowd in Jerusalem [Acts 2:14-36]. His words “cut [them] to the heart” and 3,000 were baptized.

In the passage we read in Acts, Jesus said that John the Baptist baptized people with water, in contrast to His baptism of the Holy Spirit. While it is true that the baptism of John was the baptism of repentance, preparing people to receive Christ, we must not forget that the reason his ministry was successful was because he, too, was empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke 1:11-17:

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and

power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous — to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

This is the first important truth we learn about the early church. Let me take you through the three steps that brought about the birth of the early church. These are the same steps you and I must take if we are to repeat the success of the apostolic church:

1. First, the cross of Christ destroyed all the selfish and self-centered ambitions of the disciples that they manifested during the three years they were with Him, even during the Passover feast in the upper room. Luke 22:24:

Also a dispute arose among them as to which to them was considered to be greatest.

This self-emptying made it possible for them to be of one mind and heart while they were waiting for the outpouring of the Spirit. Likewise, the

cross must destroy all our selfish ambitions. 2
Corinthians 5:14-15:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

2. Secondly, before the Spirit could give the disciples power to witness, He had to first guide them into all truth. Jesus told His disciples that when the Holy Spirit would come, one of the first things He would do was to guide them into all truth. John 16:12-14:

I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth,

comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you.

The Spirit must also guide us to the true gospel. Like the disciples, we are victims to preconceived ideas.

3. Finally, just as the disciples were given power to witness Christ in a hostile world, so we, too, must be powered by the Holy Spirit if we are to successfully witness Christ wherever we are in the world.

According to the Gospel of John, this is how the good news of the gospel is defined. John 1:14:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Paul puts it this way. 1 Timothy 3:16:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

The word “mystery” in the Bible means something that can be known and seen but cannot be explained. Colossians 1:26-29:

...The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The mystery is the fact that Christ manifested God in our humanity. The early church was a continuation of this mystery. In the same way, God wants to be revealed to the world (the word “Gentiles” in Colossians 1:26-29 means unbelievers) in these last days through His church,

the body of Christ. This must become our goal.

Chapter 3

The Essential Ingredients

Acts 2:1-4

The Christian Church is an extension of Christ. As we turn to the second chapter of the book of Acts, we will discover how this came about in the life of the early church. Their history has been recorded for our benefit, for what happened to them will be repeated in these last days. In this exiting chapter two of Acts, we read the account of the church becoming one body in Christ. Our Scripture reading tells us how it all began. Let us read it again and then examine it in detail. Acts 2:1-4:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of

them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

1. First, this great event happened on the Day of Pentecost. The word “Pentecost” is a Greek word which means “50.” It was called that because it occurred 50 days after the Passover. This coincided with the Old Testament feast day called “Feast of the Weeks” or “Feast of the Wave Loaves.” The Jews were to number seven weeks or 49 days after the Passover and, on the fiftieth day, they were to celebrate this Feast of the Weeks.

This feast came at the end of the wheat harvest in Palestine and the Jews were to take this new wheat, the first fruits of the harvest, and make two loaves of bread. These two loaves symbolized the day when the two nations, Jews and Gentiles, were to be made one in Jesus Christ. This is how Jesus Himself described it. John 10:16:

I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one

shepherd.

All through the Old Testament times, the Jews believed that they alone constituted the people of God. Even the apostles of Jesus were victims to this mentality. That is why God gave the vision of the unclean animals to Peter and asked him to kill and eat, implying that, in Christianity, the Gentiles must no longer be considered unclean or outsiders. According to the apostle Paul, this is the great mystery that was hidden in ages past but was to be made manifest in New Testament times. Ephesians 3:1-6:

For this reason I, Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles — Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made know to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This

mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

In this beautiful loaf symbolism lies the heart of the Christian church. On the Day of Pentecost, in harmony with the Old Testament feast day of loaves, the Holy Spirit came upon God's people, some 120 of them, and united them into one body. These individuals were all baptized by the Spirit into one body. This baptism of the Spirit is what Jesus promised and now it had become a reality. Note how Paul describes this unity of the body. 1 Corinthians 12:12-13:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Ephesians 4:1-6:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

This is the key essential that makes the church radically different from the world, a world that is divided by all kinds of factions. When the Holy Spirit was poured on the disciples of Christ at Pentecost, He brought with Him the key ingredient that makes God what He is by nature and by character: agape love. 1 John 4:8:

Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

This love, poured into the hearts of God's

people, made it possible to unite the church into one body. This was the greatest witness the early church gave of the power of the gospel in their lives. John 13:34-35:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

2. Secondly, when the Holy Spirit descended on the disciples on the Day of Pentecost, He came as a rushing wind. Acts 2:2:

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting.

Wind is the symbol of invisible power. Remember what Jesus said to Nicodemus about the Spirit being like the wind? John 3:7-8:

You should not be surprised at my saying, “You must be born again.” The wind blows

wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.

The power of the wind is sovereign; it is mighty, powerful, and irresistible. But it is invisible. You cannot see the wind but you can see its mighty force when it strikes. In the same way, this is to be the characteristic of the church controlled by the Spirit. When properly functioning, the church is a band of men and women bound together by the life of Christ accomplishing great things through the invisible power of the Spirit. This, too, is an essential that goes to make up God's church. As with the wind, you cannot see the source of power, but it moves mightily to change and transform lives.

3. Third, with the wind came the fire. Acts 2:3:

They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them.

Fire is used in two ways in the Old Testament.

It is a purifier, burning up dross, garbage, and waste; it also symbolizes enthusiasm, passion, and an inner hunger for truth. Note how the prophet Jeremiah put it. Jeremiah 20:9b:

...His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones. I am weary of holding it in; indeed, I cannot.

John the Baptist, who prepared the way for the first coming of Jesus, was described as a burning fire, and he predicted that when Jesus came on the scene He would baptize men and women with fire. Luke 3:15-16:

The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Christ. John answered them all, “I baptize you with water. But one more powerful than I will come, the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.”

Walking down a street in New York City, D.L.

Moody began to ponder on a sentence he had just heard: “The world has yet to see what God can do with a man who is wholly yielded to Him.” As he thought on these words, a great hunger came into his heart and he cried, “O God, make me that man!” And surely God did make him that man.

4. Finally, the third symbol that accompanied the disciples on the Day of Pentecost was the tongues. Acts 2:4:

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

The purpose of these tongues was not to give the disciples some kind of electric shock so that they would feel all fuzzy inside. Nor were the tongues they experienced some gibberish that made no sense to those around. It was the language of the people so that they could hear the proclamation of the gospel. Acts 2:5-8:

Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-

fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: “Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?”

This, too, is an essential that the infilling of the Holy Spirit brings. It is to enable God’s people to proclaim the gospel with boldness, clarity, sincerity, and earnestness. This is what the church is to be like today. It should be filled with power, passion, and proclamation. Believe me, it is exciting to see the Lord reviving a church today to this end.

By the way, the speaking of tongues by the disciples set the stage for Peter’s explanation of what true Pentecostalism is all about. This is how Peter described it. Acts 2:14-21:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and

all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'"

The Bible divides the history of this world into two distinct periods: the times of the Jews and the time of the Gentiles. The gospel was first proclaimed to the Jews and, when probation closed for them as a nation (not individually), God turned to the Gentiles. And, just as Pentecost ushered in the last days for the Jewish nation, I believe we are

living in the last days of the Gentile period. Here is one reason I believe this is true. Note what Jesus prophesied concerning the signs of the times. Luke 21:20-24:

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

The time has come for us to experience a second Pentecost. The world today is ripe for the gospel. When we do our part by putting self aside and make room for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, the prophecy Peter quoted from Joel will be

fulfilled once again. Here again is Acts 2:19-21:

I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

These are the signs that will precede the second coming of Christ. But, in closing, I want you to note the last words of this prophecy. Verse 21:

And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

Compare it with Romans 10:13-15:

...For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone

preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

This text applies to you and me. May we all say to God, “Here am I, God; send me.”

Chapter 4

The Only Solution

Acts 3:12-21

I read in Acts 4:33 that:

With great power [i.e., signs and wonders] the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all.

It is clear that not all the signs and wonders the early church manifested have been recorded. But when we come to the third chapter of Acts, which is our study, we discover that Luke has recorded Peter's healing of the crippled beggar. Acts 3:1-10:

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer — at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those

going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, “Look at us!” So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them. Then Peter said, “Silver or gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” Taking him by the right hand, he helped him up, and instantly the man’s feet and ankles became strong. He jumped to his feet and began to walk. Then he went with them into the temple courts, walking and jumping and praising God. When all the people saw him walking and praising God, they recognized him as the same man who used to sit begging at the temple gate called Beautiful, and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.

Luke evidently selected this healing out of a number of miracles that must have occurred during his time in order to teach us something very significant. For this reason, we should give it careful attention. The first lesson is that God has a purpose in manifesting His supernatural powers

through the church. It is definitely not for sensationalism or to bring attention to the one who performs the miracles, like some televangelists do today.

Signs and wonders, such as the gift of healing or tongues, is God's method of advertising. At Pentecost, God used tongues to draw large crowds to hear the disciples of Christ. Here, God used the healing miracle to draw a large crowd to hear Peter and John. Today we use large sums of money to advertise our meetings and yet, in return, we get very poor results. But, as we shall see, God's method is extremely successful and it does not involve large sums of money.

Peter and John had gone to the temple to prayer, as was their custom. This was before God had instructed the disciples to stop going to the temple. It was three o'clock in the afternoon, one of the established times set by Judaism for people to go to the temple for pray. Therefore, there was a large crowd in the temple at that time.

As Peter and John enter the temple area, they were confronted by this crippled beggar. He had been crippled since birth and for years his folks used him every day to earn his livelihood through begging at the temple gate called Beautiful. This beggar must have met Jesus, who taught in the temple during the passion week. Why did Jesus not heal him at that time? Because God had this incident in mind.

As Peter and John come towards this cripple, he typically asked for money. But both the disciples had no cash on them. Those were the days when the church did not depend on budgets to do their community services. They had something far greater and better. They were equipped with the supernatural power of God. And this Peter used.

As a result, the whole temple crowd, who were very familiar with who this crippled beggar was, flocked to see this miraculous wonder. They were absolutely amazed at what had happened. Typically, they thought Peter and John were some

kind of magicians. But note how Peter turned their attention from himself and John to Christ. This is the second lesson we learn from this incident. Acts 3:11-15:

While the beggar held on to Peter and John, all the people were astonished and came running to them in the place called Solomon's Colonnade. When Peter saw this, he said to them: "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? The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this."

Having turned the crowd's attention to Jesus Christ, the source of their miracle and salvation, Peter now witnesses to them the good news of the

gospel, man's only solution to the sin problem.
Acts 3:17-23:

“Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you — even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets. For Moses said, ‘The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you must listen to everything he tells you. Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.’”

As we carefully examine Peter's method of witnessing, we discover a very important sequence. This sequence is the very one Jesus Himself outlined to the disciples. It is the method the Holy

Spirit uses to communicate the gospel truth to the world. What is this method? John 16:8-11:

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned.

1. First, the world must be convicted of sin so that they realize that without Christ they are lost. Note how Peter does this in verses 13-15 of Acts 3:

“The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the God of our fathers, has glorified his servant Jesus. You handed him over to be killed, and you disowned him before Pilate, though he had decided to let him go. You disowned the Holy and Righteous One and asked that a murderer be released to you. You killed the author of life, but God raised him from the dead. We are witnesses of this.”

This is the same thing Peter did at Pentecost.
Acts 2:22-24:

“Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.

He then followed this by quoting David, the greatest king of Israel. Once he put them on a guilt trip, then came the plea. Acts 2:36-39:

“Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter

replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Why did Peter start witnessing Christ by first making his hearers feel such a terrible load of guilt? Psychologists today rightly tell us that guilt is a destructive force in human lives. And this would be true in Peter’s case had he left them there. The purpose of guilt is to make men and women realize that the only solution to the sin problem is Christ. And this is the second step.

2. Secondly, the world must realize that their only hope for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ. Note how Peter drove this home in the minds of those who heard him at the temple. Acts 3:16-20:

By faith in the name of Jesus, this man whom you see and know was made strong. It is Jesus’ name and the faith that comes through him that has

given this complete healing to him, as you can all see. Now, brothers, I know that you acted in ignorance, as did your leaders. But this is how God fulfilled what he had foretold through all the prophets, saying that his Christ would suffer. Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you — even Jesus.

The resurrection of Christ was the greatest proof God gave the Jewish nation that Christ was indeed the promised Messiah. According to Deuteronomy 21:23, hanging on a tree meant the irrevocable curse of God, what the New Testament refers to as the second death — good-bye to life for ever:

...You must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

The Jewish leaders demanded of Pilate that Jesus be crucified because, in Christ's day, crucifixion was synonymous to hanging on a tree. Acts 5:30:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

Jesus had predicted to the Jews, more than once, that after they had put Him to death, He would be raised the third day. By crucifying Him, i.e., hanging Him on a tree, they felt God would curse Him and thus prevent the resurrection. But it did not work. Now comes the third step in witnessing, the judgment.

3. Third, once convicted of the truth that is in Christ, a person has no excuse to be lost, no matter how sinful he or she may have been. To reject Christ after the truth hits home is to be cut off from the land of the living. This is how Peter expressed it. Acts 3:23:

Anyone who does not listen to him will be completely cut off from among his people.

To persistently and ultimately reject Christ, after the Holy Spirit has convicted you that He is truly the Saviour of the world, is the unpardonable sin and has a very serious results. For it has eternal consequences, which is good-bye to life forever. Mark 16:15-16:

He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

John 3:16-18, 36:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but

whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ...Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

In conclusion, in his second epistle, Peter tells us that God wants none to perish but all to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

Please note how Peter makes this same plea as he addresses those who heard him in the temple. Acts 3:24-26:

Indeed, all the prophets from Samuel on, as many as have spoken, have foretold these days. And you are heirs of the prophets and of the covenant God made with your fathers. He said to

Abraham, “Through your offspring all peoples on earth will be blessed.” When God raised up his servant, he sent him first to you to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways.

These three steps we discovered in Acts 3:

1. Convicting the world of the sin of unbelief;
2. Convincing the world of Christ’s righteousness; and
3. Warning the world of the consequences of rejecting Christ in the judgment.

These were the three steps the early church used to witness the gospel to people of their day. The same method must be used today, after God brings people to us by signs and wonders.

Chapter 5

A Spirit-Controlled Church

Acts 4:31-35

In our last study of the early church, as we examined chapter 3 of Acts, we discovered that God used the healing of the crippled beggar as a means of drawing a large crowd to hear the gospel message from the lips of Peter and John. Now as we turn to the fourth chapter of Acts, we discover that the Sandedrin, the leaders of Judaism, become very unhappy at what was transpiring. Note how they reacted. Acts 4:1-3:

The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.

These same priests and captain of the temple had once demanded from Christ Himself what sign He would give them to prove that He was from God and had the authority to cleanse the temple of the money changers. Jesus pointed to His resurrection as the sign. John 2:18-22:

Then the Jews demanded of him, “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?” Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.” The Jews replied, “It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

The resurrection of Christ was, therefore, the greatest evidence God gave to the Jewish nation that Christ was indeed the Messiah. Consequently, when Peter and John preached the resurrection of

Christ to the crowd who had come to listen to them, this was a very sore point to these leaders of the temple who had deliberately rejected Christ as their Messiah. To shut the mouths of the two apostles, they had Peter and John put into prison. But note what the outcome was. Acts 4:4:

But many who heard the message believed, and the number of men grew to about five thousand.

In the days of the New Testament, women and children were not counted (sorry, ladies). Therefore, the number that were converted to Christianity by that one sermon Peter and John preached could easily be doubled. That is what happens when the church becomes a Spirit-controlled church.

The following day, Peter and John were brought before the leaders of the Sanhedrin for questioning. These leaders could not deny the fact that these two men had miraculously healed the crippled beggar. So they demanded of them, “By what power or what name did you do this?” (verse

7b). I would like you to note what happened next.
Acts 4:8-12:

Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them: “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a cripple and are asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. He is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the capstone.’ Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved.”

Wow!!! Here is Peter, who not so long ago denied that he ever knew Jesus when questioned by a single woman. Now, before the leaders of the Sandedrin, he speaks boldly in defense of Jesus Christ. What made the difference? The record tells us he was “filled with the Holy Spirit.” That is what makes the difference between a human-

controlled church and a Spirit-controlled church.

The Bible tells us that, when Solomon was building the temple in Jerusalem, where now the Dome of the Rock stands, it was built in silence. The reason for this was that the stones for the temple were cut to the precise shape and size needed at the quarry itself, underneath where the temple stands. However, due to lack of communication, when the Capstone was delivered to the builders of the temple, they did not know what it was for so they rolled it out of the way, down into the Kidron Valley.

That Capstone, Peter now tells the leaders of the temple, represents Jesus Christ, whom they have rejected. But God has made this Christ the rock of our salvation. Notice how these theologians of Judaism reacted to Peter's declaration. Acts 4:13-21:

When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that

these men had been with Jesus. But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say. So they ordered them to withdraw from the Sanhedrin and then conferred together. “What are we going to do with these men?” they asked. “Everybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and we cannot deny it. But to stop this thing from spreading any further among the people, we must warn these men to speak no longer to anyone in this name.”

Then they called them in again and commanded them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God. For we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.”

After further threats they let them go. They could not decide how to punish them, because all the people were praising God for what had happened.

Not by human wisdom or might, nor by theological training, these unschooled ordinary men were turning their world upside down. This is what happens when God's church is controlled by His Spirit.

This brings us now to our Scripture reading, Acts 4:31-35:

After they prayed, the place where they were meeting was shaken. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God boldly. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

This is “Biblical Communism.” For 75 years, Russia tried to produce this kind of communism, using the humanistic ideas of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. The result, as you all know, has been absolute failure. Why? Because no human method, no matter how good it sounds, can solve the sin problem we inherited from the fall of our first parents. Man’s only solution is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Isaiah 53:6:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

This “own-way-ness” is man’s fundamental problem. Because of the Fall, all of us were born with a self-centered nature, what Scripture calls “the flesh.” And no amount of human effort can solve this sin problem. Only God can take away our stony hearts and replace it with hearts of flesh.

What we just read in verses 32-35 of Acts 4, is what the power of the gospel is all about. But the question we must ask is, why was such a

demonstration so short-lived? The answer is found in what Paul wrote to the believers at Thessalonica. 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3:

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don't let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction.

The falling away from the true gospel and replacing it with legalism resulted in the church becoming self-reliant rather than Spirit-controlled. Yes, it grew in numbers, but it became another human organization that behaved no differently than any other human institution. This is how the apostle Paul expressed it to the churches of Galatia. Galatians 3:1-5:

You foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched

you? Before your very eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed as crucified. I would like to learn just one thing from you: Did you receive the Spirit by observing the law, or by believing what you heard? Are you so foolish? After beginning with the Spirit, are you now trying to attain your goal by human effort?

The formula of the gospel is NOT I BUT CHRIST. When we turn our backs to this formula, we have to depend on our human resources and the result is a spiritless church. That is why the history of the early church has been recorded. As long as the believers of the early church were totally God-dependent and lived by faith alone, they manifested the power of the Spirit. But the moment they became self-dependent, the church became corrupt and lost its “saltiness.”

That is why, as pointed out in our last study, the only solution for the problems our denomination is facing today is to restore the pure gospel preached by the apostles of Christ. God did not raise the Advent Movement to add another

denomination to the already long list of denominations that existed in the 19th Century. This Church was raised to restore the everlasting gospel and proclaim it with a loud voice before the end comes.

The prerequisite for being a Spirit-controlled church is twofold:

1. First, there must be a clear understanding of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. No amount of human effort can produce what the Holy Spirit can do through the power of the gospel. God did not send the Holy Spirit to be a CO-redeemer with Christ but to communicate the power of the gospel in the lives of believers. Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

2. Secondly, having understood the gospel, there must be a total surrender or absolute

obedience to its demands. What are these demands? Paul spelled it out in his own experience to the Galatian Christians. Galatians 2:19-21:

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!

Obedying the gospel means we must deny self and take up the cross of Christ and follow Him daily. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Once we meet these two requirements, the Holy Spirit will take over and use us to turn this world of ours upside down by the power of the

gospel. This is what God is longing to do. For a long time now, we have been studying what constitutes the true everlasting gospel. Now the time has come for us to surrender to its demands.

Chapter 6

Behind the Opposition

Acts 5:27-33

So far in our study of the early church recorded in the book of Acts, everything has been going fairly well. With signs and wonders, and with much power, the apostles preached the resurrection of Christ. But now, when we come to chapter 5 of Acts, we see the church turning a corner.

Now we start seeing the early church facing problems and dangers. The first problem is within the church itself. A husband and wife have joined the church in order to enjoy the benefits and blessings it offered, but they were not genuinely converted. They gave the impression that they were truly followers of the way but, in reality, they were pretenders. Acts 5:1-6:

Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With

this wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles's feet. Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him.

After a while, Ananias' wife comes to Peter and does the same thing as her husband did earlier: lie to Peter that what they gave to the church was the full amount that they had sold the land for. The same thing that happened to her husband now happens to her. Acts 5:7-11:

About three hours later his wife came in, not

knowing what had happened. Peter asked her, “Tell me, is this the price you and Ananias got for the land?” “Yes,” she said, “that is the price.” Peter said to her, “How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also.”

What is this account telling us? Why was God so severe in punishing this couple for what we would consider a small sin? And why do we not see such severity displayed in God’s church today? All these are important questions that cannot be left unanswered. Let us begin by what this account tells us. Clearly, **God will not tolerate pretenders in His church.**

Unlike the communist world, there is no compulsion in God’s church. Peter made it clear to Ananias and his wife Sapphira that no one forced them to sell any of their land, and, furthermore, no one forced them to give any of the money they got for the land they sold to the church. Their sin was in pretending to give all that they sold to the

church, just as the others were doing. However, they could not lie to God. They had a heart problem and God exposed this sin through Peter.

But why was God so severe in punishing them in the way He did? Surely, they had not committed such a gross sin as to deserve death. Certainly, this thing happens all the time in the church today, especially when it comes to tithe-paying. Yet we do not see such severity being exercised by God today. Has God changed?

NO! The Bible makes it clear, God does not change. Malachi 3:6-7:

“I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.

But, in His Word, He does give clear examples to His people what He does not tolerate. That is

why He has recorded in His Book some of the terrible things that have happened to people who do not comply with His will. When the Egyptians or Canaanites, for example, deliberately and ultimately rejected Him, even after giving them clear evidence that there is no other God than Himself, they were choosing death in preference to life. Genesis 15:13-16:

Then the Lord said to [Abram], “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved for mistreated 400 years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

Likewise, when the Jews of the exodus repeatedly committed the sin of unbelief, in spite of all the miraculous signs God gave them, they died in the wilderness. And when the leaders of

Judaism rejected Christ after the resurrection, the clearest proof God gave them that Christ was the Messiah, their house was left to them desolate. Matthew 23:37-39:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

These incidents, along with the one recorded in Acts 5:1-11, are recorded for our benefit and are a warning from God that He does not treat sin lightly, even the smallest sin.

Yes, God sympathizes with our struggles as Christians, because of our sinful natures. But when we, from the heart, do not surrender to His will and pretend to be what we are not from the heart, then watch out. We are on Satan’s ground because He

is a liar from the beginning. John 8:42-44:

Jesus said to them, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me. Why is my language not clear to you? Because you are unable to hear what I say. You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.”

In dealing with the problems the church at Corinth was facing, since many of them were pretenders and not truly converted, note what the apostle Paul reminded them of. 1 Corinthians 10:1-12:

For I do not want you to be ignorant of the fact, brothers, that our forefathers were all under the cloud and that they all passed through the sea. They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud and

in the sea. They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them; their bodies were scattered over the desert. Now these things occurred as examples to keep us from setting our hearts on evil things as they did. Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written: “The people sat down to eat and drink and go up to indulge in pagan revelry.” We should not commit sexual immorality, as some of them did — and in one day 23,000 of them died. We should not test the Lord, as some of them did — and were killed by snakes. And do not grumble, as some of them did — and were killed by the destroying angel. These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!

Once again, please notice that the problem with the Jews of the exodus was a heart problem and

this is the very thing Paul is warning the Corinthian believers of.

Going back to Acts 5, we now see another danger the early church faced as the apostles, with signs and wonders, proclaim the gospel message to the Jews of their day — the opposition from the Sanhedrin or the leadership of Judaism. Here were men who claimed to be the leaders of God's people and yet note how they reacted to the message of the gospel. Listen to this incredible account. Acts 5:12-28:

The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade. No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. As a result, people brought the sick into the streets and laid them on beds and mats so that at least Peter's shadow might fall on some of them as he passed by. Crowds gathered also from the

towns around Jerusalem, bringing their sick and those tormented by evil spirits, and all of them were healed. Then the high priest and all his associates, who were members of the party of the Sadducees, were filled with jealousy. They arrested the apostles and put them in the public jail. But during the night an angel of the Lord opened the doors of the jail and brought them out. “Go, stand in the temple courts,” he said, “and tell the people the full message of this new life.” At daybreak they entered the temple courts, as they had been told, and began to teach the people. When the high priest and his associates arrived, they called together the Sanhedrin — the full assembly of the elders of Israel — and sent to the jail for the apostles. But on arriving at the jail, the officers did not find them there. So they went back and reported, “We found the jail securely locked, with the guards standing at the doors; but when we opened them, we found no one inside.” On hearing this report, the captain of the temple guard and the chief priests were puzzled, wondering what would come of this. Then someone came and said, “Look! The men you put in jail are standing in the temple

courts teaching the people.” At that, the captain went with his officers and brought the apostles. They did not use force, because they feared that the people would stone them. Having brought the apostles, they made them appear before the Sanhedrin to be questioned by the high priest. “We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name,” he said. “Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood.”

Amazing!!! You would think that by now, with all the evidence before them, that Christ was very much alive in there midst through His body, the church, the brethren of Judaism would see the light and confess in repentance the great sin of crucifying their Messiah. They were witnessing what Jesus said would happen in John 14:12:

I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.

Instead, they were determined to put the light out. But note how Peter and the other apostles responded to the demands of the Sanhedrin. Acts 5:29-33:

Peter and the other apostles replied: “We must obey God rather than men! The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him.” When they heard this, they were furious and wanted to put them to death.

Why was the Sanhedrin so furious at what the apostles said, even to the point of killing them? The answer is in what they said in verse 30:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

This was the sore point that they could not handle: the fact that Christ rose from the dead in spite of the fact that He was killed by hanging on a tree. The leaders of the Jews wanted to kill Jesus because he had “blasphemed” by claiming to be God. John 19:5-7:

When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!” But Pilate answered, “You take him and crucify him. As for me, I find no basis for a charge against him.” The Jews insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die, because he claimed to be the Son of God.”

They also knew that someone who blasphemed was to be stoned to death, not crucified. Leviticus 24:16:

...Anyone who blasphemes the name of the Lord must be put to death. The entire assembly must stone him. Whether an alien or native-born,

when he blasphemes the Name, he must be put to death.

But they wanted him crucified, or “hung on a tree,” because this meant Jesus would be under God’s curse, meaning he would be dead forever. Deuteronomy 21:22-23:

If a man guilty of capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God’s curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

Since God had raised Jesus from the dead, that meant Jesus hadn’t been cursed by God. That meant He hadn’t blasphemed. That meant that He was who He said He was. Having this pointed out to them infuriated the Sanhedrin.

But here is where God stepped in. Among the Sanhedrin was a man who was highly respected

and whom God used to turn the tables. Here were the apostles, confronted with the same group that had just crucified their Lord, threatened by the same hostility that accomplished the death of Jesus. Their lives were at stake. But the man who was Paul's professor stands up; listen to what he says and how the Sanhedrin responded. Acts 5:34-40:

But a Pharisee named Gamaliel, a teacher of the law, who was honored by all the people, stood up in the Sanhedrin and ordered that the men be put outside for a little while. Then he addressed them: "Men of Israel, consider carefully what you intend to do to these men. Some time ago Theudas appeared, claiming to be somebody, and about four hundred men rallied to him. He was killed, all his followers were dispersed, and it all came to nothing. After him, Judas the Galilean appeared in the days of the census and led a band of people in revolt. He too was killed, and all his followers were scattered. 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 from God, you will not be

able to stop these men; you will only find yourselves fighting against God.” His speech persuaded them. They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus, and let them go.

These were surely words of wisdom. What Gamaliel was really saying is that the truth of God will triumph, no matter how much you try to squash it. Behind all the opposition the gospel message faces is Satan, the enemy of souls. He knows that there is one power that has defeated him and his cause. That is the power of the gospel.

All through the history of the Christian church, he has tried to destroy or pervert in the minds of Christians the truth as it is in Christ. And even though, at times, he seems to be having success, eventually the gospel truth always triumphed. Revelation 12:10-17:

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: “Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his

Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony; they did not love their lives so much as to shrink from death. Therefore rejoice, you heavens and you who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, because the devil has gone down to you! He is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short.” When the dragon saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child. The woman was given the two wings of a great eagle, so that she might fly to the place prepared for her in the desert, where she would be taken care of for a time, times and half a time, out of the serpent’s reach. Then from his mouth the serpent spewed water like a river, to overtake the woman and sweep her away with the torrent. But the earth helped the woman by opening its mouth and swallowing the river that the dragon had spewed out of his mouth. Then the dragon was enraged at the woman and went off to make war against the rest of her offspring — those who obey God’s

commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus.

In concluding, I would like you to note how the apostles reacted to this whole experience, regarding the opposition they received from the Sanhedrin. This is the same reaction we should follow when our witnessing is opposed, inside or outside the church. Acts 5:41-42:

The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

The church is an extension of Christ and, therefore, we must be willing to suffer the offense of the cross. Galatians 5:11:

Brothers, if I am still preaching circumcision, why am I still being persecuted? ...

2 Timothy 1:8-10:

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life — not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.

Chapter 7

Growing Pains

Acts 6:1-7

We will turn our attention today to the sixth chapter of the book of Acts. This chapter may be divided into two parts. The first half, verses 1-7, is dealing with a problem that arose within the church and how the church solved the problem. The second half, verses 8-15, deals with the arrest of Stephen, who became the first Christian martyr.

In the early church in Jerusalem there were two kinds of Jews who had become Christians by faith in Christ. There were the Jews who were born and raised in Jerusalem and the Jews born and raised in the provinces away from Palestine, who only spoke Greek. So the early church in Jerusalem was divided by the language barrier between Greek and Hebrew.

During those days, distribution of food and

money was made to the widows who were in need, something like our community service except this was for members. A common fund was provided, out of which money was taken every day to meet the needs of these women. Keep in mind there was no welfare or food stamps in those days and employment for women was almost nonexistent. Therefore, women who had lost their husbands had no other means of support.

It so happened that there was some discrepancy in distribution between the Greek-speaking widows and the Hebrew. Whether this was done deliberately or was an oversight we do not know. What we do know is that the Greek widows expressed their dissatisfaction by murmuring (or “complained,” as the New International Version of the Bible puts it). Murmuring can be deadly, especially when complaints are not made to the ones in authority, as these widows were obviously doing by the Greek word Luke used in describing this incident. As a result, discontent began to spread throughout the whole church.

This was the first sign of growing pains in the early church and which has been recorded for our benefit. When members complain about a problem to people who are not in a position to do much about it, that the Bible calls murmuring. According to the Old Testament, murmuring brought the judgment of God upon the children of Israel in the wilderness.

Murmuring, in contrast to legitimate complains to the right person, is always the mark of a discontented and a unhappy person. It is evidence that one is still walking in the flesh, because the flesh is selfish and is never satisfied with what it has but is always complaining to others. In contrast, note the signs of a mature spiritual Christian. Philippians 4:10-13:

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and

I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

Paul was languishing in a Roman dungeon when he wrote this prison epistle and made this statement. He had every reason to complain, but he was walking in the Spirit and the Holy Spirit had set him from the selfish desires of the flesh. When a church reaches such maturity, it will witness to the world the agape love of God that “seeks not its own” and demonstrate the power of the gospel. Everyone will be content and be living for others.

Now, when the murmuring of the Greek widows reached the ears of the apostles, since rumors travel fast, they realized something had to be done quickly or the Church would be destroyed by Satan. So they acted, and please note how they solved the problem. Acts 6:2-4:

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples

together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose several men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.”

The first thing I want you to take note of is that, when a church grows in numbers and this creates growing pains, the solution is shared responsibilities. One of the major problems we are facing in the Adventist churches in this country is that the members expect the pastors to do everything. Consequently, he has not enough time to dig into the Word and feed the flock adequately. The result is a spiritually dying church.

I believe there needs to be more shared responsibility in the church. I hope when nomination time comes, each will be willing to take some responsibility in the activities of the church. If everyone held only one office or was responsible for only one area of church life, we

would be like a beehive, all living for the Lord. What a witness this would be to our community.

The second thing I want you to notice, regarding the solution the disciple suggested to the church, is the quality of the men to be chosen. They had to be men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. Verse 3:

Brothers, choose several men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom.

When a person is appointed to take a certain responsibility who is not of honest report and spiritually mature or has not much wisdom about that responsibility, the result is often failure or disastrous.

Finally, note the three things that happened when the early church followed this advice and acted accordingly. Verse 7:

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a

large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

This is the New Testament blue print for a successful church. When this happens, the Pastor will do his job in ministering the Word, each officer and member will do his or her part and the church will flourish. May all churches follow this blueprint.

Turning to the second half of Acts 6, we read about one of the seven men the church chose to be a deacon. His name was Stephen. Being a man of God, he did much more than just take care of the widows. He also became a powerful witness for Christ and preached the gospel to his fellow men. Note what verse 8 has to say about him:

Now Stephen, a man full of God's grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

But, typically, his witnessing of the gospel produced opposition. It is important for us to note

what the opposition was over, because times have not changed and anyone who proclaims what Stephen preached will face the same opposition. Acts 6:9-15:

Opposition arose, however, from members of the Synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called) — Jews of Cyrene and Alexandria as well as the provinces of Cilicia and Asia. These men began to argue with Stephen, but they could not stand up against his wisdom or the Spirit by whom he spoke. Then they secretly persuaded some men to say, “We have heard Stephen speak words of blasphemy against Moses and against God.” So they stirred up the people and the elders and the teachers of the law. They seized Stephen and brought him before the Sanhedrin. They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.” All who were sitting in the Sanhedrin looked intently at Stephen, and they saw that his face was like the face of an

angel.

The central issue in this controversy is, of course, Jesus. Those who preach Jesus preach salvation by grace alone made effective by faith alone. Such preaching is a slap in the face to those who insist we are saved by the works of the law. So, naturally, one of the false accusations these Jews made against Stephen was that he was against the law. Verse 13:

They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law.”

Some of these Jews that argued and opposed Stephen were from the province of Cilicia, the capital of which was Tarsus, the home of Saul, who later became Paul. He was among those who disputed with Stephen and, having failed to withstand the wisdom and the Spirit by whom Stephen spoke, was responsible for Stephen’s martyrdom. But when this same Paul was converted and began to preach the truth as it is in

Christ, he himself was accused of the very same thing he accused Stephen of. Acts 21:27-28:

When the seven days were nearly over, some Jews from the province of Asia saw Paul at the temple. They stirred up the whole crowd and seized him, shouting, “Men of Israel, help us! This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place. And besides, he has brought Greeks into the temple area and defiled this holy place.”

All this tells us that when Christ is preached as our only source of righteousness, the flesh is insulted and the result is opposition. This is how it was in New Testament times and this is how it will be when Christ our Righteousness is preached today. And here is why. Romans 9:30-33:

What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but

as if it were by works. They stumbled over the “stumbling stone.” As it is written: “See, I lay in Zion a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.”

We are told that this same message will produce the shaking in Adventism. Revelation 3:18:

I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Chapter 8

The Issue is Jesus

Acts 7:51-60

In our last study of the early church, we were introduced to Stephen, one of the seven Greek-speaking Jews chosen as the first deacons of the Christian church. This man was not only recognized as an honest person but he was full of the Holy Spirit. As a result, he went beyond the call of duty as a deacon and became a powerful preacher of the gospel. Acts 6 ended with his arrest for preaching Christ and chapter 7, our study this time, records what happened when he was brought before the Sanhedrin.

By the time Stephen was brought before this council, the charges against him had been reduced to two very specific offenses. The first was that he was speaking against their sacred temple, and the second, he was undermining the laws given to them by Moses. Acts 6:13-14:

They produced false witnesses, who testified, “This fellow never stops speaking against this holy place and against the law. For we have heard him say that this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place and change the customs Moses handed down to us.”

You will notice that Stephen’s accusers had brought in false witnesses. This means they twisted what Stephen had preached, probably taking him out of context. Looks like things have not changed since then. But because these false witnesses had misrepresented him, it was impossible for Stephen to answer these two charges with a simple “yes” or “no” when the Sanhedrin asked him, “Are these charges true?” (Acts 7:1).

Beginning with verse 2 of Acts 7, up to verse 50, we have recorded for us Stephen’s brilliant defense of what he really believed and preached. What he does is to give the council a brief history of Israel. By doing so, he answers the two charges brought against him. He first begins with

Abraham, pointing out that this father of the Jewish nation was a man of faith and believed the promise God made to him, and the other two fathers of Israel, Isaac and Jacob, about a coming Messiah.

Then he turns to Moses, through whom God had given Israel the law, the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament. Listen to what he reminded the council of regarding what Moses himself had written about another prophet appearing on the scene and changing things. Acts 7:37:

This is that Moses who told the Israelites, “God will send you a prophet like me from your own people.”

Then he raised the question, “How do you think our fathers responded to Moses and the things he commanded them to do?” Verses 39-43:

But our fathers refused to obey him. Instead, they rejected him and in their hearts turned back to Egypt. They told Aaron, “Make us god who will go

before us. As for this fellow Moses who led us out of Egypt — we don't know what has happened to him!" That was the time they made an idol in the form of a calf. They brought sacrifices to it and held a celebration in honor of what their hands had made. But God turned away and gave them over to the worship of the heavenly bodies. This agrees with what is written in the book of the prophets: "Did you bring me sacrifices and offerings forty years in the desert, O house of Israel? You have lifted up the shrine of Molech and the star of your god Rephan, the idols you made to worship. Therefore I will send you into exile" beyond Babylon.

Following this, Stephen turns to the Sanctuary that God had asked Moses to built. Note how he refers to this tabernacle, which was later replace by the temple in Jerusalem. Verses 44-47:

Our forefathers had the tabernackle of the Testimony with them in the desert. It had been made as God directed Moses, according to the pattern he had seen. Having received the

tabernacle, our fathers under Joshua brought it with them when they took the land from the nations God drove out before them. It remained in the land until the time of David, who enjoyed God's favor and asked that he might provide a dwelling place for the God of Jacob. But it was Solomon who built the house for him.

What did Stephen mean when he called the sanctuary "the tabernacle of the Testimony" (NIV) or, as the NKJV renders it, "the tabernacle of witness"?

To answer that question, we need to turn to an incident in the life of Christ Himself. John 2:13-22:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and

overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market.!”

His disciples remembered that it is written: “Zeal for your house will consume me.” Then the Jews demanded of him. “What miraculous sign can you show us to prove your authority to do all this?”

Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days.”

The Jews replied, “It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

Here, in this passage, we find that the temple represented none other than Jesus Himself. What Stephen was trying to get across, by calling the sanctuary “the tabernacle of witness,” was that it

was God's visual aid to the Jews of the exodus regarding the plan of salvation to be fulfilled in Christ, the reality of the temple.

But the great mistake the people of Israel had made, Stephen went on to say, was to take this visual aid and make it the reality. Thus they locked God in a building made by human hands. Verses 48-50:

However, the Most High does not live in houses made by men. As the prophet says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?" says the Lord. 'Or where will my resting place be? Has not my hand made all these things?'"

This is the same mistake the Roman Catholic church has made regarding the presence of God.

Having answered the two charges brought against him by laying down the facts, Stephen now turns to his hearers and brings his own charge of

blasphemy against his accusers and the Sanhedrin.
Acts 7:51-53:

You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit! Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him — you who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.

Before we turn to the effect and response this charge had on his hearers, we need to go back to the passage we read in John 2:13-22:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found men selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple area, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and

overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said, “Get these out of here! How dare you turn my Father’s house into a market.!”

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The Jews replied, “It has taken 46 years to build this temple, and you are going to raise it in three days?” But the temple he had spoken of was his body. After he was raised from the dead, his disciples recalled what he had said. Then they believed the Scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken.

The temple leaders had demanded of Jesus a sign that would prove to them that He was the Messiah sent from God. The sign Jesus gave to them was His resurrection, three days after He was

put to death. To make sure this would not happen, the chief priests and officers of the temple did two things.

First, they insisted from Pilate that Christ be put to death by crucifixion. John 19:5-6:

When Jesus came out wearing the crown of thorns and the purple robe, Pilate said to them, “Here is the man!” As soon as the chief priests and their officials saw him, they shouted, “Crucify! Crucify!”

In those days, crucifixion was identified with hanging on a tree. Acts 5:30:

The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead — whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree.

Acts 10:39:

We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed

him by hanging him on a tree.

Acts 13:29:

When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb.

According to Moses, hanging on a tree represented the irrevocable curse of God. Deuteronomy 21:22-23:

If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his body is hung on a tree, you must not leave his body on the tree overnight. Be sure to bury him that same day, because anyone who is hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not desecrate the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance.

This is what we would call the second death: good-bye to life forever, with no hope of a resurrection.

Secondly, they insisted that the tomb Christ was buried in was to be sealed and guarded by Roman soldiers. This was just in case His disciples would steal His body and claim that Christ had risen. Thus, by these two actions, this same Sanhedrin, who were now accusing Stephen, were sure Christ would never rise again from the dead.

Therefore, when Christ did rise from the dead by the glorious power of the Father (Romans 6:4), God was giving the Jewish nation the final sign they had demanded of Jesus. There would be now no excuse for rejecting Him as the Messiah. That is to say, rejecting Him now would, therefore, be the unpardonable sin, the point of no return.

This is the sad history Stephen reminded the Sanhedrin of, and all those who witnessed his defense argument, incidentally, three and a half years after the resurrection of Christ. How do you think they respond to this charge made by this godly deacon? Here is the record. Acts 7:54-60:

When they heard this, they were furious and

gnashed their teeth at him. But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul. While they were stoning him, Stephen prayed, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.” Then he fell on his knees and cried out, “Lord, do not hold this sin against them.” When he had said this, he fell asleep.

Some 600 years before Christ, the prophet Daniel was told by the angel Gabriel that God had determined 70 weeks of years for his people. This would be the time of the end for Israel, their final probation period as a nation. Note what Daniel recorded. Daniel 9:24-27:

Seventy “sevens” are decreed for your people

and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the most holy. Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven “sevens,” and sixty-two “sevens.” It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble. After the sixty-two “sevens,” the Anointed One will be cut off and will have nothing. The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city and the sanctuary. The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed. He will confirm a covenant with many for one “seven.” In the middle of the “seven” he will put an end to sacrifice and offering. And on a wing of the temple he will set up an abomination that causes desolation, until the end that is decreed is poured out on him.

This period began in 457 B.C. and ended in 34 A.D., the stoning of Stephen.

But this prophecy God gave Daniel was really the interpretation of the prophecy given to him in Daniel 8:14:

He said to me, “It will take 2,300 evenings and mornings; then the sanctuary will be reconsecrated.”

However, because Daniel thought this prophecy was referring to the earthly sanctuary, then lying in ruins, we have to give a double application to Gabriel’s explanation. The second application applies not to the Jewish nation but the Gentile world. Consequently, the time of the end for the Gentile world began in 1844. This is our probation period.

What can we learn from this study? The most important lesson is the issue the early church faced. That issue is Jesus Christ. This is the same issue we will have face in these last days. However, the issue will be more complicated. For the issue today is not whether Christ is the Saviour of the world, but which of the many gospels proclaimed

today is the true one. This is how Paul expressed his concern. 2 Corinthians 11:4:

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough.

But just as God gave the Jewish nation a clear sign that Jesus was indeed the Messiah by the resurrection, so will He give us clear evidence which of the many gospels preached within Adventism is the true one. My prayer is that, when that happens, may none of us turn our backs to it.

Chapter 9

Counterfeit Christianity

Acts 8:9-13

So far in our study of the history of the early church, the proclamation of the gospel has been restricted to the city of Jerusalem, where the apostles and the entire body of believers were remaining. As we move to Acts chapter 8, we will see how God pushes His people out into the world beyond Jerusalem. This is in fulfillment of what Jesus told His disciples before He ascended to heaven. Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Now the stoning of Stephen at the hands of an enraged Sandedrin, who could not tolerate the truth he spoke, brought to an end the first period of the

early church. But please notice that the men who stoned Stephen laid their garments at the feet of Saul of Tarsus. Acts 7:55-58:

But Stephen, full of the Holy Spirit, looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. “Look,” he said, “I see heaven open and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God.”

At this they covered their ears and, yelling at the top of their voices, they all rushed at him, dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

The reason for this last statement is because the Holy Spirit wants us to know that there was a divine reason why God allowed this godly deacon to be martyred. Out of the death of Stephen came ultimately the birth of the great apostle Paul. This is how God works. That is why when Stephen gets to heaven he will get a big surprise to see Paul there and will most likely join us in singing the

song of Moses. Revelation 15:2-4:

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

When the Sanhedrin stoned Stephen, they silenced a voice that was upsetting a city. But what they did not realize is that, by doing that, they were awakening a new voice that would not only upset an empire but turn the world upside down. Acts 17:5-7:

But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed

a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd. But when they did not find them, they dragged Jason and some other brothers before the city officials, shouting: "These men who have caused trouble all over the world have now come here, and Jason has welcomed them into his house. They are all defying Caesar's decrees, saying that there is another king, one called Jesus."

The witness of Stephen pricked the heart of Saul. The fact that Stephen pleaded with God to forgive his murderers was more than Saul could stand. It bothered him to no end. To silence this inner conviction, Saul began to persecute the church in Jerusalem. This is how Acts 8 is introduced. Acts 8:1-3:

And Saul was there, giving approval to his death. On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned

deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

But God took advantage of this persecution and turned it towards His own end. This is the way God often works. God continually uses opposition to advance His cause. This is how the early church grew and this is how our global mission, in these last days, will be finished. Note how Saul's persecution of the church advanced God's cause. Acts 8:4-8:

Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went. Philip went down to a city in Samaria and proclaimed the Christ there. When the crowds heard Philip and saw the miraculous signs he did, they all paid close attention to what he said. With shrieks, evil spirits came out of many, and many paralytics and cripples were healed. So there was great joy in that city.

The persecution that rose over Stephen forced

these early Christians out of Jerusalem and into Judea and Samaria, where they began to proclaim the good news of the gospel, all according to God's plan. And Saul of Tarsus was part of that plan even before he became a Christian. God used Saul's rage to do two things. First, He forced the church out of Jerusalem. And second, He made the lay members to become involved in fulfilling the great commission, instead of depending on the apostles to do all the work.

These believers who were scattered abroad and went about preaching the Word were ordinary men and women with no theological training. But all of them were gifted by the Holy Spirit. However, they would never have discovered their gifts had God not used this persecution to place them in circumstances where they were forced to discover their gifts.

But where God gives success, Satan, unfortunately, is always there to put a wrench into the spokes. Where there is genuine Christianity you will also find counterfeit Christianity to hinder

God's work. It is this counterfeit Christianity we must now turn to. Acts 8:9-23:

Now for some time a man named Simon had practiced sorcery in the city and amazed all the people of Samaria. He boasted that he was someone great, and all the people, both high and low, gave him their attention and exclaimed, "This man is the divine power known as the Great Power." They followed him because he had amazed them for a long time with his magic. But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. Simon himself believed and was baptized. And he followed Philip everywhere, astonished by the great signs and miracles he saw.

When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized

into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit.

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money and said, "Give me also this ability so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

Peter answered, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."

In this section, the Holy Spirit deliberately contrasts the marks of authentic Christianity with those of a false or counterfeit faith. This is the third occasion in the book of Acts we find Satan stepping in and sprouting his own seeds. The first

was the hypocrisy of Ananias and Sapphira, the second was the dissension created by the Greek-speaking widows over the distribution of goods, and now the third is this manifestation of religious falsehood by Simon the magician.

You will notice that in all these three incidents there is one thing in common that revealed the marks of counterfeit Christianity. This mark, of course, is the principle of self, the very foundation of Satan's kingdom. Note what the Bible says about Simon in the last part of verse 9:

...He boasted that he was someone great....

At the heart of all counterfeit Christianity is a manifestation of some form of self. This is what brought the downfall of Lucifer who then became Satan. Isaiah 14:12-14:

How you have fallen from heaven, O morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! You said in your heart, "I will ascend to heaven; I will

raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly, on the utmost heights of the sacred mountain. I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.”

In complete contrast, genuine Christianity leads people to Christ and makes very little of the individual. 2 Corinthians 4:5:

For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus’ sake.

But here in Acts we have a man who exalted himself. We find Simon trying to buy the power of the Holy Spirit so that his magical performance could match the superior power of the Holy Spirit that the apostles manifested. Note how Peter responds to his financial offer. Acts 8:18-21:

When Simon saw that the Spirit was given at the laying on of the apostles’ hands, he offered them money and said, “Give me also this ability so

that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit.” Peter answered, “May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God.”

Once again you will notice that the problem of self begins with the heart. In the case of Lucifer, we find him saying in his heart, “I will ascend above the heights of God Himself.” The same problem is revealed in Simon: “his heart is not right with God.” It is for this reason Jesus said in His sermon on the mount, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

According to the prophet Jeremiah, the natural heart is not only wicked but also deceitful above all things so that, in and of ourselves, we have no cure for it. Jeremiah 17:9:

The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?

It is only God who can take away our stony hearts and give us a heart of flesh. This is the power of the gospel which was promised by God to Israel in the New Covenant. Ezekiel 36:26-27:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

But for this to happen, or, in other words, if you want to be a genuine Christian, Jesus made it clear that you and I must be willing to deny self. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

This is the cost of discipleship. This is what it cost the disciples of Christ before God could use them to turn their world upside down. And this is what it will cost each one of us if the Holy Spirit is

going to use us to make an impact on the cities where we live.

That is why I want you to take note of the advice Peter gave Simon and Simon's response to Peter's counsel. Acts 8:22-24:

“Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin.”

Then Simon answered, “Pray to the Lord for me so that nothing you have said may happen to me.”

While we judge ourselves and others by our outward looks or performance, God always looks at our hearts. He knows what goes in there. Repentance is the genuine turning of the heart towards God. When this happens, we will experience genuine Christianity.

Following this incident of Simon, the 8th

chapter of Acts ends with the account of the first Gentile to be baptized into the Christian church, the Ethiopian eunuch. He was a Jew by religion and had come to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover feast. His heart was right with God and the Spirit used Philip, another godly deacon, to introduce him to Christ. Acts 8:26-40:

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road — the desert road — that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.”

Then Philip ran up the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked.

“How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains

it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.”

The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Phillip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip

away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

What a story! And this is what the Holy Spirit wants to do in each one of our lives. If you are having a heart problem, if you are struggling with counterfeit Christianity, the only solution is to repent and turn to the cross of Christ. For there is where the power is.

Chapter 10

God's Chosen Man

Acts 9:10-16

During the time that the gospel was systematically preached throughout Judea and Samaria by outstanding leaders such as Philip and others, the Lord was preparing a human instrument to take the gospel message to the Gentile world. That human instrument was none other than my favorite character of the Bible, the apostle Paul.

Here was a man motivated and fully dedicated to what he believed was the truth. As Saul, he believed that the Christian church was the enemy of God. After he got Stephen out of the way, he went all out to destroy God's people. Acts 9:1-2:

Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found

any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem.

Later on, he made this statement to King Agrippa. Acts 26:9-11:

I, too, was convinced that I ought to do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth. And that is just what I did in Jerusalem. On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the saints in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. In my obsession against them, I even went to foreign cities to persecute them.

That was Saul the persecutor.

But God knew his heart, He knew the kind of man he was inside, that even though he was trying to destroy the infant church, in his heart he believed he was doing the right thing, that he was

actually serving God. That is the big difference between God and us. We judge others by what we see them do but God judges us by what we are inside. That is why we must always leave God to do the judging. Romans 14:10:

You, then, why do you judge your brother? Or why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before God's judgment seat.

Having done all he could to destroy the church in Jerusalem, Saul of Tarsus now prepares to destroy the church in Syria. Once he gets the necessary documents from the high priest, he sets out for Damascus, the chief city of Syria. Note what happens. Acts 9:3-9:

As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

"Who are you, Lord?" Saul asked.

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,” he replied. “Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.”

The men traveling with Saul stood there speechless; they heard the sound but did not see anyone. Saul got up from the ground, but when he opened his eyes he could see nothing. So they led him by the hand into Damascus. For three days he was blind, and did not eat or drink anything.

Although there have been many scholarly attempts to explain what could have happened to Saul on the Damascus road — that it may have been a lightning stroke or an epileptic seizure — Paul himself is utterly consistent in all his writings as to just what he heard and saw on this occasion. He saw and heard none other than Jesus Himself. Paul bases his apostolic authority on the fact that he had seen Jesus.

Saul was a young man who was very sensitive and dedicated to the things of God. But Judaism kept him in darkness until this moment of

exposure. And even though this experience left him physically blind for a few days, the eyes of his inner being were opened and he realized for the first time that Jesus of Nazareth was indeed the promised Messiah.

This experience left an indelible mark on his soul and he was never the same man again. One of the first things he did after his conversion was to change his name from Saul to Paul. This change is very significant. As Saul of Tarsus he belonged to the tribe of Benjamin, the same tribe as King Saul. Obviously, his parents gave him the name Saul because they were hoping he would be a great man one day. But when he found Jesus, he changed his name to Paul, which means “little.” Now his one desire was to be a slave of Christ so that Christ may be all in him. Romans 1:1:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God....

Having confronted Saul on the Damascus road, notice how Christ turns Saul the persecutor into

Paul the apostle and prepares him for his mission to proclaim the gospel to the gentile world. Acts 9:10-16:

In Damascus there was a disciple named Ananias. The Lord called to him in a vision, “Ananias!”

“Yes, Lord,” he answered.

The Lord told him, “Go to the house of Judas on Straight Street and ask for a man from Tarsus named Saul, for he is praying. In a vision he has seen a man named Ananias come and place his hands on him to restore his sight.”

“Lord,” Ananias answered, “I have heard many reports about this man and all the harm he has done to your saints in Jerusalem. And he has come here with authority from the chief priests to arrest all who call on your name.”

But the Lord said to Ananias, “Go! This man is my chosen instrument to carry my name before the

Gentiles and their kings and before the people of Israel. I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.”

The first thing I would like you to notice in this passage is Ananias’ reaction to God’s request. Certainly, we can’t blame him for the way he responded. From any human standpoint, Saul is the last person we would think of as God’s chosen man. Yet he was. In the same way, God is today preparing men and women to lighten this earth with His glory. We must never undermine His choice or His ways. Often, I meet some very strong opponents of the gospel, and I have to ask myself, “Is this person going to one day be another Paul?”

The next thing I want you to notice is what God said about Paul’s ministry. They were two in number: first, where God was going to use him, and second, how Paul was to make his impact. Let us consider them:

1. First, where God was going to use him. It

would be to three separate groups:

a. His primary obligation was to take the gospel to the Gentiles, the non-Jewish nations. It is for this reason Paul later called himself “The Apostle to the Gentiles.”

b. His second area of ministry was to kings. He was to penetrate the power structures of his day and speak to those who were on the top.

c. Finally, his ministry was to reach his own people, the Jews. Paul, of course, always wanted to put his own nation first, he longed to minister to his own countrymen; but he was no longer running the program, God was. His part was to be a servant of Christ. That is how it must be with us.

2. Secondly, the Lord revealed how Paul was to make his impact. “I will show him,” God said, “how much he must suffer for my name’s sake.” Paul was called to suffer. And he surely did. 2 Corinthians 11:23-28:

Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

Suffering is something none of us likes. But that is the cost of discipleship. It is impossible to proclaim the gospel of grace without opposition and suffering. The devil will make sure of that.

Paul was willing to put up with sufferings because the love of God compelled him.

From the time Paul was converted on the Damascus road to the time he was martyred in Rome was approximately 30 years. During that time, he made three major missionary journeys, wrote several epistles, and established many churches. Paul never experienced burnout. You know why? Not because he was superhuman but because he accomplished his ministry by the grace of God. 1 Corinthians 15:9-10:

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. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace to me was not without effect. No, I worked harder than all of them — yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me.

We think of grace as the unmerited favor of God by which we are saved. That is the primary meaning of grace. But the Bible also talks of grace

as the power and strength of God made available to believers so that they can carry out God's purpose in their lives without experiencing burnout. Here is Paul's own experience. 2 Corinthians 12:7-9:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

Ephesians 3:7:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power.

Do you know that the same grace power is available to each one of us? Paul pointed this out in the fourth chapter of Ephesians. Ephesians 4:7:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it.

God never calls you to do anything for Him without giving you His power and strength to do it. Note Paul's experience. Acts 9:17-19:

Then Ananias went to the house and entered it. Placing his hands on Saul, he said, "Brother Saul, the Lord — Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here — has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit." Immediately, something like scales fell from Saul's eyes, and he could see again. He got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

When we depend on our own strength to do God's work, we experience burnout. This is the problem with so many of us and, as a result, God's church suffers. But when we do the same work in God's strength, we never get tired of serving Him. Isaiah 40:28-31:

Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Please remember this text when you are called upon to serve in a church office. As a result of God's intervention in Saul's/Paul's life, the church prospered. Acts 9:31:

Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.

As God intervenes in each one of our lives, may our own churches also prosper.

Chapter 11

Times of the Gentiles

Acts 10:9-16

Our last study of the early church centered around the conversion of the apostle Paul, God's chosen man to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles. However, it was not Paul but Peter whom God used to introduced the gospel to the Gentiles. In His foreknowledge, God knew that before Paul could have any success in converting the Gentiles, the way had to first be prepared for him. He used Peter to do this. Let me explain.

One of the biggest hurdles God faced in establishing the early church was to convince the Jewish believers, including the apostles themselves, that the salvation obtained for mankind in Christ included the Gentiles. Therefore, before Paul could win the Gentiles for Christ, this hurdle had to be overcome or his mission would face insurmountable problems. This is what Acts 10,

this study, is all about. Acts 10:1-8:

At Caesarea there was a man named Cornelius, a centurion in what was known as the Italian Regiment. He and all his family were devout and God-fearing; he gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly. One day at about three in the afternoon he had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God, who came to him and said, “Cornelius!”

Cornelius stared at him in fear. “What is it, Lord?” he asked.

The angel answered, “Your prayers and gifts to the poor have come up as a memorial offering before God. Now send men to Joppa to bring back a man named Simon who is called Peter. He is staying with Simon the tanner, whose house is by the sea.”

When the angel who spoke to him had gone, Cornelius called two of his servants and a devout soldier who was one of his attendants. He told

them everything that had happened and sent them to Joppa.

While Cornelius was instructing these three men to go and invite Peter to come to his house, God, in turn, was preparing Peter to receive them. Our Scripture reading, Acts 10:9-16, describes how God did this:

About noon the following day as they were on their journey and approaching the city, Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, “Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.”

“Surely not, Lord!” Peter replied. “I have never eaten anything impure or unclean.”

The voice spoke to him a second time, “Do not

call anything impure that God has made clean.”

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

Notice what happened next. Acts 10:17-29:

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon’s house was and stopped at the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them.”

Peter went down and said to the men, “I’m the one you’re looking for. Why have you come?”

The men replied, “We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the

Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say.” Then Peter invited the men into the house to be his guests.

The next day Peter started out with them, and some of the brothers from Joppa went along. The following day he arrived in Caesarea. Cornelius was expecting them and had called together his relatives and close friends. As Peter entered the house, Cornelius met him and fell at his feet in reverence. But Peter made him get up. “Stand up,” he said, “I am only a man myself.”

Talking with him, Peter sent inside and found a large gathering of people. He said to them: “You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without raising any objection. May I ask why you sent for me?”

Now Peter understood what that strange vision

God gave him on the roof top of Simon's house was all about. It was not to show him that the gospel had done away with the health law about unclean animals, as some would like to believe, but to convince Peter that he, a Jew, was no longer to consider the Gentiles as unclean. This is a truth of the gospel Peter and the other apostles still had to learn, a truth spelled out in Ephesians 2:11-13:

Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men) — remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Going back to Acts 10, in verses 30-33 we find Cornelius describing to Peter his experience with the angel and how he was instructed to send for him:

Cornelius answered: “Four days ago I was in my house praying at this hour, at three in the afternoon. Suddenly a man in shining clothes stood before me and said, ‘Cornelius, God has heard your prayer and remembered your gifts to the poor. Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He is a guest in the home of Simon the tanner, who lives by the sea.’ So I sent for you immediately, and it was good of you to come. Now we are all here in the presence of God to listen to everything the Lord has commanded you to tell us.”

After listening to Cornelius’ story, please note very carefully how Peter responded. Acts 10:34-35:

Then Peter began to speak: “I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

In this statement, Peter was revealing a gospel truth that we need to come to grips with. What

Peter is saying here is that this godly man Cornelius had been accepted by God, i.e., he was saved, even before he had heard the gospel message and believed in Jesus as his Saviour. How can this be, you say? I, too, wrestled with this question and here is what I came up with.

All through history there have been millions of people who, through no fault of their own, have never heard the gospel or the name of Jesus. Yet they have been faithful to the light they had, whatever that light may have been. God can save such people because, in Christ, they have already been reconciled to God by the death of His Son. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's

behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Yes, these people, who were faithful to the light they had, would have responded positively had the gospel truth come to them, just as Cornelius or the Ethiopian Eunuch did. This is how Paul explains it. Romans 2:14-16:

(Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.) This will take place on the day when God will judge men's secrets through Jesus Christ, as my gospel declares.

Now I can imagine what some of you are thinking!!! If the heathen can be saved without hearing the gospel, why spend time, money, and

effort sending missionaries to foreign lands, especially when some of them have to risk their lives doing so? This is a valid question and I would like to give you three important reasons why it is necessary for the gospel to be preached into all the world, besides the fact Christ has commissioned us to do so.

1. Apart from the knowledge of the gospel, it is hard to be saved and easy to be lost. Why is this so? Because only the gospel offers mankind salvation as a free gift to sinners. Romans 4:5:

However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

All other religions teach salvation by works, i.e., “I have to be good to be saved.” And you all know, that is hard.

2. When the gospel is clearly proclaimed, the chances of being saved becomes a 100 times easier than if one does not hear the gospel. Why?

Because the gospel that proclaims God saves sinners, the undeserving, reverses the situation so that it is now easy to be saved and hard to be lost.

3. Once a person is convicted by the Holy Spirit of the truth as it is in Christ, this makes it inexcusable for that person to be lost. Why? Because when one realizes that he or she has already been justified unto life by Christ's obedience (Romans 5:18), has already been reconciled to God by His death (Romans 5:10), and is now sitting in heavenly places in Christ (Ephesians 2:6), to reject this indescribable gift is to deliberately choose to be lost. Jesus Himself made this clear. Mark 16:15-16:

He said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."

John 3:16-18, 36:

For God so loved the world that he gave his

one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ...Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him.

That is why Jesus made it clear to His disciples that when this gospel of the kingdom has been proclaimed into all the world (i.e., to every nation, kindred, tongue, and people) for a witness, the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

Going back to Acts 10, notice what happens when Peter begins to expound the gospel to Cornelius and his household. Acts 10:44-48:

While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message.

The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God.

Then Peter said, “Can anyone keep these people from being baptized with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have.” So he ordered that they be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

This experience of receiving the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues played an important part in convincing Peter and the Jewish believers with him that the gospel saves the Gentiles. To appreciate this, turn to 1 Corinthians 14:22:

Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.

Until now, the Jewish believers, including Peter

and the other apostles, were unbelievers when it came to the salvation of the Gentiles. That is why Peter and his fellow Jews were astonished when the Gentiles began to speak in tongues, just as they themselves did at Pentecost. This discovery was later passed on to the other apostles. Acts 11:1-4, 17-18:

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened.

...“So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God

has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”

Now how did this whole experience prepare the way for Paul and his mission to the Gentiles? The answer is found in the Jerusalem council. Acts 15:1-2, 5:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

...Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, “The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses.”

Most Jewish believers at that time believed that the only way the Gentiles could be saved was by first becoming Jews. This was the issue in the

Jerusalem council. Because of the Acts 10 experience, Peter could correct this misconception and open the way for Paul's mission to the Gentiles. Acts 15:7-12:

After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

In concluding, let us consider these facts.

The period from Abraham to the stoning of Stephen was the time of the Jews, approximately 2,000 years. During this time, Israel was to be the light of the world, but they failed miserably. Matthew 23:37-39:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.’”

According to Daniel chapter 9, the time of the end for the Jewish nation was the 490 years from 457 B.C. to 34 A.D., the stoning of Stephen. Since then, we have been living in the times of the Gentiles. Almost 2,000 years have since passed. Today we are living in the Gentile time of the end. Luke 21:20-24:

When you see Jerusalem being surrounded by armies, you will know that its desolation is near. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, let those in the city get out, and let those in the country not enter the city. For this is the time of punishment in fulfillment of all that has been written. How dreadful it will be in those days for pregnant women and nursing mothers! There will be great distress in the land and wrath against this people. They will fall by the sword and will be taken as prisoners to all the nations. Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled.

But before the end comes and this earth is left desolate by the second advent of Christ, God is going to give the whole world, including the Jews as individuals, one final opportunity to accept the gift of salvation in Christ. The message that will do that is the three angels message of Revelation 14. I believe that God has raised the Advent movement to fulfill this mission. May God remove our stubbornness and give us the wisdom and the

grace not repeat the history of the Jewish nation.
Amen.

Chapter 12

None Excluded

Acts 11:11-18

This study on the early church is really a continuation of the last study, the times of the Gentiles. One of the big arguments among Bible scholars is when the gospel was first brought to the Gentiles. Did the first breakthrough take place at the meeting of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, in Acts 8, or was it when Peter came to the house of Cornelius, in Acts 10, our last study? The clear answer to this question is provided in this study of chapter 11 of Acts, verses 19-20:

Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen traveled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews. Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. The Lord's hand was

with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

It was the persecution that followed the martyrdom of Stephen, described in Acts 7, that the gospel began to penetrate the Gentile world. This is in perfect harmony with our fundamental SDA beliefs. According to our Sanctuary doctrine, the stoning of Stephen in 34 A.D. brought to an end the 490 years of probation time, the time of the end, for the Jewish nation (not as individuals) as predicted by the prophet Daniel in his ninth chapter. Since then, we have been living in the times of the Gentiles.

However, Peter's experience with Cornelius was significant because it overcame the hurdle in the minds of the Jewish believers, including the apostles themselves, that the good news of the gospel included the Gentiles. This is what prepared the way for the apostle Paul to begin his extensive work of reaching the Gentile world, to which most of us here belong. We noted this in the last study in the first 18 verses of chapter 11 of

Acts:

The apostles and the brothers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him and said, “You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them.”

Peter began and explained everything to them precisely as it had happened: “I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles, and birds of the air. Then I heard a voice telling me, ‘Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.’

“I replied, ‘Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.’

“The voice spoke from heaven a second time, ‘Do not call anything impure that God has made

clean.’ This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

“Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man’s house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, ‘Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.’

“As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ So if God gave them the same gift as he gave us, who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could oppose God?”

When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, “So then, God

has granted even the Gentiles repentance unto life.”

Once the way was open for the gospel to go to all the Gentile world, Paul could begin in earnest his mission to the Gentiles. And it all started in Antioch, an important Greek city of culture, the third-largest in the Roman empire. It was noted as a sports center where chariot races was their specialty. This city was also noted for much corruption. But it was here where believers were first called Christians and, furthermore, it was from this city that Paul, along with Barnabas, began their first missionary journey.

After the leaders in Jerusalem recognized that the salvation Christ obtained for them also included the Gentiles, they sent Barnabas to Antioch to support the work there. What a great choice they made! Great-hearted Barnabus was the very man they needed. He did not try to take over from the Gentile leadership, as some missionaries do when they go to foreign missions, but he encouraged these new believers to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ. Acts 11:22-24:

News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. When he arrived and saw the evidence of the grace of God, he was glad and encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. He was a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith, and a great number of people were brought to the Lord.

Barnabas is characterized here as “a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and faith.” What does it mean to be full of the Holy Spirit? Remember, the Holy Spirit is a person, the third person of the Godhead. How can one be full of a person? Let me explain, since this is the supreme qualification that we need to have to fulfill our mission to the world.

At conversion, the Holy Spirit comes and indwells us. This is the “new birth” experience referred to as “regeneration.” But the fact we have the Spirit does not mean He has all of us. For us to be full of the Holy Spirit means that He must

controlling spirit, soul and body, i.e., all of us. For that to happen, we must apply the truth of the cross to our lives. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

What does it mean to deny self, take up our cross, and follow Christ? The answer is found in the truth of the cross. When Jesus came to this world to be the Saviour of mankind, He totally emptied Himself of all His divine prerogatives and became a slave to His Father. That is the truth or the principal of the cross. Philippians 2:6-8:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!

Even though Christ had in Himself divine power, the same power by which He brought into existence this world of ours, He became totally God-dependent. John 5:19a, 30; 6:57; 8:28-29; 14:10-11:

Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself....”

“By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself by him who sent me.”

“Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.”

So Jesus said, “When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am the one I claim to be and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him.”

“Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves.”

Going back to Philippians 2, Paul says this is the attitude or mind we Christians must have. Verse 5:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus....

I would like you to note what Paul has to say in 2 Corinthians 4:7:

But we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

There is much talk today for the need of revival within the church. And this is true. Do you know

what is the letter in the very center of the word REVIVAL? When that “I” is crossed out so that we can say with Paul, “I am crucified with Christ and, therefore, it is no longer I who live but it is Christ who lives in me,” then and then only will we experience revival. How can we bring this about? The answer is in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

The cross of Christ is God’s verdict on our sinful human nature which He assumed in the incarnation. And only when we surrender this life of the flesh to the cross of Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to take over, then, like Barnabas, we, too, will be full of the Holy Spirit and experience the power of God as the early church did. Galatians 5:22-24:

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

As I mentioned in the last study, it is about 2,000 years since the time of the Gentiles began. And God has already indicated, by the restoration of the nation of Israel, that we are living in the time of the end for the Gentiles. The only reason why Christ has not come is because He is waiting on us to finish our global mission. God wants none to perish since none were excluded in the redeeming grace of Christ. 1 Peter 3:8-9:

Finally, all of you, live in harmony with one another; be sympathetic, love as brothers, be compassionate and humble. Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult, but with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing.

But this work will not be finished by budgets, promotional programs, or any other human method. It can only be finished by the power of the Holy Spirit. Barnabas recognized this, as well as the fact God had set aside Paul to be the human agent to bring the gospel to the Gentiles. So what did he do next? Let's go back to Acts 11 and see what this man full of the Holy Spirit did. Acts 11:25-26:

Then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul, and when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So for a whole year Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch.

In the meantime, I want you to notice what God revealed the situation would be throughout the Roman empire and how the Gentiles responded to it. Acts 11:27-30:

During this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. One of them, named

Agabus, stood up and through the Spirit predicted that a severe famine would spread over the entire Roman world. (This happened during the reign of Claudius.) The disciples, each according to his ability, decided to provide help for the brothers living in Judea. This they did, sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul.

Here were these Gentile believers coming to the aid of the Jewish believers in Judea. Keep in mind, these two nations were, in those days, bitter enemies. This is the power of the gospel.

In conclusion, today Roman Catholic Christianity teaches that salvation is only through the church; Calvinist theology teaches only the elect have been chosen to be saved; and Armenian theology teaches that salvation is only provisional so that we have to take the initiative to experience salvation. But the truth of the everlasting gospel is that none were excluded from the redemption that is in Christ. The world is desperately waiting to hear this unconditional good news. God has chosen us to do this. May we, like Paul and

Barnabas, be willing to put self aside and let the Holy Spirit take over.

Chapter 13

Releasing God's Power

Acts 12:1-7

In our last study of the early church, we saw that the power behind God's people — men like Stephen, Philip, Peter, Barnabas, Paul, etc. — was the Holy Spirit. This same power is available to us today and all that God is waiting for to manifest that power once again is for us to put self aside and let him take over. This was how it was with the early church and this is how the work will be finished in our day. Acts 1:8:

“But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

In this study, as we turn to Acts 12, we come to the last study of the early church as our model and what we are going to discover is how the early

church released God's power. What we have been studying about the early church may have been twenty centuries away but we are not twenty centuries away from the Book of Acts, because what this book has recorded is the work of the timeless Spirit of God who is the same in every age. He is anxious to work today as He did 2,000 years ago.

In this twelfth chapter of Acts, Luke records for us three events which, at first, may seem to be unrelated, but, in carefully examining them, we find that this man of God was inspired to put them together to show us as well as instruct us on how God's power was released in the early church. The three events are: the murder of the Apostle James, the deliverance of Peter from prison by the intervention of an angel, and the death of King Herod. First is the murder of James. Acts 12:1-3:

It was about this time that King Herod arrested some who belonged to the church, intending to persecute them. He had James, the brother of John, put to death with the sword. When he saw that this

pleased the Jews, he proceeded to seize Peter also. This happened during the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Here is an event that took place about the same time of the year as the crucifixion of our Lord Jesus Christ, during the Passover season. But now it is the year 44 A.D. We know this because the death of King Herod, also recorded here, took place about the same time and his death is recorded in ancient history. The church had been growing and expanding during these 12 years, but now the enemy of souls strikes and uses Herod to do his dirty work. This is not the Herod before whom Jesus appeared but his brother who was called Herod Agrippa, the father of the Herod before whom Paul would later appear.

When Herod discovered that the execution of James had pleased the opponents of the gospel, he decided to try to gain further favor with them by imprisoning none other than the Apostle Peter. But this time I want you to notice what happened. Acts 12:4-5:

After arresting him, he put him in prison, handing him over to be guarded by four squads of four soldiers each. Herod intended to bring him out for public trial after the Passover. So Peter was kept in prison, but the church was earnestly praying to God for him.

When James was arrested and then executed, we find no mention made about the church earnestly praying for him. But now, when Peter is arrested, they realize that things are becoming very serious and they cannot count on God intervening for the church automatically. So earnest prayer is made on behalf of Peter. And even though Herod has taken double care to make sure Peter cannot escape, let us see what happens next. Acts 12:6-11:

The night before Herod was to bring him to trial, Peter was sleeping between two soldiers, bound with two chains, and sentries stood guard at the entrance. Suddenly an angel of the Lord

appeared and a light shone in the cell. He struck Peter on the side and woke him up. “Quick, get up!” he said, and the chains fell off Peter’s wrists.

Then the angel said to him, “Put on your clothes and sandals.” And Peter did so. “Wrap your cloak around you and follow me,” the angel told him. Peter followed him out of the prison, but he had no idea that what the angel was doing was really happening; he thought he was seeing a vision. They passed the first and second guards and came to the iron gate leading to the city. It opened for them by itself, and they went through it. When they had walked the length of one street, suddenly the angel left him.

Then Peter came to himself and said, “Now I know without a doubt that the Lord sent his angel and rescued me from Herod’s clutches and from everything the Jewish people were anticipating.”

What a remarkable story! After what happened to James, there was no doubt in Peter’s mind he was to be executed the next day. And yet what do

we find him doing? Fast asleep between two soldiers. How could he do it? No doubt the gospel had set him free from the fear of death. After all, this is what the gospel is all about. Hebrews 2:14-15:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

1 John 4:16-18:

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Has the gospel set you free or are you still afraid of the judgment and afraid to die? This is the transformation that took place in Peter's life since he denied the Lord at Pilate's court. Now he was free, no longer afraid to die and God still had a work for him to do. But Peter had no idea that the church was earnestly praying for his deliverance. When the angel came to deliver him, he was utterly surprised so that he thought he was just dreaming the whole thing, that is, until he was outside the prison walls. Then notice what happened. Acts 12:12-17:

When this had dawned on him, he went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"

"You're out of your mind," they told her. When she kept insisting that it was so, they said,

“It must be his angel.”

But Peter kept on knocking and when they opened the door and saw him, they were astonished. Peter motioned with his hand for them to be quiet and described how the Lord had brought him out of prison. “Tell James and the brothers about this,” he said, and then he left for another place.

This is absolutely amazing! Here is Peter valiantly pounding on the door, while the girl inside is desperately trying to convince the believers that the man pounding outside is none other than Peter. At first they think she is insane, but after she convinces them that it is Peter and they open the door and find that she was telling the truth, they are amazed that God did answer their earnest prayer. “Oh, ye of little faith.”

Here is a discovery the early church made which we must discover, or rediscover today: the power of prayer. As we review the events of this two incidents — the death of James and the

deliverance of Peter — we must ask the question: “Why did God allow James to be killed and then turn around and deliver Peter?” Could not have God delivered James, just as he did Peter? The answer, of course, is yes.

Could it be that God was trying to bring out a most important lesson for the church? The need for the church not to take things for granted but to realize they must be totally God dependent on Him? While no earnest prayer was offered for James, yet earnest prayer was made for Peter. This made the difference. Not that God needs our prayers but we need His power and prayer is the evidence that it is not by our might or our budgets or through promotional programs, but by His Spirit the work will be finished.

God has chosen prayer as the means to release His power in the life of the church. This is the great lesson Acts 12 has for us. God works in the same way today as He did in those first-century days. He will respond to our earnest prayer in very much the same way. This does not mean that

everything we pray for He will grant. Sometimes God overrules our request because He knows what is best.

Today the church is facing major issues that no amount of human effort is able to solve. The church is polarized into all kinds of factions: divisions over the gospel, factions over the authority of Scripture, disagreement over church policy, the problem of breaking away from the organized church (congregationalism). The devil is having a hay day.

The time has come for us corporately as well as individually to earnestly seek the Lord in prayer. This cannot happen by promotional programs. We ourselves must realize the seriousness of the times we are living in. We are perhaps further over the edge than we realize and I hope that nothing drastic has to first happen before we wake up, as were the death of the James and the imprisonment of Peter before the early church woke up. Consider with me these texts of the New Testament that show how prayer releases the power of God. Matthew

7:7-8:

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened.

Luke 18:1, 8:

Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. ...“I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?”

Ephesians 6:18-20:

And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints. Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel,

for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I may declare it fearlessly, as I should.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18:

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

James 5:16-18:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective. Elijah was a man just like us. He prayed earnestly that it would not rain, and it did not rain on the land for three and a half years. Again he prayed, and the heavens gave rain, and the earth produced its crops.

Finally, as we conclude our study of Acts 12, notice how this chapter ends with the death of Herod. His end is recorded as a warning to anyone who tries to oppose God and destroy His church.

Acts 12:19b-24:

Then Herod went from Judea to Caesarea and stayed there a while. He had been quarreling with the people of Tyre and Sidon; they now joined together and sought an audience with him. Having secured the support of Blastus, a trusted personal servant of the king, they asked for peace, because they depended on the king's country for their food supply.

On the appointed day Herod, wearing his royal robes, sat on his throne and delivered a public address to the people. They shouted, "This is the voice of a god, not of a man." Immediately, because Herod did not give praise to God, an angel of the Lord struck him down, and he was eaten by worms and died.

But the word of God continued to increase and spread.

Chapter 14

Most Powerful Force

Matthew 5:13-16

In the first twelve studies of this series, we concentrated on the early church as recorded in the book of Acts. In reading the New Testament, you will discover that the first four books, commonly known as the gospels, records for us how God manifested Himself in and through one person, Jesus Christ. 1 Timothy 3:16a:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body....

The fifth book of the New Testament, the book of Acts, is an historical account of how God manifested Himself through the early church, the body of Christ.

Now we are going to continue our study of the church, not as it is often understood, but as God

intends it to be, an extension of Christ. For that is what the church is. According to the clear teaching of the New Testament, the church is the body of Christ. He is the head and we represent His body. I can quote many texts, but this one will do: Colossians 1:15-18:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

Today, however, the word “church” means different things to different people. To some, the church is a denomination; to others, it is a building; and to still others, it is a group of people or an organization. But, according to the New Testament, the church is more than this. It is a

living organization, a “Koinonia,” made up of individuals from all cultures and walks of life knit together as if they were one body having certain responsibilities, goals, and objectives. This means that when the world sees us, they must see Christ in us.

From its very inception, Christ intended the church to be the most powerful force to bring hope, joy, and peace on earth. According to our Scripture reading, taken from Christ’s sermon on the mount, Matthew 5:13-16, the church is to be the “salt” of the earth and the “light” of the world:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled by men.

You are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before men,

that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.

Yet today the church has lost its saltiness and is hiding its light under a bushel.

What did Christ mean when He told His disciples that they are to be the salt of the earth and a light to the world? Typically, Jesus was using two common elements that His disciples were very familiar with and drawing out spiritual lessons that pointed them to what He intended the church to be:

1. SALT. We all know that salt is the ingredient we use to flavor our food. But the disciples Christ was speaking to were mostly fishermen by profession. To them, salt was not just something they used to flavor their food, but it was a very important ingredient in their trade. There was no refrigeration in those days, so fishermen rubbed salt into their catch to keep it from rotting before they got to market.

Jesus was implying two things when He

compared the church to salt:

a. The first implication is negative. He was implying that the church is living in the midst of a corrupt society. Because of the sin problem, the world in which we live is rotting. I do not have to convince you that sin is abounding all around us. The news media reminds us of this fact every day.

b. The second implication Christ had in mind when He compared the church to salt is positive. Just as salt, when rubbed into the dead fish, retarded the rotting process, in the same way, Christians are to retard the rotting process of this world dead in sins and trespasses. As we rub ourselves with men and women of the world in our daily walk, we should be a retarding force in a corrupt society, besides adding meaning, hope, and flavor to human life.

2. LIGHT. When Jesus compared the church to being a light, He used the word “light” in the singular even though the pronoun “you” was in the plural. According to Scripture, there is only one

light. Christ is that true light, which lights every person that is born in this world. John 1:9:

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world.

But since the church, made up of many individuals, is an extension of Christ, the world must see Christ in us the only hope of glory. Colossians 1:27:

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

The world we live in is not only rotting but is engrossed in darkness and hopelessly lost. With all our technological advances in science and medicine, men and women are still living in fear because science has no answer for the problem of death. According to the writer of Hebrews, man's only solution to the grim reaper is Jesus Christ. Hebrews 2:14-15:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.

But how can Christians bring hope, joy, and peace to others when they themselves are not sure of their own salvation? Like the believers of Ephesus, most Adventists are living in doubt and fear when it comes to their ultimate salvation. Jesus said, let your light so shine before man that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

As a people we are not short of good works, but the question is, are these good works reflecting Christ as the light of the world or are they simply the fair showing of the flesh? If we are to be the light of the world and reflect Christ, we need to first learn how to stick in the key of the gospel and turn on our spiritual engines. Only then can we bring light, hope, peace, and joy to those around us, men and women who are groping in darkness.

Paul's prayer for the release of God's power is what we need to experience today. Ephesians 3:16-21:

I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge — that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

This prayer has three progressive steps:

1. Inner Strength (verse 16). This inner strength comes not by promotional programs or

incentives but from the Holy Spirit. When Paul talks of “inner being” (NIV) or “inner man” (KJV), he is not referring to our sinful natures which we still possess but to the converted mind which is rejoicing in the good news of the gospel. It is here where the Holy Spirit gives us strength to face this hostile world in which we live. Romans 8:16-17:

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

2. The Indwelling Christ (verse 17). Since Paul is writing to believers who already have Christ dwelling in their hearts, this statement at first seems to make no sense. But Paul is not referring to Christ simply dwelling in the believer’s heart but permanently dwelling in us.

3. Incomprehensible Love (verses 17-19). Here is where most Christians miss the mark. The word Paul used for love is “agape,” a word that has

no equivalent in the English language. The word “agape” is a noun used some 87 times in the New Testament and describes God’s unconditional love, in total contrast to our human conditional love. That is why Paul says this love “surpasses knowledge” (NIV) or “which passeth knowledge” (KJV).

The way we come to a knowledge of this incomprehensible love is not through education but by revelation. It is the Holy Spirit that convinces us in the inner man that our salvation is not based on our human performance but the love of God. Romans 5:5-8:

And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we

were still sinners, Christ died for us.

With such an understanding of God's love, we experience something that the world cannot give us but which it needs desperately. What is this experience? The answer is found in John's first epistle. 1 John 4:16-18:

And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him. In this way, love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment, because in this world we are like him. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

Chapter 15

A Called-Out People

John 15:18-21

When the Bible writers wrote the New Testament in the common Greek language of their day, there were no theological words to describe some of the spiritual truths God revealed to them. As a result, they had to use words that the people were familiar with but, at the same time, give them new meanings that conformed to the divine revelation.

For example, one of these words is “propitiation” or “expiation,” depending on which translation you have, or, in the New International Version, “sacrifice of atonement.” A good example is Romans 3:25:

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance

he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished — ...

This word “propitiation” in Greek is hilastarion and was used to describe sacrifices offered by pagans to appease the anger of their gods. But when the New Testament writers used the same word, they were not referring to any sacrifice we make to appease our angry God but the sacrifice God Himself made in Christ to meet the just demands of His holy law so that He can lawfully justify sinners who believe in Jesus. Verse 26 brings this out. Romans 3:26:

...He did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.

Another word that had a similar problem, and that has to do with this study, is the word “church.” The Greek word is actually two words put together, ek-klesia, from which we get the English word “ecclesiastical.” EK means “out of” and KLESIA means “a called people.” Put together, this word

means “a called-out people,” the title for this study. This word was used in secular Greek to refer to any group of people who would meet together for a specific purpose. For example, a nominating committee to choose officers for a new term in New Testament times would be called an “ekklesia.”

But when the New Testament writers used this word ek-klesia to refer to the Church of Christ, they gave it a special meaning that conformed to the truth of the gospel. What was that special meaning? The answer is found in our Scripture reading. John 15:18-19:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Christians are men and women, young and old, from all races, all cultures, and all walks of life who have one thing in common: they have all

responded by faith to the claims of the gospel and have been called out of this world to be citizens of heaven. This is how Peter describes this called-out people. 1 Peter 2:9-10:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

To understand all the ramifications of what it means to be this called-out people we call the church, we need to understand what the Bible teaches about the two kingdoms: the kingdom of God under Christ and the kingdom of this world under Satan. 1 John 5:19:

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one.

When Adam fell, he not only passed on to his posterity (to which we all belong) sin, condemnation, and death, but he also handed the dominion of this world to Satan. Luke 4:5-6:

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, “I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to.”

It is for this reason Christ referred to Satan as the prince or lord of this world. He did this on more than one occasion but here is one example. John 14:30:

I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. He has no hold on me....

Satan’s kingdom is also referred to as “the kingdom of darkness.” Luke 22:53:

Every day I was with you in the temple courts,

and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour — when darkness reigns.

Ephesians 6:12:

For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.

And the great tragedy is that all of us, by nature, were born in and belonged to this kingdom of darkness. But the incredible good news of the gospel is that Christ came to deliver us from this world of darkness doomed for destruction. John 1:1-13:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God — children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

How did Christ accomplish this most difficult task? In other words, what did it cost Christ to deliver us from Satan's kingdom of darkness that is doomed for destruction and bring us into the glorious light of His kingdom? Listen to how Peter answers this question. 1 Peter 1:18-19:

For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

On the cross, Christ paid the supreme price for our sins, the wages of which is death. Paul tells us in Romans 8:32 that God spared not His own Son but delivered Him up for us all:

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all — how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?

And to the Galatian Christians he told them that Christ came to this world so that we sinners may be delivered from this present evil world into His glorious kingdom of righteousness. Galatians 1:3-5:

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave himself for

our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

But what does it mean to be delivered from this present evil world, this world that is groping in darkness? According to the apostle John, this world of darkness is driven by three driving forces all of which are motivated by the principle of self, the fundamental principle of Satan's kingdom. 1 John 2:15-17:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

James 1:27; 4:4:

Religion that God our Father accepts as pure

and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world. ...You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

This is what Christians are called-out from. Not this physical world so that we have to live in monasteries as some of the early Christ did, but we are a called-out people from this world of evil dominated by self. Note the prayer of Jesus before He went to the cross. John 17:15-19:

My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.

This, my dear people, is the cost of

discipleship. When God called you to become His child through faith in His Son, He called you and me to die to self, to surrender this self to the cross of Christ and become new creatures in His Son. Luke 9:23-25:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit his very self?”

John 12:24-25:

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Galatians 5:24:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires.

Unfortunately, not all are willing to pay this price. As a result, the church is made up of two groups of people — those who have from the heart surrendered to the cross of Christ and in their innermost being confess that “For me to live is Christ,” and those who, like Ananias and Sapphira, are pretending to be Christians but they have one leg in the church while the other is still in the world.

But because the heart is deceitful above all things, it is impossible for us humans to tell to which camp others belong. It is so easy to cover up our true motives by our outward behavior. That is why Paul warns us not to judge our fellow men since we cannot read the hearts of others. As Jesus pointed out in the parable of the wheat and tares, we must let God do the shifting out of the true and false believers. Matthew 13:24-30:

Jesus told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away. When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared.

“The owner’s servants came to him and said, ‘Sir, didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?’

“‘An enemy did this,’ he replied.

“The servants asked him, ‘Do you want us to go and pull them up?’

“‘No,’ he answered, ‘because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’”

But my question to you is, are you truly a called-out person? Or are you still clinging to the world dominated by the principle of self? I cannot stress strongly enough that if you have not fully surrendered your life of sin to the cross you are on very dangerous ground, for Satan will one day pull you out of Christ like he did Judas.

Besides God, only you can read your heart. And that is what God is ultimately concerned about. “Give me your heart,” that is His plea. Christ, our great High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary, understands your struggles with sin and the flesh. He knows your every weakness and failures, but what He wants is your heart.

Today God is calling to all who claim to be His people, “Come out of Babylon,” this principle of self. He wants you to glory in nothing else but the cross of Christ so that one day you may share the glory of Christ. He wants each one of us to be truly His called-out people, so that, with the apostle Paul, we can make this confession. Galatians 6:14:

May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Chapter 16

Our Highest Priority

Colossians 1:23-29

According to the apostle Paul, every Christian has been baptized into the body of Christ by the Holy Spirit. 1 Corinthians 12:13:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Therefore, as the extension of Christ, every believer stands perfect in Christ. While this guarantees our salvation so that we have peace with God, it also involves certain responsibilities. I would like to consider with you what our main responsibility is as the body of Christ.

The highest priority the church has on earth is expressed by Paul in our Scripture reading, especially verses 25-29. Colossians 1:23-29:

...If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church. I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God its fullness — the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of his mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully

works in me.

Here the apostle tells us that the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and which has now been revealed to the saints is now to be revealed to the Gentiles, meaning the unbelievers. This mystery is Christ in you, the hope of glory. This is the church's highest priority.

In the previous verses of Colossians 1, Paul describes to his readers the objective facts of salvation. Some 2,000 years ago, God united Christ's divinity to our corporate humanity that needed redeeming. Then by His perfect life and sacrificial death, Christ rewrote our human history and fully reconciled mankind to God. Colossians 1:19-23:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross. Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of

your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation — if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

Since the church is the extension of Christ, this is the foundation that Christ laid and upon which all our Christian experience must be built. In the holy history of Christ, the mystery of God was revealed. The word mystery means something that can be seen but cannot be explained. For example, when an apple tree produces oranges, this would be a mystery because it contradicts nature. In the same way, what Christ accomplished in our corporate humanity was a mystery. 1 Timothy 3:16:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by

the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

This same mystery God wants the world to see through the church. This is our highest priority. Colossians 1:27 again:

To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

When Christ lived on this earth in our humanity, besides redeeming mankind, He also reveal His Father to the world. That is why He could say to Philip, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9).

When you read the first four books of the New Testament, you will find that this is a historical account of how God was manifested in and through one man, Jesus Christ. The next book of the New Testament, the book of Acts, is also a historical account. It tells us how God was manifested

through the body of Christ, the church. That is why we spent studying its first 12 chapters in this series on the church as an extension of Christ. Acts 4:32-35:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need.

However, this manifestation of the power of the gospel was short-lived. Satan had succeeded in perverting the gospel, thereby nullify its power. As a result, the church was eventually plunged into darkness and became another human organization, no different from the world around it. A good example was the church at Corinth. 1 Corinthians

3:3:

You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men?

But when the gospel is fully restored and the believers who comprise the body of Christ totally surrender to all its demands, the earth will be lightened by the glory of our Saviour and the church will fulfill its highest priority: Christ in you, the hope of glory. Revelation 18:1:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor.

The big question is how this great and glorious manifestation of “Christ in you, the hope of glory” is to be realized. I would like to suggest three ways this can become a reality:

1. As Christ lived by the Father, so we must also live by Christ. John 6:57:

Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so the one who feeds on me will live because of me.

This means we must be totally Christ-dependent just as Christ was totally dependent on His Father for everything. This is what it means to live by faith alone, the first step in manifesting the mystery of Godliness.

2. Just as God worked in and through Christ, so also now Christ must live and work in and through us. John 14:10-12:

Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves. I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these, because I am

going to the Father.

This is what it means to have “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” Our part in Christian living is to abide in Christ so that He, in turn, may abide in us and produce the fruits of righteousness. John 15:4-5:

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

3. Just as Christ had to deny self in order that the Father may live in Him, so also we must deny self in order for Christ to live in us. This is the cost of discipleship. John 12:24-25:

I tell you the truth, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds. The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man

who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Jesus equated this self denial with the principle of the cross. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Too often we look at the cross that Christ bore for us as that piece of wood He carried from Pilate’s judgment hall to Calvary. Actually, the cross Christ carried was His self-denial which He bore for us all His earthly life, from birth to death. This is the cross we must carry in order for Christ to live in and through us. Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This brings us to where the rubber meets the

road (to use a good American expression). The fact that the church is the body of Christ, with Him being the head, demands a living connection with Jesus. This intimate relationship between the believers and their Saviour is what makes us the body of Christ. By our faith obedience to the gospel, we become one with Christ so that He and we have become one flesh. Ephesians 5:30:

...For we are members of his body.

Further, this intimate relationship between Christ, as the head of the church, and we, the believers, as His body also means an intimate relationship of the believers. Just as our human bodies are made up of many parts that need each other and have to work in harmony, so also the church is made up of many members who need each other and who have to live in harmony. Romans 12:4-5:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form

one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

1 Corinthians 12:12, 13, 27:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink. ...Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Some individuals in church are wearing many hats while others are not involved in the church life at all, except to warm the pews on Sabbath morning. This should not be. We must be willing to deny self, take up the cross, and follow Christ. When this happens, three important things will take place in each one of our lives:

1. We will all have a living connection with our Lord and Master Jesus Christ,
2. We will all consider ourselves as slaves of

Christ just as Paul did, and
3. We will all love each other in the same way
we love ourselves.

When this happens, when self is put aside and the Holy Spirit takes over, the world around us will no longer see us but “Christ in us, the hope of glory.” This is the church’s highest priority and my prayer is that this will soon become a reality.

Chapter 17

A Gifted People

Ephesians 4:10-16

In our last study, we saw that, as the extension of Christ, the church's highest priority is reflecting the life and character of Christ: "Christ in you, the hope of glory." Our study today, "A Gifted People" is an important continuation of this theme. When we talk of reflecting the life and character of Christ as a church, we are talking about a whole group of sinful men and women from various walks of life, nationalities, cultures, backgrounds, outlooks, and temperments.

How can such a group of people collectively reflect one person, Jesus Christ? Let us be absolutely clear from the very beginning, what Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 19:29: with men, this is impossible:

And everyone who has left houses or brothers

or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life.

In other words, this objective of “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” as I concluded last time, cannot be accomplished by promotional programs, or by incentives, or by trying to shape up the saints by rules and regulations.

There was a time we tried to do this as a denomination. If a believer failed to meet the standards and did not shape up, we disciplined him or her. The result was, we produced an outward conformity so that we behaved like the Pharisees of Christ’s day: clean outside but hypocritical inside. Finally, it produced a generation who said “enough is enough” and the result today is rebellion against the standards.

But what is impossible with men is possible with God. And the difference with God’s method is that He does not begin from the outside but inside, the heart. Unlike the Old Covenant, which

we have been practicing, the New Covenant begins by taking away the rebellious stony heart and replacing it with a heart of flesh, that is a heart of love. Ezekiel 36:26-27:

I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

We caught a glimpse of God's method when we studied the first twelve chapters of the book of Acts — how God took a bunch of people, Jews and Gentiles, who were no different than we are today, and united them into one body so that, collectively, they were of one heart, reflecting their Lord Jesus Christ. Let me refresh your memory by quoting some of the texts we studied. Acts 1:14; 2:1; 4:32a; 5:12:

They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers. ...When the day of

Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. ...All the believers were one in heart and mind. The apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders among the people. And all the believers used to meet together in Solomon's Colonnade.

How is this unity of the body knit together in love to be accomplished? What are the practices? The first step is a clear understanding of the gospel, the truth as it is in Christ. This is the foundation to all Christian experience. 1 Corinthians 3:11:

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

The second step is to surrender to this truth: a heartfelt obedience to the gospel. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me."

Galatians 5:24; 6:14:

Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. ...May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

This second step opens the door for the third step, the Holy Spirit taking over our lives. And with that comes the manifestation of His supreme gift to the church: agape love as described in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8:

Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails....

The result is a united body of people, all of whom are doing their part so that, collectively, we reflect the spirit and love of Christ. Can you

imagine what people would think of us? Let me show you. John 13:35:

By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Ephesians 4:1-6:

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unit of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit — just as you were called to one hope when you were called — one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But love itself is not enough for us to reflect Christ collectively. Yes, it is the key ingredient that is necessary to do it, but, besides love, the Holy Spirit also bestows special functional gifts on each one of us. And this is what Paul continued to

point out in Ephesians 4:7-16:

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it. This is why it says: “When he ascended on high, he led captives in his train and gave gifts to men.” (What does “he ascended” mean except that he also descended to the lower, earthly regions? He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe.) It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held

together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

When we examine these gifts of the Holy Spirit, we find they cover a variety of functions, all of which are absolutely necessary for the health and building up of the church to what it should be. This gifts that build up the church so that it reflects Christ are gifts of: Prophecy, Pastors, Teacher, Exhortation (counseling), Administration, Wisdom (on how things are to be done), Knowledge (regarding the needs of the church), Faith (to do things that may seem impossible), Giving (so that the church is not lacking financially, Discernment (distinguishing between truth and error), etc.

All these gifts are supplied by the Holy Spirit to individuals of the church so that we may act as one body. And none are exempted. Every believer has one or more gifts and these must be used or put into practice if the church is to reach its goal. Romans 12:6-8:

We have different gifts, according to the grace

given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to this faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

This brings me to the last and final point in our strivings to reach the divine objective: unitedly reflecting the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because God is love, there is no compulsion in the way He deals with us. Yes, when it comes to our salvation, that is entirely a free gift made effective by faith alone.

Ephesians 2:8-9:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith — and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast.

But when it comes to living the Christian life, it demands our cooperation. In accepting Christ as

our Lord and Master, we do not become robots so that the Holy Spirit works in us automatically. I wish that were true, it would make life much easier, but, unfortunately it is not so and, unless each one of us applies the principle of the cross to our daily Christian living, all our attempts to meet God's ideal for us will be in vain.

In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus made it very plain to His disciples that you cannot serve two masters at the same time, that is, masters who belong to two opposite or different camps. The two masters He was referring to are God and Self. Matthew 6:24 (“Mammon” [KJV] or “Money” [NIV] in this text represent the principle of self):

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

This is the Christian battle. As long as there is life in these bodies of ours, this battle has to be fought relentlessly. Only as we submit this life of

the flesh to the cross of Christ moment by moment of our lives, it will take over and further delay God's ideal for the church. Constantly, we have to abide in Christ so that constantly Christ lives in us. Then only will our highest priority become a reality. 1 Corinthians 12:7-12, 25-26:

Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines. The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. ...So that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers,

every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

If ever there was a time when the world desperately needs to see Christ in His body, the church, it is now. The world around us is becoming unglued — financially, politically, and in every way. I don't have to convince you that the future looks bleak. And the good Word tells us that when you see these things happening, look up, for your redemption draws near.

But God wants none to perish and, as ambassadors of Christ, man's only hope is to realize that the gospel is not some human invention but the power of God unto salvation. But the history of the Christian church has not been too convincing on this fact. Unless we, as His people, are willing to put self aside and let God take over, many more souls will have to go down into Christless graves.

The kingdom of God, says Paul in 1 Corinthians 4:20, is not in words but in power.

May we be willing to be used by God to turn our own cities upside down with the power of the gospel.

Chapter 18

Powered by the Spirit

Luke 24:45-49

Our last two studies on the Church as an extension of Christ has been focusing on its Highest Priority: it is “Christ in you, the hope of glory.” When God created our first parents, He created them in His image. This meant that their natures were dominated by the agape love of God, which Paul says “seeketh not its own.” This was the glory that surrounded our first parents so that they did not need any clothing.

But when Adam and Eve sinned, this agape love did a flip and turned towards self. As a result, the glory of God departed from them. At that time, Steps to Christ tells us love disappeared and selfishness took its place (17). The Old Testament word that describes this bent to self is “iniquity.” Since all of Adam’s children were born after the Fall, this is how all of us were born into the world.

Psalm 51:5:

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

Isaiah 53:6:

We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Therefore, one of the effects of the Fall is that it has robbed mankind of the glory of God. Romans 3:23:

...For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

And there is nothing you and I can do to restore this glory. In other words, it is beyond our human reach. But what is impossible with man is possible with God. In coming to this world, Christ did not only come to save us from the curse of the law which hangs over each one of us but also to restore

the glory of God sin has robbed us of. Hence, Christ in you is the hope of glory.

This study we are going to look into the power that makes this highest priority of the church possible. The starting point is Christ Himself. When our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ came to this world, He divested Himself of His divine glory and came down to us in flesh, the same flesh and blood all of us were born with. Hebrews 2:14-17:

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil — and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.

So even though Christ looked outwardly like

any other human being, His life revealed the glory of God so that He could tell Philip that anyone who saw Him saw the Father. John 14:9:

Jesus answered: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

One of the best descriptions of this glory revealed in the life of Christ is expressed by John. John 1:14:

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

But what gave Christ the power to manifest this glory? Was He born with a special human ability that we do not naturally have? The answer is yes. However, the good news of the gospel is that this same power is made available to all God’s children who have experienced the new birth. The source

of this power is none other than the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the one who represents Christ. Luke 4:14, 18-19:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ...“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Acts 10:38:

...How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him.

This same power was manifested by the early church, which we saw when we studied the first 12 chapters of the book of Acts. Before Jesus left this world, He gave His disciples a commission. That

commission was to go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to every creature. But Jesus knew that, in and of themselves, they had no power to fulfill this great commission. So what did He say to them? Luke 24:49:

I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.

Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

A good example of this power is Peter, the big fisherman. Before Pentecost, he proved he was a coward, especially when he denied His Lord three times. But note the change and the power he experienced after Pentecost. Acts 2:14-16:

Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his

voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. These men are not drunk, as you suppose, it’s only nine in the morning! No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel.”

This same power was also manifested by the rest of the disciples and the early Christian church. Even though these were ordinary men and women who did not possess any special abilities, yet they turned their world upside down with the glory of Jesus. Note, for example, what the Scriptures have to say about Stephen. Acts 6:1-5a, 8:

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be

full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.” This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit.... Now Stephen, a man full of God’s grace and power, did great wonders and miraculous signs among the people.

This same power is available to us today, for God is the same yesterday, today, and forever. But, you will ask, why do we not see such power today in our churches? The answer is simple.

1. The church was robbed of this power when the gospel was perverted.
2. Therefore, the first step in restoring this power is to restore the pure gospel.
3. Finally, there must be full surrender to the claims of the gospel. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

But here I would like to make something very clear. This total surrender to the cross of Christ must be from the heart and not just in words. God will not tolerate shams in His church. Let us look at what happened in Ephesus when some so-called believers tried to imitate Paul. Acts 19:11-20:

God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that even handkerchiefs and aprons that had touched him were taken to the sick, and their illnesses were cured and the evil spirits left them.

Some Jews who went around driving out evil spirits tried to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who were demon-possessed. They would say, "In the name of Jesus, whom Paul

preaches, I command you to come out.” Seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest, were doing this. One day, the evil spirit answered them, “Jesus I know, and I know about Paul, but who are you?” Then the man who had the evil spirit jumped on them and overpowered them all. He gave them such a beating that they ran out of the house naked and bleeding.

When this became known to the Jews and Greeks living in Ephesus, they were all seized with fear, and the name of the Lord Jesus was held in high honor. Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

So the big question is, how is the church to manifest this power and finish the work God has raised the advent movement to accomplish? Certainly, it cannot be done by increasing our

budgets, or through promotional programs, or whipping our members into shape. None of these have been successful in the past and neither will they be successful in the future. The only answer is found in the message of the fourth angel, that is, to join the three angels of Revelation 14. Revelation 18:1-4:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority and the earth was illuminated by his splendor. With a mighty voice he shouted: “Fallen! Fallen is Babylon the Great! She has become a home for demons and a haunt for every evil spirit, a haunt for every unclean and detestable bird. For all the nations have drunk the maddening wine of her adulteries. The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.” Then I heard another voice from heaven say: “Come out of her, my people, so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues....”

What does Babylon represent here? In the Old

Testament, Babylon is described as the most powerful nation of the ancient world. Its downfall, however, has been recorded in the book of Daniel as a warning to spiritual Babylon mentioned in the book of Revelation. Therefore, to understand the significance of spiritual Babylon, we must first understand literal Babylon and why it fell. Daniel 4:28-33; 5:18-23a:

All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, he said, “Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?”

The words were still on his lips when a voice came from heaven, “This is what is decreed for you, King Nebuchadnezzar: Your royal authority has been taken from you. You will be driven away from people and will live with the wild animals; you will eat grass like cattle. Seven times will pass by for you until you acknowledge that the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and

gives them to anyone he wishes.”

Immediately what had been said about Nebuchadnezzar was fulfilled. He was driven away from people and ate grass like cattle. His body was drenched with the dew of heaven until his hair grew like the feathers of an eagle and his nails like the claws of a bird.

...“O king, the Most High God gave your father Nebuchadnezzar sovereignty and greatness and glory and splendor. Because of the high position he gave him, all the peoples and nations and men of every language dreaded and feared him. Those the king wanted to put to death, he put to death; those he wanted to spare, he spared; those he wanted to promote, he promoted; and those he wanted to humble, he humbled. But when his heart became arrogant and hardened with pride, he was deposed from his royal throne and stripped of his glory. He was driven away from people and given the mind of any animal; he lived with the wild donkeys and ate grass like cattle; and his body was drenched with the dew of heaven, until he

acknowledged that the Most High God is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and sets over them anyone he wishes.

“But you his son, O Belshazzar, have not humbled yourself, though you knew all this. Instead, you have set yourself up against the Lord of heaven. You had the goblets from his temple brought to you, and you and your nobles, your wives and your concubines drank wine from them. You praised the gods of silver and gold, of bronze, iron, wood and stone, which cannot see or hear or understand.”

The word “Babylon” comes from two Semitic words joined together. They are bab, which means gate; and el, which is the Old Testament word for God. When put together, it means men trying to reach the gate of God, or in other words, men trying to reach heaven by their own efforts. A good example is the tower of Babel.

When used spiritually, Babylon means anything we think or do, no matter how religious it

may be, that is polluted with the principle of self. True Christianity begins with death to self. This is the first step in experiencing the power of the gospel. Note what Paul has to say to those who have been baptized into Christ. Romans 6:10-13:

The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.

Only when we surrender this self life of ours to the cross of Christ will it be possible for the Holy Spirit to take over and turn our modern world upside down with the power of the gospel. True Christianity means to be Spiritually minded. This is the second step in experiencing the power of the gospel. Romans 8:5-11:

Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you.

Finally, as we keep our minds focused on Christ and His redeeming grace, as we learn to abide in Christ so that He can abide in us through

His Spirit, our lives will change, first from the inside and then outside. It begins with our thoughts, our desires, and our goals in life; all these will take a new direction. This makes it possible for the Holy Spirit to take over and lighten the earth with the glory of Christ. 2 Corinthians 3:17-18:

Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.

Chapter 19

Shaping the Saints

Ephesians 4:11-16

When I first began my ministry in the United States, one of the first things I noticed was how far here in the U.S. we had drifted from the blueprint the New Testament outlines regarding how the church is to function. It was not far from the way the Roman Catholic church was functioning — the hierarchy versus the laity. This, I believe, is one reason for the spiritual decline we are seeing today. Therefore, if we are to experience the success of the early church at a modern church, one of the great needs is to return to the blueprint of the New Testament.

What is the blueprint? It is what the apostle Paul outlined in our Scripture reading. This outline will be the passage we will be considering in this study of the church as the extension of Christ. Let me start by reading the passage from my New

International Version. Ephesians 4:11-16:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The first word in this blueprint that I want you to take note of is the word found in verse 12, "prepare," or, as the King James Version puts it, "perfecting." The word Paul actually used here is

katartismos. It is from this word we have our English word “artisan.” This word is normally applied to a craftsman, one who works with skill at a specific job — building, carpentry, painting, computers, electronics, etc.

A good example of how this word is used in the New Testament is what the gospel writer Matthew recorded in his fourth chapter, describing what Jesus saw the two brothers, James and John, along with their father, Zebedee, doing in regards to their fishing trade. Matthew 4:21:

Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them....

What Jesus saw was that these men were mending or preparing their nets. That is to say, they were preparing or equipping themselves for successful fishing. In the same way, Paul tells us that God wants to equip or prepare the saints for successful service. This is how verse 12 of

Ephesians 4 reads in my New International Version:

...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up....

In other words, shaping up the saints to do what God wants them to accomplish.

According to the apostle Paul, God gives the church four specific gifts in order to shape up the saints for service as well as build them up in Christ. These four gifts, which are recorded in verse 11 of Ephesians 4, are: Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, and Pastors and Teachers. Let us briefly examine each of these four important gifts.

1. Apostles. This word literally means “sent ones.” In the New Testament, this word is especially used to identify the 12 apostles Christ chose during His earthly ministry, and later on Paul, whom I believe He chose to replace Judas. To them He gave a very special task, one that would lay the very foundation for the Christian

church throughout its history.

That task was to define, as well as defend, the truth of the gospel, the good news of salvation Christ had obtained for the entire human race in His earthly mission. Several texts in the New Testament point out to this fact. Some examples are: Ephesians 2:19-21:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.

Galatians 1:8-9:

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you

accepted, let him be eternally condemned!

Acts 15:1-2, 6-11:

Some men came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the brothers: “Unless you are circumcised, according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved.” This brought Paul and Barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them. So Paul and Barnabas were appointed, along with some other believers, to go up to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders about this question.

...The apostles and elders met to consider this question. After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a

yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

(The “we” refers to apostles.) It is extremely important that we pay heed to what the apostles recorded in Scripture concerning the gospel, so that our understanding of the gospel as well as its proclamation be in perfect harmony with what they taught. This includes the Three Angels’ Message of Revelation 14 which God raised the Advent movement to proclaim in its global mission.

2. Prophets. The actual meaning of this word is “to cause to shine.” In the Old Testament, prophets were individuals whom God chose to represent Him before His people. That is why their writings form part of the Canon, the inspired words of Scripture. In the New Testament, however, the prophetic gift has a somewhat different purpose and function and we must keep this in mind, especially when we read Ellen G. White.

According to 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul is

contrasting the prophetic gift with the gift of tongues, you will notice two things about the prophetic gift which must be the basis of our use of the Spirit of Prophecy: (1) the function of the prophetic gift, and (2) to whom this gift applies. 1 Corinthians 14:3 (function) and 22 (application):

But everyone who prophesies speaks to men for their strengthening, encouragement and comfort. ...Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.

We must keep both these in minds when we read Ellen G. White. Her writings are to guide the church (i.e., believers) in Christian living and practice. They are not to take the place of the Bible in defining what truth is, as some unwittingly do.

3. Evangelists. This word means “one who brings good news.” The word “evangelist” is derived from the Greek word evangelion, which is the word used in the New Testament for the gospel.

Luke 2:10:

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

The gift of an evangelist is given to individuals in the church who are in a special way to proclaim the good news of the gospel to the unchurched. This must be the foundation of all Christian doctrine and practice. I wish all evangelists would keep this in mind.

4. Pastors and Teachers. If you are wondering why I combine these two functions (pastors and teachers), what many feel are really two separate gifts, here is my reason. Please note that before each of these four gifts, Paul mentions the word “some.” Ephesians 4:11 again:

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers....

But the word “some” is not found before the word “teachers.” Why is this so? I believe because the phrase “pastors and teachers” refer to one and the same gift.

A pastor is a teacher. His or her job is to dig into the Word and share with the flock of God every Sabbath the hidden treasure that is to be found in the pages of Scripture. Thus, the primary work of the Pastor is to build up God’s people in Christ. For example, note the counsel Paul gave to the pastors in Ephesus on his final journey to Jerusalem. Acts 20:27-32:

For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never

stopped warning each of you night and day with tears. Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

In conclusion, turning back to our Scripture reading, you will notice that all these four gifts have two objectives or purposes in mind: (1) to equip the saints for ministry, and (2) to build the believers up in Christ. Ephesians 4:12-13:

...to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

When this is realized, the result will be verses 14-16:

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

What a day that will be! May the Holy Spirit shape us all up so that we become a united body who together will work in unison to lift up Christ.

Chapter 20

One Body in Christ

Romans 12:2-5

With the exception of one, all the metaphors used in the New Testament to describe what the Church is have been derived from the Old Testament. For example, in John 10:1-15, 26-30, the church is compared to a flock of sheep with Christ as the shepherd:

“I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watch man opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a

stranger's voice.” Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

Therefore Jesus said again, “I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

“I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — just as the Father knows me and I know the Father — and I lay down my life

for the sheep.”

...“But you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”

Proceeding to John 15:1-10, we find Jesus describing believers as branches with Him being the vine:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love.”

Turning to Ephesians 2:19-22, the church is equated to a temple building with Christ being the chief cornerstone:

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the

foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Again in Ephesians 5:22-32, the church is compared to a bride with Christ being its husband:

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Saviour. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated

his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.

The purpose of all these metaphors is to point out to believers that a unique relationship does exist between Christ and His followers — the flock of sheep is totally dependent on the shepherd for survival, protection, and care; without the vine, branches cannot bear any fruits and, in fact, cannot survive; in Bible days, when constructing a building, every stone had to be lined up with the chief cornerstone. But the most intimate relationship borrowed from the Old Testament is, of course, the relationship between husbands and wives. They are to be one flesh. Ephesians 5:28-32:

In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife

loves himself. After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church — for we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery — but I am talking about Christ and the church.

This brings us to the one metaphor of the New Testament describing the church which is not found in the Old Testament. This unique metaphor of the New Testament is the church being the body of Christ. According to the New Testament, the church is made up of men and women, boys and girls, of all nationalities and cultures, all baptized into one spiritual body. 1 Corinthians 12:13:

For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body — whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free — and we were all given the one Spirit to drink.

Thus, the church is a community of believers, a unique fellowship, a *koinonia* with Christ as the

head. Several texts in the New Testament point out the fact that we believers constitute the body of Christ with Him being the head. I would like you to consider with me four main or important ones. First the texts that describe the church as the body of Christ. Romans 12:4-5:

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

1 Corinthians 12:12, 27:

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. ...Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Ephesians 1:22-23:

And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the

church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Colossians 1:24:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.

I hope you noticed the conclusion Paul came to, in at least two of the passages we read, that to be part of the one body of Christ also means that we are members of one another. Now let us look at the texts that specifically point to Christ as being the head of the church. We saw this brought out as we read Ephesians 1:22 [above]. To this I would like to add Ephesians 4:15:

Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ.

Colossians 1:18:

And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

And, especially, Colossians 2:18-19:

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize. Such a person goes into great detail about what he has seen, and his unspiritual mind puffs him up with idle notions. He has lost connection with the Head, from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow.

This last text is important because it links the body concept with our salvation. When we become part and parcel of the body of Christ by faith and baptism, all that the body of Christ accomplished in His earthly mission becomes ours. This is what righteousness by faith is all about, our only hope of salvation. Hebrews 10:5-10:

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.’”

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them” (although the law required them to be made). Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

You will notice that, unlike all the other metaphors the Bible uses to describe the church, the union and unity between Christ as the head and the church as His body is much more intimate. By extension, this unity and union between Christ and the believers also becomes true between the believers themselves. 1 Corinthians 12:14-27:

Now the body is not made up of one part but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” it would not for that reason cease to be part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be? But in fact God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, but one body.

The eye cannot say to the hand, “I don’t need you!” And the head cannot say to the feet, “I don’t need you!” On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special

treatment. But God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.

Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

What is Paul saying in this passage? At least three important things that we must take note of if the church is to fully function as the body of Christ:

1. First, all believers have a vital part to play in the life of the church, the body of Christ. There is no person who constitutes a vestigial organ in the body of Christ. (A vestigial organ is a needless organ like the appendix.)

2. Secondly, the spiritual condition and progress of the individual believer is greatly

enhanced or hindered by the spiritual condition of the church as a whole. The Exodus is a good example. Even though Joshua and Caleb were ready to enter the promised land at Kadish-Barnia, the rest of the church was not and they had to suffer with the church 40 years.

3. Thirdly, we are to react to each other's needs in the same way that our bodies do. For example, when I hurt my foot, the whole body feels the pain and comes to its aid. Such behavior within the body of Christ will bring unity and love that will become the most powerful witness to the world that the gospel is indeed the power of God unto salvation. John 13:34-35:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

The big and practical question that faces us is how this unity and union between believers is to be achieved. The answer is that we must follow the

principal of the body. In other words, we must apply the same rules or methods that our human body uses in everyday living. What are they?

1. Just as there is a living connection between every member of our body with the head through the nervous system, so also there must be a living connection between the believer and Christ Himself. When the nerve between the head and any member of our body is severed, that member becomes paralyzed so that it not only ceases to function but becomes a hindrance to the rest of the body. The same is true of the church as the body of Christ. This living connection between Christ and the believer is realized through our prayer life, practicing daily the presence of God through continual communion with Him. John 17:20-23:

My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave

me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.

2. Just as there is only one head in a body so that every member of the body is in complete subjection to the decisions of that head, so also every believer is to be a slave to Christ as the head of the body. When I am hungry, my stomach sends a message to my brain, which tells the legs to go to the kitchen, tells the hand to grasp an apple and bring it to my mouth, which it tells to open wide, and the teeth chew. So the hunger of the stomach is satisfied by every member of the body obeying the directions of the head and cooperating, just as Christ was subject to the Father's will and Paul was to Christ's. Matthew 26:39:

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Philippians 1:1a:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus....

Also note David's prayer in Psalm 143:10:

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God;
may your good Spirit lead me on level ground.

3. Finally, as we read in 1 Corinthians 12, all of us must realize that no member of the body of Christ is insignificant, but all have a vital part to play in the life of the church. 1 Corinthians 12:21-25:

The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and the parts that we think are less honorable we treat with special honor. And the parts that are unpresentable are treated with special modesty, while our presentable parts need no special treatment. But God has combined the members of

the body and has given greater honor to the parts that lacked it, so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

In conclusion, can you imagine what we would be like as a church if everyone of us were to put into practice these principles of the body? There would be such unity and love within the body that maybe even Congress would come to us and ask us how we managed to solve the partisan spirit that they are facing in running this country. What a witness we would be to a world that is torn by all kinds of factions.

Folks, this is not some wild dream I have come up with but a gospel doable. As we saw in our study of the book of Acts, it was manifested in the life of the early church and it must be manifested in the life of the last generation of the Christian church, so that this earth will be lightened by the glory of Christ before the end comes.

Chapter 21

Fulfilling God's Mission

Revelation 10:9-11

So I went to the angel and asked him to give me the little scroll. He said to me, “Take it and eat it. It will turn your stomach sour, but in your mouth it will be as sweet as honey.” I took the little scroll from the angel’s hand and ate it. It tasted as sweet as honey in my mouth, but when I had eaten it, my stomach turned sour. Then I was told, “You must prophesy again about many peoples, nations, languages and kings.” —
Revelation 10:9-11

Since the church as the body of Christ is an extension of Christ, it goes without saying that the mission of the church is also an extension of Christ’s mission on earth. And just as Christ could say to His Father at the end of His earthly mission, “I have glorified your name and finished the work you have given me to do” (John 17:4), likewise,

when the church has finally fulfilled its mission, it must be able to say to Christ, “We have glorified your name and have finished the work you gave us to do.”

This being the task of the church, the starting point in fulfilling God’s mission is to look at Christ as the prototype of the church’s mission. In doing this, we discover four key facts:

1. Motivation. It was the agape love of God that motivated Christ to come to this sin-cursed world and redeem mankind. John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

2. Humility. In order to accomplish His saving mission, Christ had to humble Himself, i.e., give up all His divine prerogatives. Philippians 2:6-8:

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be

grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death — even death on a cross!

3. Universal. There was no discrimination in Christ's saving mission, it encompassed the entire human race — the Jews and the Gentiles, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated, the good and the bad, even those who hated Him. Romans 5:8-10:

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

1 Timothy 4:9-10:

This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance (and for this we labor and strive), that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe.

Titus 2:11:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.

1 John 2:2:

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

4. Objective. Finally, the goal of His mission was to see none perish but that all mankind be saved. 1 Timothy 2:4:

...[God our Saviour], who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

2 Peter 3:9:

The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.

These four facts must be the basis of our mission as a church:

1. Motivation. That which must motivate us in our mission is love, a heartfelt appreciation for what Christ has done for us as well as a desire to see souls won for Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:14-15:

For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.

1 John 3:16:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus

Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.

2. Humility. If we are to fulfill our mission as a church, each one of us will have to deny self and put Christ first. Luke 9:23:

Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”

Philippians 1:21; 2:5:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ...Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

3. Universal. Our objective as a church is to reach all classes of people — Jews and Gentiles, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, the good and the bad, even our enemies. Matthew 28:18-20:

Then Jesus came to them and said, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to

me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

Mark 16:15-16:

He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

4. Objective. Finally, to fulfill our mission we must have a burning desire to see all persons saved. Romans 9:1-4; 10:1:

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. Theirs is the

adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. ...Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved.

1 Corinthians 9:23:

I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.

By His birth, life, death, and resurrection, Christ rewrote the history of mankind and reconciled the entire world to God. This is the good news of the gospel. Thus, in Christ, the human race has been redeemed and passed from condemnation to justification unto life.

But unless we who are rejoicing in this incredible good news of the gospel communicate this truth to others, how will they know? God's mission for the church is to bring the knowledge of salvation to all mankind. 1 Corinthians 2:7-13:

No, we speak of God's secret wisdom, a wisdom that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him" — but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man's spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.

This is our first priority as an extension of Christ. As Christians, we are ambassadors for our

Saviour and our mission is to plead with our fellow men to stop running away from God for He is not out to get them but save them. This is our global mission and nothing must sidetrack us from this divine mission. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of his reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Since our mission is an extension of what Christ's mission was on earth, we need to ask ourselves how Christ described His mission when He was on this earth. He first spelled it out to the people in His own home town, Nazareth. Consider with me the account recorded for our benefit by the

gospel writer Luke. Luke 4:17-21:

The scroll of the prophet Isaiah has handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

Let us analyze what Jesus quoted from the prophet Isaiah regarding His earthly mission:

1. Christ was anointed to preach good news to the poor. What does this mean? The text is not referring to those who are materially poor but who are spiritually poor: those who have tried hard to

save themselves by their own good works but have failed miserably. As a result, they are heavy laden and have lost all confidence in themselves. These are the kind of people who need to hear the good news of the gospel. And all who are honest with themselves know that it applies to them. To such the gospel brings hope. Matthew 5:3; 11:28:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ...Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.

2. Christ came to proclaim freedom for the prisoners. According to the plain truth of the Bible, all mankind are prisoners to sin. But not all realize this, because sin is a deceiver. However, to those who recognize their total depravity, Christ came to give them hope. And that is what we do when we preach the good news of the gospel to those who recognize that they are prisoners to sin. John 8:31-36:

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, “If you hold to my teaching, you are really my

disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

They answered him, “We are Abraham’s descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?”

Jesus replied, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.”

3. The next mission of Christ was to recover sight to the blind. As I have mentioned already, sin is a deceiver. According to Jeremiah 17:9, our hearts are not only desperately wicked but also deceitful above all things. And the one it deceives most is ourselves. Note how Christ warned His disciple against the teachings of the Pharisees of His day. Matthew 15:12-14:

Then the disciples came to him and asked, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when

they heard this?”

He replied, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Leave them; they are blind guides. If a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

John 9:39-41:

Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.”

Some Pharisees who were with him heard him say this and asked, “What? Are we blind too?”

Jesus said, “If you were blind, you would not be guilty of sin; but now that you claim you can see, your guilt remains.”

But before we begin to condemn the Pharisees for their blindness, we’d better read Revelation 3:17:

You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

4. Finally, Christ’s mission was to proclaim the year of the Lord. For centuries the Jewish nation had been waiting for their Messiah. When Jesus came on the scene, the year of the Lord was fulfilled. “Today,” He said, referring to His first advent, “this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Christian has been waiting for the second coming of Christ for almost 2,000 years. And, judging by what is happening in our world today, it cannot be too long before the year of the Lord for us will become a reality. Our mission as a church is to proclaim that the year of the Lord is very near, even at the door. 1 Peter 1:3-6:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into

an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials.

When we have accomplished these four things, we will have finished our God-given mission as a church and the world will have been lightened with the glory of Christ. The end can then come and we can go home. May this be our primary mission.

Chapter 22

The Wise Choice

Joshua 24:14-18

Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord. — Joshua 24:14-18

The Bible divides all believers into two distinct camps. By this I am not referring to wheat and tares, since the latter are really not true believers. The two groups of believers I am referring to are both born-again Christians. But one is carnal and the other spiritual, or one is weak and the other strong, or one is immature and the other mature.

Here are two examples. 1 Corinthians 3:1-3, 16:

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly — mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? ...Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

Hebrews 5:11-14:

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

The big difference between these two groups of believers is not that one is saved and the other is lost, but the big difference is threefold:

1. The carnal believer is still a babe in Christ and is not able to absorb heavy food, only milk. 1 Corinthians 3:2:

I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready.

2. The mature Christian is reflecting Christ in his/her behavior, while the carnal believer's behavior is, in most cases, no different than the worldly person. 1 Corinthians 3:3:

Are you not acting like mere men?

3. The mature Christian's faith is strong and therefore unshakable, no matter what the situation. The Bible describes such believers as the remnant, the ones whose faith endures unto the end. Matthew 15:21-28:

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”

Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”

He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.

He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”

“Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’s table.”

Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great

faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

In contrast, the faith of carnal Christians is weak and will not stand the pressure of trials or persecution. This was the problem with the believers the book of Hebrews is addressing. That is why the epistle to the Hebrews alternates between ENCOURAGEMENT and WARNINGS. The encouragement passages are to strengthen their faith while the warning sections are to alert them of the great danger of losing their salvation altogether because of their weak faith. Hebrews 6:1-8:

Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift,

who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.

Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

One way you can tell whether you are a carnal Christian or a mature one is the way you handle your money. Money is the ingredient that runs this world. Without it we face major problems. For this reason, it is very easy for we Christians living in this world to make money an idol. But Jesus made it very clear to His disciples in the sermon on the mount that you cannot serve both money and Him. Matthew 6:24 (NIV):

No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.

It is also for this reason the apostle Paul warned young Timothy against coveting money. Not that money, in and of itself is evil, otherwise the church would have no right to touch it. But the love of it is very dangerous. 1 Timothy 6:6-10:

But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

What I would like to do now is to examine the lives of two Old Testament individuals. Both were

believers, both belonged to the same religion and served the same God of heaven, both worshipped at the same altar. But one was spiritual and the other carnal. Their lives have been recorded for our benefit and we need to learn from their experience.

The two men I am referring to are Abraham and his nephew Lot. Let us start by reading a little about their background. Genesis 11:27-32:

This is the account of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out

from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.

After Terah, the father of Abram, died, God visited Abram and gave him a call. Note the call in the next chapter. Genesis 12:1-4:

The Lord had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.” So Abram left, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was 75 years old when he set out from Haran.

Please notice two things in this passage.

1. Abram is told he must leave his country, his people, and his father’s house and go to the land God would give him for an inheritance. Why did

God uproot him from his family, his people, and his country? The answer is found in Joshua 24:2-3a:

Joshua said to all the people, “This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants....’”

If we were to express this same call in today’s language, God would say, “Come out of the world, my people.” 1 John 2:15-17:

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world — the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does — comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

2. The second thing I want you to notice about the passage we read in Genesis 12 is that Abram adopted his nephew Lot, who became part of his family and joined him on his safari to Canaan. Genesis 12:4a:

So Abram left, as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him.

According to the book of Hebrews, Abram had no idea what Canaan was like or what reception he would receive in this foreign land. But, by faith, he obeyed God and went. Hebrews 11:8-10:

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Going back to Genesis 12 please note what happened after Abram settled in Canaan. Genesis 12:10:

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

This famine was so bad it forced Abram and his family, which included Lot, to journey to Egypt for survival. But all the time his faith held on to his God.

We do not know how long Abram and his family lived in Egypt but God did bless them while they were there and they became quite rich, i.e., by the standards of that time. However, the time came for them to return to the promised land. Note their material condition as they return to Canaan. Genesis 13:1,2,5 (the KJV does not have Negev, only that they left Egypt with their wealth):

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev,

with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. ...Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents.

Until now Abram and Lot lived as one happy family, worshipping at the same altar morning and evening. But as they approach Canaan, trouble brews up between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. Material blessings can sometimes be a curse in the family. Genesis 13:7:

And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot....

It is at this point the true spiritual characteristics of Abram and Lot show up. Please note how Abram dealt with the problem and Lot's reaction. Genesis 13:8-12:

So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the

whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left."

Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.

Notice also that not only was Lot's choice selfish but how he compromises by pitching his tents near Sodom, a wicked city. Verse 13:

Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.

But our story does not end here. Once you begin to compromise, you begin to slide backwards into the world. Please note where Lot was living

some five years later, when the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah were defeated by their four enemies and Lot and his possessions were also taken. Genesis 14:11-12:

The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. They also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom.

I am sure Abram was concerned about the fact that his nephew Lot and his family had moved into that wicked city Sodom and very likely Lot, in turn, gave soul-winning as his excuse for the move. We will see later on why I have come to such a conclusion.

But Lot's story does not end with his capture. Turn with me to Genesis 19 and see what Lot is doing once he moved into Sodom. Genesis 19:1:

The two angels arrived at Sodom in the evening, and Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city. When he saw them, he got up to meet them

and bowed down with his face to the ground.

Now this sitting in the gate had special significance in Lot's time. Daniel 2:48-49:

Then the king placed Daniel in a high position and lavished many gifts on him. He made him ruler over the entire province of Babylon and placed him in charge of all its wise men. Moreover, at Daniel's request the king appointed Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego administrators over the province of Babylon, while Daniel himself remained at the royal court [but Daniel sat in the gate of the king, King James Version].

By worldly standards, Lot had made a success of himself: From Shepherd Boy to Mayor, or How to Be Successful in Life. Let us interview Lot.

1. Did you really find happiness in Sodom? 2
Peter 2:7

...and if he rescued Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the filthy lives of lawless men...

2. How many souls did you really win in Sodom? Genesis 18:22-32:

The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the Lord. Then Abraham approached him and said: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are 50 righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away and not spare the place for the sake of the 50 righteous people in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing — to kill the righteous with the wicked, treating the righteous and the wicked alike. Far be it from you! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?”

The Lord said, “If I find 50 righteous people in the city of Sodom, I will spare the whole place for their sake.”

Then Abraham spoke up again: “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am nothing but dust and ashes, what if the number of the righteous is five less than 50? Will you

destroy the whole city because of five people?”

“If I find 45 there,” he said, “I will not destroy it.”

Once again he spoke to him, “What if only 40 are found there?”

He said, “For the sake of 40, I will not do it.”

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but let me speak. What if only 30 can be found there?”

He answered, “I will not do it if I find 30 there.”

Abraham said, “Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, what if only 20 can be found there?”

He said, “For the sake of 20, I will not destroy it.”

Then he said, “May the Lord not be angry, but

let me speak just once more. What if only 10 can be found there?”

He answered, “For the sake of 10, I will not destroy it.”

3. What benefit did your children get from city life? Genesis 19:14:

So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who were pledged to marry his daughters. He said, “Hurry and get out of this place, because the Lord is about to destroy the city!” But his sons-in-law thought he was joking.

4. Did you really find success in life by moving to Sodom? Verse 30:

Lot and his two daughters left Zoar and settled in the mountains, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar. He and his two daughters lived in a cave.

In conclusion, how did Abraham fare? Genesis 13:14-17:

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

Proverbs 14:12:

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.

Chapter 23

Trust and Obey

Hebrews 11:7-10

In recent years, the popular definition given for “faith” is the word “trust.” Something about this definition bothered me, so I decided to investigate and find out how Biblically accurate this definition is. The reason for my concern is that the word “trust” can become a very passive thing that does not produce any change in one’s life.

For example, we trust our auto insurance company to cover the cost of our damaged car if we are involved in an accident. Or we trust our health insurance to cover our medical costs should we get sick. But neither of these things we trust produces a dramatic life change.

As I investigated what the Scripture had to say about faith being synonymous with trust, I found out that there are two Greek words that can be

translated into our English word trust. The two words are *elpizo* and *pitho*. But neither of these two words are used in Scripture equivalent to the word faith. The reason is because faith involves much more than trust.

Yes, to be sure, faith does definitely involve trust in God and His Word. But, as I mentioned, faith involves more than trust. In fact, it involves three major things:

1. The first is knowledge. Genuine New Testament faith is possible only after receiving the knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ, i.e., the gospel. John 8:32, 36; 17:3:

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free. ...So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed. ...Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.

Romans 10:13-15, 17:

...For, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” ...Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.

2. Secondly, faith requires us to believe what we have heard about the gospel or any Biblical truth. By belief I mean a mental assent to truth. A good example of belief is how the disciple Thomas related to the resurrection. John 20:24-29:

Now Thomas (called Didymus), one of the Twelve, was not with the disciples when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, “We have seen the Lord!”

But he said to them, “Unless I see the nail

marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe it.”

A week later his disciples were in the house again, and Thomas was with them. Though the doors were locked, Jesus came and stood among them and said, “Peace be with you!” Then he said to Thomas, “Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe.”

Thomas said to him, “My Lord and my God!”

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

All through Scripture one of the key elements of faith is belief. John 5:24:

I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death

to life.

John 6:40:

For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.

Acts 8:35-38:

Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptized?"

And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

Romans 10:9:

...If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised

him from the dead, you will be saved.

3. Most Christians are familiar with these two requirements that go to make up faith. But, unfortunately, most Christians stop here. It is the third element of faith that many of God's people are ignorant of, including many Adventists. What is this third element of faith? It is obeying the truth as it is in Christ.

Without this third element, faith loses much of its ability to experience the power of the gospel which radically transforms our lives. In fact, it is this third element of faith that makes it possible for the church to function as the body of Christ. Without this obedience of faith on the part of every believer, the church will fail to be the extension of Christ.

In dealing with this third element of faith, let us start by reading several texts that clearly point out that genuine New Testament faith involves obedience. These texts are both the positive and the negative aspects of obedience. Romans 6:17:

But thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted.

Romans 10:16:

But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?”

Romans 16:25-27:

Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him — to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.

Galatians 5:7:

You were running a good race. Who cut in on you and kept you from obeying the truth?

2 Thessalonians 1:7-8:

...And give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Hebrews 5:9:

...And, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him....

1 Peter 4:17:

For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God?

But what does it mean to obey the gospel? The first thing that I would like to point to is that obeying the gospel must not be equated with obeying the law. Yes, the two are related, so that obeying the gospel will produce a people who will obey the law as a standard of Christian living. However, the two are not synonymous, otherwise the gospel becomes legalism, which, as you know, is the great enemy of the gospel.

What then does it mean to obey the gospel? Keep in mind that the gospel is not a set of rules like the law. The gospel is the truth as it is in Christ. But it is here where many have a problem. Adventists, generally speaking, belong to the Armenian camp. The Armenian gospel, based on the teachings of Jacob Armenius, teaches that no one was actually saved on the cross of Christ but that the gospel is only provisional. Let me explain.

According to Jacob Armenius, a contemporary of John Calvin whom he clashed with over the gospel, all that God did in the life and death of Christ was make provision for the salvation of the

entire human race. However, for this salvation to become a reality, one must believe in Christ and repent of sins. Only then will God put you into Christ and save you.

When you examine this view of salvation, the gospel is not good news but good advice. Why is this so? Because I have to first do something, i.e., take the initiative by believing and repenting, before God can put me into Christ and save me. This contradicts Paul's view of the gospel. For, according to this great apostle, it is the goodness of God (the gospel) that leads us to repentance. Note his statement in Romans 2:4:

Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?

According to the clear teaching of the New Testament, God took the initiative in our salvation. First, out of His agape love, He chose the whole human race in Christ so that we may be holy and blameless in Him. Ephesians 1:4:

For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will....

Then, about 2,000 years ago, He carried out this plan by putting us into Christ at the incarnation so that by His death, Christ could rewrite our history and change our status from condemnation unto death to justification unto life. Romans 5:18:

Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men.

1 Corinthians 1:30-31:

It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts

boast in the Lord.”

Ephesians 2:5-6:

[God] made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions — it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus....

On the cross the corporate, sinful, mortal life of the human race died forever the second death in Christ, the second Adam. In exchange, God gave mankind the eternal life of His Son so that humanity could rise with Christ in the resurrection. This is what constitutes the good news of the gospel. This gospel becomes effective in our lives when we by faith obey the gospel. John 3:16:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

1 John 5:11-12:

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.

2 Corinthians 5:21:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

With these facts in mind, how do we define obeying the gospel? It is consenting to what God did to us in Christ. It is the surrender of the will, what Paul calls the inner man, to the truth as it is in Christ. It is, above all, participating in Christ. Romans 6:10-11:

The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Galatians 2:19-20:

For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

This obedience to the gospel is, of course, confessed by baptism. It is for this reason Christ made it plain to His disciples, when He gave them the great commission. Anyone, He said, who hears the gospel, believes it, and is baptized will be saved. Mark 16:15-16:

He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”

By baptism Christ did not mean that the act of baptism saves but the truth of baptism. What is the truth of baptism? It is confessing from the heart that you have obeyed the gospel and have become

one with Christ, especially in His death, burial, and resurrection. Galatians 3:27:

...For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.

Romans 6:3-8:

Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin — because anyone who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

What then does it really mean to have faith in Christ? It is more than trusting in Him. More precisely, it is TRUST and OBEY. This is what Hebrews 11, the hall of faith, is all about. Our Scripture reading presents just two examples. Hebrews 11:7-10:

By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

This is where “the rubber meets the road,” to use a good American expression. All through our Christian experience our obedience of faith will be tested. Every time God places a demand on us, financial or otherwise, our faith is being tested. May we all demonstrate such trust and obedience.

Chapter 24

The Church Triumphant

Revelation 15:2-4

We come now to our final study of the church as the extension of Christ. When Jesus established His church, He intended it to be the most powerful force on earth for good. For this to happen, He promised the Holy Spirit. His task is to baptize all believers into the body of Christ, guide them into all truth, and empower them to fulfill His mission.

All this can only become a reality when we, as God's people, fully understand the everlasting gospel, the truth as it is in Christ, and surrender from the heart to all its claims on us. This, as we saw in our last study, is what faith is all about: trust and obey.

This is what growing up into Christ is all about. And when the church finally reaches maturity, it will at last make its ultimate impact on this world.

The earth will be lightened with the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. Revelation 18:1:

After this I saw another angel coming down from heaven. He had great authority, and the earth was illuminated by his splendor.

When this happens, the gospel will not only have been preached but also witnessed into all the world. There will be no excuse for anyone to be lost and the end will then come.

When Christ was on this earth, the Bible tells us that there was nothing about His outward appearance that made Him different from His fellow man. But when it came to His life, the things He did and said, His actions and behavior reflected God. That is why Jesus could say to Phillip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father.” This is how the apostle Paul explained it to young Timothy. 1 Timothy 3:16:

Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by

the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory.

This same manifestation is what God would like to manifest in the Church, the body of Christ. Acts 1:8:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Only through the power of the Holy Spirit will we be able to produce true witnessing and the ultimate goal Christ has for His church. John 15:26-27:

When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.

Colossians 1:26-27:

...The mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory.

When Christ was on this earth, He witnessed to the world the agape love, the wisdom, and the glory of the Father. This same love, wisdom, and glory is to be reproduced in the church as the extension of Christ. Yet today what we are mostly witnessing to the world is the life of the flesh: strife, division, jealousy, and carnality. No wonder the church is making very little real impact on the world.

But the time, I believe, is come when we must all put self aside and let the Spirit take over. All around us are signs that this cursed world is heading for destruction and man's only hope is turning to Christ. How can they do it if all they see in the church is what they see in the world? God's

plea to His people at this time is, “Come out of her my people and have no part in her selfish ways.” The spirit of which Paul speaks must now take over in our lives, individually as well as corporately. So that we may all say in unison what he declared to the Galatians. Galatians 2:20:

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

Remember, in the Great Controversy, it is Christ who is on trial. The big issue is: Can He produce a people who can live above their selfish, egocentric natures so that they reflect the self-emptying life of Christ? Is the gospel powerful enough to do this? The answer is yes. Revelation 14:12:

This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.

When this happens, when this earth is lightened with the glory of Christ through His church, then the final showdown between Satan and Christ will take place, the war of Armageddon. Revelation 16:12-16:

The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty.

“Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed.”

Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon.

This is not a political war but a spiritual war. The clear proclamation of the everlasting gospel will polarize the human race into only two distinct camps: those who have taken their side with Christ and those who have deliberately and ultimately rejected Him and come under the banner of Satan, the prince of this world.

At that time, God's people will be plunged into a time of trouble that has never been experienced by any generation in the past. It is referred to in Scripture as the great tribulation. Listen to how two of the Old Testament prophets describe this time of trouble. Jeremiah 30:7:

How awful that day will be! None will be like it. It will be a time of trouble for Jacob, but he will be saved out of it.

Daniel 12:1:

At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the

beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people — everyone whose name is found written in the book — will be delivered.

There is much speculation and confusion as to what the issue will be in the time of trouble. Many Adventists think that the issue will be sinless living. As a result, their emphasis is very legalistic: “You must overcome all sin in order to prepare for this great time of trouble, because you will have to live without a intercessor during this time” (based on Ellen G. White).

But the fact is that the time of trouble will take place after probation closes, after the judgment of the believers is over, after Christ has vindicated the saints and declares to them, “Let him who is holy remain holy” (Revelation 22:11). Besides, the prophet Jeremiah describes that this time of trouble is like the time of Jacob’s trouble. And Jacob stands for or represents all those whose faith endures to the end in spite of opposition and persecution. Genesis 32:22-28:

That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two maidservants and his eleven sons and crossed the ford of the Jabbok. After he had sent them across the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak."

But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."

The man asked him, "What is your name?"

"Jacob," he answered.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome."

What then is the issue in this final showdown between Christ and Satan, between the body of

Christ, the church, and the world under Satan? The answer is found in the Old Testament book of “Romans.” Who is the gospel prophet of the Old Testament? Isaiah. Isaiah 54:5-8:

“For your Maker is your husband — the Lord Almighty is his name — the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer; he is called the God of all the earth. The Lord will call you back as if you were a wife deserted and distressed in spirit — a wife who married young, only to be rejected,” says your God. “For a brief moment I abandoned you, but with deep compassion I will bring you back. In a surge of anger I hid my face from you for a moment, but with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you,” says the Lord your Redeemer.

Faith in Christ’s righteousness is what the issue will be all about. Not our righteousness but our faith in Christ’s righteousness is what will be tested in the great tribulation. Can God produce a people whose faith is unshakable even though the heavens fall? By this I mean, can God produce a people who know Him so well and whose faith is so

grounded in the truth of His agape love and redeeming grace that nothing whatsoever can shake that faith — not persecution, not the treat of death, not even the feeling that God has forsaken us, just as Christ felt on the cross?

When Satan fails to destroy our faith, when he is defeated by God's people who are fully and completely established on the platform of righteousness by faith alone, then he will become so angry that, in his fury, he will do something that God has not permitted him to do: kill the saints. He will pass a decree that at midnight all those who are loyal to Christ must be put to death.

But before this decree is about to be carried out, there will be a great earthquake, the heavens will be departed as a scroll, and the sign will be seen by all of the second coming of Christ. At that time we will vacate the caves we have been hiding in and those who came to kill us will take our places. Note what they will say. Revelation 6:15-17:

Then the kings of the earth, the princes, the generals, the rich, the mighty, and every slave and every free man hid in caves and among the rocks of the mountains. They called to the mountains and the rocks, “Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand?”

The church will triumph at last and Christ will take us to heaven. And all those who have come out of this great tribulation will sing a new song, the song of deliverance, referred to as the song of Moses. The words of that song are in our Scripture reading. Revelation 15:2-4:

And I saw what looked like a sea of glass mixed with fire and, standing beside the sea, those who had been victorious over the beast and his image and over the number of his name. They held harps given them by God and sang the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb: “Great and marvelous are your deeds, Lord God Almighty. Just and true are your ways, King

of the ages. Who will not fear you, O Lord, and bring glory to your name? For you alone are holy. All nations will come and worship before you, for your righteous acts have been revealed.”

It is my sincere prayer that everyone here will be included in that great heavenly choir singing praises to our Lord and Saviour.